

“It was the dress that was a problem for me”: Muslim cadets’ negotiation of a “secular” uniform in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Launched in 2008 as part of a community policing initiative, the Student Police Cadet (SPC) project is a school-based, voluntary, extracurricular program designed by police in the south Indian state of Kerala. Conceived as a youth leadership programme, it seeks to train high school students to be responsible and law-abiding citizens. For the cadets, one of the most appealing features of the programme is the khaki uniform that closely mirrors the Kerala police uniform. In 2022 the Kerala government dismissed a request by a Muslim cadet to wear a hijab and full sleeve shirt as part of the SPC uniform. In this paper I draw on data from my multi-sited ethnographic study of this cadet programme that I conducted before the ban; from 2014-2015. I illustrate how female Muslim cadets negotiated the secular aspirations of the cadet program’s ‘gender-neutral’ khaki uniform and the religiosity of the hijab. The cadets’ sartorial negotiation of the uniform and the hijab illustrate how girls’ bodies are a site for multiple agents of discipline and control. The hijab here becomes ethnographically significant as an object that sheds light on the ways in which Muslim girls navigate the boundaries between family, community and state that mediates their lives. I argue against a reductionist reading of the hijab as a refusal of the secular.

Keywords: cadets, ethnography, hijab, secularism, uniform