

## PURDAH PRATHA: CULTURE OR CRITICISM

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### ABSTRACT

Purdah became combined to the legal and cultural etiquette of Rajasthan by the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was observed in outsiders as well as local residents. In Northern India many older women can easily be observed veiling their faces especially in rural areas. Women in ancient and medieval times barely covered their bodies, as well as their faces. Even today in many rural areas women reveal a great part of their bodies. The point is that the purdah system exists only in some parts of north India today, not in the west, south or the east. Obviously it is north India which bore majority of the attacks of various invaders throughout history and it is a non-deniable fact that during the foreign rule, women are often raped and kidnapped. That is why the system did not vanish in parts of North India. In fact it has become deep-rooted in some communities. Certainly, in the north-eastern parts of India such as Kerala, which were far away from the invading armies the status of women continued to improve. So really, it is a historical fact that the invading armies of the Turks, Arabs, the Mughals and the British had something to do with the purdah system in north India. It is broadly believed that the purdah system began after the Mughal invasion, in fact. There are several areas in the country where women do not wear the veil and there are several other areas where the veil has always been the practice, even before the Mughals came to India.

**Keywords:** Women, Culture, Purdah, seclusion, Mughal, Veil system

### Introduction

The status and position of a every woman changes as her life progresses. A small girl in her parental house passes through infancy, childhood and adolescence. After marriage, she shifts permanently to her husband's. There she spend rest of her adult life, as daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law and grandmother. Women in their different life phases have different activities, as well as different degrees of freedom and adherence to *purdah*. Lifecycle changes are directly affected by social status, regional differences and economic conditions. The birth of a girl is often greeted with gloom. In a society where sons signify honor and assets for the family and security in old age, a daughter is less valued, though not necessarily less loved. In the parental home, when a girl usually reaches the age of nine or ten, or in some families till the onset of puberty, certain restrictions are imposed on her. She is no longer allowed to play with boys or to roam about the neighborhood. Gradually she is confined to the female part of the house and rarely leaves the house unescorted. Whether she goes to the fields for natural functions or to fetch water or fuel, she is usually accompanied by a sibling or friend.

### Objective

- To know the importance of purdah in life of a woman
- To study the origin of purdah pratha in Indian sub-continent.

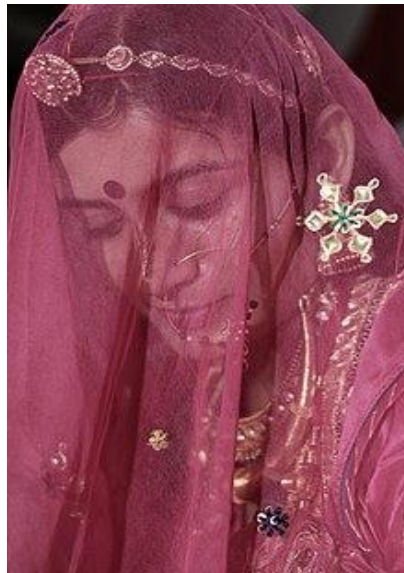


*Image Source: legal news around the world/ law.najah.edu.com*

### Review of Literature

Professor Satish Chandra, a renowned historian in his well known book writes that the Turks and Arabs brought this custom to India and it became common in North India (Chandra and Hasan, 2008). He writes that the growth of the purdah has been attributed to the fear of the Hindu women being captured by the attackers. In the age of violence, women were

liable to be treated as a prize of war. The most important factor for the growth of purdah was social but later it became a symbol of higher class in society. Also, those who wanted to be considered respectable tried to adapt it. There is no harmony amongst historians about the exact period of origin of veil system in Hinduism. Historians say that purdah or the veil in India started before Babur ruled the Mughal Sultanate in 1526 AD (M. Athar Ali, Mughal India, 2004). According to them the social custom emerged to protect women from the invader's eye. They say that the purdah was also a status symbol of the higher classes in medieval times. The practice of keeping women in privacy and asking them to cover their faces in presence of outsiders by ghonghat or purdah became widespread among upper class women.



**Image Source: indianexpress.com**

Some of the historians found the traces of practice of the veiling custom from the Vedic period also. It seems that veiling and seclusion of women was not unknown before the Mughal Invasion. There was a social ideology that women should remain in seclusion to mark their complete loyalty towards their husband (Lamba, 2017). This is more obvious in the layout of medieval Chittorgarh fort that has separate quarters for women that were known as *jenani deorhi*. This indicates that male dominant values also have already emerged in pre medieval times. And that a family's honor had already come to reside in the bodies of their women. It is a sign of respect for a wife's father-in-law and other males in her husband's family who are older than her. At that time the oldest male in the extended families made all the decisions and established the rules that must be followed, including marriage partnerships.

In South Asian countries there is a tradition of early marriage for females, often in their early teens. The system of arranged marriage which prevails in South Asia is clearly related the purdah system, which generally prevents the development of relationships between young people which could lead to a marriage other than one arranged by parents. A Muslim marriage takes the form of a civil contract signed by the two sides and may include specific restrictions agreed upon by the two sides. In comparison with other pieces of clothing, interpretations of the symbolic meaning of the veil and veiling practices seem to be particularly diverse and contested, among both non-Muslim and Muslim men and women. However, it is important to remember that apart from fulfilling practical functions, such as comfort, warmth and protection from the sun or from rain, every piece of clothing is loaded with a symbolic meaning. The explanation and attentive or cautious debate of dress codes create regular difficulties for many people and are clearly not limited to a certain culture. What to wear or not to wear is a decision most people face on a daily basis across the world within very distinct circumstances and this decision can be influenced by a wide range of separate factors and can give rise to various types of responses. Apart from the economic restrictions and thoughts of climatic conditions, there are complex protocols, social expectations and norms of what is considered to be socially acceptable or fashionable that influences what to wear and what is expected for others to wear. Some of the texts put forth the idea that in Arab women were accustomed to veiling themselves with a cloth because of the harsh and hostile climatic conditions. Also known as the hijab, the purdah was at that time considered to be the shield of a woman against animosity of bad climate, dirt and pollution and also as a signifier of a conservative culture where a woman was not allowed to step out of her house without covering her face.

### Role of purdah in women's life

Traditionally a family that improved its financial position would attempt to enhance its social standing by placing women in a stricter compliance with the rules of female seclusion. Purdah which literally means curtain refers to the physical segregation of living space, as well as the covering of body and face. In broader terms it also refers to the beliefs and values about the behavior of women, the restrictions on their movements and the requirements for their respectful behavior. These include a set of norms which govern the behavior of women in the presence of males within the home and outside in public areas. The concept also governs the proper behavior towards male and female elders, which should be respectful of their superior status.



*Image Source: [images.indianexpress.com/women-sarpanch-haryana/](https://images.indianexpress.com/women-sarpanch-haryana/)*

Most historians consider Mughal invasion as a breaking point when purdah is said to have more widespread as a defensive reaction in troubled times among Rajput Royalty trying to protect their women. The case is unproven in the absence of statistical material that could establish a change in the extent of the prevalence of the purdah. Probably the practice became more general amongst the Rajput Royalty in trying to imitate the customs of the new ruling classes. It is an interesting fact that peasants and working class women were not observed in purdah. It was a feature primarily among upper classes. Over time seclusion came to be combined with purdah/ghoonghat and became a part of female respectability amongst higher class and part of the feminine code of modesty.

In India, Muslim women use the burqa, mostly black in color for purdah, a loose garment covering the body from shoulders to feet and to wear over the dress, with a scarf to cover the head sometimes with a niqab, a piece of foldable cloth of fine net, to cover the face.

Purdah practices are inextricably linked to patterns of authority and harmony within the family. Such rules of feminine modesty are not considered purdah but merely proper female behavior. For almost all women, modest dress and behavior are important. Social classes are based on feudal landholdings and occupations. But virtually all classes in the social hierarchy continue to associate purdah with respectability and status and to endorse its principles of the separation of sexes and feminine modesty. Women from the poorer class are less restricted by purdah due to practical considerations and because they lack the status that purdah represents. Nevertheless, these women, too, attempt to adhere to accepted standards of feminine modesty in behavior and dress. Clothing covering most of the body is common, only in tribal groups and among a few castes do women publicly bare their legs or upper bodies. In most of the northern and central half of India, traditionally dressed Hindu women cover the tops of their heads or the end of the sari or dupatta (scarf). In many orthodox families Hindu married women still do not show their face to their father-in-law and elder brothers of her husband by covering their face with extension of sari, which is known as ghoonghat.



*Image Source: [Utsavpedia/cultural-connections](https://www.utsavpedia.com/cultural-connections)*

One cultural tradition that is being noticed among many women in different areas in Northern and Central India is the covering of the face, sometimes even covering the eyes. This was expected with Muslims but is also surprising at how often Hindu women do something similar or a variation of the tradition. As with many aspects of Indian Hindi life, this too is changing with the youngest generation of adults, particularly among the educated, professionals, higher castes, and Indians from the cities.

Researches on fundamental religious movements indicate that Muslim women are more likely to engage in veiling and less likely to venture outside the home for recreation and employment.

### Present Scenario

Veiling is a rich and nuanced phenomenon, a language that communicates social and cultural messages, a practice that has been present in tangible form since ancient times, a symbol ideologically fundamental to the Christian, and particularly the Catholic, vision of womanhood and piety, and a vehicle for resistance in Islamic societies, and is currently the centre of scholarly debate on gender and women in the Islamic East.



Image Source: [www.thehansindia.com](http://www.thehansindia.com)

In movements of Islamic activism, the veil occupies centre stage as symbol of both identity and resistance. 'Veil' in the religious sense means seclusion from worldly life and sex (celibacy), as in the case of the life and vows of nuns. This Christian definition of the Western term 'veil' is not commonly recognized. Although evidence shows that the veil has existed for a longer period outside Arab culture, in popular perception the veil is associated more with Arab women and Islam. Veiling and seclusion are customs shared by both Hindus and Muslims in the *purdah* zone, but they are used in each community for different social purposes and in differing context. Whereas Muslims use this practice to safeguard their women from men outside the family and to keep them in their own separate feminine world, Hindus use the same device to enforce women's subordination to their in-laws, generally to order the domain of family and kinship. Muslim seclusion begins at puberty, Hindu seclusion strictly speaking begins with marriage. Both Hindus and Muslims, however, share two very central concerns, namely the protection of women and the maintenance of harmony through respect relationship within the family and kindred.



Image Source: [ghoonghat/news18.com](http://ghoonghat/news18.com)

### Criticism of PurdaPratha

Many women have raised their voice against the barriers of purdah, saying that the impounding rules limit their approach to education and information about the world. The limits imposed by this practice vary according to different countries and class levels. Those who support the practice say that purdah is meant to improve women's position and increase respect for them by freeing them from concern about their appearance and from men's reactions to their bodies. Some critics see purdah as an evil influence that has only strangled the rights of women and existing male partiality. They point towards the society in India who has shut off women from the outside world in order to make them ignorant of the practicalities of life.

Variations in purdah strictly depend on the amount of modernization that influences the practice of the system in different communities. For example, in the modern Muslims communities, it is not required of a woman to cover herself from head to toe in a burqa. It is fine if she veils only her face. Moreover, the only mandatory colour black has been replaced by a palette of colours to make purdah a bit interesting. When it comes to clothing trend that was conceived because of the religious and social system of a particular community, it is beyond obvious that the apparel has little to do with fashion.

Critics see women who practice purdah as having no voice or free will. Others see purdah as a very positive and respectful practice that actually liberates women. It is viewed as liberating because it brings about an aura of respect. Women are looked at as individuals who are judged not by their physical beauty but by their inner beauty and mind. By covering themselves, women are not looked at as sex objects that can be dominated.

However, as many people in Muslim and Hindu societies have become more educated and women have become more ambitious and independent such that the practice of purdah has begun to disappear. The role of purdah in any culture has become more controversial since the rise of the women's movement. Purdah has almost vanished in the Hindu practice and is practiced in much of the lesser degrees in many of the Islamic countries. Either way the practice of purdah is looked at, whether in a negative or positive light, it still remains an integral part of everyday life for some peoples and marks a part of their culture.

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