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RELIGION   WOMEN AND CHILDREN

## Muslim Women's identity amidst religion and the State

HASINA KHAN · MARCH 8, 2023

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*Why does the State always have a protectionist stance toward Muslim women? The Muslim woman has always been a pawn in the hands of the community and now the State.*

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**THE** hijab has triggered a fierce debate in India. Various players, including the bigoted Hindutva government and religious institutions, have fuelled the controversy.

The discourse around the hijab has been complex and has evolved significantly over time. These debates are both emancipatory as well as self-contradictory. In order to elaborate on the complexity of the issue at hand, I propose a contextual understanding of the politics of the hijab.

In this piece, I shall map the introduction of the hijab in the South Asian context, and I hope to unpack the societal and political nuances of the practice of the hijab in India, the Islamophobic majoritarian view on the hijab in the current times and the State-sponsored violence in this debate. Further, the discourse is incomplete if we do not articulate the Iranian protests against the morality police and the oppressive State.

The past year has seen several movements vis-à-vis the hijab issue, including the [hijab row](#) in Karnataka, [Iran's enforcement of the Hijab and the subsequent protests](#), and the [Taliban's compulsory Hijab decree](#). In the case of Karnataka, the argument for its ban revolves around the idea that the hijab is oppressive and a vehicle of patriarchy, while in the case of the latter two, it is a matter of religious principles and the sanctity of the veil.

**Also read: [Both Iran's hijab law and Karnataka ban oppress Muslim women](#)**

Although all three may seem divergent, they have certain common threads. They stem from a shared understanding and agreement that Muslim women need protection; from the oppressive elements of



to go astray in the latter case.

Why does the State always have a protectionist stance toward Muslim women? The Muslim woman has always been a pawn in the hands of the community and now the State.

## The hijab and Indian Muslims

Back in the 1970s, the oil boom increased the migration of Indian workers to the Gulf States, which were predominantly Islamic. The Gulf economies expanded exponentially, and the migrant workers from India saw the Gulf as a symbol of prosperity and a place to earn their livelihoods. Indian Muslims who migrated to the Gulf for work got a whiff of religion, and they brought it back with them. This whiff became stronger through the glorification of the 'good' Muslim woman. The veil is pertinent in patriarchal societies as the women in the family are considered the 'honour' of the house.

Subsequently, the hijab became a symbol of a good Muslim woman. Indian Muslims were taught that the West Asian idea and praxis of Islam was the only legitimate way. Women and their families faced ostracisation for not imparting good Islamic values to their daughters. They were vilified for not practising this new version of Islam. There was an appreciation in society for burqa-clad women, whereas those who didn't practise wearing the hijab were disowned.

“ ***The past year has seen several movements vis-à-vis the hijab issue. They stem from a shared understanding and agreement that Muslim women need protection; from the oppressive elements of religion in the former case, and from Western modernity that would distract women and cause them to go astray in the latter case.*** ”

Post the 1992 Mumbai communal riots, when the Muslim community collectively faced aggression from the right-wing on the pretext of their identity, most Muslims assimilated to project their religious force against the right-wing's attack. This assimilation caused division between the religious groups trying to conserve Muslim identity, and another group voicing concerns over the lack of welfare schemes, education and employment opportunities for Muslims and their socio-economic backwardness. Religious groups thus began to regulate Muslim women's bodies to protect them. There was a sense of asserting religious identity.

**Also read: [Hijab row shows why we should see Muslim women's rights through the dual lens of religion and gender](#)**



## **MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE INDIAN STATE**

We have witnessed the [criminalisation](#) of the [Triple Talaq](#) debate through which the State aimed to protect Muslim women from supposed regressive practices. This criminalisation portrays Muslim women as mute spectators incapable of taking their own decisions.

Five years later, the hijab row in Karnataka highlights the relationship between politics, culture and religion. The State has been incompetent in providing affirmative action to increase Muslim women's participation in the workforce. It has [removed](#) scholarships for minority students, such as the Maulana Azad fellowship for research scholars. Instead, the priority has been to impose a uniform code of conduct in educational institutions, which paves the way for a code of conduct for Muslim women in Indian society.

The idea of one nation, language and code of conduct devoid of religious affinity seems utopian and beautiful, but is dangerous in the Indian context, as I believe the singularity connotes majoritarian, right-wing, Hindu values. For instance, the toxic masculine reaction to the hijab protests was for right-wing men to adorn saffron shawls, and [harass and verbally abuse](#) Muslim women.

Thus the push for a uniform dress code in Karnataka is to invisibilise the Muslim identity. The [“sulli deals” and “bulli bai” apps](#) are tools to suppress and censor vocal Muslim voices in the public sphere. Such humiliation is also intended to cause shame to the larger Muslim community.

**Also read: [Bulli Bai and cyber violence: a symptom of power imbalance](#)**

The repercussions of such targeting of the Muslim community would be to retreat from the public. It is to self-censor their political activism and opinions. Muslim women are bound to face further moral policing from their families and religious groups on their clothing, movement, political activism and personal choices.

## **Raising a ‘good Muslim woman’**

My understanding of the ‘good Muslim woman’ is complex. Muslim women are socialised, and taught to believe that certain ideas of religion are essential to leading dignified lives. Any non-conformity with the same makes them deviant and labels them as outsiders.

Coming from a non-practising, non-conforming family, and settling down in a predominantly Muslim area, the kind of ostracisation and othering that my family, and others like mine, faced within the community, forced many women I know to adorn the hijab.

“ ***Protesting Iranian women are claiming their life as State repression and not adhering to the hijab law is life***



***for freedom from the oppressive State infringing on their human rights.***

After the 1992 riots, many religious groups within the community, to assert their identity and their strength, encouraged the Muslims to mobilise and take pride in wearing the hijab. Conforming to the perceived idea of this decent clothing was imperative in search of a sense of belongingness. The hijab here can be viewed as a consequence of their socialisation in a society striving to conserve and assert themselves.

Similarly, the Popular Front of India (PFI), an Islamic political organisation, has, in the Karnataka hijab row, also [demonstrated](#) its solidarity as the hijab aligns with its religious stance. However, the State [criminalising](#) PFI is also a deliberate move to vilify minority religious groups. Hence, we cannot view the hijab row as an isolated controversy.

Also read: [After declaring PFI an ‘unlawful association’, Union Government directs social media platforms to purge PFI-related content](#)

## ***Zan, Zendegi, Azaadi***

The [death](#) of 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini in Iran results from State-sponsored violence against women. Women in Iran [protest](#) against the compulsory hijab law, which the morality police have enforced. Hijab here symbolises a medium of oppression and, moreover, an imposition of modesty on women.

I would like to unpack the expectations the Iranian State has from women to confirm with the religious ideals of a ‘good Muslim woman’ — a woman who practises hijab in public and affirms the morality of the State.

The youth and women of the country thus took to the streets for the brutal repercussions of not adhering to moral codes mandated by the police. ‘*Zan, Zendegi, Azaadi*’ which means ‘Woman, Life and Freedom’, depicts what women in Iran are fighting for. They assert their identity as women who are not veiled but are in public, in the streets. They are claiming their life as State repression and not adhering to the hijab law is life-threatening for them; most importantly, they are fighting for freedom from the oppressive State infringing on their human rights.

The [international attention](#) these protests have received needs to be reviewed from a feminist perspective. The overt interest of the West on this issue is a singular and myopic view of the veil. The

West has always characterised Muslim women as oppressed and voiceless; as women who require saving from oppressive practices such as veiling. Its efforts to show solidarity are **politically motivated**

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