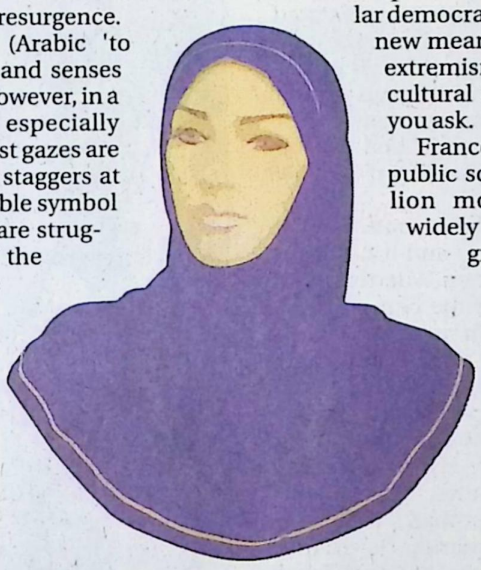
THE HIJAB AND ITS FACES

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I grew up watching my Nani and Dadi don the full-face Niqab and Burqa when they went out. My mother and aunts covered their hair and bodies. My siblings and cousins retained the latter tradition, at least during times of the Adhaan, religious festivals and funerals. There was always gentle reasoning and persuasion from older generations, but I never saw coercion. I'd always assumed by the time I grew up – the tradition would vanish. But then, I recently spotted the new 'Hijab Shop' in Banani and wondered if the Hijab wasn't experiencing a resurgence.

Islam prescribes Hijab (Arabic 'to cover') for the body, mind and senses for both men and women. However, in a cross-cultural context – especially where modesty and downcast gazes are outmoded – the discussion staggers at the Hijab. As the readily-visible symbol of religion in societies that are struggling to free themselves of the last vestiges of creed – the Hijab has become a thorny centerpiece of growing interfaith interactions.

The Hijab, popularly equated to women's headscarf or face-veil, is hardly a new or unique concept. Starting from the Apostolnik of the Orthodox to the bonnet of the Amish, from the Mitpachat of the Jewish to the Chunni of the Sikhs, from the Čādor of Zoroastrians to our traditional Ghungat / Ghumta – veils have appeared in many shapes and forms in history. They all serve religious, social and practical purposes. Today, while some remain divinely-ordained, others like the Ghungat, have blended into local culture. Purdah, in Iran and Burqa in Arabia also had cultural roots. But what stirs the modern debate over the Hijab, its necessity and its regulation – is not its cultural roots, but its political implications.

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In the post-9/11 era, the Hijab has become intrinsically political. There are now fundamental questions about what it means and what authority gets to regulate it. More than anything else, the Hijab has now become a religio-political statement in the West. In the East, it has been revisited and in some cases, has experienced resurgence among young, educated Muslims. But the frontline in the struggle over the Hijab is taking place far beyond the traditional boundaries of the Islamic bloc. It lies deep inside the heartland of modern, secular democracies where the Hijab has found new meaning as either an expression of extremism or a symbol of religious and cultural identities, depending on who you ask.

France's 2004 ban on headscarves in public schools, which affected 12 million mostly-Muslim children, was widely touted as an attempt to integrate Muslims to the French way of life. The message seemed clear: the 'Hijab' is a mark of the 'other' and will not be tolerated on our lands. A vast majority of the population supported the move – which would lead to the 2011 ban on full-face veils in public. Violations now result in fines and mandatory 'citizenship training' – the latter being reminiscent of 18th century attempts to assimilate Native Americans into mainstream society.

France's Muslim population have been protesting the bans: if security was the issue, they demanded to know why Western face-covering items such as baseball caps, sunglasses and hoodies weren't banned too. Many Muslims felt they were being deliberately targeted. But that isn't necessarily true since French public schools also banned crucifixes, turbans and yarmulkes to ensure there were no religious undertones left in schools. In reply, Muslim activists pointed out that unlike