



INDIAN MUSLIMS: ERASURE IN THE NAME OF INTEGRATION

I was in my law school when I was questioned on my hijab, not for the first time, of course. Remarks like “Why do you wear it? It makes you look odd”, followed by “it hides your beauty, let people see your beauty” or a variation of this. I wore an abaya (black cloak commonly worn by Muslim women) whenever I would go out with my friends, and I could sense the discomfort in their body language. “You shouldn’t have to wear it in this heat! Allah must understand,” said one of them. “You look so much older in this,” said the other.

The problem is not curiosity itself- a non-Muslim asking why one wears hijab can be a genuine, empathetic attempt at understanding. The problem is what that curiosity, when socially amplified, does to young teenagers who are still learning to inhabit their faith. For observant Muslim women, hijab is not a preference but a religious obligation- a conscious act of obedience, worship, and identity. To be made to feel that this obligation is an eccentricity, a social burden, or an aesthetic failure is not neutral interaction. It is a form of acute social pressure. And pressure, unlike argument, does not engage—it erodes. The girl who stops attending outings because her abaya makes others visibly uncomfortable has not chosen social withdrawal. She has been pushed toward it, quietly, incrementally, by a social environment that mistakes conformity for acceptance.

Social Ostracisation in the Minority Context

The psychological impact on Muslims living as minorities in a majoritarian country like India is qualitatively different from that of those living as a majority group, such as in the Arab nations. For a Muslim student in a non-Muslim country, there is a high probability of isolation if they do not conform to the cultural norms of the majority. The tendency for a dominant group to close ranks around the familiar is natural—it does not require teaching; it requires conscious effort to overcome. Conversely, for a Muslim in a Muslim-majority state, shared religion provides common ground and makes societal adaptation much easier.

This distinct pressure must be understood if we are to consciously facilitate discussions on how true tolerance is built and how we can genuinely live together in a secular country like India. When microaggressions are met with polite silence, they mature into overt social exclusion. The constant questioning, followed by shifting gazes and slow ostracization by peers—often beginning subtly, such as not being invited to outings or parties because one's traditional attire “makes others uncomfortable”—leads to believers slowly losing their willingness to mingle across cultural lines.

We see young girls facing these isolating questions throughout their schooling and college lives. They are made to feel so uncomfortable in their attire—and, by extension, in their own skin—that they eventually may refuse to meet friends in public spaces. It is unreasonable, even

cruel, to expect young girls to possess the advanced theological fluency and immense spiritual resilience required to absorb these systemic pressures alone. Who does not want to be included? Who does not want to go out with friends without drawing stares or fielding pointed, escalating questions about their clothes

Theological Stakes

To accurately understand this pressure, one must understand that for devout Muslim women, the hijab is not merely a lifestyle choice or an optional fashion preference. For all Muslim women, the hijab is not merely a matter of choice but is a religious obligation; Fard mandated by Quranic injunctions (Surah An-Nur Ayat 31)ⁱ and prophetic traditions (Al-Bukhari, 4481)ⁱⁱ. It is viewed by the believer as a conscious act of obedience, worship, and core identity.

Because the hijab carries this profound theological weight, the social pressure to remove or modify it becomes an existential conflict. I remember my young 17-year-old sister telling me, “Aapi, I love wearing the hijab. I want to wear it to college. But my friends ask me these questions — silly questions, deliberate ones — they call me old-fashioned, they make me feel like I’m wrong to be here. I don’t want to remove the hijab. I just want to be able to sit with them without everything feeling so awkward. The more I defend it, the more they pull away.” When peers trivialize the hijab as a mere ‘aesthetic choice’ or an ‘outdated custom,’ they are not engaging in a neutral cultural critique, but are demanding that a young Muslim woman compromise a fundamental tenet of her faith to purchase social entry into the group.

Cultural Reinforcement

The demand for assimilation is heavily influenced by Indian popular culture particularly mainstream cinema which forces Indian Muslims into two extreme tropes. On one hand, they are shown as radicalists, imposing their faith through violence—a stereotype heavily debated in the contexts of films like the Kerala Story which contribute significantly to media polarization.

On the other hand, contemporary cinema portrays the ‘very liberal’ Muslim by effectively erasing all the aspects and theological mandates of what a believer of Islam is expected to be like. A prominent example is the recent movie ‘Great Shamshuddin Family’. The premise revolves around a supposedly ‘modern’ Muslim family navigating generational gaps and social tensions. The cousin of the female lead Bani, elopes with a Hindu woman to get married. Through the movie, the narrative highlights the family’s initial difficulty in accepting an inter-religious marriage, culminating in ultimate acceptance.

The critique here is not against the raw representation of human weakness or reality that Muslims deviate from religious rulings. Rather, the issue lies in the narrative frame which actively normalizes and endorses these violations as if the theological boundaries did not exist. There is a vital distinction between depicting a social reality and normatively endorsing a religious violation. Cinema can certainly continue to depict human flaws and complex social realities without implying that Islam as a faith holds no definitive positions on such actions. When media consistently frames the ‘good, acceptable Muslim’ as the one who readily discards Islamic rulings, it reinforces the majoritarian gaze: that a Muslim is only palatable when they are thoroughly assimilated, sanitized, and disconnected from the text of their faith.

Political Dimension

This cultural shift reveals a deeper, more troubling political drift. As a society, in the name of striving for national integration, we have subtly become deeply intolerant. The version of integration that contemporary India is demanding is a far cry from the foundational vision envisioned by our anti-colonial leaders.

The original vision of Indian secularism was never about forced assimilation. Mahatma Gandhi imagined an India where all cultures blow freely through our house, but none are blown off their feetⁱⁱⁱ. Jawaharlal Nehru championed a '*unity in diversity*' where distinct identities aren't obstacles but the very fabric of the nation^{iv}. B.R. Ambedkar designed a constitutional framework to ensure minorities need not shed their identity to be truly 'Indian'^v while Maulana Azad spoke of a 'composite culture' where different faiths merge like a mighty river^{vi}.

Indian democracy's founding idea of secularism was never mere religious neutrality — it was, in aspiration, a commitment to genuine pluralism: that communities could retain their distinctiveness while sharing a common civic life. What we have drifted toward is something else entirely: an integration that demands cultural assimilation, reads visible Muslim identity as an inherent obstruction to modernity, and cloaks this demand in the gentle language of modernity, progress, friendship, and inclusion. The modern societal definition of acceptance has curdled into: "*We will accept you, but only if you behave like us.*"

Conclusion

Islam lays out a well-established framework of established laws and rulings that guide a believer's way of life. Such a framework is viewed as not as prohibitions, but as gateway for success in this life and the hereafter. When society demands the dilution and normalization of these principles as the price of admission into public life, it creates dangerous caveats to the faith, threatening to breach the internal unity of the *ummah*—the collective, global community of Muslims bound by a common religious identity.

The onus is on us as a society, irrespective of our religious leaning, to dismantle this assimilationist trap. It is on us to build such strong unity. Though we teach ideas of secularism and tolerance to our children, how that tolerance needs to be built and is executed remains a flawed work in progress.

India can only celebrate its true plurality when we understand that tolerance should not demand assimilation or erasure. True integration would mean a practising Muslim being recognised as an equal, unquestioned thread in our shared civic life. A true democracy can be achieved only when visible faith is accepted as a natural facet of who a person is rather than an eccentricity that society feels compelled to 'fix'.

ⁱ The Qur'an, *Surah al-Nūr* (24):31, trans Saheeh International, in *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings* (Al-Muntada Al-Islami Trust 1997)

ⁱⁱ Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Darussalam Publishers, Riyadh, rev edn, 1997) hadith no 4481

ⁱⁱⁱ M K Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (trans Mahadev Desai, Navajivan Publishing House 1927) ch 90

^{iv} Nehru's Nationalism: Unity in Diversity for India's Progress' (*Social and Political Thought in Modern India*, Political Science Institute, 22 November 2025) <<https://polsci.institute/social-political-thought-modern-india/nehru-nationalism-unity-diversity-india/>> accessed 6 June 2026

^v Bhatt RC, 'A Study of Dr B R Ambedkar's Idea of Nationalism in the Context of India's Freedom Movement' (2018) 7(7) *International Journal of Latest Technology in Engineering, Management & Applied Science* 18

^{vi} Glimpses into a Nationalist Muslim: Maulana Azad' (*Centre for Study of Society and Secularism*)
<<https://csss-islam.com/secular-perspective/glimpses-into-a-nationalist-muslim-maulana-azad/>> accessed 6 June 2026