

Hijab Row as the Reflection of a 'Hegemonic Hindu Masculinity' in the Service of Hindu Nationalism

In March, the courts in the Indian state of Karnataka upheld a ban on Muslim women students wearing hijabs to classrooms. The court's judgement had been preceded by weeks of aggressive Hindu protests in support of the ban purportedly to provide equality to students of all religions. Jyoti Bania argues that the episode became yet another vehicle for the expression of a 'hegemonic Hindu masculinity' – constructed in opposition to denigrated masculinities of marginalised communities – that is sanctioned and rationalised in the name of an assertive nationalism.

In December 2021, [Muslim women students were denied access to educational institutions](#) for wearing Hijabs in the Udupi district of Karnataka state in India. [Women students who resisted](#) the ban and demanded entry into the classrooms were singled out for victimisation in the form of threats and intimidation by a group of right-wing Hindu nationalist men who seemed to have the sympathy of both the educational institute in question and the different institutions of the state.

In this episode in India's politics, hijab as well as the bodies of Muslim women became sites of conflict, used by Hindu nationalists and politicians, mostly men, to signify disrespect for Muslim women and denigrate the larger Muslim community. This occurred against the background of ongoing attacks on Muslim women [by the members of conservative hate groups collectively known as "Trads" \(the abbreviation for 'Traditionals'\)](#) – consisting mostly of [Brahmin and Upper Caste Hindu men](#) who centre around the idea of [Brahminical supremacy, and are committed to targeting Dalits, Muslims and women](#). They have created apps such as [Bulli Bai](#) and [Sulli Deals](#) to auction Muslim women, for example, and make their pictures available online publicly. Even though no such auctions happened in reality, [these apps clearly intended to degrade and humiliate Muslim women](#), many of whom have been vocal against rising Hindu nationalism.

The principal of the institute justified the hijab ban in the name of maintaining "uniformity". Since then, this justification has been furthered by the state's government and the courts too in their actions on this matter. [On 15 March 2022](#), a full-judge bench of the Karnataka High Court upheld that the government has the power to prescribe a uniform, and the restriction on hijab is "reasonable" and constitutionally permissible, which the students cannot object to. This rationalisation of the ban in supposedly secular, neutral terms is important to note.

It should be further noted that under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rule in Karnataka state as well as in other parts of India, attacks on minorities, such as mob-lynching of Muslim men on the mere suspicion of [carrying, consuming beef](#) and [transporting cows](#); [detaining Muslim men](#) for [love jihad](#) (although official investigations have not found any evidence of this), the introduction of [anti-conversion bill](#) to prevent love jihad and other religious conversions; and [blaming](#) the [Tablighi Jamaat](#) for the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, have been growing greatly. This post looks at such occurrences as reflections of a majoritarian cultural identity which is synonymous with the ideal of a 'hegemonic Hindu masculinity'. I examine the construction of this masculinity in the context of a masculinised Hindu nationalism attempting to assert dominance over marginalised 'others' – in this case Muslim men and women.

Understanding Hegemonic Hindu Masculinity

Sanjay [Srivastava \(2015\) quotes that masculinity](#) is both socially constructed and embodied. It is expressed and manifested through behaviours, language, gestures, social interaction and a set of actions and practices that are "appropriate" to men. Connell (2005) in her well-known book, [Masculinities](#), argues that masculinity is a relational and plural concept (therefore she prefers "masculinities" to "masculinity"); it does not exist without a contrasting "femininity".

Similarly, a hegemonic masculinity is defined in comparison with subordinated and marginalised masculinities.

Further, per [Connell \(1993\)](#) "Masculinity as personal practice cannot be isolated from its institutional context". She identifies three institutions of the State, workplace and family as crucial in "organization of gender" (p. 602). In the case of the hijab ban the workplace could be replaced by the educational institute. Srivastava expands the list of sites where the discourse of masculinity as a dominant and superior gender position is produced to include customary laws, religious norms, and the media, and says that this has specific consequences for women as well as those men who may not fit into the dominant and valorised models of masculinity ([Srivastava, 2015](#)).

The construction of Hindu masculinity (by this I mean "upper caste Hindu masculinity" because I have no room to discuss caste hierarchies within the Hindu masculinity here) can thus be considered as an example of a hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary socio-political context of India. This masculinity, I argue here, is a manifestation and an expression of a Hindu nationalism, which is characterised by aggression, masculine strength and willingness to engage in battle in order to subordinate Muslim men and women.

A Brief Historical Background of the Construction of Hindu Masculinity and its Relation to an Aggressive Hindu Nationalism

Indian masculinities were constructed by the different periods of history such as pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial eras, and were informed by caste and religious identities (See [Indian Masculinities](#)).

In the context of recent history, during colonialism, the "masculinisation" of British male identity, and the "feminisation" of colonised men was a major theme of discussion. In this, some native colonised men were considered feminised, while others – such as Sikhs and Gurkhas – were declared to have "martial masculinity" (see, [Colonial Masculinity](#) and [Men and Masculinities in South India](#)). However, it is important to note that the British did not simply construct certain types of masculine cultures and impose them upon Indian culture but built on pre-existing cultural tropes (see, [Manliness and Imperial Service in Mughal North India](#)).

In addition to colonialism, many nineteenth-century Hindu scholars believed that "['emasculated' was also attributable to Muslim rule](#)". [This Hindu vs. Muslim binary continues to influence the contemporary politics of Hindu nationalism](#) where the construction of Hindu masculinity is rationalised to confront "aggressive" Muslims.

Sikata Banerjee points out ([MAKE ME A MAN! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India](#)) that this recurrence of the myth of Muslim aggression continues to feed the tropes of Muslim men's "voracious appetite for blood and sex" and the need for an aggressive Hindu masculinity in response.

The dominant discourse of Hindu nationalism espoused by the BJP is to resist foreign aggressors, often that includes all Muslims. Thus, resistance forms a vital part of the BJP's configuration of the myth energising Hindu nationalism. The following excerpt from the BJP's official website, quoted by [Banerjee in her book](#), **reflects dominant tropes of Hindu strength and power in the terms of hegemonic masculinity:**

we must never, never forget our own history—both our proud martial tradition of defending ourselves against external aggression as also our sad tradition of excessive pacificism ... Indian sages and philosophers never suggested that cowards and weaklings, ... can be the torch bearers of India's great tradition of suraksha [good defense] ... None but the valiant can achieve salvation (Advani, 1997, p. 47).

[Banerjee \(2005\)](#) rightly argues that the symbols of armed Hindu masculinity include weapons, saffron bandanas, and slogans expressing militant anger. Muslim women's bodies were used to be shown contempt and villainise the entire Muslim community. The same holds for the attack on Muslim women in the hijab row in Karnataka. [The Muslim women students were confronted by hundreds of boys](#) and men wearing saffron and shouting slogans such as [Jai Sri Ram \(Hail Lord Ram\) at the campus gates](#). At one campus, a boy was seen climbing a flagpole and [hoisting a saffron flag](#) while his other supporters in saffron shawls cheered from the ground. Thus, the

hegemonic Hindu masculinity was expressed symbolically through the saffron-clad, angry mob, *Jai Sri Ram* slogan manifesting militant anger and the readiness to perpetuate violence.

In conclusion, the Hindu nationalism-centred aggressive hegemonic Hindu masculinity can be easily evoked and intensified in the current socio-political scenario of India. The BJP government in Karnataka has been valorising this masculinity as the ideal expression of Hindu nationalism. Such hegemonic Hindu masculinity can be traced back to *the so-called father of Hindutva* Savarkar's slogan, "Hinduise all politics and militarise Hinduism!"

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