

India: What is at stake in the hijab issue

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Javed Anand writes: Secularists must support rights of Muslims in an increasingly Islamophobic world, but they should be wary of strengthening the Muslim right in the process

To make sense of the contradictory voices within the community of secular-minded Indians on the raging hijab controversy, we would do well to recall a decades-old remark, in another context, of the US-based “Indian philosopher of language and mind”, Akeel Bilgrami: Sometimes who is saying it is as important as what is being said.

On the one hand are a large majority of secularists — women’s organisations, independent feminists, political parties — along with Muslim religious and political leaders, as also some secular-minded Muslim women and men, who see in the attempt of some pre-university colleges in BJP-ruled Karnataka to bar the wearing of hijab in classrooms as yet another attempt by Hindutva forces to impose their majoritarian agenda on the minorities. In full-throated support of the agitating Muslim girls, they believe they are defending the Muslim women’s constitutional right to freedom of religion, right to education, right to freedom of choice. On the other hand, are the relatively fewer voices of Muslim women and men at pains to point out that all the Quran asks of Muslim men and women is that they dress “modestly” and “decently”. Neither the hijab nor the full-body burqa has anything to do with the fundamental tenets of Islam. Included among these voices are those of Zeenat Shaukat Ali (Islamic scholar, author of *The Empowerment of Women in Islam*), Ghazala Wahab (author of *Born a Muslim: Some truths about Islam in India*), Zakia Soman (co-convener, *Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan*), Shabnam Hashmi (Anhad), many members of Indian Muslims for Secular Democracy (IMSD). It is a view they share with a host of modern-day, internationally renowned scholars of Islam, both women and men.

A full bench of the Karnataka High Court is now set to deliberate on whether the hijab is among the “essential practices of Islam”. Here is the rub: The Quran is one but its interpretations are many. Like any other religion, there are in practice not one but many Islams. So, which version of Islam will the court rely on in reaching its judgment — that of orthodox or of reformist Muslims?

For progressive, reform-oriented Muslims, the veil is an age-old symbol of patriarchy whose origin lies outside Islam to which the mullahs of Islam continue to cling on to perpetuate male dominance over women. According to them, the veil is not a standalone issue; rather, it is among the external manifestations of an Islam which is at odds with modernity and a secular-democratic polity. The deep unease of such Muslims is best exemplified by the statements of a few Muslim women from Karnataka, who have been quoted in a report in this paper last week (‘A letter from Karnataka: Udupi, Class of 2012’, February 13).

Says a 45-year-old homemaker who preferred anonymity: “While we were in school and college, we never wore the hijab or the burqa. We just wore a dupatta like the other girls. Tab itna knowledge nahin tha religion ke baare mein. We didn’t know what was right and wrong.” Says her daughter Sana, who started wearing the hijab from Class 8: “Now I wear it (hijab) even at home... the hijab is

a part of me.” Says Fatima, a medical student: “I wear it (hijab) because we have been taught that God wants us to wear it. It’s my individual choice.” Another homemaker Sabina Begum (36) says her eight-year-old daughter “loves wearing the hijab”.

So here we have it — the changing face of Indian Islam in recent decades where indoctrination is being paraded as the right to freedom and the right to choose. As many Muslims will tell you, Allah gives you the freedom to choose, but the “wrong choice” will land you in Hellfire. In any case, the current controversy is not about the barring of the hijab or burqa from all public spaces but only inside classrooms where a uniform is prescribed.

The mullahs have for long maintained that a Muslim woman must never step out of home unless covered in a head-to-toe burqa but they were ignored by the educated among Muslims until recently. With great success, however, someone in recent decades has taught educated, middle-class Indian Muslims a “new Islam” and the hijab or burqa (the “flag of fundamentalist Islam”) is but a small part of the new package deal. This someone is the Campus Front of India, the students’ wing of the Popular Front of India which like the banned Students Islamic Movement of India is rooted in the ideology of political Islam (Islamism) espoused by two highly influential Muslim propagandists of the 20th century, Maulana Abul A’la Maududi (founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami in the Indian Subcontinent) and Syed Qutb (the most influential leader of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood). Like the Hindutva zealots, Islamists too are at heart hostile to the ideals of a secular democracy.

Also not to be forgotten is the role of the petrodollar-funded televangelist, Zakir Naik, in promoting Islamic supremacism among the gullible, though educated, young Muslim men and women. Naik deploys distasteful “logic” while asking Muslim women to cover up. Those who do not, he argues, expose themselves like uncovered sweets in a mithai shop. Sure to attract flies in one case, sexual predators in the other.

Ironically, while an increasing number of Muslim majority countries including ultra-orthodox Saudi Arabia are moving away from the hijab or niqab is mandatory-in-Islam position, a section of Indian Muslims are headed in the opposite direction. Needless to say, it is the moral and political obligation of secularists to support the rights of Muslims in an increasingly Islamophobic world. But should they not beware lest they end up strengthening the Muslim Right in the process?

As for the Muslim girls’ right to education, it may be worth pondering over whether education is for degrees alone or is education for life? A young Muslim woman has poignantly commented in a chat group of secularists: “What have we come to as a community? We need to initiate (the) process of dialogue within to figure out how to counter the increasing conservatism and fundamentalism in the community. If we don’t, the BJP will.” If not the communal BJP, the secular courts might.

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P.S.

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