

Search of Truth, Series-28

Hijab



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Hijab

The entire country seems to be immersed in the controversy surrounding the Hijab. Newspapers, television or social media – the issue of Hijab has become the centre of our discourse. This controversy, which began with a Government College in Udupi, eventually snowballed into a communal issue, and has spread like wildfire to each and every nook and corner of our country.

Some are saying that religion should be kept out of educational premises. Some others are asking if religion is dearer than the country. Some others are also suggesting that the students should forsake their faith for the sake of education. On the other hand, some people have stepped forward to support those students and have raised questions on the abrupt decision of the college to ban the Hijab, citing the fact that the students have been always attending college wearing their Hijab. This leads us to some pertinent questions. Why exactly are Muslim students so determined on wearing the Hijab, and what is its place in Islam? Come; let us understand this in some detail.

Is the Hijab purely a Muslim issue?

Those who are giving this issue a communal tinge have tried to portray it as an outcome of Islamic fundamentalism. They allege that Muslims are forcing their womenfolk to don the Hijab even in the 21st Century, and that it is oppressive and regressive, being the biggest roadblock in their path to progress. But had the Hijab been so oppressive, other religions would never have endorsed it, right?

Like Islam, Christianity and Judaism too consider Hijab a symbol of modesty, decency and piety. The fact that all pictures and portraits of Mother Mary show her wearing the Hijab bears ample testimony to its place in Christian doctrine. The Hijab is so essential to Christianity that, even in this age of fashion, women always cover their hair while in the Church, and nuns always wear the complete Hijab all their life. In Judaism, married women cover their hair as a mark of modesty, and it is for this reason that many Jewish ladies can be seen wearing scarves.

Pre-Islamic India was not alien to the concept of Hijab either. But why go that far? Even as late as fifty years ago, ghungat was a common sight in our country. Ladies in most Indian villages can be seen in ghungat (which is also a form of Hijab) even today. Sikh ladies cover their heads to this day. Ladies trying to cover their heads and faces with the pallus of their saris is a ubiquitous sight in all parts of India. The post-marriage ritual of 'muh dikhai' is evidence of the fact that married women are required to keep their faces veiled. A 2016 survey by SARI

shows that more than 60% of ladies in the 26-40 age group practice the ghungat in Delhi, Rajasthan and UP.

Hijab in Islam

The Hijab does not owe its origin to Islam; rather, it is a timeless tradition which has been upheld by Islam and made a part of its social order in view of its need and importance. To achieve its objective of establishing an ideal society of high moral standards, Islam has defined the interpersonal relationship of males and females in intricate detail. Islam believes that if these relationships are not reined in by the boundaries of morality and modesty, we would be engulfed by a storm of oppression and abuse which would devastate our society. We take this opportunity to highlight the important boundaries that Islam has set for males and females in this regard:

Restraining one's gaze: Islam forbids males and females from staring at each other. Many men are addicted to the disease of ogling women on the streets, and no one even bothers to raise an eyebrow. But Islam sees this as the first step to social disintegration. **When the Qur'an takes up this issue, it begins by addressing men and then ladies, asking them both to 'restrain their glances and protect their private parts' [Surah Al Noor, Ayaat 30-31].** What this means is that if a man happens to see a woman, he should look away immediately. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ has warned that looking at women with lecherous eyes is akin to rape.

Prohibition on overt display of beauty and ornaments: Islam does not stop women from dressing up, but asks them not to make a wanton display of their beauty and ornaments. It sees this as a major cause of social evil. The Qur'an instructs women not to display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof. **'And they should draw a veil over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers . . . (the ayat proceeds to make a list of close male relatives)' [Surah Al Noor, Ayat 31].** Every person realizes the importance of covering women's bosoms with a scarf or dupatta, and there is no need to elaborate upon the problems that arise when this is not done. Islam has tried to shut tight the floodgates of evil that would otherwise arise in society.

Covering themselves: If women require stepping out of the house, Islam instructs them to cover themselves. **"O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves part of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused."** [Surah Al Ahzab, Ayat 59]. It is but obvious that this injunction seeks not to oppress women, but to

protect them. If there is a woman walking down the street wearing a Hijab and another woman not wearing a Hijab, it is not difficult to guess who would be more prone to abuse.

If, along with the aforementioned points, the following points are also kept in mind, it would be easier to understand the entire philosophy of Hijab:

Islamic Dress-code

The clothes should be loose, lest they reveal the underlying figure of the person.

The clothes should not be transparent, lest they reveal the body of the person.

The clothes should not be too glamorous, lest they attract people of the opposite sex.

The clothes should not be similar to those used by the opposite sex.

These facts make it amply clear that Islam has advised women to wear Hijab and a refusal to wear it would amount to violation of the divine commandment. Wherever women have violated this divine commandment, it has resulted in their oppression and abuse. The state of women in our country is not hidden from anyone. Whenever a young lady goes out of the house, her parents remain worried until she returns home. The newspapers are filled with cases of rape and sexual abuse. A woman is raped in India every 16 minutes. In such a dreadful situation, if Muslim women cover themselves with a Hijab to protect themselves, there is no reasonable justification for such hue and cry over it.

The Hijab protects and empowers women

Protects her body from getting displayed: Display of a woman's body has turned into an industry, opening up numerous avenues of exploiting her. The use of semi-naked women to advertise everything from alcohol to bikes has attracted school and college girls towards it. The Hijab is an attempt and declaration to keep oneself away from such filth.

Protects from the lecherous eyes of society: It becomes clear to onlookers that the Hijab-clad lady is not open to their vile advances. It is a sign that those who wish to interact with her, need to do so within the boundaries of modesty and dignity.

Allows her to express her true personality: The Hijab encourages women to define their personalities on the basis of their intellect, skill and behaviour, rather than their beauty.

This leads to the development of their true identity as a human being, allowing her to play a constructive role in society.

Nurtures self-confidence and courage: Protecting her from the discomfort of lecherous eyes, the Hijab fills a woman with self-confidence and courage.

Gives her honour and respect: Men, while speaking to Hijab-clad women, become respectful and self-restraining. This does not allow any immodesty to creep in.

It showcases a strong bond with God: A woman can hold on to the Hijab in such an extremely forbidding environment if, and only if, she has a strong bond with God.

It shows a strong resolve to follow one's religion: The Hijab is a silent declaration that the woman donning it has a firm resolve to abide by the requirements of her religion and fulfil her religious obligations.

It allows her to exercise her constitutional rights: The Constitution of our country, under articles 25-28, grants every citizen the right to Freedom of Religion. By wearing the Hijab, a woman exercises her constitutional right.

Does the Hijab come in the way of pursuing one's Education and Career?

It is rather unfortunate that the Hijab is being perceived as an obstacle to one's progress and development. There is a false notion being cultivated among the masses that Muslim women are being forced to wear the Hijab by their families or they do so under societal pressure. This is nothing more than an unfounded myth which has been spread with ulterior motives.

The late Kamala Surayya (formerly Kamala Das), who has been an acclaimed Malayali writer and poet, has this to say about the Hijab:

"Purdah is a wonderful dress. No man ever makes a pass at a woman in purdah. It provides her with a sense of security."

[In an interview to the Times of India]

Noted Australian academician, Dr. Rachel Woodlock says that

"Most Muslim women in the West have chosen to don the Hijab as a symbol of their identity; it is not an act of fundamentalism."

According to a report by the National Sample Survey, the participation

of Muslim girls aged 18-23 in the education sector has increased from 6.7% in 2008 to 13.5% in 2018. This clearly shows that neither is the Hijab an impediment, nor do Muslim girls wish to stay behind. On the contrary, any ban on the Hijab would prove to be the biggest obstacle in their pursuit of modern education.

Although Islam has liberated women from all financial responsibilities, it does not forbid Muslim ladies from engaging in business or taking up a job if they so desire or require; they can very easily do so wearing their Hijab. Even in the fields of social service and service to the nation, Hijab has never been an obstacle, nor is it today. The only obstacle is the prejudiced attitude of society, which offers ample opportunities to everyone, but creates umpteen hurdles in the path of Hijab-clad ladies.

The Current Situation

Our nation is a multi-cultural country. It is similar to a garden which has flowers of various hues and fragrances. Every flower appeals to the senses with its unique colour and fragrance, and all these flowers together contribute to the splendour of the garden. Likewise, each of us has a unique identity, and we are all trying to enhance the glory of our nation in our own unique way. Some lady drapes herself in a sari, while another lady wears a salwar-kameez. Some lady covers her head with the pallu of her sari, while another does so with her dupatta, and yet another with her Hijab. Someone wears a turban, while another wears a skullcap. Someone is wearing an armlet, while another is wearing a cross around his neck. For someone, her mangalsutra has sacred value, and for someone else, her bangles are sacrosanct. All of us are trying to prosper in this country with our identities intact. Such a sublime display of 'unity in diversity' cannot be found in any other country!

Whether you look at it from the religious point of view, or from that of a woman's security and the protection of her femininity, the Hijab is essential for every woman. The humble Hijab wrapped around a woman's body and her head plays a significant role in discouraging the anti-social elements which have pervaded every sphere of public life. Supporting the Hijab would be akin to supporting the religious teachings and values of all religions. Opposing the Hijab for the sole reason that it is mostly worn by Muslim women exposes one's underlying Islamophobia, and it would not be a wise thing to do either. Wisdom lies in gracefully accepting something that benefits everyone. In that lies the interest of the nation and the society, and it is this that is the need of the day.

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