

Burka Ban - A tragic farce

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A ban on wearing the burka is as bad as a diktat to wear one. Both are born out of intolerance and an inability to appreciate and respect the 'other' way of life.

It is, therefore, ironical that so called western civilized countries are rubbing shoulders with those they describe as 'barbaric' and 'primitive' by imposing a ban on the burka that has come to symbolize a faith and a way of life for many in this world. Bans ---on dress, art, music, literature even political parties---can never be seen as progressive legislation as these seek to impose the prejudiced will of a government on peoples and individuals.

Fatwas to wear the burka have invited strong protests and opposition from across the world. It is interesting to note that the ban on the burka has been met with a stony silence from the West that clearly is not worried about the suppression of women under the burka, but more about the fact that the wearer is openly flaunting her religious identity and looks 'different.' Just as the Sikhs offended western sensibilities by insisting on wearing the turban.

I personally regard the burka as a symbol, not of faith, but of oppression. Men have misinterpreted Islam to convert the 'dress modestly' directive into this terrible clothing that completely shackles not just the bodies but also the minds of women. At a strategic institute in Tehran one met this very bright, charming, intelligent woman who was extremely talkative when we went together to the 'Ladies' but clammed up when we came back into the seminar room. The men spoke for the entire day, she wearing the burka in all its glory, sat quietly without a word to contribute.

And this has been my experience through out. Be it Lucknow, Tehran, Mumbai, Karachi, any where women are covered from head to toe they seem to pale into insignificance. My grandmother who did wear the burka for a while, discarded it when she was in her early thirties to plunge into social work and later politics. She never wore the black garment again in her life, and made sure that neither her children or her grandchildren were ever clad in this stifling gear. A well known woman who worked closely with Gandhi, and later became a Member of Parliament, she used to tell us never to mix religion and faith with the oppression of women. And mind you she was religious, said her prayers regularly, but realized early in life that the burka could only weight down women, not empower them in this world.

At the same time the answer is not a ban. This only stokes passions, gives a handle to fundamentalists to further fuel prejudice and hatred, and create suspicions instead of trust and confidence. Author Salman Rushdie says he does not want to see half the world in a bag. But then perhaps, there are many in the world who do not want to see women in halter tops and plunging necklines. And like France and other such countries do not hesitate to ban women from wearing such clothes, and insist they wear the cloak when they go outside.

Why do governments legislate on what a woman should or should not wear? It is because male driven societies even today look upon the woman as a possession to be controlled in not just the home, but also the work place, on the streets. So she should wear the burka, or she should not wear the burka, according to what governments ordain and not what she decides for herself. Both sides have very convincing and detailed arguments for their diktats, one addressing itself to the so called 'liberal' western audience that is basically suspicious of anything or anyone who looks different; and the other targeting the so called 'primitive' audience that does not like its women to breathe.

What does the woman want? She wants the freedom to decide for herself. I met these lovely young women in Iraq, before the US invasion, all wearing mini skirts and running a bank. They were very comfortable with themselves and said that they faced no problems at all. I met this young woman in Tehran who took off the burka as soon as she entered the house where we were all invited for dinner, heaving a huge sigh of relief. She was dressed in clothes that would have made Rushdie comfortable. She hated the burka but said she had no choice in the matter like all the other women in Iran. Then there was this woman from Pakistan who had started wearing a hijab and was engaged to be married to a man from a different religion. Her reasons were entirely different. "I live on my own in Lahore, and some how in today's environment I feel I am safer and more secure if I dress in this manner," she said even as she took out a photograph of a glamorous her, with flowing hair and twinkling eyes. In Egypt the women told me that they had all started wearing the hijab because they were heckled in the streets if they did not. "Its safer," they said.

So let the women be. Let them dress as they want, and perhaps one day they will have the power to take off the burka, as my grandmother did, and throw it into the dustbin for good. But these bans only encourage those who want to keep women in shackles, and help them build a case for a piece of clothing that most women regard as a 'prison.' And the thousands of women who have been trying to fight against the diktats to wear the burka, are silenced when faced with a law not to wear the burka. What a farce, but what a tragic farce.

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P.S.

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