

Hijab row: Why is the BJP echoing liberal playbook by seeking to ban religious symbols in public?

The ruling party is seeking to reconfigure plural and undefined cultural practices into a forced uniformity.

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A demonstration in Kolkata on February 9 against the ban on students wearing the hijab in some colleges in Karnataka. | Dibyangsu Sarkar/ AFP

The recent incidents of Muslim girls wearing the hijab being banned from attending pre-university college in Karnataka have raised questions about diversity and inclusion in educational spaces. The hijab or headscarf is a garment that women use to cover their head and is worn in the presence of male members outside the family and during prayers. The college administration did not allow the girls inside the college premises in the interest of what it claimed as protecting “uniformity” in the classroom.

Hindutva groups are reacting in a predictable manner by taking to the saffron cloth and demanding a uniform dress code for all students.

In a move that ironically took a leaf out of the liberal secular playbook, the minister for education in the state government echoed that schools and colleges are “not a place to practice dharma”. With this, the ruling party strangely appears less conservative for its reputation, as it is claims to seek a ban on religious symbols in public.

The red herring of patriarchy

The issue shows a scepticism that is shared with both Hindutva as well as progressive liberals on allowing religion in daily conduct, even if they go on to differ about the role that religion ought to play in politics. Both essentially see religion as identitarian, doctrinal and institutional, rather than as practices of moral conduct.

As a result, the practice of veiling is looked upon as barbaric and women are seen as trapped in a patriarchal culture. Legal, technological, and global outlook are taken as liberators of these culturally backward minorities. Franz Fanon, writing on the Algerian anticolonial revolution in *A Dying Colonialism*, elaborated on the colonial project of conquest where the European coloniser sought to resignify cultural norms in colonial society by Westernising Algerian women through its liberal progressive agenda.

For the college women in Karnataka, a ban on the veil is tantamount to violating their bodily and cultural-ethical practice. There are two predominant approaches to this issue that need to be addressed.

First, there are views that see the hijab as an essential part of Islamic custom, and tied to this is those who stress on it as a marker of modesty. The problems with these are that it only ends up objectifying the hijab, ascribing it to a code of rules. There is something in the way rules are negotiated in practice that gets wholly missed out.

The hijab can be seen as an ethos that does not need to be justified as a symbol or act of worship, much like we see women wearing saris or bindis are not necessarily affirming the shastras.

Although acts like wearing the hijab, the Sikh turban, or applying a tilak on the forehead bear connections to religion, they are quotidian practices promoting virtue or a good life.

Second, an argument taken from the legal register grounds the choice of wearing the hijab as rights of freedom of speech and expression, and practising one's religion. The limitations this poses for a cultural understanding are that it seeks to imagine an autonomously acting woman for whom cultural specifications about clothing and her desire are distinct attributes that must be consciously rearticulated.

Envyng the West

The [education department in Karnataka](#) went on the record to state that “boys and girls behaving according to their religion hurts equality and unity”. But this unity is based on a prior exclusion, a way of uniting by separating what is undesired. A prominent state leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party aptly summed up the atavism of the universal when he declared: “one school, one uniform”. A deeper implication according to this view is that religion must be kept out of the public sphere.

A curious question arises: how is it that the political party otherwise known for its conservatism and advocacy of Hindutva is seeking to separate religion from the public? Herein is revealed a deep-seated envy that the ruling party’s ideology shares with countries in Western Europe, which basically see religion as a threat to national unity.

In effect, what the ruling party seeks is to reconfigure plural and undefined cultural practices into a forced uniformity.

France follows a form of secularism it calls [laïcité](#). It is a product of a long and troubled history of Church-State relations culminating in 1905 as equality of the state towards all religions and confinement of religion to private affairs. This later became incorporated in the country’s Constitution and has since become an expression of French identity and integration.

Tensions, however, surfaced after the headscarf affair in 1989, when some Muslim girls were expelled from school for refusing to remove their hijabs. Islamic symbols have become a bone of contention with the idea of Frenchness. A law in 2004 prohibited wearing any religious symbols in public schools deemed to be “conspicuous”.

In 2010, a major law was brought making it illegal to conceal the face in public spaces. Further, in 2021, Muslim women were banned from wearing the burkha in public places such as streets, public transport, shops, cinemas and hospitals. In addition, the government has approved the ban on girls under 18 from wearing the veil in public, and it is on course to banning hijabs in sporting competitions.

Other European countries like Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, and Denmark have restrictions that specifically target the Islamic veil because it perceives them as threats to national assimilation.

Cultural difference

The inability to accept cultural difference as basis of social relations results in making the woman wearing a hijab into the other. Gandhi's model of toleration was not based on either a cultural universal or separating religion from the public sphere. In one instance, he said that the only way that India and Britain could justly relate to each other was if the British turned to their Christian roots, so there could be a mutually beneficial learning between the Indians and English.

By implication, it is through one's moral tradition that one can access another culture as ethical knowledge. This model opens a way of intercultural dialogue that is based on understanding ways of going about the world not as religious signs and symbols but as different modes of learning and thinking.

In the end, the fascination of Hindutva adherents for neutrality and apathy that European-styled secularism extends towards religion is exposed from the recent school incidents in Karnataka. Prohibiting wearing hijabs will only lead to relegating religion to be misused in politics.

The growing move towards a pan-Indian uniformisation points to the utter failure of Hindutva to offer any framework for intercultural dialogue. The present path will ultimately lead to the destruction of traditions altogether and institute the supranational as its substitute.

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