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MANUFACTURING CONFLICT

The hijab controversy is part of the right wing's project to turn coastal Karnataka into a Hindutva laboratory since the 1990s, which has got a fillip from the Basavaraj Bommai government's aggressive communal push

Denying agency of choice

The **woman's right** to wear or not wear the hijab is often not considered an independent decision. And women voices on the subject are seldom heard. BY **ZIYA US SALAM**

THE UDUPI HIJAB DEBATE HAS DIVIDED SOCIETY into halves: those who respect the students' right to dress according to their religion's instruction and those who argue that Muslim men often condition women of their community in a certain way and virtually deny them the freedom of choice. While both groups quote from the Constitution and Islamic traditions in support of their arguments, what is not stated is that the Quran does not address men alone. It speaks to humanity in gender-neutral terms. Wherever a specific verse is addressed to men, another verse or even a part of the same verse is addressed to women too. For instance, the Quran says that chaste men and women are made for each other and those not able to respect the norms of modesty are made for each other. Through Surah Noor, verse 26, we are told, "Corrupt women are for corrupt men, and corrupt men for corrupt women. Good women are for good men, and good men for good women."

Interestingly, the Quran does not use the term husband with all its attendant connotations anywhere. It uses the term spouses or partners without any underlying meaning of superiority. Through Surah Tauba, verse 71, it calls men and women partners who help each other do good, prevent evil. The verse reads, "The believing men and women are protectors and helpers of each other. They (collaborate) to promote all that is good and oppose all that is evil; establish prayers and give charity, and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those are the people whom Allah would grant mercy. Indeed, Allah is exalted and wise."

Significantly, the Quran gives both men and women the right to step out of an unhappy marriage. Nowhere does the Quran mention instant triple talaq. Surah

MUSLIM WOMEN going to a vote in the Assembly elections in Kairana, Uttar Pradesh, on February 10. The hijab made a beginning in India in the form of a loose single garment of cotton, usually with a cap attached to it. Some came with a veil, many without it.



PTI

Baqarah talks in detail about the process of divorce, how each pronouncement has to be separated by at least one menstrual cycle, etc. It also talks of *khula*, a woman's inalienable right to divorce. Interestingly, there is an ongoing debate in Muslim circles over whether *khula* is an absolute right of a woman to get out of an abusive or even unhappy marriage or is a man's consent necessary. Many scholars from the Indian subcontinent often subscribe to the view that a man's consent is necessary even when a woman exercises her right to divorce under *khula*. In April 2021, the Kerala High Court called *khula* a valid non-judicial form of divorce, "the form of divorce conferred upon wife similar to talaq conferred upon husband".

As in the matter of *khula*, the woman's right to wear or not wear the hijab is often not considered an independent decision. If she wears one, it is not universally respected, with many people in cosmopolitan circles arguing that the woman is doing it under family or societal

pressure. If a woman does not wear the hijab, those in religious circles argue that she is doing so under social pressure. Either way, the woman is denied the agency of choice. Similar to 'love jihad' cases where practitioners of Hindutva feel that a Hindu woman is incapable of deciding for herself, that she is always tricked into marriage by lust-driven Muslim man. In the matter of the hijab, a Muslim woman is said to be under the control of either conservatives or liberals; under no situation is she given credit for what might be her personal decision. Incidentally, the Indian *burqa* is not mentioned in the Quran. It talks of women dressing modestly, covering themselves in front of men other than father, brother, son, husband or father-in-law, so as not to expose themselves to the male gaze.

Surah Noor, verse 31, gives an outline, "And enjoin believing women to cast down their looks, and guard their private parts and not reveal their adornment except that which is revealed of itself, and to draw veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornments save to their husbands, or their fathers..." In fact, two *surahs* of the Quran talk of the hijab: Noor and Al-Ahzaab. Verse 59 of Al-Ahzaab describes the way to cover the body. Addressing the wives and daughters of the Prophet and, after them, other Muslims, it says, "O Prophet, enjoin your wives and your daughters and the believing women, to draw a part of their outer coverings around them. It is likelier that they will be recognised and not molested." In everyday parlance, a loose sheet or shawl over their usual attire to conceal their modesty should suffice.

According to the Islamic scholars Mufti Abdul Dayam and Sanaullah Panipati, who wrote in *Tafseer-e-Mazhari*, "Jilbab means a sheet wrapped up on top of the usual *dupatta* or shawl". They go on to describe the circumstances of the revelation of this verse: A wife of the Prophet, Sauda, was easily recognisable in public, as she was quite heavy. Once when she stepped out for some work she was intercepted. She came back to relate the incident to her husband. The verse of *surah* Al-Ahzaab talking of a 'jilbab', or shawl over garments, was revealed at that time.

ISLAM FROM MALE PERSPECTIVE

Most commentaries in the subcontinent on the subject are by men. It is almost always Islam from the perspective of men, women voices are seldom heard on the hijab. Abul Ala Mawdudi, the founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, wrote an Urdu book *Purdah* in 1939. The book has since been translated into several languages and has seen many reprints. His is a conservative outlook on *purdah*. He talked of covering the face to avoid a lustful male gaze. This is remarkable since Mawdudi was among the first to respect Muslim women's right to go to mosques to offer prayers. To this day, Jamaat-e-Islami welcomes women in mosques under its management and has a woman's representative on its board. Among the women who come for prayers at the Jamaat's mosques, some are in a burqa, others in a hijab, some merely cover their head and bosom with a shawl or *dupatta*. All are permitted.



‘Purdah’ for men, too

TALK of hijab, and the mind’s eye of almost all men automatically shifts to women. In fact, any discussion on *hijab* is always from a male perspective. There is an ongoing debate over whether women must cover their face or it will suffice for them to merely wrap a loose sheet or shawl around the head and bosom. Of course, many believe a woman must have a complete layer of clothing over and above what she normally wears. Seldom, if ever, is a man’s attire discussed in the light of Islam.

In Islam, a man too is required to dress modestly. Pertinently, this ‘purdah’, or concealment, is not just for women but also men. Men, too, are asked not to dress in clothes that reveal the contours of their body, particularly the region around midriff and a little below: Under all circumstances a man is required to cover himself from waist downwards, including the knees. The region should preferably be covered in a loose garment. In other words, a man is advised to keep his body covered waist downwards in front of other men, too.

In hijab, the focus is often on the physical meaning of the term. According to the Quran, which mentions hijab in eight places, the *purdah* starts from the eyes. Men have been instructed to lower their gaze, that is, avoid gawking at women. In fact, the instruction to lower one’s eyes is given first to men and then to women. Verse 30 of Surah Noor says, “(O Prophet) Enjoin believing men to cast down their looks and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Surely Allah is well aware of what they do.” The next verse gives a similar instruction. Verse 30, which addresses men, lays to rest all arguments about women dressing in a certain way, and inviting the male gaze. The Quran puts the onus on men to lower their gaze. Under no circumstances is a man allowed to gawk at a woman’s body, whatever her attire. It also refutes the argument that men can force women to dress in a certain way. Men are given instructions for themselves. Likewise, women have been given



NISSAR AHMAD

MUSLIMS offering prayers outside a mosque in Srinagar. In Islam, men, too, are asked not to dress in clothes that reveal the contours of their body, particularly the region around midriff and a little below.

instructions applicable to them. To each his or her own. There is an instance from the Prophet’s life on the subject. Once a beautiful woman approached the Prophet for some advice on Hajj when he was with his companion Al Fadl bin Abbas. Abbas could not take his gaze off the woman. The Prophet noticed it. He did not admonish the woman for not covering her face or dressing in a certain manner. He touched Abbas’ chin and turned his face away. While this was the Prophet’s way of making Abbas obey the instruction of verse 30, it also meant that the responsibility for self-control lay with men.

Islam not only prohibits ogling the opposite gender, it instructs people not to walk with pride. Through Surah Luqman, verse 18, people are told, “Do not (con-

This contrasts with the practice in the Jameat Ulama-i-Hind and the Tablighi Jamaat where mosques are considered a monopoly of men, and women, in a hijab or otherwise, are not welcome. In fact, the Tablighi Jamaat, which encourages men to undertake outstation trips for spiritual rejuvenation, does not approve of women inside mosques. Women who travel to these spiritual retreats are usually asked to stay at a house in the vicinity of the mosque, not in the mosque itself. Of course, women making such trips are expected to be covered from head to foot and be accompanied by a male family member and not be independent.

Dr Israr Ahmed, whose commentaries on the Quran are followed widely online and who parted ways with Mawdudi on the subject of political participation of

Muslims, recalled: “I have seen hijab and burqa in India, in Hyderabad. I addressed a lecture in Mecca Masjid. There were 15,000 men and 5,000 women. Every one of them was in complete burqa. Unlike in Pakistan.” Ahmed believed, “Surah Al-Ahzab which was revealed in 5 Hijri (615 CE) talks of *purdah* outside the home, Surah Noor talks of *purdah* at home. The former talks of a woman’s character, and enjoins men not to enter home without permission, the latter made it a general order to all and not just the Prophet’s wives.”

Well-known scholar Farhat Hashmi, a rare woman preacher whose online lectures on the Quran have gained popularity in the past 20 years, feels the instruction of hijab for women is to cover themselves with a loose sheet over their usual garments.

temptuously) turn your face away from people, nor tread haughtily upon the earth. Allah does not love the arrogant and the vainglorious.”

According to scholars, hijab is not just about the headscarf or mere physical covering of the body. The Quran regards the idea of piety over and above clothing. Surah Araf's verse says, “O Children (of Adam)! Verily we have sent down to you clothing, it covers shame and as an adornment. But the clothing (of) righteousness—that is best. That (is) from (the) Signs of Allah so that they may remember.”

That is as far as the scriptures go. The reality is different. Men tend to think it is their responsibility to ask women to observe hijab when they themselves move around in less than desirable attire. Interestingly, like women, men too occasionally, tend to suffer from wrong interpretation of faith. Some maulanās and imams tick off young men clad in jeans and T-shirt and men in formal suit with their shirt tucked in who come for prayers. They are told to wear pyjama-kurta or a full-sleeved shirt with pants. That the kurta-pyjama is a speciality of the subcontinent and has nothing to do with faith does not register with many of the clerics. A bare-headed man is not appreciated in mosques. Often in the middle of a prayer, a worshipper may put on his cap in the erroneous belief that one is supposed to keep one's head covered.

Easily forgotten is the fact that even in Hajj or Umrah, a man is only expected to tie an unstitched cloth around his middle, and put a shawl over his left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder and head bare. If a man's bare head is acceptable in Mecca and Medina, it must be allowed in Chandigarh or Chennai. That is the bare physical truth of the hijab for men.

The sexist interpretation of the hijab, which puts the responsibility for concealment of body and lowering the gaze entirely on women, seeks to absolve men of their responsibility.

Ziya Us Salam

“Jilbab means a long sheet, a sheet a woman wears over her garments when she steps out.”

In extreme contrast to the views of Mauwdudi, Ahmed and Farhat Hashmi, the contemporary Islamic scholar Amina Wadud created quite a stir by leading mixed gender prayers in the United States some 17 years ago. Amina Wadud said in an interview, “There is nothing said in the Quran about the hijab. There are some statements in the Quran about women's dress. I don't believe that the hijab is a requirement of the religion. But it is personally my preference for my public work. I don't wear it at home, I don't wear it in my neighbourhood... but when I am in public I do.... But because the hijab is so politicised in a negative way under the roof of Islamophobia, I am even more inclined to assert it.” Incidentally,

after 9/11, Amina Wadud, like many others, was subjected to additional screening because she wore a hijab at the time. She was advised against wearing it. She replied, “No, no, why would I not identify with the people being the most oppressed?”

Amina Wadud wore a *naqab*, or veil, early in her life as a Muslim. “Until we actually accept people in the full range of their clothes, we cannot know about the full spectrum of women Muslim and their dress,” she said, adding, “they are all about women saying... that's my body, my choice.”

THE HIJAB'S ADVENT IN INDIA

As far as India is concerned, the hijab made a beginning in the form of a loose single garment of cotton, usually with a cap attached to it. Some came with a veil, many without it. Women used to put the cap on the head and wrap the garment around their body. During the Sultanate period, women from upper classes donned it when they stepped out. Mughal princesses were not known to favour the burqa, but they were uniformly covered and stepped out only in a palanquin. For instance, Maham Anga, foster mother of Akbar who built the Khairul Manazil Masjid in Delhi, and Azizun Nisa, also known as Begum Akbarabadi, who built a mosque under her name near the historic Jama Masjid in Old Delhi, have been depicted in paintings of the era with their head covered but not in a hijab or burqa. In fact, the paintings of Maham Anga in *Akbarnama* depict her with clear facial contours and white and yellow robes. Clearly, she did not wear a hijab or a burqa. Before them, Raziya Sultan, the only woman to sit on the throne of Delhi, rode elephants and fought wars, without a veil, in the 13th century. In the run-up to her ascension to the throne, she went to Quwwatul Islam Masjid in Delhi on a Friday, clad in all red, and sought the support of the ulema gathered there. Her hands, face and feet were not covered.

Purdah came with Muslim kings. Sudha Sharma writes in *The Status of Muslim Women in Medieval India*: “Strict *purdah* originated with Amir Timur.... He made the proclamation, ‘As they were now in the land of idolatry and amongst strange people, the women of the families should be strictly concealed from the view of the stranger.’ *Purdah*, thus, became common among Muslim ladies.” According to her, Muslim men were zealous in guarding women from public gaze, and considered it a dishonour if they were exposed unveiled.

Niccolao Manucci, the 17th century Venetian traveller to the Mughal empire, wrote in his *Storia Do Mogor*, “Mohammedans are very touchy in the matter of allowing their women to be seen.” Almost all Muslim women, except those from the peasant class, observed *purdah*. Only at Meena Bazaar, a fancy market instituted in Delhi during the time of Akbar and continued by Jahangir and Shahjehan, were women seen without *purdah* as they did not have to be veiled in front of the king, who visited the market and also arranged marriages of boys and girls there. *Purdah* then was regarded as a symbol of honour. Today, the hijab is a mark of identity. □