

## Opinion

# The burqa paradox: Feminism's blind spot amid patriarchal impositions

If no woman wears the burqa, the patriarchal structures that rely on such garments to enforce control would lose a key tool of their influence.

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My mother was born into a traditional upper-caste, upper-middle-class family. Though her upbringing came with its share of restrictions for women, the mindset in her household was not as conservative as that of my father's family. My father, hailing from a Peshawari lineage, grew up in a household with a rigid adher

When my mother was on the brink of marrying my father, he laid down a condition: she must always wear a burqa when leaving the house. My mother,



father's word was final, and my mother was helpless to defy him.

This is not an isolated instance. The burqa has long been enforced through patriarchal edicts, frequently justified as divinely ordained.

### **From modesty to patriarchy via theological interpretations**

The history of the burqa is deeply intertwined with religious texts, cultural practices, and interpretations that have evolved over centuries.

In the Qur'an, verse 59 of Surah Al-Ahzab instructs women to draw their cloaks over their bodies to avoid harassment, while verse 31 of Surah An-Nur advises women to “lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers.”

Verse 34 of Surah An-Nisa contributes to this discourse.

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given



...three party's real sovereignty and in conduct, admonition from (me), (them), (her) to share their beds, (and last) beat them lightly. But if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance).”

Such interpretations highlight the tension between religious prescriptions and the fundamental principles of gender equality. They also place the burden of modesty squarely on the shoulders of women, rather than addressing the responsibility of men not to objectify women as mere sexual objects.

The expectation is that women must cover themselves to avoid tempting men, rather than emphasising that men should control their gaze and behaviour. This dynamic shifts the focus away from addressing the root problem – male behaviour – and instead enforces the notion that it is women’s responsibility to prevent unwanted attention.

Over time, the same verses have been interpreted by scholars and cultural leaders in various ways, leading to a range of practices around the world – from the modest hijab to the full-body burqa. Although the Qur’an’s directive was intended to promote modesty, garments like the burqa have been shaped by centuries of cultural and social influences. They have often been used as instruments of patriarchal control, enforcing the segregation of women and restricting their presence in public spaces, effectively functioning as a “mobile prison” for them.



Feminists often rally against these bans, advocating for the right of women to

Can girls as young as 10 make a personal choice to wear the hijab? When these practices stem from patriarchal frameworks, they are not genuinely free choices but are imposed by societal expectations.

But at the same time, it's important to recognise that bans on the burqa, including the one in Karnataka, may often have their own selfish, communal, or political motivations which complicate the debate.

### **Hindutva approach only deepening divisions**

The BJP frames the burqa as a symbol of oppression of Muslim men, often failing to address the deeper issues of patriarchal control that affect women across all communities. So it shifts the focus away from a broader critique of patriarchal structures.

This is not very different from how similar political groups fuel communal tensions to deflect attention from more pressing concerns, such as caste inequalities and the government's failures in economic and developmental spheres.



the garment, which celebrated the quashing of militant interpretations by the Supreme Court.

My own experiences with my mother's struggle with this garment provide a personal lens through which to view the broader issue. Over the years, her experience has been marked by a tension between her personal desires and the patriarchal expectations imposed upon her. This personal history suggests that any advocacy for women's right to choose must also involve challenging the underlying systems that restrict genuine freedom.

Feminism, after all, fundamentally aims to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression and to ensure that women have the freedom to make choices free from coercion or societal control. And by rallying behind the burqa as a symbol of choice, there is a risk of endorsing a practice that directly opposes the fundamental goals of feminism. True feminist support involves questioning and challenging the patriarchal frameworks that enforce such practices rather than endorsing them as symbols of personal choice.

In a hypothetical scenario where no woman wears the burqa, the patriarchal structures that rely on such garments to enforce control would lose a key tool of their influence. After all, if the burqa was universally abandoned, what examples would patriarchy use to maintain their authority and control?



...entire... each... process, the... large... will... remain... a... symbol... of... paternal... and... control...

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