

A TEST CASE FOR LIVING WITH PLURALISM IN KARNATAKA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

A meet on the Hijab ban | Photo Credit: Thulasi Kakkat

It is very unlikely that the curtain would be brought down on the issues raised by the [hijab controversy in Karnataka](#) and elsewhere in India through administrative and judicial initiatives that are afoot now. There has been some respite with the brief closure of institutions of academic learning in the face of the demand by some young Muslim girls that they be allowed to wear a hijab to college that was countered by supporters of Hindutva outfits wearing saffron outfits. The High Court of Karnataka, in an interim order, has also made it clear that “all students, regardless of their religion or faith, have been restrained from wearing saffron shawls (bhagwa), scarfs, hijab, religious flags or the like within classrooms until further orders” with regard to petitions “pending consideration” on the issue of the right to wear a hijab in classrooms. This order has also been confined to institutions where a student dress code/uniform has been prescribed. In addition, the police have held flag marches in some cities and towns that could witness a communal flare-up as a result of opposing stances.

The hijab as a differentiating marker has been an explosive issue elsewhere in other political societies as well in coming to terms with pluralism. But what is it that makes the hijab the test case for living with pluralism in Karnataka? The approach that we employ to engage with this issue will have its repercussions elsewhere too.

While an average person in India, including students, wears (sports) one or several insignia that has or have a strong religious association, it is the social and political faultlines that have acted as the springboard to pit saffron against the hijab in Karnataka.

Although this issue has been simmering elsewhere in other parts of the State for a while, it could not have had a better social anchor than in the Udupi and Dakshina Kannada districts of southern coastal Karnataka. These two districts have been in the grip of the Sangh Parivar for over a dozen years through a phalanx of institutional interventions and initiatives aimed at consolidating the Hindu identity. The Muslim minority is about 20% of the population in these two districts — 25% in Dakshina Kannada alone — and much higher than the 13% in the State as a whole (2011 Census).

While, traditionally, most of them have been petty traders, merchants and informal labour, there has been significant changes in the community following large-scale migration to West Asia right from the early years of the oil boom. There has been an impressive rise in terms of enterprise and initiative in the community across various domains such as health, education, housing, merchandise including literary and cultural production in recent years. This expansive social reach has gone along with religious consolidation as well.

While this religious archive is complex, for many young men and women exposed to the wider churning it beckons, it is not something pitted against the modern, but a distinctly new way of being and acting in the world. The political marginality they have been subjected to following the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the region, makes such a craving all the more important. They see education as a major resource not merely to access the world but also to find a fulfilling place in it. The complex churning that these new mappings of the world beget throw up fringe tendencies such as a reassertion of orthodoxy or a shallow imitation of what is

perceived as the Arab way of life. There is also the rise of new institutions: the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI) and the student organisation, the Campus Front of India closely associated with the radical group, the Popular Front of India, have also made significant advances in this region in the last few years. They are clearly fringes of a wider aspirational striving.

Muslims in the rest of Karnataka have not made equal strides; there are some sections all over Karnataka where their living/social conditions are similar to those who are socially lowest. However, they are more concentrated in the urban areas, and in some localities more than others. One of the big challenges that the BJP's Hindutva project confronts in Karnataka is the centrality of caste as the principal anchor of electoral politics. Its attempt to subordinate it to the Hindutva project has not made much headway among politically significant communities such as the Lingayats. Several Lingayat seers still hold on to the belief that they are a separate religion.

While the Sangh Parivar has mounted campaigns against love jihad, cow slaughter, etc. their impact has been limited. The hijab issue offers one of the best opportunities to polarise Muslims against Hindus. While in this wider arena, Muslims become the scapegoats for the failure of Hindutva to consolidate itself, in the case of coastal Karnataka, it is the staid nature of Hindutva nationalism and its failure to reach out to a vibrant community that accounts for the social fissures highlighted in the hijab controversy.

Christians, mainly Roman Catholics —the other religious minority in southern coastal Karnataka — who form about 8.5% of the population have also been targeted by Hindutva outfits — by renaming public places, attacking minor shrines, conducting assaults on fringe Christian gatherings, etc. The Karnataka anti-conversion Bill — or the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill — introduced recently but yet to be passed into law in the State, is clearly directed against churches. But the broad response of this community is confined to a withdrawal and reassertion of a formal secular constitutional project.

Given these faultlines, any approach to the hijab question that confines it to religious insignia is not merely archaic but misses its significance to those who don it. For a lot of young Muslim women in coastal Karnataka and probably a stratum elsewhere in Karnataka, particularly drawn from lower social rungs, the hijab is not an archaic and patriarchal imposition, but a choice through which they wish to make their presence in the world and define themselves. Access to education is deeply bound with this search for self-definition. In such a mode of striving, forbidding wearing of the hijab is not a progressive measure — as some good old people think it to be — but an assault on their self-worth and dignity. Binding them to the prescriptive dress code subjects them to a uniformity that not only submerges their difference but also reinforces prevailing political dominance. It is not necessary to reiterate the bearing such a code has on freedom of choice and sustaining its context. The hijab may have other connotations for elders of the community that one belongs to, and may be integral to one's own religious convictions, but they are largely supportive planks.

In this context it is important to make a distinction between the burqa and the hijab. The burqa is strongly associated with religious codes. Most young Muslim students in the coastal region in Karnataka may wear the burqa outside educational institutions, but they keep it aside once they are on their premises, but would continue to wear the hijab. But as a teacher I have also found that at times they may even remove the burqa in the classroom depending on the comfort level and fellow feeling they sense in the classroom. Clearly, these dispositions cannot be imposed through a regimen of codes.

How does a person wearing a hijab alongside the school uniform affect another student or a teacher or an academic administrator? Fortunately little, unless one conceives the school as

turning out cogs in the wheel and not persons with a capacity to make choices and assume responsibility for themselves.

In a deeply diverse society such as India — and such diversity is increasingly normal to most large political societies today — the only way we can build our common futures is by inviting those who feel different into a conversation and continually forge the common through it.

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