

Being a Muslim Woman in India

India is located in large geography; it lies on essential trade routes. As the second-most populous country in the world, India is home to a diverse population in terms of language, religion, and culture. After years of European colonialism, it gained its independence in 1947 as the Republic of India; the ideology of nationalism played an essential role in its struggle for independence. In this process, Hindu and Muslim Indians shared their struggle against colonialism.

However, with the withdrawal of the British, differences of opinion and conflicts began. Ultimately, the region was divided into two, with the Hindu majority in India and the Muslim majority in Pakistan, a country that resulted exactly because of this division. With the partition that resulted in the establishment of Pakistan, a significant part of Indian Muslims settled in Pakistan. Since India's large area and economic conditions prevented all Muslims from immigrating to Pakistan, some Muslims remained in India.

With approximately 180 million Muslims living today, India is the country with the second-largest Muslim population in the world. However, policies towards Muslims, who make up 14.2% of the total population, have led to an escalation of anti-Islamism in the country in recent years. After the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - which defended Hindu nationalism and based its party's ideology accordingly - came to power in 2014, a significant increase in anti-Islamic practices was observed in the country. Especially after winning the overwhelming majority with its allies in the last elections in 2019, the party's oppression and intimidation policies towards Muslims became even more dominant; the social hatred created by this situation has targeted Muslim women the most. This social hatred, fuelled by the state, manifests itself in many areas, from population policies to social media practices, from headscarf bans to acts of sexual violence against women.

One of the biggest concerns created by Hindu nationalism among India's Muslim population is the policies related to family planning and sterilization due to the change in demographic structure. According to Hindu nationalists, while the fertility rate of Muslim women increases, the fertility rate of Hindu women decreases. Although there is no actual data on this situation, the unfounded claims that dominate social media turn into violent acts in daily life. In this context, besides government officials, the National Volunteers Organization (Raashtrveer Svayamsevak Sangathan-RSS), an essential ally of the ruling party, and other Hindu nationalist organizations have also begun to promote population regulation bills regarding fertility rates.

A year after the BJP assumed power, a resolution on the implementation of population control was adopted. It is stated that the birth rate of Muslim women is high, and the Muslim population is increasing rapidly with illegal immigration. On the subject, a BJP deputy argued that a two-child policy should be implemented and suggested that those who do not comply with this rule should be deprived of their voting rights and even imprisoned. Like the BJP, the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena Party, an ally of the ruling party, also submitted a motion to the parliament regarding the sterilization of all Muslim women.

One of the concrete examples of widespread hate speech among the Hindu public is the humiliating campaigns against Muslim women on social media. Firstly, in July 2020, an internet application called Sulli Deals emerged in India, where photos of Muslim women were disclosed and sold through an online auction. In the application, pictures and personal information of nearly 80 Muslim women are listed. Sulli Deals depicts Indian Muslim women in a derogatory way, and a social hate speech is tried to be built on Muslim women. Despite all these negativities, official authorities did not take the necessary steps to catch the perpetrators of this practice. Six months later, another application of the same type, called Bulli Bai, emerged. It is stated that the words "bulli" and "sulli" in the local language are derogatory expressions used for Muslim women, and the shared photos are uploaded as "bulli of the day."

Muslim women have been publicly harassed and insulted by being exposed in an obscene context with manipulated photographs in the application. The fact that no sanctions were made against the perpetrators of the first application must have served as an incentive for the repetition of this situation. Quratulain Rehbar, a journalist in the Indian-administered Kashmir region, complained about the application when she saw that her name was listed in an online auction and her photos were uploaded for sale. After Rehbar shared this situation on social media, it was revealed that the photos of more than 100 Muslim women, including the wife of the Delhi High Court Judge, journalist, actresses, and politicians were

sold via an online auction.

Similarly, Ismat Ara, a journalist in New Delhi, filed a complaint to the Delhi Police Cyber Crime Unit about the practice in which many women, including herself, were exposed because "it incites hostility based on religion and creates threats of sexual harassment against women." While the mainstream media in the country ignored the issue of Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai apps, it took a long time for complaints about these apps to even be reported by law enforcement agencies. Finally, after an investigation launched on religious hatred, three engineering faculty students who were determined as the apps founders were arrested. One of the arrested students confessed to the police that he had embraced the ideology of Hindu nationalism after contacting Hindu right-wing users and that his application resulted from these ideas. Therefore, these kinds of apps show that the issue is not just misogyny but the product of a deliberate and unacceptable hate speech against the "Muslim woman" identity. This situation also reveals the necessity of establishing a reliable mechanism to officially supervise the social media platforms used in the country and prevent the spread of such contents. Undoubtedly, such attacks against Muslim women will increase if an effective fight against cybercrime, supported by laws, is not spearheaded in the country.

One of the oppressions imposed on Muslim women in India is the hijab ban. After the BJP emerged with a great victory in the 2019 election, hijab bans started to be implemented in some public institutions and schools, especially in the states where the party is strong. The headscarf incidents, which grew over time and were reflected in the media, caused public reaction and created a social awareness on the issue, with the images of Muslim young girls not being admitted to classes on December 28, 2021 in Karnataka. These incidents escalated when the school administration did not take a step back. The tension in the region increased considerably when Hindu students supported the ban and wore saffron-coloured shawls, which are the symbol of Hindu nationalism, and protested the hijab. Students belonging to extremist Hindu groups verbally abused Muslim female students.

As a result of the comments and videos shared on social media, especially on Twitter, protests on the hijab ban were held in various places across the state, including Bengaluru, Mysuru, Hassan, Kolar, Shahapur, Shivamogga and Udupi. Finally, Muslim students applied to the Karnataka High Court on January 31, claiming that the hijab is within the scope of fundamental rights and freedoms according to the Indian Constitution. Students stated that a harmless practice such as wearing a hijab and not changing uniforms should be considered within the scope of freedom of expression. Even though no decision has been made in the ongoing hearing, hijab bans continue. In addition, actions have been taken to expand the ban in the country. In Uttar Pradesh, a group wearing traditional Hindu clothing applied to the administration of Dharma Samaj College in Aligarh to demand the hijab ban.

It is stated that "persuasion rooms" were set up in some schools for Muslim students to agree to remove their hijab. On the other hand, there are reports that similar incidents are taking place in Udupi, one of the socially sensitive cities located in the coastal region of Karnataka and known as a BJP stronghold. The Indian government often uses this city as the "crucible of Hindutva politics" and the "proving ground" of its theses. Therefore, it is stated that the hijab ban tried to be implemented in this city is not an isolated case, and if successful, the practice here could spread to the whole India. The ban that the Indian government is currently trying to implement in high schools may apply to all schools and other public spaces in the future.

This hatred towards Muslim women as the primary addressees of the intensifying Islamophobia in the country signals that the hijab issue will grow. Another dimension of the hijab ban is the ruling party's goal of integrating young electorates into its vote pool in the upcoming elections, by increasing the polarization between Hindu and Muslim youth in high schools and universities over the hijab issue. In other words, the ban, which was intended to be imposed as an element of pressure on Muslim women, has also been used as a political tool that fuels the Hindu-Muslim conflict among young people and increases social tension.

Rape is one of the gravest and most unacceptable violations experienced by Muslim women in India. Rape cases, which can be described as one of the biggest reflections of violence between ethnic groups, directly target Muslim women. It is known that Muslim women were subjected to sexual abuse, gang rape and various tortures during violence against Muslims by Hindu groups, which were provoked by the nationalist media and supported by governments in the states. In the Gujarat Genocide, which took place in 2002 and became a symbol of religious nationalist violence, thousands of Muslims were massacred and women, young girls and children were gang raped. However, the events in question were trivialized by the dominant Hindu majority and the responsibility of the society towards violence was masked. Similarly, during the violence between Hindus and Muslims in Uttar Pradesh in 2013, many Muslim women were gang raped. On the subject, Amnesty International has noted that the perpetrators of the incident in

question in India have not yet been arrested and that the victims' statements have been changed because they were threatened. In a report, it was stated that government officials did not take the necessary steps regarding the cases and the necessary documents were not prepared within the scope of investigation. From this point of view, it is possible to say that the Indian judicial system has a discriminatory and prejudiced attitude towards Muslim women and has failed to provide justice. It is clearly seen that public institutions protect different religious groups with such prejudiced and discriminatory practices.

What is worse is that rape cases against Muslim women in the country can be justified for almost any reason. In one rape case, the Hindu belief of cows led to the rape of a Muslim woman who allegedly ate beef. The attackers threatened the woman not to make a complaint and kept her silent. Hindu nationalists justify raping Muslim women because they think that a Muslim woman ensures the biological and cultural continuity of the community to which she belongs, and that the female body symbolizes the body of all Muslims. This attitude towards rape cases shows that Muslim women are positioned at the center of violence and conflict perpetrated by Hindus against all Muslims.

Without a doubt, Muslim women are the most exploited people in India, thanks to the government's nationalist policies that tear apart Indian society, and the roadmap inspired by the Hindutva ideology. If the ruling party continues its policies of hatred and increases its power through Hindu nationalism, the rights and freedoms of Indian Muslim women could be ignored completely and they could be exposed to social isolation. This is because such acts of violence against women are the result of a systematic policy of humiliating the "Muslim female identity". However, it is also understood that the target of these policies and all kinds of acts of hatred is the entire Indian Muslim community. In other words, there is a desire to inflict a "social defeat" on Indian Muslims through religious nationalism. For this reason, a polarizing-divisive policy is carried out by the state through women, who are the most vulnerable element of the society.

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