

# Lifting the Veil

## Reform Vs Tradition in Turkey

### An Interview with Nilofer Gole

**N**ILOFER Gole is a professor of sociology at the Bogazici University, Istanbul. She was educated in France, where she worked with Alain Touraine on new social movements in Europe for 10 years. Since then she has been working on issues related to women and politics in Turkish society. Her most recent book is on Islamic veiling. In this interview with **Manushi**, taken during one of her visits to India, she talks about the centrality of this issue of veiling to women's lives. Many of the questions she raises regarding the secularist handling of religious issues in Turkey have direct bearing on the Indian situation. - Ed.

Veiling has been the main political issue for over a decade in Turkey. Over this period it has become the emblem of Islamisation not just in Turkey, but in Europe as well. In France, the basic discussion on French secularism was triggered by the demands of Muslim high school girls to put on the head scarf. It is labeled 'the head scarf dispute' in France. In almost all non-western Muslim countries, certainly in Turkey, the women's issue is a basic issue, it is not secondary epi-phenomenon. It is almost a marker to understand the history of modernisation and to understand the Islamic movement today as well. We have to put at the centre of our analysis women's symbolic meaning, the meaning of women's bodies and also women's agency. It is more than a matter of modern versus traditional dressing.

*Do Turkish women have a traditional head scarf?*

Yes and it has nothing to do with this modern Islamic head scarf. At the beginning it was less colourful and totally covered the hair and shoulders.

*In India, some Muslim men have never been content with the traditional head scarf. They insist on the full burka, where the woman's whole face and body is covered. Do men pressurise women in Turkey to wear something similar?*

In Turkey as well, as my research has shown, there were always some women who were forced by their men

(fathers, husbands, brothers) to wear the burka, the majority were not forced. Suddenly the Islamic movement used the symbol of the headscarf to increase its visibility. I'm trying to understand this movement from the inside, not just from the external indicators. Who are these women who put on the veil? In the Turkish case, they come from modest social origins. The bulk of the movement's support comes not from the main cities, but from the more peripheral cities and small towns with a conservative background. What is interesting is that the women from these backgrounds put on this headscarf after they arrive in the big cities. Veiling is an urban phenomena.

*And women in the countryside?*

Women in the countryside wear the classical headscarf, but not this new item of dress, which is a more militant symbol. As I mentioned earlier, veiling is part of an urban movement of educated girls. These girls have succeeded at the university entrance exams. These exams are very, very difficult in Turkey, very selective, and very competitive. It



Nilofer Gole

requires real skill to score well in them. I have also found that most often, those young women who not within the Islamic movement, are not as well-educated as compared to the urban veiled girls. The image of the Islamic movement as made up of uneducated, rural, or marginal women is inaccurate. These women are an upwardly-mobile group, who are making new radical political demands. They are not just going back to religiosity, or an Islamic way of living, but they are making a political movement out of Islam, and religion. What is paradoxical is that these women who are participating in Islamic movements are, at the same time, leaving the domestic space, the private sphere. They are distancing themselves from traditional women's roles through education and through politicisation, because now they are writing in the newspapers and acquiring public visibility as professionals, as writers, as intellectuals, and even as political activists.

*Thereby gaining visibility that they didn't have before?*

Yes, they didn't have this visibility before. They are just starting to participate in the public sphere of life. Their participation has come through education, mastering of modern education and knowledge, writing in the journals and newspapers and even speaking in public debates and on public television. This is a new phenomenon. The image of the traditional Muslim woman is that of a docile creature, one who is much more engaged in her basic family traditional roles, as mother and wife. But these militant Islamic women are bringing about a change in the role and image of Muslim women.

*But I thought that Turkish women were exceptional in that they took to modernisation long ago...*

Exactly. But these radical Islamicist women are a small minority, not more than 10 per cent of the population. The



**Islamic women students at the university**

Islamic movement is just a minority movement for the time being. It is not a movement which has yet brought the entire Turkish population in its fold. The majority of the population is living under a more modern way of life using a different ideology. Turkey is quite distinctive in its radical engagement in modernisation starting with Mustafa Attaturk.

*Could you give a little background?*

Yes. Movements of modernisation began in the Tanzimat period in 1876. The question raised was: to what degree was Turkey going to accept westernisation as synonymous with modernisation during that period, and to what degree would we preserve our cultural identity? This was the main

debate before the advent of the Turkish nation-state in 1923 with Mustafa Attaturk at the helm of affairs. Under his leadership Turkey began building a secular republican nation-state. Throughout this period, women's position in society became a major issue. The modernists (or reformists) argued that the only way to achieve progress was through the emancipation of women. The conservatives were arguing that if we let go of some of our traditions, we would lose our identity, so we shouldn't allow women to come out of their traditional roles and become professionals. The conservatives were defining their political project through the control of women's roles; conserving our identity meant keeping women delimited within the domestic space. Women were the markers of communal morality. But from 1923 onwards, we see radical modernisation under Mustafa Attaturk. Our civil code was translated and adapted from the Swiss civil code in 1926 and became secularised.

*How is it that you chose to emulate the Swiss Civil Code instead of the French Napoleonic code?*

The Swiss code was considered to be the most progressive at that point

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***“What is paradoxical is that these women who are participating in Islamic movements are, at the same time, leaving the domestic space, the private sphere. . . are distancing themselves from traditional women's roles. . . .”***

of time. Modernisation meant the emancipation of women, and more precisely, the public visibility of women. Modernity in Turkey was almost synonymous with women taking public roles, without questioning the private roles. Kemalist reforms pushed women into the public sphere, through citizenship, through getting their educational rights, and even at the level of the body. It was not by accident that in 1995, Turkey had a woman president as well as a woman prime minister. Citizenship rights, and even more than that, women's rights, defined the structure and meaning of reforms, such as the coeducation of girls and boys. The mixing of men and women in social spaces and in education was very important since it went against the segregation that is conceived of as a key tenet of Muslim organisational and community life. For us, a woman's morality is related to the way she covers her body. This signifies the separation of the private (all that is forbidden and what is related to the sexuality of women) and the public, or *mahrem* (forbidden to the foreign eye, and to the foreign man).

*But why did Turkish men define modernisation in this particular fashion?*

Because modernisation was conceived against the Islamic conception of social life. Modernity was conceived in binary, oppositional terms; it was thought of as liberation from Islamic traditions. I think it was a very Jacobin notion and an exaggeration of the French construction of modernity. It was anti-Islam.

*What are the other components of this modernisation apart from this women's project?*

Apart from the women's project, there was also a transition from a multi-ethnic empire to a republican nation-state. The ideology of Turkish nationalism, compared to multi-ethnic Ottoman identity, emphasised a homo-



Overcoming the educational barriers

***“The ideology of Turkish nationalism, compared to multi-ethnic Ottoman identity, emphasised a homogenising process.”***

genising process. The banning of certain language groups began many of Turkey's modern problems, including the Armenian problem. Although the Armenian troubles occurred prior to the formation of the nation-state, nevertheless it was part of this

nationalisation process.

*You are referring to the large scale massacre of the Kurdish and Armenian populations?*

Yes, Nationalist ideologies are based on purification of race, language and history, so that was one of the major components. The written language changed from Arabic to The Latin script. There was a Turkification of language purging it of its Persian and Arabic influences. We witnessed a combination of nationalism on the one hand, and western oriented nationa-



Young girls participating in a sports festival: a marker of Republican modernity



list version of feminism on the other. It was a westernisation project, and the two essential components were nationalism and feminism.

*How were the ethnic relations conducted prior to the republic, in the Ottoman empire?*

The empire ruled communities of individuals within *millet*s. *Millet*s were regulated but they were not unified under one law.

*But were they warring communities? Did they have a past history of constant conflict?*

No. Each one governed its own affairs. Each one had the rights of worship, education, language, and law. But we shouldn't idealise it, as is happening now. Of course, they were under the political and the military control of the Ottoman state.

*The Shah of Iran's modernisation project was almost violent in its strategies. They seem to have forced, for instance, liberation from the veil. How was it in Turkey?*

No, in Turkey the modernisation project was not so violent because unlike in Iran where they continued with the monarchical regime there was a rupture with the Ottoman aristocratic monarchical classes in Turkey because of the Kemalist reformers. The reformers were able to get closer to people. They were civil and military servants. Turkey has a very rich political experience, although it has been interrupted by military interventions, and a very rich democratic experience that Iranians didn't have. In Turkey, democratic institutions, political parties, civil society, social movements, pressure



**A member of the Refah Party**

groups, and independent mass media played an important role in this transition, unlike in Iran.

From the 1920s to 1950s many radical changes took place in Turkey. Ear-



**Mustapha Kemal Pasha**

lier from 1923 to 1946 there was a single party regime under the Republican People's Party in Turkey. This regime was a product of the Kemalist reformers. In my view, secularism has always been implemented by authoritarian regimes in Muslim countries. They have believed that if they let the principle of popular sovereignty work through democratic elections, we would move towards the values of traditional society, and Islamic values. So, that's why there was almost a kind of opposition, a kind of tension, in the Turkish experience between secularism and democracy at the beginning.

*How authoritarian is the regime?*

It is not as authoritarian as the regime of the Shah of Iran because we had the transition in the 1950s to democracy. We have not had a series of dictatorial regimes. The transition to democracy created middle classes, and

middle classes found the way to come to power. There is alternating power in Turkey because of this transition to democracy that began in 1946. There's the Democratic Party which is more liberal-conservative and closer to societal values, including Islam, but very liberal at the political and economic level. It came to power in 1950 as the main opposition party against the Republican People's party. The 1950s were a very important turning point in Turkey, when different social groups first acquired representation.

*What was the concrete manifestation of the way secularism was imposed from above by the reformist regime?*

Firstly, almost all the traditional religious organisations were banned. So shariat, the religious law, was totally abolished by the regime. And the Swiss Civil code, as I mentioned earlier, was implemented. Secondly, religious marriages, for example, were not recognised by the state anymore.

Though they are socially acceptable, the children don't have any citizenship rights and all other rights that go along with it like property and inheritance until the parliament decides, about once every few years, to accept the children born from religious marriages. One of the campaigns of progressive people is having collective civil marriages for women who previously had only religious marriages and who therefore don't have any basic rights, such as divorce.

*In India, it doesn't matter what the state says. A de facto marriage is one which has social recognition. Do the majority of people continue to go through the religious ceremony in Turkey?*

Some people have both civil and religious ceremonies, But many from the middle classes have totally abandoned religious marriages.

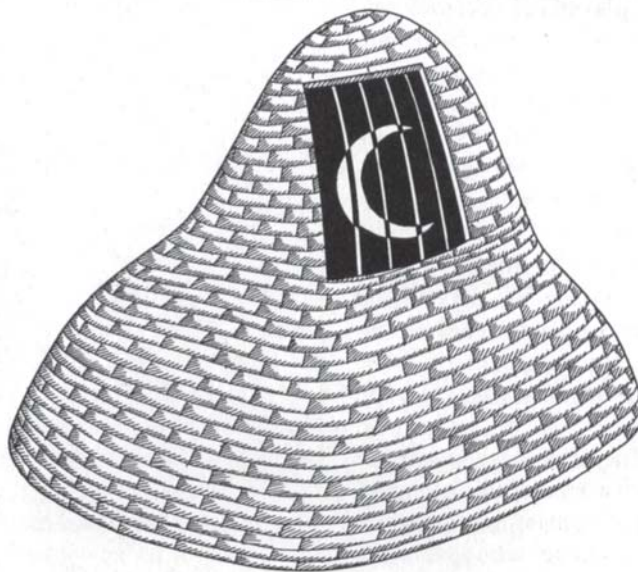
*What about the rural population? Are they also going in for civil marriages?*

Some of them only have religious marriages, which is the cause for some of the modern campaigns for civil marriages. There are recurrent legal regulations to recognise the children born out of these marriages.

*What were the distinguishing features of this progressive code, besides state sanctified marriage? What rights did it give?*

It gave women civil rights regarding marriage, equal inheritance, eligibility to vote and an easy access to divorce.

*And would you say the code is sufficiently egalitarian to be attractive to women?*



***Dress codes were also banned. . . the fez, which was the hat of the Muslim Ottomans, was banned by law***

Feminist movements and progressive women are campaigning right now against some clauses in the civil code dating from the 1920s which are not sufficiently progressive. For instance, a woman has to ask permission from her husband in order to work outside the house. Although we don't apply it in reality, women don't want it even as a law. Dress codes were also banned. For example, the fez, which was the hat of the Muslim Ottomans, was banned by the law.

*And about the veil for the women?*

It wasn't banned, but it was discouraged and women were not allowed

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***“...Traditional religious organisations were banned. So shariat, the religious law, was totally abolished by the regime. And the Swiss Civil Code, was implemented... religious marriages, . . . were not recognised by the state anymore.”***

to wear their head scarves in public places such as schools. As a reaction, in this generation women began the Islamic veiling movement on university campuses asking for the right to put on their head scarves while attending university classes.

It's not a majority movement because the majority of women in the middle classes are very much attached to a secular way of life. The secularists would say that individuals should have a right to live as they choose, in terms of alcohol consumption, dancing, nightclubs, veiling or not veiling. They oppose censorship and favour free expression in the arts. On the other hand, the Islamic movement would try to put limits on what is permissible and what is forbidden.

Even though the latter is a minority movement, it is a significant, influential and determined minority. What is interesting is that the Islamic party has been on the political scene in Turkey since the 1970s, and it is becoming less marginal, less peripheral. It is becoming a very important political force because it is being welcomed by people from the modern, urban, and political

spheres, including the universities. Everywhere in the world today, marginal political forces, nationalist movements, and Islamic movements, are getting more and more involved in centre stage politics. So ethnicity and religiosity are coming into the political sphere where we thought before that they were totally marginalised.

*Are they using the banner of Islam or nationalism?*

Islam. The Kurdish ethnicity issue will be another marker to distinguish between nationalist and Islamic concerns. Those who are pure Islamic, against nationalism, would be less nationalist on the Kurdish issue.

*Are they willing to give the Kurds a measure of autonomy?*

Some Islamists would argue that all nationalist ideologies are totally reactionary, western products, and even primitive. Therefore they wish to be concerned about the *Umma*, the overall community of believers. The Islamist party will have the vote of the Kurdish population simply because there is a latent inclusion of the Kurdish population within the Islamist fold. Nationalists would have a tendency to exclude ethnic groups such as the Kurds.

*In the Kurdish case, is the Kurdish identity more important, or Islam?*

There are differences within the Kurdish community about their identity. There is a Kurdish separatist movement which is based on Marxist-Leninist thought, but there are also some Kurds who are more Muslim and nationalist, while some Kurds are totally for assimilation.

*Are you saying that the manner in which the Kurdish issue gets to be handled is going to determine the fate of democracy in Turkey?*

Yes, though in Turkey, opinions are divided on this issue as well. The reformists believe in the deepening of democracy and the conservatives are anti-democracy. The latter would



consider movements which make an appeal to ethnicity or religiosity to be reactionary movements, and threatening to the secularism of the state in the case of the Kurdish nationalist movement. If, for instance, the Islamist party comes to power through the ballot box, the authoritarians would justify military intervention. With respect to the Kurdish issue, the politically liberal reformists would say that we must give full importance to human, political, and cultural rights. In democratic terms, maybe the reformists don't give the solution, but at least they would say we have to create a public debate in order to understand who wants what, in order to create a consensus. While some feminists would end up more on the democratic side, others would lean to the authoritarian side. And some feminists would acknowledge Kurdish rights.

*Where do you stand?*

I am a radical democrat, but I am totally independent in that I do not have any political affiliations. Independence from political action is crucial for a sociologist in order to highlight some of the aspects of the problems which are not taken into consideration

through political debates. Political debate fixes the terms of the polarisation, whereas, I would consider social scientific work as something which moves the frontiers, changes the frontiers. So, my work has gotten me a bit under a crossfire from both sides. But on the positive side, I also became a bridge between the two.

*Have you been involved in negotiations between these two groups?*

I have not been directly involved but due to my work, in areas of public debate where the Muslim intellectuals and secular intellectuals were never together, the two groups started coming together. I was among those who blurred the frontiers; I mean, if I am a secularist, it doesn't mean that I am anti-Islam. □

#### SORRY FOR THE DELAY

*We are extremely sorry that Manushi is running behind schedule. This issue, in particular, has been very late in coming due to unavoidable problems. We hope to catch up in the next three months. We assure our readers that they will get the six issues due to them for a year's subscription before the year is out.*

**- Editor**