

# Veiled in France

*The ban on 'ostensible' religious symbols is being upheld as an assertion of French 'laïcité'; on the other hand, the rising right-wing trends will reap its full effects.*

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The French parliament early this year passed a law that forbids “ostentatious signs of religious belonging” at primary and secondary schools. In India, it is seen as an anti-Sikh law, while other analysts underline that it is a universal law, targeting all religious signs, and that also, only if ‘ostentatious’. Now, both views are wrong in practice; it is, if not an anti-Muslim law (and we shall explain this), truly an anti-something-related-to-one-form-of-political-Islam law. The problem is, nobody even in France really knows how and why, at this particular moment, a question of school management that had led to a workable status quo for a few years has again suddenly reemerged as the epitome of a battle around and for the French system. The problem is also that nobody knows why this topic has been cowardly selected by a whole society instead of talking of the real issue: forms of political Islam whose prevalence is seen much beyond school.

And indeed, a law for a mere thousand so-called ‘cases’ has set off a debate that has monopolised the whole political arena in France. A shameful affair with the reactionary, that engenders discussion and controversy around the world as well as learned debates that argue whether France has (again) failed to its tradition or rather epitomises in paradox the very subtlety of an inter alia progressive system – the so-called French exception. Some less well-read explanations too, on pre-digested, ready for thought ‘terror-specific’ lines of simplifying the world.

Actually, is the French republic that threatened by a few veiled young adolescents? What is the public debate hidden in the closet? What is blurring the broader perception of the French tradition, what is it telling about the rotten status of decomposition of official politics? Why is it unfortunately offsetting the generational hope of a self-reconstructing young France?

For France, to begin with, does have and still retain a societal tradition, evolved out of two to three hundred years of ideas, social struggles, dialectics, and many resolutions. In short, a societal system has taken shape, out of which a French is first French, where, compared to but a few

countries in the world, gender, race, beliefs, non-beliefs and practices, and recently sexual practices either do not matter, do not necessarily matter or hardly matter across a vast cross-section of ‘French’ people. This is not to convey a rosy picture, but whenever race-related problems may arise, there will still be a quite consistent part of the population who will not bother with; there is even a non-negligible active section of the population who will actively negate, these rotten dialectics. Again, the institution of the school has evolved to play a central role since the last 100 years. Especially, the public school, which in France is an institution that wears well its name, a school that is public, a part of the state. An institution that is supposed to help students grow from the private to the public sphere, in the ancient Greek sense. A school neutral in polity, but also in gender (would the language comport a neutral gender, the substantive that marks the school would be of that genre). Not that Foucault had not taught us that institutions can never be neutral, but here is the tension, the very contention of the French system that has the school as its core (the education budget is even now at the topping first rank, just ahead the ‘defence’), here lies the price and the pride of the ‘model’ of the French ‘tradition’ in the *dépassement* (transcendent) of French particularisms. Here come the battles and the many furies that regularly shake France: 1968, 1984 with a violent debate on public vs private schools, 2003 and even in 2004. ‘We the people of France’, it seems, cannot touch upon the core of the French polity without involving the school in the debate, sometimes without instrumenting it.

However, school, even in France, need not be the very sole institution conveyed in the battle for the French laïcité. Laïcité having been, if defined as the guarantee given by the state to anyone to exercise freely one’s religion (or not to exercise any), has been in exercise since 1789. From this two consequences arise: the much-argued 1905 law of separation of the state and the Catholic church, was a mere regulatory measure in a then positivist and Masonic-inspired ruling France, that had altogether started elaborating just another kind of religion, a right to worship laïcité as a religion too. Second, and of

essence here, no need to convey either to the school or the school to ensure laïcité. No ‘universal for boys’ public school before 1875, and no ‘universal school’ before the post-WWII (earlier, girls used to go to... Catholic school). But still, laïcité is not mere secularism, what the principle of laïcité does not tolerate today religious-inspired political parties, nor positive discrimination based on religion, not to mention a differentiated civil code, unlike Indian secularism. The consensus evolved overtime to first, integrate the various forms of Christianity, Judaism, the ‘Masonic faith’ we argue, and, silently and slowly but truly, also Islam, call it French Islam, upon which we will elaborate on later. In other words, the system revolves around a political vision of the society, a societal model. Upper stage of the structure, the allegory of the state being not neutral and ethereal in practice, the servants of the state have to wear no distinctive signs that might disturb this subtle link of understanding between the state and the citizen, this subtle but clear and deep understanding that, at any time, we are the state. This stands true from enlightenment down to popular claims on the state including the cops: ‘after all, this is with our tax’; so French. We the French, as a sociological constant, do really love being in front of the state. Compared to the Indian or the British models, polity has to revolve around universalistic values. But here stops the ‘model’, and, one can think of constructing the polity while vesting particularisms (Badiou), and the whole question is rather to know why the tree of the particularisms (a few veils, a few more turbans, ‘gods know what’ else...) has been taken for the forest of the polity... or is it that we want to hide the forest with a tree?

## Politics of Particularisms

We argue, the issue is indeed about politics primarily – political Islam, the unnamed real issue, an altogether recent idea-cum-force. Just that the public debate missed, or wanted to miss, the whole point. We said there is a French model; is there a ‘French Islam’ too, understood as a French cultural Islam? If this might be iconoclastic to write that there is a French Islam; however, there is one in evolution. Already there are, four million members of the Islam community who have lived in France for some two-three generations, who have come from former French colonies with a cultural background – some from northern Africa, some from sub-Saharan Africa, some from the country, some from cities that had in the 1950s to the 1970s developed a quite ‘laic’ Islam

(some Muslim countries still have, think of Syria today, or Iraq till very yesterday...). In reverse, we all French are the result too of the post-colonial encounter: the French Muslims have come from former French colonies, just like the 'pacca firangis' too have not escaped their post-colonial heritage. This has resulted in a population with many not-so-believing people, people of many 'united colours' as the French people would simply define themselves. Gender, 'origin', faith or degree of faith would, again, only marginally count in the 'public space' encounters.

France today has a council of 'representative' imams that meets with the home ministry, it has some pre-political movements of 'laic Muslims'. Both argue that a French Islam is in the making, that the community is young and forward looking and that they are not that strict on the veil. French Islam, as of today, is unveiled and its representatives respectful to a law; even if the law is missing the point or is anti-Muslim.

In spite of its size, influence, actual capacity, modes of funding, peripheral role in the play of powers; though the degree of its instrumenting and control is neither clearly known, nor quietly analysed beyond the lens of a 'situated' media system, still, a political-Islam exists. Primarily political, this political-Islam, no doubt is at play, like other various political-religions would be at play in several parts of the world. The French Muslims, too, know it as a singularity, who call it the "cellars' Islam". No doubt it conveys a regressively articulated message, actions, vision of the society, no doubt this political movement calls for action. But action need not bring reaction, and the role of action is actually quite huge in polity, at the condition of having rightly analysed the problem. But is un-veiling the girls for the sake of veiling the real issue improve things? Who is going to believe that excluding girls from the only 'laic' place (public schools) they know will in any sort help them unveil one day if so they wish? And, finally, how can we not think that, in a country where after all few private (Catholic) schools still exist, there could be private... Islamic schools that may not be quite private... 'French Islam' schools (public schools) but something entirely regressive. These should be banal arguments, but still one is confounded to see that they do not look to be so for a whole majority of united colours French, for even a majority of Muslim French (which again proves their integration and that the danger might not have been quite that big!). The ultimate question is then, why has a whole society, its politicians, its intellectuals, many of its activists including feminists, chosen to believe in a false

problem rather than solving a real issue? And, after all, would terrorists ever veil up?

Moreover, some French girls (whatever their 'origin') do veil because they think they have found values in a valueless consumer society; a community of soul in an otherwise egoistic and egotic set of 'relationships'. And, while this is true, but that sometimes they are instrumented by bad guys of political-Islam. They embrace such ideas and practices, also because the earlier generation as a whole, the earlier generation of activists, progressists, feminists even, has lost touch with them. Vociferous feminists and rights leaders supporting the law for 'the rights they had acquired'; but this has also condemned a few girls to the ban, a ban not only from the neutral, laic, teachers, but a ban from their classmates, their friends, these 'others', the not veiled.

Ultimate paradox, despite this anti-Muslim law, France has not gone racist. But today, images of non-racism have emerged where instead the reverse used to be true, even if, of course, the lines of racism have evolved, even if a reverse racism dares give its name, proof again that the overall situation has relaxed to allow the former oppressed to use weapons of the oppressor. And, even the existence of a party that casts votes along racism, is actually rather a paradoxical testimony that residual racism can form a party's identity, whereas yesterday either active racism or banal denial used to be a more or less shared generality.

This law, if a tragic farce, shows one thing: that the very support it enjoys from one substantial part of the 'beur' (initially, a suburbs' denomination for Arab-origin French) community, is the very proof of its wish to be 'in'. In this wish to be 'in'; French Muslims show that they don't understand the veil. Sociological profiles tell us that beurs are increasingly right-wing; increasingly French that way. The Republic should not fear this law, nor the 'bearded' should take it against them; the girls are all back home. And what about the extreme-right, for the pleasing of which, the law has after all emerged? It just enjoyed the immense luxury to oppose it, for 'ostensible' veils have to be seen more by the electorate, while its leader, it is public knowledge, foresees that this useless law will anyway just antagonise people, sowing what the extreme-right might one day reap.

President Chirac has declared that the French should no longer be 'aggressed' by the veils. The imams of the representative council of Islam, the parliament, the people, are giving their imprimatur, while the 'bearded'... remain in their cellars. Soon, their day will come, but meanwhile, we have veiled the real problem. **EW**