

## **Muslim Class Relations and the Freedom to Veil: Secularism and the “Burqa” in France and India**

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### ABSTRACT

This essay explores the growth of Salafist Islam and the practice of the burqa among poor Muslim minorities in France and India. It departs from existing approaches to this phenomenon by showing how Islamic discourse is grounded in local political context and Muslim class relations. While the burqa is stigmatized yet freely practiced in India, in France it became the focus of a national commission to issue recommendations against its use and raise the possibility of a ban in certain public settings. Based on ethnographic research in poor Muslim neighborhoods in Lyon, France, and Hyderabad, India, I argue that India’s particular model of secularism allowed for the development of a strong Muslim middle-class that has created a dynamic Islamic field where the burqa is simultaneously protected and contested among the poor. In contrast, the French model of *laïcité* has obstructed a solid Muslim middle-class, whose bonds to poor Salafist Muslims have been broken down. The burqa is attacked by the state and practiced among a vulnerable and isolated population of women. Although the research supported some of the existing literature that focuses on globalization and identity to explain Salafist Islam, this essay privileges the role of the state and class relations as shaping the field in which the burqa is embraced and questioned.

Few expressions of faith today cause as much fear and loathing in plural democracies as the “burqa.”<sup>1</sup> The burqa has come to represent a number of evils currently associated with Islam, including the oppression of women, terrorism, and radical separatism. The right to wear a burqa has become a particularly vexed issue in several secular countries, from Tunisia to the Netherlands, where the growth in numbers of women who wear it is closely tied to the spread of Salafist Islam. The Salafist movement, increasingly prominent in poor minority Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> The term “burqa” is commonly employed by Indian Muslims but is not employed by those in the French Muslim community who are familiar with women’s veiling practices. The word is currently used in France to refer to either the full body covering including the face, except the eyes, or a mesh-fabric covering over the eyes. These are the specific practices being debated in the French Assembly. Among adherents, they are referred to as a “niqab” or “sitar” (which covers the eyes). Most of the women in France among whom I conducted fieldwork wore the “djelbab,” which refers to a long hair and body covering that leaves the face exposed. Some of them also wore the niqab. In India, most of the Muslim women whom I researched wore a niqab. In this paper, I switch back and forth between the terms. There is little distinction made in the French Assembly hearings, for example, between these practices.

neighborhoods, is based on the desire to emulate the Prophet Muhammed and follow the teachings of the earliest generations of Muslims.<sup>2</sup> This essay is an analytical comparison of the question of the burqa in France and in India, two countries where Salafist Islam has grown among the Muslim poor.<sup>3</sup> While the burqa is freely practiced in India, in France it has been the subject of a national commission that has proclaimed it a violation of Republican principals and raised the possibility of a future ban on the practice in certain public venues. Based on 20 months of ethnographic study in Lyon, France, and Hyderabad, India, I argue that although the burqa is stigmatized in both countries, in the latter the legal framework of religious freedom and the existence of a strong Muslim middle-class has created an open and dynamic Islamic field where the burqa is simultaneously protected and contested.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in France the debates and application of *laïcité* and the weak Muslim middle-class have created a bifurcated Islamic field in which the burqa is attacked by the state and practiced among a vulnerable and isolated population of women.

This essay departs from existing approaches to Salafist Revival and the burqa by showing how Islamic discourse and its relationship to the state is grounded in local context and Muslim class relations as opposed to more abstract notions attached to globalization or crises of identity suffered by young Muslims (Gerholm and Lithman, eds. 1988; Nielsen 1999; Behabib 2002; Davis and Krauthammer 2005). Existing literature tends to focus on a Salafist, “born again”

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<sup>2</sup> Historically, the Salafist movement refers to a reform movement within Sunni Islam to return to the original teachings and practices of the Prophet Muhammed and the Quran. Its origins as a movement are debated, with some citing 18<sup>th</sup> century Arabians and others citing 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals in Egypt. It is also internally debated as to which Islamic groups, schools of thought, and practices, may be considered Salafist. Salafism has historically been a pietist and apolitical movement, after some involvement in state politics in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Stemmann 2006). See Hourani 1983 and Euben and Zaman 2009.

<sup>3</sup> This intra-Muslim debate in France is generally framed as mainstream versus Salafist Islam, whereas in India the same trend is often noted as “modern” versus “backwards,” as opposed to Salafist per se. Moreover, Salafism is sometimes used interchangeably in India with Ehl-e-Hadees and Wahhabi Islam.

<sup>4</sup> Both cities have a significant ethnically Muslim population, largely living in the poorer peripheries. My research consisted of participant observation at mosques, madrasas, and Islamic welfare centers, and interviews with Muslim activists and leaders in a poor Muslim neighborhood and middle-class community in each city.

Islam that flourishes especially in a context of minority status, where Muslims must redefine themselves and purify their relationship to Islam (Roy 2004, 2006). Disaffected youth, who feel alienated from the dominant culture, welcome the redefinitions that the burqa and other practices impose on one's life. While my research corroborated some of this phenomenon, I place greater emphasis on the role of the state in defining religious freedom and allowing or preventing certain class formations among Muslim minorities as key to the dynamics of Islam in poor neighborhoods.

### **Laïcité versus Composite Nationalism**

Both France and India, despite very different histories and global positions, have struggled over religious freedoms for their Muslim populations, the largest religious minority in both cases. But they have inverse models of secularism, and thus, religious minority integration—one marked by “accommodation” and the other, by assimilation. Indian secularism, or composite nationalism (termed by Prime Minister Nehru), seems to embody fundamental contradictions because of its acceptance of religious laws and the existence of Muslim Personal Law (Hasan 1997; Hasan 1998; Sunder Rajan 2000). Muslim Personal Law accepts the legality of sharia in matters of family, finances, and property. In addition to Personal Law, minority recognition occurs through state funding of certain religious activities, holidays, and affirmative action policies for Muslims in some states.

In stark contrast to India's multicultural model, the French model of *laïcité*, rooted in the Jacobin tradition, is based on political and cultural assimilation and opposes recognition of religious or ethnic minorities. The passion with which the French state aims toward a more homogenous sense of nationality is demonstrated through the 2004 banning of the headscarf (hijab) in public schools. Aside from controversies over veiling practices, there are key Muslim

demands for rights such as construction of prayer halls, Muslim cemeteries, and separate swimming pool hours for men and women.

Such demands are not made in India, where state respect for separate dietary laws, cemeteries, and religious institutions generally prevails. Even where municipal laws appear to hinder certain religious freedoms, political and religious parties at the local level manage these through informal negotiations. For example, during my ethnography in Hyderabad, I noticed the Islamic call to prayer loudly amplified five times daily by neighborhood mosques. Although such amplification is technically not allowed, a political party member admitted to me that Hindu parties tolerate this in exchange for maintaining a temple at the base of the Charminar, the principal city monument and homage to the city's Muslim heritage. Moreover, there is a mutual understanding that while Muslims amplify their calls and prayers, Hindus amplify music during their frequent festivals.

Unlike the Indian case, French *laïcité* was designed to keep religiosity *out* of the public sphere and moreover, to uphold national values of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*. Loyalty to Islam is viewed as suspect, a threat to the authority of the state and a form of sectarianism. The recent targeting of the burqa (niqab), worn by a marginal number of women concentrated in poor urban peripheries, stems from a presumed sectarianism of Salafist Islam and rejection of French values (Césari 2005; Bowen 2006; Stemmann 2006; Strieff 2006; Killian 2007; Salvatore 2007; Scott 2007; Amiraux 2008; Joppke 2009). Granting women the right to wear a burqa, according to the French commission, is a threat to destabilize the secular Republic (Gerin, National Assembly hearings, September 16, 2009). The French state has thus begun an intervention to “protect” Muslim women and the Republic from this practice—a practice that freely prevails in the Indian

case. While in India, secularism is designed to guarantee freedom *of* religious practice, in France it is designed in a sense to guarantee freedom *from* practice.<sup>5</sup>

### **Conflict and Paternalism**

Like in Lyon, the burqa in Hyderabad is increasingly practiced among the poor as part of the growing influence of transnational Salafism. In particular, the continuous flow of labor, goods, and ideas from Saudi Arabia and Gulf states has facilitated the growth of Salafist Islam. In response to state retrenchment from impoverished Muslim neighborhoods, many Muslim men have taken work contracts in the Gulf or Saudi Arabia. Poor Muslim women, in turn, participate in local welfare and textile training centers operated by the city's Muslim elite. These women, concentrated in slums and in the "Old City" section of Hyderabad, are stigmatized as "backwards" and oppressed by men. For example, when I attended a press conference for a Jama'at-i-Islami Hind (JIH) women's conference, several members of the press were hostile with the three burqa-clad directors sitting at the dais.<sup>6</sup> One journalist cried out, "This is the modern era! Under what conditions are you ever going to change?"

As is the case with their counterparts in Lyon, the burqa is largely the women's choice, notwithstanding common misconceptions about women's volition. At the JIH women's conference, nearly 40,000 women gathered to hear speeches about their role in Islam. There were giant banners with various slogans such as "we use purdah [veil] to cover our bodies, not our minds." One particular poster had images of women in burqas in various professional settings, to convey the common message that Muslim women can be equally educated and

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<sup>5</sup> This is notwithstanding the intense controversy among Muslims as to whether certain veiling practices are even part of Islam and thus a question of *laïcité* (Asad 2005). Indeed, if the state cannot control the practice in the name of *laïcité*, it has tried to do so in the name of women's rights.

<sup>6</sup> JIH is a sub-Continental Islamic religious and political organization, formed in 1941. Despite episodes of hostile relations with the Indian state, its history has remained relatively stable (Grare 2001).

employed, so long as they wear the burqa. These messages are continually reinforced, especially in a context of external hostility to Salafist Islam.

At the same time, because of the relative dynamism and freedom in the local Islamic field, many poor women challenge both the burqa and sex segregation. One night I witnessed an intense gendered conflict at a popular Sufi shrine, where for decades many poor Muslims have gathered to hear *qawaali* performances.<sup>7</sup> As the music accelerated, people were shuffling around on the floor, trying to get closer to the singers. Suddenly, several men from Tablighi Jama'at entered the area and started directing all of us women further from the performers and shooing us to a different, segregated section.<sup>8</sup> A number of women started resisting this, pushing men out of the way, refusing to move, or shouting irritably against the intrusion. The men unfurled a thick white curtain to create a separate women's section, but the women continued to tug at the curtain and argue with the Tablighi members.

I argue that part of this dynamism and contest over gendered practices comes from a strong and paternalistic Muslim middle-class and elite. The Muslim elite in Hyderabad has organized around philanthropy as well as around the Muslim political party, the MIM (Majlis-e Ittihad al-Muslimin). As these groups vie for political recognition, their legitimacy rests on drawing in the Muslim poor. They distribute welfare and education but at the same time encourage political participation and discourage practices of Salafist Islam, including those of Tablighi Jama'at. I observed a number of episodes at welfare center settings, where philanthropic Board members debated with poor women about their practices, the burqa, and the meaning of "true" Islam. At one educational center for poor Muslim children, a struggle

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<sup>7</sup> Qawaali refers to Sufi devotional music and singing. It originated many centuries ago in Persia, migrated to the Subcontinent, and today represents a blend of Persian and Indian musical traditions.

<sup>8</sup> Tablighi Jama'at, founded in India, is the largest transnational Islamic movement. It deliberately shuns engagement with the state in favor of missionary-style preaching (Metcalf 2001).

developed between the female principal, who refused to wear a burqa, and the male school-teachers who criticized her practices and teaching of English at the school. All were from poor Muslim families in the Old City. The philanthropic Board sided with the principal, even threatening to fire the teachers.

Although the Muslim middle-class and elite strongly disapprove of the burqa, at the same time they buffer and defend their poor brethren from the state, and thus tend to oppose state interventions in the lives of the poor. These include such things as state interference in madrasa curricula or potential legislation of women's veiling practices. In sum the freedom to wear a burqa is at once protected from the state and challenged by the Muslim elite.

### **Isolation and Disconnect**

The Muslim middle-class of Lyon also confronts an uneasy position between the state and poor Salafists. While many middle-class activists oppose state legislation of veiling practices, they commonly argue that the burqa is a grave misinterpretation of Islam by Salafist Muslims, concentrated in the city's poor banlieues, such as Vénissieux. Les Minguettes, with its history of police surveillance and mosque raids, is the neighborhood of Vénissieux where I conducted fieldwork. The largely French-Arab residents of Les Minguettes suffer unemployment rates of nearly 50% and live in the aftermath of the collapse of Islamic civil societies that were once active in the 1980s and 90s prior to state intrusion (Césari 2002, 2005). A number of Salafist women I knew, who wore the niqab, chose to withdraw from school when the anti-headscarf law was passed in 2004. Most of these women, about a third of whom are French converts to Islam, live in housing projects and are unemployable due to their veiling. During my ethnography I had numerous encounters with and observations of their ostracization, including such episodes as being physically pushed at a metro station and ridiculed on the street.

Soon after President Sarkozy announced that the burqa was “not welcome” on French territory, a local bank in Les Minguettes posted a sign with an image of a woman in niqab with an ‘X’ marked through it. I asked one of my informants who wore a niqab what she would do if anti-burqa laws were passed. “I’m going to get out of here and get a house in Algeria. We can’t take it here in France anymore.”

For such women, the mosque community they created was an important refuge for them. Much of their Salafist teachings during mosque classes were oriented around serenity and acceptance of suffering and ostracization. For example, when students asked the teacher what to do about public reaction to their veiling, she replied: “Remember, the Prophet’s companions were always mocked. They were even tortured. You have to have courage to do what you believe. If someone mocks you, don’t engage [them]. Just turn inward.” The teachers also frequently emphasized trusting God instead of worrying over their futures and being satisfied with their situations no matter how dire. The frequent theme of social disengagement and fostering a very individualized relationship with God has developed out of a context of hostility to women’s veiling as well as the isolation of poor Salafist women. Amina, a 29-year old French woman of Algerian descent, lived alone on public benefits that were soon to expire.<sup>9</sup> She received no support from her family, who despised her wearing of the burqa. “But then I always remember that God is guiding me and I shouldn’t have fear. Malika [mosque teacher] always tells us not to worry, to trust God. That’s what I’m trying to do.”

I argue that this isolation and limited potential of poor Muslims in the *banlieues* to socially engage outside their own communities or to defend their religious freedoms is due partly

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<sup>9</sup> All proper names have been changed to protect anonymity.

to Muslim class segregation.<sup>10</sup> With the collapse of civil societies in Les Minguettes, the bonds between middle-class Islamic associations and the poor were broken. Most of the middle-class Muslim activists I knew were disdainful of Salafist Islam and admitted that their associations were disconnected from Muslim families and their socioeconomic conditions in the housing projects. When major national, state-created Islamic institutions (Conseil Fédéral du Culte Musulman and the Grand Mosque of Paris) announced their support for the commission on the burqa, one informant in Les Minguettes said: “I hate the fact that they’re the ones who represent us [to the state], who speak for us. Actually, they don’t represent us [in the banlieues] at all.” Thus, there is a bifurcated Islamic field, between one that embraces French norms and another marked by a form of Salafist Islam that the state seeks to restrict. The Muslim middle-class has neither the will nor capacity to protect religious freedoms for the poor nor ameliorate their economic suffering as seen in the Indian case.

### **Conclusion**

Driven by laïcité and the desire to uphold Republican values, the French state and public has attributed various significations to Muslim women’s veiling, specifically oppression, sectarianism (*communautarisme*), and Islamism (*Islamisme*) (Kaltenbach and Tribalat 2002; Deloire and Dubois 2004; Tissot 2006; Assembly hearings 2009). Based on the Assembly debates as well as numerous discussions I had with French non-Muslims, the burqa is virtually perceived as an infringement of the public’s rights because it is imbued with such negative meaning. The hermeneutics of the practice are ignored by the French Assembly alongside the fact that most women who wear it do so willfully. Veiling is a deeply emotional and essential part of their lives (Mahmood 2005). Thus, what is at stake in the state’s wish to restrict the

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<sup>10</sup> The term “banlieue” refers to the suburban peripheries of France’s urban centers. For an analysis of the socio-political construction of the ‘problem of the banlieues’ in France, see Tissot 2006. See Wacquant (2008) for an analysis of the differences between French banlieues and the American ghetto.

practice is nothing short of the women's relationship to their faith and mortality. At the same time the collapse of Islamic civil societies in the banlieues and the demise of Muslim class relations has further isolated Salafist Muslims and prevented the development of a freer and more dynamic Islamic discourse in the banlieues—whereby women might explore, embrace, or challenge the burqa in an atmosphere free of political charge.

In Hyderabad there is also public stigma against burqa-clad Muslim women. But the peculiar state model of secularism established a legal framework whereby the state refrains from determining the meaning of practices deemed internal to a community.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the burqa is not typically portrayed as an infringement of others' rights or a symbol of values that violate national principals. The state remains indifferent to the motives or circumstances of those who wear it. Further, I argue, freedom of practice has also led to an open atmosphere and the creation of autonomous Islamic civil societies. "Composite nationalism" allowed for the use of religious identity in organizing a philanthropic elite and political parties. In turn a paternalistic relationship to the Muslim poor has facilitated welfare efforts, protection of freedom to practice, as well as space to question gendered practices. In sum, the Indian model has allowed some space to breathe, though perhaps not to thrive, whereas the French model has lent itself to a gradual smothering of religious freedoms.

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<sup>11</sup> There are, however, occasional threats from right-wing groups and parties.

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