

The mullahs in Iran and Hindutva: Mirror images of each other

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The hijab controversy in Iran and India are mirror images of each other. In one place, the dominant state punishes women for removing hijabs. In another place, the hegemonic society and courts punish women for wearing hijabs.

What does hijab mean? Women are the repository of honour, order, pleasure and reproduction in a patriarchal society. This makes female sexuality a very precious asset. Like any other capital- money, land, gold - it has to be controlled for effective use.

Sexuality is an asset that women possess, but do not always own. Katherine Mckinnon says sexuality is to feminism what labour is to Marxism. That what is most one's own, and yet, is most alienated. Workers' labour is sold to and owned by capitalists. Women's bodies and their sexuality, which is the most intimate part of their being, are owned, bartered and sold by men. The economy is based upon labour, as without labour, there is no production or surplus or profits. Similarly, society as a whole depends upon women's sexuality for its survival and continuation. Without it, there is no reproduction, no family.

To understand Iran's mullahs, it is useful to see the motivations of our own society. Apart from electoral considerations, why is the Hindu right trying to keep the hijab out of schools and colleges? Because the mere presence of hijab-clad girls is evidence that a 'contradictory other' exists in our society and threatens the 'ontological security' of the majority, as we say in International Relations. This means it tells a different story about the universe than my own and thus challenges my faith and very being. Similarly, the removal of the Hijab in Iran threatens the theological state's ontological security.

Women represent the honour of the community. In Iran, since the state is involved, this means not just the honour of the state but its very survival, because a rejection of the hijab is a rejection of the regime itself. In fact, the desire for uncovered hair is an acceptance of the West and modernity. In India, too, since the community's honour lies in its women, the removal of the hijab is a conquest of the minority. Moreover, the hijab makes Muslim women less accessible than Hindu women.

This fear about accessibility lies at the heart of the love jihad controversy, which in this sense is the twin of the hijab controversy but directed at Muslim men, and surreptitiously at Hindu women. It reflects the anxiety about Hindu women becoming

independent and going out of the control of clan and community, and at the same time, by choosing their own partners, these educated Hindu women seem to be more accessible to Muslim and Dalit men.

State and religion both want the same thing - order in society. Desirable women create chaos and infighting, i.e. Fitna. That is why Kunti asked Draupadi to be shared, so that her sublime sexuality would not cause infighting and division between the Pandavas. A similar belief drives the Iranian state, wherein keeping women covered is key to the stability of the state. Women's hair and polity are thus intricately braided together.

Women may choose to wear hijab for reasons of faith, security, modesty or habit. In Shah's Iran and in Ataturk's Turkey, just as in India today, many women chose to stay at home rather than discard their veils. Women's choices should be key and not a source of punishment.

Maybe it is time to recognise women as humans. Or else, as the Marathi Vidrohi poet Sharan Kumar Limbale says, "Prisons will expand. As I will not contain in prisons, schools, colleges, homes will become prisons. And then...you too will become a prison. What do you prefer? To create so many prisons or to accept me as a human?"

(Sameena Dalwai is a Professor at the Jindal Global Law school, and Mohsin Raza Khan is a Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs)

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