

THE VEIL CONTROVERSY

The controversy surrounding recently elected President Pratibha Patil's hotly contested statement on Muslims and the veil dearly illustrates how Muslim women's dress has become a central issue in contemporary discourses about Islam. Critics see the veil as 'obscurantist' and 'patriarchal', while its defenders regard it as protecting women from the oppressive male gaze. In this brouhaha over the veil, the fact that there is no single definition of it, that it has different meanings for different people and that what is considered to be normative Islamic women's attire varies across different Muslim ethnic groups and social classes is completely lost sight of. Further, the important distinctions between the veil, the burqa, the naqab and the hijab, all different forms of Muslim women's dress, are overlooked.

Interestingly, the Quran does not lay down any particular form of clothing for men or indeed for women. It does not require Muslim women to cover their faces completely and remain confined at home, this being a custom that Muslims later took over from the Byzantine Christians. Instead, it talks about the need for both men and women to dress modestly. Modest appearance means that erogenous parts of the body should be covered suitably. This modest dress, or hijab, meant both for men and women, has been historically understood in diverse ways in different Muslim communities.

In medieval India, it was the general practice of Muslim elites, like their Hindu counterparts, to veil their women and keep them concealed behind the four walls of their homes. But, then, as now, this was not the custom among the poorer classes, whose womenfolk were forced, by sheer economic compulsion, to work outside. They donned different forms of 'modest' Islamic dress other than the veil and did not observe strict purdah. In large parts of rural India, for instance, Muslim women wear the shalwar kameez and dupatta, which serves the same function of 'modest' dress as the veil, at the same time as it allows them to work in the fields.

A few decades ago, shuttle-cock like veils were a common sight in India, covering women from head to toe like billowing tents. This, however, is rare now. Instead, new forms of the hijab have emerged, often influenced by fashions elsewhere in the Muslim world. Far from necessarily constraining Muslim women, they often facilitate them to enter the public space and to go in for higher education and careers that their mothers would never have considered. Many Muslim parents feel comfortable letting their daughters go outside their homes to study or work if they wear loose gowns that do not necessarily cover their faces. Many Muslim women would feel more comfortable dressed that way, regarding this sort of attire as protecting them from unwanted male attention. This way of dressing is also a social leveler, erasing class differences to a great extent, in terms of external appearance. As many young Muslim women who voluntarily choose to don this form of hijab see it, it saves them the trauma that many other women have to suffer when they feel compelled to 'look good in public, thanks to the overbearing and relentless assault of the media that projects Western

women's clothing styles and the accompanying advertisements on cosmetics, hair-styles, hair colours and so on-as defining the parameters of feminine beauty.

Although some Muslim clerics consider the face-covering burkha as normative for Muslim women and insist that they should stay cloistered in their homes, many others differ. These new perceptions are reflected in the writings not only of Muslim 'modernists' but also of a significant section of the madrasa-trained ulema, a number of who have even started schools for Muslim girls. And it is not that all the ulema would insist that Muslim women should necessarily dress in plain black gowns. Interesting innovations are now being made with this simple dress in terms of colours, shapes and styles, catering to a clientele that seeks an Islamic approach to modernity. □□□

[Contributed]