

# Forced Conversions or Faith Conversions

## Rhetoric and Reality



**Ghulam Hussain**

*Edited by Syed Nadeem Farhat*

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**FORCED CONVERSIONS OR FAITH CONVERSIONS**  
**Rhetoric and Reality**

**Baseline Study**

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## Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction and Background</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Part I</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Content Analysis of NGO Reports</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Presentation of Facts and Figures .....	15
Tautologies and Circular Arguments .....	16
<b>How the narrative of ‘forced conversion’ is generated in Pakistan?</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Development of Current Narrative .....	22
Location of Media Outlets .....	31
The Issue of Defining Conversion .....	37
How ‘Under-Age’ is Problematized?.....	42
Legislation Against ‘Forced Conversion’? .....	43
Faith Conversions in a Regional Context .....	44
The Problem of Religious Binaries.....	47
<b>Part II</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>Alternative Evidence from Academic Studies, and the Hidden Script</b> .....	<b>49</b>
Muhammad Wajid on the ‘Myth of Reality’ of Forced Conversion.....	49
Jürgen Schaflechner on ‘Forced’ Conversion.....	51
Hidden Scripts.....	56
Hidden Patriarchy: Banning Dharmeelo .....	57
Sindhi Ethos and Cross-Faith Marriages .....	58
Cases of Voluntary Conversion .....	59
Local Dalit Intellectuals on Conversion.....	61
<b>Part III</b> .....	<b>65</b>
<b>Summing Up and Conclusion</b> .....	<b>65</b>
<b>Conversion-Conquest Trope as Defining Factor</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>70</b>
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>72</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>75</b>

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

BIF	Bheel Intellectual Forum
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CCJP	Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace
CIFoRB	Christian freedom of religion or belief
CLAAS	Center for Legal Aid and Assistance
CSW	Commission on the Status of Women
DST	Dalit Sujaag Tehreek
EU	European Union
GHRD	Global Human Rights Defence
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
HRFP	Human Rights Focus Pakistan
ILO	International Labour Organization
MLA	Member for Legislative Assembly
MSP	Movement for Solidarity and Peace
NCJP	National Commission for Justice and Peace
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
PHC	Pakistan Hindu Council
SAP-PK	South Asia Partnership Pakistan
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



## Preface

It is rightly said that the nature of wars has changed in the contemporary time. One aspect of this changed nature is the large-scale development of lethal weapons of mass destruction and the ability to use these weapons in far-flung areas. But even more important is the advancement in the field of communication technology, which has provided new weapons for psychological warfare.

It is not something new to use psychological warfare tactics to intimidate an opponent with one's power and to prepare him mentally to accept defeat during a war. However, today the scope of this psychological warfare has become vast. Now the media has made it possible to target a whole society and to bring it down in its own eyes and thus weaken it. Along with that public opinion about it can be distorted in the outside world. There is no doubt that once this process begins and progresses successfully, there is no need for a military attack on the opponent because it becomes very easy to cause internal disintegration through chaos and division.

Almost three quarters of a century has passed since the establishment of Pakistan. Despite many ups and downs in the political, economic and social spheres, the country as a whole is progressing on the path of development. But one of the challenges the country has been facing since its inception is the psychological warfare related to narratives that have been propagated by certain sections of the population and their patrons abroad to create chaos at the national level and affect the country's internal unity. Against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict at various levels in today's Pakistani society, it is a very important factor about which awareness is necessary at every level.

It needs to be reiterated that any human society has its strengths and weaknesses. Pakistan is no exception. But all the attention of the specific groups creating chaos here is only to describe the weaknesses, flaws and problems. There may be some justification for this practice based on imbalance in pure academic discussion, but in reality this imbalance generally lacks any academic basis. Unfortunately, there are elements in the country who present unrealistic issues about Pakistan and unrealistic statistics based on these issues around the world. In the contemporary psychological warfare, this is the narrative that can be sold to the enemies of Pakistan by these elements to benefit individually and collectively.

The report under review comprises an important study from the Institute of Policy Studies in this overall context. The study examines whether religious minorities in Pakistan are being systematically and forcibly converted to Islam. This research is important both academically and practically for two reasons: One is that many reports have been published about the issue and now the impression both within the country and internationally is that minorities in Pakistan are being systematically converted to Islam. In fact, governments and other responsible bodies, from the local to the international level, take steps while keeping this narrative in view. As a result, a very bad impression is emerging about the Pakistani state and society locally and internationally, and many decisions are based on this perception.

On the other hand, the Qur'an has on several occasions declared religion to be a matter of personal choice. The international human rights treaties, other prominent human rights instruments and the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan recognize the freedom of the individual to practice any religion. So if the alleged forced conversion is a reality, notice should be taken of the matter and all measures are necessary to eliminate it.

While deciding to make this issue a subject of research, we were aware that it is very easy to create a narrative in this age of information flow and social media and to influence policymaking by campaigning for a specific purpose. Therefore, in most cases, it is extremely difficult to separate reality from fiction and truth from fabricated assumptions. A shocking news or report receives worldwide attention, and even if proved wrong later, it has caused irreparable damage by then.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to make this alleged issue of forced conversion a subject of research and to understand its various aspects so that legal and constitutional measures could be proposed for policymaking to protect the rights and dignity of everyone.

As with any other research study, the initial and most important step was to review the existing material on the subject. Since the research program of the Institute of Policy Studies on the subject was more interested in knowing the real dimensions of the problem and in compiling the initial structure of the information available for future research, the relevant reviews and articles were carefully scrutinized. However, as the research progressed, it became clear that the information circulating on the subject not only lacked a solid academic and research basis, but was highly exaggerated.

Is this exaggeration just a coincidence? The report under review answers this question in detail and with great clarity and proves that there is no credible evidence to support the prevailing narrative of forced conversions. The report also answers the question of how this narrative, based on exaggeration and fallacy, is formed and disseminated. It also naturally indicates the gap that is evident due to lack of purposeful research on the issue. After reviewing all aspects of the issue, it is suggested that no decision should be taken on the basis of exaggerated reports from specific organizations and interest groups that would set the course of policy in this regard.

This is our first report on the facts regarding forced conversion in Pakistan. Research is underway to obtain more comprehensive results, including direct access to the affected groups, so that the problem can be understood from different angles and dimensions. As the research progresses, IPS will continue to present its latest findings.

To understand the trend of conversion in Pakistan, the current IPS program is broad in the sense that it is not limited to understanding the various aspects and angles of the subject but also covers other related trends such as caste and forced marriages. We hope that this preliminary research will help not only scholars and policymaking institutions and individuals but also the general public to understand how facts are being fabricated and how everyday events are being portrayed as organized crime. Then this is extensively propagated to discredit religion, Pakistani society and the state of Pakistan.

The author of this research study, Ghulam Hussain, deserves due thanks and congratulations for his hard work of going beyond the picture presented in general and exploring the facts, and being able to present this eye-opening research. Thanks are also due to Naufil Shahrukh, Syed Nadeem Farhat and all the other members of the IPS team who are fulfilling the responsibility of guiding and facilitating this entire research and publishing work.

**Khalid Rahman**

Executive President  
Institute of Policy Studies  
Islamabad



## Executive Summary

Pakistan, being an Islamic Republic, is portrayed as a country where rights of religious minorities are undermined. A major allegation in this context is that members of minority communities, particularly women and girls, are forcibly converted to Islam. The frequent promotion of this allegation has developed a narrative that is repeated without verifying its authenticity to malign Pakistani state and society at international forums.

This baseline report presents content analysis of the reports, academic studies and social media outlets on the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan. The argument of most of the activists and many policymakers about prevalence of organized and systematic forced conversions of minority community members revolves around the claims and data presented in certain reports. Part I of this baseline report is based on the content analysis of the NGO reports that are often presented as the principal evidence of the existence of the issue in Pakistan. In Part II, the report reviews academic studies on the subject and presents alternative evidence hidden in the scripts of Hindu and Dalit (scheduled castes) activists. In the end, a brief discussion is followed by some recommendations and propositions for further in-depth study.

The analysis primarily focuses on the selection and representation of the cases of alleged forced conversions, the way forced conversion is defined, and the organizations as well as individuals involved in reporting and highlighting the cases and incidents of ‘forced conversions’. It analyzes them to assess the scientific rigor or the validity and reliability of the overall data presented. It also interrogates the discursive anomalies that singularly focus on the State religion, instead of on the post-truth minority politics as it is staged on the internet or social media. Epistemologically, its primary concern is that the meaning of ‘conversion’ becomes fixed as ‘forced’ conversion in various reports.

The content analysis shows that these reports that are often presented by rights activists as the primary evidence based on substantive first-hand data, and understood as such by civil and political society, lack a primary evidence, and mainly rely on clichés cited from other similar reports. The reports rely on anecdotal evidence taken from newspaper reports and statements primarily collected from activists and politicians rather than the supposed victims and so-called perpetrators. Based on that, it is argued that claims in these reports framed as statements are tautological in nature and make circular arguments on the basis of unverified/unverifiable secondary data, presumed as primary data. The study also interrogates the polemics against religious clerics, lawyers, police, and the State of Pakistan that characterizes the content of the reports.

The study also underscores the narrative internal to minority communities, particularly Dalits, and found that irrespective of the influence of religious clerics or dominant Muslim communities, the young girls and women have acquired some agency to transcend the domestic or familial pressure of the patriarchs to challenge ‘forced’ marriages, and to break caste-based and religious barriers. Some Dalit activists maintain that the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion is being projected by the privileged caste Hindus to maintain their hegemony over the emerging political class of Dalits.

The report, therefore, concludes that the issue of conversion is more complicated than it is made out to be in everyday politics. The reports and simultaneous projection of the statements through social media and internet seem more political rather than objective and impartial accounts based on scientific authenticity. Additionally, this study contends that although academic studies on the subject suspect the monolithic narrative of NGO reports, they have not adequately addressed orientalist historicity of the narrative, hidden and public scripts of the rights activists, Hindus, Dalits, victim families, and alleged perpetrators. Finally, this analysis recommends primary research into the subject to understand the phenomenon of faith conversions, various factors contributing to it, and the justification and objectives of the rhetoric being promoted through various reports and statements.





## Introduction and Background

A recurring narrative in Pakistan often argues that the country was conceived by its founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah as a secular state but was turned into an Islamic Republic in 1956 when the first Constitution was introduced. Despite abundant material to the contrary, the proponents of this narrative allege that it was this watershed turn of events that had later led to the passage of laws and formation of statutory regulations<sup>1</sup> that are discriminatory to the religious minorities and that in a way sanctioned persecution of religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> Rights activists suggest that it was this radicalization of the State and society that has led to a systematic and organized phenomenon of ‘forced conversions’ in Pakistan (Satyani, P.L., 2014; Ansari, E., 2014; Mitha, Y., Bano, A., Ali, Z., 2015; SAP-PK, 2015, p.6; Shakeel, A., 2017, p.5; Ackerman, R., 2018).

In fact, the issue of ‘forced conversions’ along with terrorism has emerged as the international identifier or the marker of Pakistan. The reports prepared by various NGOs and the narrative spread through activism allege that at least 1,000 women or girls from other faiths are forcibly converted to Islam every year. This narrative has been successful to the extent that major international and global forums, including the UN, EU, US Congress and UK Parliament, have raised concerns over ‘forced conversions’ in Pakistan and have demanded of the government to take necessary measures to curb the practice. In the same way, Pakistan was ranked fifth on Christian Support Organization’s Open Doors 2020 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian.<sup>3</sup> On November 28, 2018, the United States also added Pakistan to its blacklist of countries that violate religious freedom,<sup>4</sup> while USCIRF consistently mentions ‘forced conversions’ as a major violation of minority rights in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Indian government and media keep a constant eye over any cases that are alleged to be of forced conversions to highlight them and malign Pakistan,<sup>6</sup> and on occasion, India has formally protested to Pakistan on this pretext.<sup>7</sup>

A more disturbing aspect of this narrative is that ‘forced conversion’ was cited as a form of persecution of Hindus and minorities by BJP MLAs as an excuse for the anti-Muslim and highly controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and to build international pressure against Pakistan. Presenting this bill, Union Home Minister of India Amit Shah tried to build his argument on the rhetoric of ‘forced

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Pirbhu Satyani, a rights activist, noted that Article 2 (Islam shall be the State religion), Article 41 (president of the State will be a Muslim, and that prime minister will also be a Muslim) as given in the Constitution of Pakistan are discriminatory against non-Muslims (Satyani, 2014, p.14)

<sup>2</sup> Pirbhu Satyani notified that Anti-Blasphemy Laws, Hudood Ordinance and Law of Evidence (Qanoon-e-Shahadat), and establishment of Shariat Court and Council of Islamic Ideology as discriminatory against non-Muslims.

The Islamization of Pakistan is understood by Nazir S. Bhatti, a veteran Christian rights activist, as betrayal by the State. In the context of court decisions related to forced conversions of Christian girls, he writes, “the Muslim judges are declaring marriages null and void of abducted, gang raped and enforced converted Christian marriage women, in accordance with Islamic laws. The Islamic laws are forcibly implemented on Christians to prosecute and punish. Is it time for peaceful movement to launch civil disobedience to the constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan, if the government denied formation of ‘Minority Commission’, ‘Christian Ideology Council’ and ‘Christian Law Board’, according to Liaquat-Nehru Pact”. Nazir S. Bhatti, “The Trial of Pakistani Christian Nation,” 2008, p.90.

<sup>3</sup> 2020 World Watch List Report, Open Doors, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/2020-world-watch-list-report/>

<sup>4</sup> AFP, “US Adds Pakistan to Blacklist for Religious Freedom Violations,” Voice of America, December 11, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/us-adds-pakistan-blacklist-religious-freedom-violations>

<sup>5</sup> “Pakistan: USCIRF-Recommended for Countries of Particular Concern,” USCIRF Annual Report 2020, <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/Pakistan.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, “Amarinder Singh meets Amit Shah to discuss ‘abduction’, conversion of Sikh girl in Pakistan,” *First Post Press*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/amarinder-singh-meets-amit-shah-to-discuss-abduction-conversion-of-sikh-girl-in-pakistan-7277941.html>.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see “India Summons Pakistan Mission Officials Over Abduction, Conversion Of Hindu Woman In Sindh,” *The Logical Indian*, <https://thelogicalindian.com/news/hindu-woman-forced-conversion-pakistan-19515>



conversions' in Pakistan using statistics, borrowed from Farahnaz Ispahani<sup>8</sup> and based on willfully concealed facts, to prove that Hindus are being persecuted in Pakistan on the scale of genocide.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a BJP leader Rakesh Sinha, in an interview with NDTV, alleged that “since 1947, there has been systematic genocide of Hindus; every year there is a minor genocide”,<sup>10</sup> and that forced conversion is one of its manifestations. Social scientist Shiv Visvanathan, based in O.P. Jindal Global University, told *Al Jazeera* that “the BJP views Pakistani Hindus as an ‘amorphous’ population which serves their Hindu nationalist agenda”. It “wants to be the messiah of Hindus by raising issues of conversion in Pakistan”.<sup>11</sup>

In view of the primacy of human rights that allow every individual to freely profess the religion of his or her choice, and the geo-strategic and geo-political implications of the phenomenon of ‘forced conversions’, this study attempts to provide a rudimentary analysis of the narratives on ‘forced conversions’ in Pakistan. The goal of study is to make an informed assessment of the narrative of ‘religious persecution’ (Ispahani, F., 2015, 2017; Roberts, R.S., 2019) to separate fact from fiction so that an atmosphere of inter-faith harmony could be achieved, and the actual victims, if any, could be brought to relief. It specifically investigates whether or not ‘forced conversion’ is a phenomenon of the nature and scale as is purported by several NGO reports and rights activists, and what causes develop this narrative. The report will attempt to interrogate the public and hidden scripts of minority rights activists as they promote this theme at the anvil of social media and the internet (Figure 1). It traverses

<sup>8</sup> While moving the Citizenship Amendment Bill in the Lok Sabha, Union Home Minister Amit Shah relied on the fudged data presented by Farahnaz Ispahani (2015, 2017) in the book *Purifying the Land of the Pure*, which terms the status of minorities in Pakistan harboring to genocide (Ispahani calls it ‘drip-drip genocide’ describing it as ‘the most dangerous’). Citing her, Amit Shah said at the time of independence, non-Muslims comprised 23 per cent of Pakistan’s population and that by 2011 their numbers had reduced to 3.7 per cent. Contrary to what Hindutvadis propagate, the data shows that the population of non-Muslims was never 23 per cent of Pakistan’s total population. Even in undivided Pakistan, share of non-Muslim population never even touched the 15 per cent mark (the highest was 14.2 per cent in 1951). When it comes to today’s Pakistan (i.e. erstwhile West Pakistan), non-Muslims comprised 3.44 per cent of the region’s population in 1951. Census data show that share of non-Muslims in Pakistan has hovered around 3.5 per cent over the decades.

See, “Citizenship Amendment Bill: Are India’s claims about minorities in other countries true?” *BBC News*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50720273>.

Also see, Mukesh Rawat, “No, Pakistan’s non-Muslim population didn’t decline from 23% to 3.7% as BJP claims,” *India Today*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistan-bangladesh-non-muslim-population-citizenship-amendment-bill-bjp-1627678-2019-12-12>.

Also, ANI, “BJP lawmaker’s Zero Hour notice in RS over forced conversion of Hindus in Pakistan,” *Business Standard*, July 16, 2019, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/bjp-lawmaker-s-zero-hour-notice-in-rs-over-forced-conversion-of-hindus-in-pakistan-119071600367\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/bjp-lawmaker-s-zero-hour-notice-in-rs-over-forced-conversion-of-hindus-in-pakistan-119071600367_1.html).

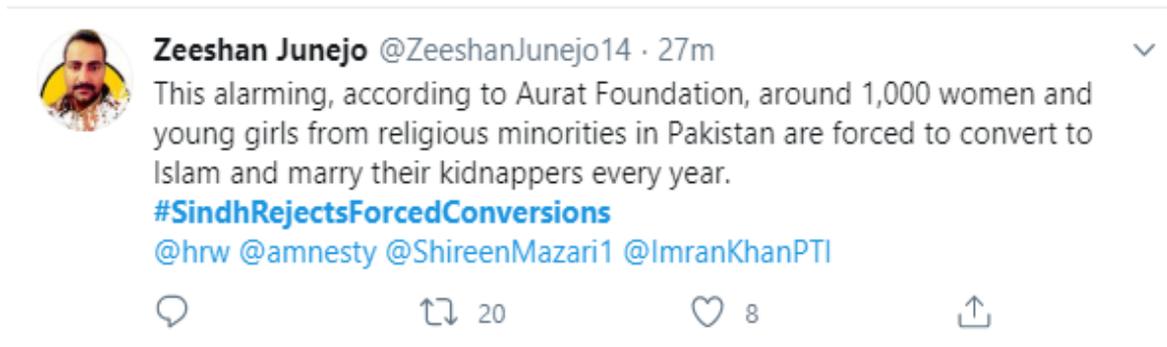
<sup>9</sup> While moving the Citizenship Amendment Bill in Indian Lok Sabha, “Amit Shah said at the time of independence, non-Muslims comprised 23 per cent of Pakistan’s population and that by 2011 their share was reduced to 3.7 per cent.” See, Mukesh Rawat, *India Today*, December 12, 2019.

These figures, however, grossly misrepresent and fudge the statistics by ignoring the fact that Pakistan comprised East and West Pakistan prior to 1971, with the major portion of minorities in the eastern part. According to 1951 census of Pakistan, the population of Pakistan was 75 million, with 33.7 million residing in West Pakistan and 42 million residing in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Hindus constituted 12.9% of the population, which made Pakistan the second largest Hindu country in the world. West Pakistan had 1.6% of the Hindu population, while East Pakistan had 22.05%. See, *Encyclopedia Pakpedia*, “Pakistan Census,” March 30, 2017, <https://www.pakpedia.pk/pakistan-census/#:~:text=According%20to%201951%20census%2C%20the%20population%20of%20Pakistan,the%20Hindu%20population%2C%20while%20East%20Pakistan%20had%2022.05%25.> Currently, Hindu population in Pakistan stands at 1.60% as per the latest census of Pakistan.

<sup>10</sup> “Since 1947, there has been systematic genocide of Hindus,” *NDTV*, December 10, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/video/news/left-right-centre/since-1947-there-has-been-systematic-genocide-of-hindus-bjp-s-rakesh-sinha-534720>.

<sup>11</sup> Sonia Sarkar, “Pakistani Hindus promised a home in India demand citizen rights,” *Al Jazeera*, July 3, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/pakistani-hindus-india-demand-citizenship-rights-190702152117141.html>

the networks and flows of the neoliberal left (NGOs, civil society) and center-right (mainstream political parties), and the right (religious clerics), who often contend with each other over the existence or absence of ‘forced conversions’.



**Figure 1:** A tweet by a Sindhi nationalist citing research done by Aurat Foundation claiming 1,000 women and young girls are forced to convert by their kidnappers.

For the purpose of this baseline report, the reports prepared by various NGOs including SAP-PK, Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah, HCRP, CCJP, MSP and others were reviewed. These reports have been discussed in detail in the following sections. These NGO reports are significant as they serve as the principal source evidence to convince those who might believe otherwise. These reports do not simply state the phenomenon but associate certain sections and individuals, such as the religious clerics and the State of Pakistan for undertaking and facilitating ‘forced conversions’. These studies suggest that forced conversions are taking place in Pakistan on a grand scale, and the State of Pakistan is encouraging such conversions.

Apart from the reports that particularly focus on ‘forced conversions, there are several other studies on minorities in Pakistan that make peripheral allusion to the phenomenon of conversion.<sup>12</sup> Such studies have been consulted but have not been discussed in this report unless they are referred in another report for authentication of its claims.

There are not many academic studies on the subject. Jürgen Schaflechner (2016, 2020) is one scholar who has particularly attempted to understand the phenomenon of ‘forced conversion’, while Muhammad Wajid (2017) has researched mass conversions among scheduled castes, and Huma Pervaiz and Tahir Mahmood (2018) have written on mass conversions to Christianity. The third of these studies is not directly related to the topic of this baseline report, while the first two have been discussed ahead at some length. Interestingly, these academic studies are neither referred or promoted by rights activists nor do they form a basis for the opinions of policymakers. Most of the activists and policymakers draw their understanding of the issue through NGO reports. This selectivity may partly be driven by the fact that these reports are more accessible vis-à-vis academic studies, and partly by the political motives of rights activists who want to prove the severity and existence of ‘forced’ conversions.

Part I of this report attempts content analysis of reports on ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan. It primarily concerns the question of how a particular understanding of conversion becomes fixed within a particular discourse that emanates from NGO reports. “When statements about a topic are made within a particular discourse, the discourse makes it possible to construct the topic in a certain way. It also limits the other ways in which the topic can be constructed” (Hall, S., 1992, p.291). This study thus shows the epistemological limits of the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion as it is being constructed by some activists through the making and presentation of certain reports as authentic evidence.

<sup>12</sup> See: Jinnah Institute Research Report, 2011; O’Brien, J., 2012; Satyani, P., 2014; Singha, S., 2015; Mitha, Y., Bano, A., Ali, Z., 2015; Saeed, S., 2016; and Aqeel, A., 2020.



Part II is based on the review of academic studies on the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan. It primarily pertains to the question of how a particular meaning of ‘conversion’ became fixed within academic discourse, the meaning that still evades explaining the alternative subterranean evidence hidden from the gaze of academia. In continuation to the first part, this part begins with the analysis of alternative evidence proffered by these academic studies. Jürgen Schaflechner (2016, 2020) mainly covers cases involving individual couples marrying after conversion. Wajid (2017) studied mass conversions among scheduled castes to show if the mass conversions were really ‘forced’. Huma Pervaiz and Tahir Mahmood (2018) studied mass conversions to Christianity in District Sialkot, Punjab. They present the historical analysis of the phenomenon of mass conversion with reference to the Chuhra (Dalit) community of Sialkot district from 1880 to 1930 and identified the strategy of the Christian missionaries to focus on Dalits, or lower caste Hindus, instead of on privileged caste Hindus that led to the mass conversion of Chuhras. They had rightly identified the weakness of Hindu caste system whereby Dalits were reduced to subhuman status and wanted to redefine their identities. Dalit’s pursuit of a new identity was based on their aspirations for socioeconomic uplift. Consequently, most of the Chuhras came under the sway of the Ad-Dharm movement of the 1920s. Hence, Pervaiz and Mahmood attribute mass conversion to both push and pull factors that did not involve an element of ‘force’ at any level. Since, this baseline study primarily deals with the so-called forced conversions involving ‘forced’ marriages, Pervaiz and Mahmood’s study will not be dealt in detail and this part of discussion will remain focused on Schaflechner’s and Hussain’s work on ‘forced’ conversions in Sindh.

In the analytical portions of this part, an attempt is made to explain, with reference to academic studies, the complexity of the issue to juxtapose it against the monolithic narrative presented in NGO reports. The academic studies will be thoroughly analyzed to bring to relief the epistemological loopholes that undermine the hidden script of the alleged victims, the historicity of Islamophobia. Further, given the preoccupation of both the left and the popular neoliberal right activists with the issue of ‘forced conversion’, it will be explained, if the Dalit intellectuals and the converts “themselves regard their ‘religious’ beliefs (current or previous) as essential to who they are?” (Roberts, 2012, 280).

Part III sums up the discussion and concludes it with some recommendations. It gives an outline of the research study that is needed to actually analyze and understand the nature of faith conversions in Sindh and parts of Punjab.

## Part I

### Content Analysis of NGO Reports

Google search for any pdf format on “forced conversion in Pakistan” returns several documents that are either reports or official statements of international and Western institutions. Among them, 19 such documents that instantly popped up (on January 10, 2020) were in the following sequence:

1. ‘Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Sindh, Pakistan’, Reuben Ackerman, University of Birmingham, 2018<sup>13</sup>
2. ‘Forced Conversion of Minority Girls and Women in Pakistan’. Submission by World Sindhi Congress to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the consideration of the 3rd Universal Periodic Review of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan during the 28th Session<sup>14</sup>
3. ‘Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan’, MSP, 2014<sup>15</sup>
4. ‘Forced Conversions in Ghotki: Field Investigation Report’, HRCP, 2019<sup>16</sup>
5. ‘Forced Conversion of Religious Minorities in Pakistan: A Socio-Cultural Perspective’, CCJP, HRCP and European Union, 2017<sup>17</sup>
6. ‘Religious Minorities of Pakistan: Report of a Parliamentary visit’, All Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, UK, 2018<sup>18</sup>
7. ‘Pakistan: Religious freedom under attack’, CSW, December 2019<sup>19</sup>
8. ‘Pakistan: Religious conversion, including treatment of converts and forced conversions (2009-2012)’, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, 2013<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Reuben Ackerman, “Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Pakistan,” CIFORB, University of Birmingham, 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/Forced-Conversions-and-Forced-Marriages-in-Sindh.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> “Forced Conversion of Minority Girls and Women in Pakistan,” World Sindhi Congress, <https://uprdoc.ohchr.org/uprweb/downloadfile.aspx?filename=4376&file=EnglishTranslation>.

<sup>15</sup> “Report on Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan,” MSP, [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP\\_Report\\_-\\_Forced\\_Marriages\\_and\\_Conversions\\_of\\_Christian\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP_Report_-_Forced_Marriages_and_Conversions_of_Christian_Women_in_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215)

<sup>16</sup> “Forced Conversions in Ghotki (Field Investigation Report),” HRCP, <http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Ghotki-investigation-report-20190807-EN.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> “Forced Conversion of Religious Minorities in Pakistan,” NCJP, <http://www.ncjp-pk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/forced%20conversion%20of%20religious%20in%20pakistan.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Prof Javaid Hussain, Councilor Morris Johns and Amro Hussain, “Religious Minorities of Pakistan: Report of a Parliamentary visit 27 September 2018 to 3 October 2018,” <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/190918-Full-Report-Religious-Minorities-of-Pakistan-Report-of-a-Parliamentary-Visit.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> “Pakistan: Religious freedom under attack,” CSW, December 2019, <https://www.sadf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-12-pakistan-religious-freedom-under-attack-final-compressed-single-pages-1.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2013, <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2014/03/04/PAK104258.E.pdf>



9. 'Minorities under attack: Faith-based discrimination and violence in Pakistan', HRCP and FIDH, 2015<sup>21</sup>
10. 'Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Pakistan'. Legal briefing on behalf of the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales following a visit to Pakistan by Zimran Samuel, March 2013<sup>22</sup>
11. 'Persecution and Discrimination of Hindus in Pakistan', Ranbir Singh, Chair of Hindu Human Rights Group (HHR), All Parties Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, undated<sup>23</sup>
12. 'Fact Sheet of Forced Conversions in Pakistan', Naumana Suleman, NCJP, 2014<sup>24</sup>
13. 'Searching for Security: The Rising Marginalization of Religious Communities in Pakistan', SDPI and Minority Rights Group International, 2013<sup>25</sup>
14. 'Pakistan: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern' (CPC), USCIRF, 2019<sup>26</sup>
15. 'Limitations on Minorities: Religious Freedom in South Asia', USCIRF, November 2018<sup>27</sup>
16. 'Cleansing Pakistan of Minorities', Farahnaz Ispahani, 2013<sup>28</sup>
17. 'Misuse of the Blasphemy Law and Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Report of the International Hearing', Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, World Council of Churches, 2013<sup>29</sup>
18. 'Testimony of Ms. Fatima Gul Sindhi-American Human Rights Activist before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation, United States House of Representatives'. Hearing on 'Human Rights in South Asia: Views from the State Department and the Region', October 22, 2019<sup>30</sup>

<sup>21</sup> "Minorities under attack: Faith-based discrimination and violence in Pakistan," FIDH and HRCP, 2014, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/57fb91e54.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> "Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Pakistan," Legal briefing on behalf of the Bar Human Rights Committee of England and Wales following a visit to Pakistan by Zimran Samuel, March 2013, [http://www.barhumanrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/forced\\_conversions\\_and\\_forced\\_marriages\\_in\\_pakistan-1.pdf](http://www.barhumanrights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/forced_conversions_and_forced_marriages_in_pakistan-1.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> "Persecution and Discrimination of Hindus in Pakistan," Ranbir Singh, Chair of Hindu Human Rights Group (HHR), All Parties Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/Pakistan-Hindu-brief.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Naumana Suleman, "Fact Sheet of Forced Conversions in Pakistan," NCJP, 2014, <http://archive.paxchristi.net/MISC/2014-0247-en-ap-HR.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Shikha Dilawri, Ahmad Salim, Dr Humera Ishfaq, Mome Saleem, "Searching for Security: The Rising Marginalization of Religious Communities in Pakistan," SDPI and MRGI, <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/old-site-downloads/mrg-searching-for-security-pakistan-report.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> "Pakistan: USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)," USCIRF, 2019, [https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1\\_PAKISTAN\\_2019.pdf](https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_PAKISTAN_2019.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> "Limitations on Minorities: Religious Freedom in South Asia," USCIRF, November 2018, <https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Limitations%20on%20Minorities%20Religious%20Freedom%20in%20South%20Asia.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Farahnaz Ispahani, "Cleansing Pakistan of Minorities," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 15 (July 2013): 55-67, [https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1377/ispanhani\\_vol15.pdf](https://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1377/ispanhani_vol15.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> "Misuse of the Blasphemy Law and Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Report of the International Hearing," Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, World Council of Churches, 2013, [http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pakistan\\_Hearing\\_Report\\_130614.pdf](http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Pakistan_Hearing_Report_130614.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> "Testimony of Ms. Fatima Gul Sindhi-American Human Rights Activist before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation, United States House of Representatives," Hearing



19. 'Christian Persecution in Pakistan: An Examination of Life in the Midst of Violence', Rebecca Seiler, senior thesis submitted at Liberty University, Fall 2014<sup>31</sup>

As may be evident from the title, some of these reports portray themselves to have been prepared on the basis of actual research and objectively collected facts; others only rely upon them to further develop the narrative. In this baseline study, the focus will remain on those reports from the rights groups that have become a source for others to give an impression that 'forced conversion' is happening in Pakistan on a grand scale and quite systematically.

Each such report is presented by rights activists as the primary evidence based on substantive first-hand data and understood as such by civil and political society.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to that, this study contends that most of the reports lack primary evidence and mainly rely on clichés cited from other similar reports to advance as evidence.

### Presentation of Facts and Figures

Three organizations have led the drive – HRCP, a human rights watchdog; PHC, a privileged caste Hindu organization; and NCJP, a Christian organization funded by Christian missionaries. The narrative developed through the above reports alleges that around 1,000 women and girls are forcibly converted to Islam every year in Pakistan. An alternate but contradictory figure of 25 forced conversions per month is also presented simultaneously (see Table 1). Some of these reports allege that minority women are trafficked and sold into prostitution as well,<sup>33</sup> but this does not appear as a major concern in these reports.

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**It seems there is no such report or dataset that could show us the method of reaching per-month and per-year estimates of 'forced' conversions in Pakistan.**

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This section attempts to analyze the way the figures of 1,000 forced conversions in a year or 20-25 in a month were arrived at and disseminated by HRCP, PHC, NCJP, SAP-PK, MSP and Aurat Foundation. The rest of the NGO reports, such as by Shirkat Gah<sup>34</sup> or international organizations<sup>35</sup> and the human

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on 'Human Rights in South Asia: Views from the State Department and the Region,' October 22, 2019, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA05/20191022/110143/HHRG-116-FA05-Wstate-GulF-20191022.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Seiler, "Christian Persecution in Pakistan: An Examination of Life in the Midst of Violence" (senior thesis, Liberty University, 2014),

<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1492&context=honors>

<sup>32</sup> Apparently believing the narrative, the Prime Minister of Pakistan was reported to have said, "Those who convert others to Islam through force neither know Islam nor its history. There is no concept of coercion in Islam. How can we take into our own hands the matter of forcefully converting others to Islam by marrying women or taking them on gunpoint or killing someone because of their religion?" See: "Forced marriage, conversion un-Islamic: Imran," *The News*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/505726-forced-marriage-conversion-un-islamic-imran>

<sup>33</sup> "Report on Forced Marriages and Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan," Movement for Solidarity and Peace, 2014, p.2, accessed July 4, 2019,

[http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP\\_Report\\_Forced\\_Marriages\\_and\\_Conversions\\_of\\_Christian\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP_Report_Forced_Marriages_and_Conversions_of_Christian_Women_in_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215).

<sup>34</sup> "Women's Rights in Pakistan – Status and Challenges," Shirkat Gah, 2012, accessed January 18, 2020, [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/JS13\\_UPR\\_PAK\\_S14\\_2012\\_JointSubmission13\\_E.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/JS13_UPR_PAK_S14_2012_JointSubmission13_E.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> For instance, see:

\* "Franciscans International (FI) Expresses Its Serious Concern about the Kidnapping of Ms. Farah Hatim, 24, Who Has Been Forced into Marriage and Converted to Islam, in Rahim Yar Khan, Southern Punjab (Pakistan)," Franciscans International, July 29, 2011, [http://www.franciscansinternational.org/fileadmin/docs/Urgent\\_Appeals/FI\\_Urgent\\_Appeal\\_Pakistan\\_Ms\\_Farah\\_Hatim.pdf](http://www.franciscansinternational.org/fileadmin/docs/Urgent_Appeals/FI_Urgent_Appeal_Pakistan_Ms_Farah_Hatim.pdf)



rights defenders, avidly picked up the claimed figures manufactured by these NGOs without seemingly bothering to verify them. Resultantly, unverifiable figures continued to circulate in various NGO reports with almost each report, in turn, presented as the primary source of evidence. It is hard to dig out the original reports, if any, that in the first place claim to have calculated or estimated these figures. In fact, it seems there is no such report or dataset that could show us the method of reaching per-month and per-year estimates of ‘forced’ conversions in Pakistan.

### Tautologies and Circular Arguments

Suspensions over the rhetoric of ‘forced’ conversion had already been raised by a few independent researchers (Farhat, 2015), but no one has dug into the reports prepared by those NGOs that added to

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**No known organization has ever provided data to verify that 1,000 non-Muslim girls are forced to convert every year. In 2014, an NGO, named Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan (MSP), quoted a report based on the data collected by the Catholic news agency Fides from undisclosed sources. The report claimed that about 700 Christian women and 300 Hindu women were kidnapped and forced to change their faith in Pakistan every year. The report did not mention any names or incidents in support of its claim.**

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the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion. Recently, an anti-caste scholar and a Christian by religion, Asif Aqeel, in his report, has hinted at the inadequacy of such ‘research’ reports on forced conversions (Aqeel, 2020). He notes that “the data collected shows that the issue of forced conversion and marriage is much more complex than headlines like: ‘1,000 minority girls forced into marriage every year’”. Giving an example of two NGOs, Aqeel argues that:

No known organization has ever provided data to verify that 1,000 non-Muslim girls are forced to convert every year. In 2014, an NGO, named Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan (MSP), quoted a report based on the data collected by the Catholic news agency Fides from undisclosed sources.

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\* “Joint NGO Submission on the Situation for Minorities in Pakistan,” Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) and Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP), 2012, [http://ghrd.org/FilesPage/4072/UPR\\_Submission.pdf](http://ghrd.org/FilesPage/4072/UPR_Submission.pdf)

\* “Pakistan: Abducted and Forced into a Muslim Marriage,” Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) News and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, February 27, 2012, accessed January 18, 2020, [www.irinnews.org/report/94969/PAKISTAN-Abducted-and-forced-into-a-Muslim-marriage](http://www.irinnews.org/report/94969/PAKISTAN-Abducted-and-forced-into-a-Muslim-marriage)

\* “Pakistan: International Religious Freedom Report for 2011,” US Department of State, July 2012, accessed January 18, 2020, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193145.pdf>

“USCIRF Annual Report 2012 – Countries of Particular Concern: Pakistan,” United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, March 20, 2012, [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4f71a674c&skip=0&query=blasphemy](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4f71a674c&skip=0&query=blasphemy)

\* “Pakistan: Despite being reelected to the Human Rights Council religious minorities continue to suffer abuse and harassment,” Asian Human Rights Commission, November 13, 2012, [www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-ART-118-2012](http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-ART-118-2012)

\* “Pakistan: A 12-Year-old Christian is Gang Raped for Eight Months, Forcibly Converted and then ‘Married’ to her Muslim Attacker,” Asian Human Rights Commission, October 10, 2011, <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-199-2011/?searchterm>

\* Associated Press (AP), “Forced Conversions Hike Pakistan Minorities’ Fears,” *Dawn*, March 28, 2012, <http://dawn.com/2012/03/28/forced-conversions-hike-pakistan-minorities-fears/>

\* British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA). December 14, 2012. Correspondence sent to the Research Directorate by a representative.

\* Submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council: 14th Session of the UPR Working Group: Pakistan, 2012, [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/BPCA\\_UPR\\_PAK\\_S14\\_2012\\_BritishPakistaniChristianAssociation\\_E.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/BPCA_UPR_PAK_S14_2012_BritishPakistaniChristianAssociation_E.pdf)



The report claimed that about 700 Christian women and 300 Hindu women were kidnapped and forced to change their faith in Pakistan every year. The report did not mention any names or incidents in support of its claim. Now, the data compiled by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), a non-government organization working on minority rights, shows that 160 incidents of forced conversion took place over six years (2013-2019), which seems more reasonable.

(Aqeel, 2020, p.65).

At the outset of this analysis, it is important to note that according to Williams and Horgan (2018), conversion can be defined and understood in various ways, depending on the nature, context or the given factors such as convert's agency as a woman, level of religiosity, social integration, the temporal span of conversion, and the roles that crisis, emotion, religion, and identity play in conversion. Not every faith conversion is forced conversion.

The reports prepared by NGOs, however, do not encompass the complexity of the issue and rather adopt polemical tone while defining the issue. We found in our study that most of these reports generate tautological statements citing each other as explained in the table below:

**Table 1: Exploring the Basis of NGO Reports**

No	Tautological statements	NGO/Author	Basis of information
1	"25 Hindu girls abducted every month, claims HRCP official."	Rabia Ali, 2010	HRCP's claim is the first commonly mentioned unverifiable source. The reports, such as by Rabia Ali, do not provide any citation or source to the actual report by HRCP where such claim was made in the first place.
2	"[C]onversion of a girl... began with her abduction and/or rape."	HRCP, 2011	HRCP gives a one-sided narrative based on the opinion of Hindu rights activists. The allegation is promoted without referring to the alleged victims and/or perpetrators.
3	"Several Hindu participants... raised the issue of Hindu girls and women in Sindh being forced to convert to Islam and married off to Muslims."	HRCP, 2011	
4	"... 15 to 20 such incidents take place each month in Sindh..."	UN, 2012	UN cites Shirkat Gah, a local NGO, as a primary source for the same piece of information that is cited by Shirkat Gah from HRCP's report, which in turn, does not provide any verifiable source.
5	"Several NGOs estimate that at least 700 Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam every year."	FAFEN/Agenzia Fides, 2012	NCJP's report based on the collection of cases from newspapers over the span of 12 years is deliberately misrepresented as the cases happening on average in one year. This sets the precedent for



			other NGO reports to reproduce that rhetorical claim.
6	“HRCP reported an average of 25 forced conversions per month in Pakistan.”	Shirkat Gah, 2013	Figures of HRCP are based on secondary evidence, but often interpreted as primary evidence by Shirkat Gah, and is frequently cited in other reports as such.
7	“1,791 (out of which 624 are Christian) cases of ‘forced’ conversion happened over the period of 12 years from 2000 to 2012.”	NCJP, 2012-13	The newspaper-based survey claimed to be done by NCJP, but the Human Rights Monitor 2012-13, the actual source document cited as the primary evidence, does not exist on the referred website. The source document was not provided by NCJP even when asked by the researcher.
8	“[I]n Pakistan, around 20-25 kidnappings and forced conversions of Hindu girls in Sindh every month according to report by the Asian Human Rights Watch.”	Ispahani, 2013, p.63	Similar figures taken from the above reports are reproduced by MRG and AHRC.
9	At least 300 Hindu women, and between 100 and 700 Christian women (including minors), are victims of forced conversion and marriage each year. [...] according to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), between 20 and 25 Hindu girls are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam each month [in Sindh].	MRG, 2014, p.15	
10	“Estimates... range from 100 to 700 victim Christian girls per year. For the Hindu community, the most conservative estimates put the number of victims at 300 per year.”	MSP, 2014, p.1	NCJP’s collection of cases based on newspaper reports over the 12 years is misquoted by its own subsidiary organization MSP and presented as the incidences happening in the one-year period.
11	“MSP also reports that from 100 to 700 Christian and 300 Hindu girls are married forcibly each year to have them convert to Islam.”	Zaman, 2014, p.16	The MSP report, in turn, is presented as the primary evidence by Zaman (2014) to prove that over a one-year period about 1,000 girls were forcibly converted.

12	“According to Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, chief patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council, roughly one thousand Christian and Hindu girls, about seven hundreds of which are Christian, are abducted and converted to Islam through forced marriages yearly (Yusufzai, 2014).”	Rebecca, 2014, p.10	The same figure is picked by a Hindu politician, and his statement is then presented as the primary evidence by Rebecca Seiler (2014).
13	“1,000 girls from the minority communities are forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan every year – of which around 25 are converted every month in Umerkot district in Sindh province alone.”	SAP-PK, 2015, p.6	SAP-PK continues with the one-year-rhetoric which is then understood as the primary evidence by the activists.

As shown in the table above, the claims are made in the NGO reports based on unverifiable evidence. Almost every report cites another report, which is then presented as the primary evidence by the so-called minority rights activists. These unverifiable tautological statements recur again and again in various other reports and public statements of certain key activists as shown in the table below:

**Table 2: Tautological Statements and Circular Arguments**

No	Tautological statements	NGO/Author
14	“The percentage of forced conversion in Sindh during the last 15 years is equal to that number of such cases from 1947 to 1987.”	SAP-PK, 2015
15	“About 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are abducted in Pakistan every year. They are converted to Islam through the use of forced marriages, as stated by Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, Chief Patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council (PHC). Focusing primarily on the Christian community, the study says roughly 700 girls are abducted each year while ‘conservative estimates’ indicate that about 300 are Hindus in the age bracket of 12 to 25 years.”	CCJP/Shakeel, 2017, p.26
16	“According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year.”	HRCP, 2018, p.172
17	“About 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are abducted in Pakistan every year. They are converted to Islam through use of forced marriages, as stated by Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, Chief Patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council.”	Shakeel, 2017, p.26
18	“762 cases of forced conversion from 1999 to 2004 and around 1,415 cases recorded from 2000 to 2014, which can be verified by leading newspapers.”	Shakeel, 2017, p.18,
19	“Around 250 Hindus and Christians have been converted to Islam in the Bharchundi Sharif Shrine seminary only.”	Shakeel, 2017, p.24



20	“Hindu Panchayat claims that every month around 20 girls are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam.”	Shakeel, 2017, p.24
21	“It has been estimated that 1,000 women and girls from religious minorities are abducted, forcibly converted and then married off to their abductors every year (ref The Aurat Foundation and the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP)). The volunteer group, Responsible for Equality and Liberty, also estimates that between 20 to 25 Hindu girls are forcibly converted every month.”	Ackerman, 2018, p.12
22	“The Aurat Foundation and the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP) estimate that 1,000 women and girls a year are abducted, forcibly converted and then married off to their abductors.”	Ackerman, 2018, p.12
23	“Aurat Foundation estimates that 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls each year are abducted and forced to marry and convert.”	CSW 2019, p.32
24	“Around one thousand cases of Hindu and Christian girls were estimated in the province of Sindh alone in 2018.”	HRCP, 2019, p.119
25	“A report by South Asia Partnership-Pakistan in collaboration with the Aurat Foundation in 2015 stated that at least 1,000 girls from the minority communities are forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan every year – of which around 25 are converted every month in Umerkot district in Sindh province alone.”	Veengas, 2019

## How the narrative of ‘forced conversion’ is generated in Pakistan?

NGOs pick up the issue: approximate estimates are made without demonstrating how they did it.

HRCP (2010) estimates 25 Hindu girls are abducted every month

### HRCP takes turn from MSP

“According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year.” (HRCP, 2018)

“... 15 to 20 such incidents take place each month in Sindh...” UN cites Shirkat Gah, a local NGO, as a primary source for the same piece of information that is cited by Shirkat Gah from HRCP’s report, which in turn, does not provide any verifiable source.

“1,791 (out of which 624 are Christian) cases of ‘forced’ conversion happened over the period of 12 years from 2000 to 2012.” NCJP, 2012-13 Human Rights Monitor

### The figure of 25 per month is reduced to the single district of Umerkot

“1,000 girls from the minority communities are forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan every year – of which around 25 are converted every month in Umerkot district in Sindh province alone.” (SAP-PK, 2015)

### NCJP’s (2014) collection of cases based on newspaper reports over the 12 years is distorted to 1,000 cases per year.

The newspaper-based survey is claimed to have been conducted by NCJP, but the Human Rights Monitor 2012-13, the actual source document cited as the primary incidence, does not exist on the referred website. The source document was not provided by NCJP even when asked by the researcher.

“According to Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, chief patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council, roughly one thousand Christian and Hindu girls, about seven hundreds of which are Christian, are abducted and converted to Islam through forced marriages yearly (Yusufzai, 2014).” (in Rebecca, 2014)

Per month and 12-year estimates are distorted and reduced to cases actually happening in one year by Shrikatgah (2013), Aurat Foundation, FAFEN/Fides (2012), MRG (2014), MSP (2014), SAP-PK (2015), etc.

“Estimates... range from 100 to 700 victim Christian girls per year. For the Hindu community, the most conservative estimates put the number of victims at 300 per year.” (MSP, 2014)

At least 300 Hindu women, and between 100 and 700 Christian women (including minors), are victims of forced conversion and marriage each year ... according to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), between 20 and 25 Hindu girls are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam each month [in Sindh]. (MRG, 2014)



## Development of Current Narrative

Thus the issue of ‘forced’ conversion began making headlines in 2010 and was picked up, rather problematized, by advocacy-based NGOs. HRCP was one of those leading NGOs that played an important role in bringing that issue to the national and international arena and human rights discourse. Resultantly, ‘forced’ conversion was debated at international forums including the UN in its Universal Periodic Review of Pakistan (October 30, 2012) with Austria, Thailand and Canada recommending to curb them. HRCP in one of its 2010 reports noted that:

At times conversion of a girl from a minority faith began with her abduction and/or rape. A claim was later made that the girl had converted to Islam, married a Muslim, and did not want to return to her family. Members of the working group said that in such legal challenges, the courts had seldom decided matters of custody of the abducted girl in the family’s favor, at times even if the girl in question was no older than 12 or 13. They said that the courts that were asked to adjudicate on such matters invariably came under immense public pressure, in the form of courtrooms packed with slogan-chanting zealots. [...] Members of the working group noted that scores of incidents of forced conversion were reported in the country every year. [...] They said that any person who wanted to convert should appear before the authority in a secure environment. The authority should have the powers to protect the person in question and prosecute the accused if coercion was alleged. It was suggested that senior judges and individuals with unblemished credentials should be nominated to the authority.

(HRCP, April 2011, p.36-37)

Before and after 2010, the privileged caste Hindus would raise the issue more often at their caste-based forums such as Hindu Panchayat Pakistan and Pakistan Hindu Council.<sup>36</sup> The issue was also discussed in meetings of the human rights defenders. HRCP was at the forefront of arranging such meetings. In one of its reports in 2011, HRCP notes:

Several Hindu participants at the two meetings of the working group in 2011 raised the issue of Hindu girls and women in Sindh being forced to convert to Islam and married off to Muslims. They said that no one was paying attention to this serious issue and the courts twisted these cases and failed to provide justice to the victim.

(HRCP, December 2011, p.22)

It seems that by 2010, HRCP had come up with the per-month and per-year averages of the cases that are often attributed to it, and many organizations, politicians, human rights defenders, and even academics often cite HRCP to argue for the existence of ‘forced’ conversions. Shirkat Gah, a local NGO, was probably amongst the first organizations that referred to HRCP while presenting the estimated figures. Shirkat Gah, in its report “Women’s Rights in Pakistan: Status and Challenges. Stakeholders Joint Submission to UN Human Rights Council: Pakistan’s Universal Periodic Review – 14th Session, October 2012”, notes:

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<sup>36</sup> It has to be understood that faith conversions normally occur in scheduled castes (Dalits) who are not yet being adequately represented at any social or political platform. Since majority of Dalits are understood as Hindus in Pakistan, the privileged caste Hindus find it convenient to maintain their domination over them and pretend to be the representatives of Dalits as well. The awakening voices among Dalits, however, take exception to the narrative of forced conversion as will be mentioned ahead by citing Ganpat Rai Bheel, a contemporary Dalit scholar and anti-caste activist.



The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported an average of 25 forced conversions per month in Pakistan despite the guarantee of freedom of belief and equal protection before the law under the Constitution.

(Shirkat Gah, October 2013, p.12)

Interestingly, Shirkat Gah did not directly quote HRCP but acquired that number from yet another source which had cited HRCP. It was Rabia Ali's (2010)<sup>37</sup> newspaper article which was published in *The News* on March 30, 2010 (Shirkat Gah, 2013, p.20). Shirkat Gah (2012), in turn, is quoted by other NGOs and interest groups including international bodies and foreign national organizations. For instance, Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2013), cites Shirkat Gah (2013) and other sources to argue that, "Sources report that the number of Hindu girls and women abducted for forced conversion per month is approximately 20. The sources also indicate that 15 to 20 such incidents take place each month in Karachi, Sindh Province (US, March 20, 2012; UN February 27, 2012)."

In this manner, the 'sources' multiply with each one citing the other. While HRCP gives forth some calculations here and there, it does not tell about the source or method of reaching those estimates. For instance, in its 2018 report on the State of Human Rights, it writes:

Unfortunately, no authentic data is available on forced conversions and forced marriages in Pakistan. Around one thousand cases of Hindu and Christian girls were estimated in the province of Sindh alone in 2018.

(HRCP, 2019, p.119)

There is no reference or link to the relevant dataset or the methodology through which HRCP or any other organization made such estimates. There is no way to verify these estimates. This methodological loophole, however, is covered up by a note of explanation that:

Sources, where not quoted in the text, are HRCP surveys, fact-finding reports and communications from its correspondents and private citizens; official gazettes; economic and legal documents and other public releases and statements; reports in the national and regional press; and publications of international agencies such as UNDP, ILO, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the World Bank. Considering the limitation of official reports, press accounts and sample surveys conducted by NGOs, the figures and assessments offered here may not always represent the full or exact picture. They should be taken as a reflection of the trend during the year.

This makes the argument quite circular and at best tautological as international organizations like UNDP, ILO, WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, EU, and many NGOs have first and foremost relied on HRCP's reports to make claims about the numbers of cases of 'forced' conversion. The estimates made by the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) and HRCP are widely quoted and reproduced by different reports prepared by human rights defenders. NCJP is a human rights body, established by the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference in 1985. It carries out its activities from urban centers of Pakistan with its national office located in Lahore. In 2016, Pax Christy International (Geneva) conferred NCJP with Peace Award 2016 for its efforts in the field of human rights particularly the rights of minorities.

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<sup>37</sup> Rabia Ali, "25 Hindu girls abducted every month, claims HRCP official," *The News*, March 30, 2010, <http://www.thenews.com.pk/TodaysPrintDetail.aspx?ID=231616&Cat=4&dt=3/31/2010>.



Reportedly, NCJP’s Human Rights Monitor 2005, recorded 762 non-Muslim conversions to Islam between 1999 and 2004 by monitoring the four daily newspapers printed from Lahore<sup>38</sup> (NCJP, January 2014, p.10). NCJP’s Human Rights Monitor 2012-13, however claims that 1,791 (out of which 624 are Christian) cases of ‘forced’ conversion happened over the period of 12 years from 2000 to 2012<sup>39</sup>. This makes 149 cases per year, and 12 cases per month. It means that 60 Hindu girls are allegedly converted by ‘force’ each year and five are ‘forcibly’ converted each month. Similarly, 51 Christian girls are converted each year, and four in each month.

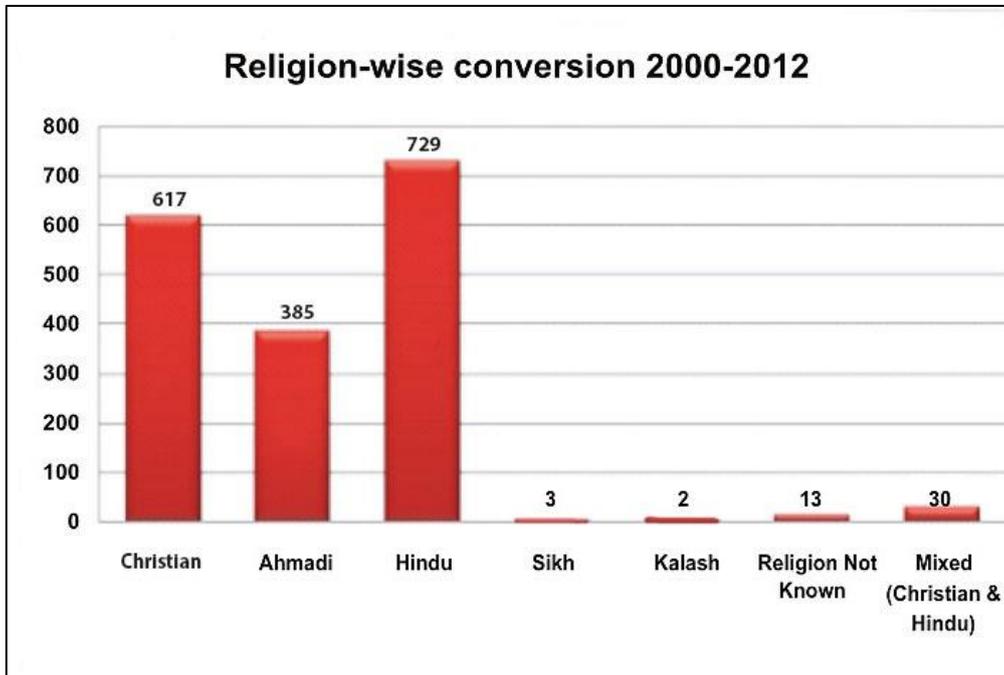


Figure 2: Graph of estimated cases of conversion given in NCJP’s January 2014 report.

The webpage of NCJP does not have an electronic copy of the Human Rights Monitors that first reported these figures. On request for electronic copies of Human Rights Monitor(s) published in different years, it could be delivered after a month, it did raise some suspicions over the veracity and authenticity of their research, and as expected, it did not contain the data about the cases claimed to have been collected over the span of 12 years. It contained the same graph on page 97 as shown above in Figure 2 given in NCJP’s report (2014). The caption below the graph reads:

The above graph is data of reported cases of conversions mainly from four daily newspapers for minorities to see the trends which can be used to make further assessment though this is not an exhaustive data.

(Human Rights Monitor, 2012-2013 [2013, p.97])

It did, however, contain several cases reported in newspapers that stated the cases of alleged abduction and forced conversion as claimed by the activists or the parents of the girls or the family of the women. It means that the human rights monitors have merely collected some cases from the newspapers instead of doing primary research on them to show if the cases so reported were authentic or mere allegations. Notwithstanding that, they are cited repeatedly as proven cases and used to malign Pakistani State and society internationally.

<sup>38</sup> “Human Rights Monitor 2005,” National Commission for Justice and Peace-Pakistan.

<sup>39</sup> [http://www.ncjp-pk.org/media/publications/Human\\_Rights\\_Monitor\\_2012-13.pdf](http://www.ncjp-pk.org/media/publications/Human_Rights_Monitor_2012-13.pdf).



An example of deliberately shrinking newspaper reported figures from 12 year period (2000 to 2012) in NCJP's report to one-year period in order to synchronize it with claims of HRCP and Hindu rights activists can be seen in the report by MSP prepared by Emad Ansari (2014).<sup>40</sup> Reports by Ackerman for Birmingham University and Sarah Zaman (2014, p.16) for Aurat Foundation have relied upon this MSP report, clearly to develop a narrative. Interestingly, this report begins with a humble note that "statistics on forced conversions are either proximate or unavailable". It then gradually raises the tempo citing from unverifiable and unverified sources to prove that 'forced conversions' are in fact happening on a grand scale. For instance, taking estimates from a few newspaper articles, it writes:

The prevalence and incidence of forced conversion and marriage are difficult to accurately estimate due to reporting deficiencies and the complex nature of the crime. Estimates, therefore, range from 100 to 700 victim Christian girls per year. For the Hindu community, the most conservative estimates put the number of victims at 300 per year. Minority advocacy groups have attempted to extrapolate figures from conversion cases and media reports. These methods are also inadequate since the intensity and scale of conversion are far greater than as reported by the media.

(MSP, 2014, p.1)

There is no dataset given inside or any online link through which the claimed cases could be verified. It takes the newspaper reports on 'forced' conversion for granted and quite uncritically assumes that all such reports are of 'forcible' conversion (MSP, 2014, p.14). There is not even any statistical methodology or the figures through which one could infer the numbers of 'forcibly' converted Christian or Hindus girls. The number of cases of 'forced' conversions claimed in MSP's report are further twisted in other reports to achieve the magical equation of 1,000 per year. For instance, All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief published a report in September 2019<sup>41</sup> in which they noted that:

Although no precise figures are available, Pakistani NGOs such as the Movement for Solidarity and Peace have estimated that around 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and forcibly married, or sold into prostitution, annually in Pakistan<sup>42</sup> (p.29).

HRCP's self-contradictory figures of 1,000 conversions each year and 20-25 each month (which add up to 240-300 per year) are cited by international organizations, Hindu and Christian rights activists and human rights defenders from one or the other report and presented as evidence of the gravity of the issue. For instance, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in its Annual Report 2019 noted that, "Several independent institutions, including the National Commission of Justice and Peace and the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, recognize that an estimated 1,000

<sup>40</sup> The MSP is an Ohio-based dubious organization with no physical presence in Pakistan and even without a website. It began in 2011 as Pakistan Minority Support and published a report on the Hazara Shias. It later changed its name to MSP.

<sup>41</sup> The report of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Pakistani Minorities was authored by Professor Javaid Rehman, Professor of Law, FRSA, FAcSS Brunel University, London, Councilor Morris Johns, Secretary to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Pakistani Minorities and Amro Hussain, Director of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief. See: "Religious Minorities of Pakistan: Report of a Parliamentary visit 27 September 2018 – 3 October 2018," All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief and All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Pakistani Minorities, September 2019.

<sup>42</sup> "Report on Forced Marriages and Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan," Movement for Solidarity and Peace, 2014, p.2, accessed July 4, 2019, [http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP\\_Report\\_Forced\\_Marriages\\_and\\_Conversions\\_of\\_Christian\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP_Report_Forced_Marriages_and_Conversions_of_Christian_Women_in_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215).



young women are forcibly converted to Islam each year; many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and subjected to rape.” (USCIRF, 2019)

Also, take an example from a CSW report, which says: “Aurat Foundation estimates that 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls each year are abducted and forced to marry and convert.” (CSW December 2019, p.32). It provides the following reference to this piece of information: “Aurat Publication and Information Service Foundation (2014), *Forced Marriages and Inheritance Deprivation in Pakistan*. [www.af.org.pk/pub\\_files/1416847483.pdf](http://www.af.org.pk/pub_files/1416847483.pdf).” On looking at this report by Aurat Foundation (written by

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**HRCF’s self-contradictory figures of 1,000 conversions each year and 20-25 each month (which add up to 240-300 per year) are cited by international organizations, Hindu and Christian rights activists and human rights defenders from one or the other report and presented as evidence.**

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Sarah Zaman and cited by CSW), it transpired that it had in fact cited NCJP’s report that had collected the cases happening over the period of 12 years. The Aurat Foundation report also refers to the MSP (2014)<sup>43</sup> to strengthen its claim of 1,000 cases per year, saying: “MSP also reports that from 100 to 700 Christian and 300 Hindu girls are married forcibly each year to have them convert to Islam,” (Zaman, 2014, p.16). Ironically, Aurat Foundation, which becomes a frequent citation source to argue for the huge number of cases of ‘forced

conversions’, does not furnish any basis for the information or primary data but simply borrows the clichéd datum from other reports.<sup>44</sup> A Karachi-based journalist and Hindu rights activist Veengas wrote in *New Indian Express* that:

“67 Hindu girls were abducted between 2012 and 2015. A report by South Asia Partnership-Pakistan (SAP-PK) in collaboration with the Aurat Foundation in 2015 stated that at least 1,000 girls from the minority communities are forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan every year – of which around 25 are converted every month in Umerkot district in Sindh province alone.”<sup>45</sup>

The proponents of this narrative do not restrict themselves to this figure, but often add sensation by alleging that many cases of forced conversions go unreported due to perceptions of threat by the radical Islamists and the religious clerics. This may be seen in the above quoted text from MSP (MSP, 2014, p.1).

SAP-PK’s report is another oft-quoted source for rights activists and the journalists and has greatly added to the manufacturing and dissemination of this anecdotal figure. SAP-PK works under the REAT network and is managed by Krishan Sharma, an upper-caste Hindu nationalist. A review of literature to dig out the origins of the statement could only lead to a public statement by Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, a privileged caste Hindu politician.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Report available at:

[http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP\\_Report\\_-\\_Forced\\_Marriages\\_and\\_Conversions\\_of\\_Christian\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP_Report_-_Forced_Marriages_and_Conversions_of_Christian_Women_in_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215). accessed January 18, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Since the main purpose of Sarah Zaman’s report was to explore ‘substantive and structural gaps in the implementation of Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2011, it has not extrapolated on the sociology of conversion either.

<sup>45</sup> “Brides of Despair,” *New Indian Express*, March 31, 2019,

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/2019/mar/31/brides-of-despair-1956753.html>.

<sup>46</sup> See the original statements made by Vankwani on forced conversion: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_5yg6ELbjE4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5yg6ELbjE4).

SAP-PK's report also makes a huge claim based on undisclosed sources that "the percentage of forced conversion in Sindh during the last 15 years is equal to that number of such cases that happened from 1947 to 1987" (SAP-PK, 2015, p.6). It does not provide any reference or hint about the source of the estimates. Interestingly, the report presents only one case study of alleged forced conversion. Even this single case is described very clumsily in an accusative tone alleging that a daughter and niece of Hunjoo Kolhi were kidnapped and forcibly converted in Samaro (SAP-PK, 2015, p.9). The rest of the report is very sketchy and written in short bullets and headlines and buttressed with some statements taken from local human rights defenders.

Similarly, CCJP's report written by Arifa Shakeel (2017) cites NCJP's figures as well as a statement published in a newspaper by Ramesh Kumar Vankwani to argue for 'forced' conversion. It writes:

About 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls are abducted in Pakistan every year. They are converted to Islam through the use of forced marriages, as stated by Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, Chief Patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council (PHC). Focusing primarily on the Christian community, the study says roughly 700 girls are abducted each year while "conservative estimates" indicate that about 300 are Hindu in the age bracket 12 and 25 years.

(Shakeel, 2017, p.26)

The author takes for granted the political statement made by a politician and a life-time chief patron of an upper-caste Hindu organization, and refers only to an online newspaper article based on secondary and anecdotal sources by a journalist instead of a research study.<sup>47</sup> Vankwani's statement is widely quoted and mistaken as if based on a research study. The same statement is also quoted in the dissertation by Rebecca Seiler (2014) from a different source: "According to Dr. Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, Chief Patron of the Pakistan Hindu Council, roughly one thousand Christian and Hindu girls, about seven hundred of which are Christian, are abducted and converted to Islam through forced marriages yearly (Yusufzai, 2014)." (Rebecca, 2014, p.10).

The report begins with a note that "the names of the victims and perpetrators have been removed" from the presented "data/statistics to secure privacy and security". However, the report does not base itself on study of actual cases that have been alleged to be of forced conversion but has been prepared by conducting "5 FGDs in Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore", and interviewing some notable Hindu rights activists, Christian rights activists and minority rights activists (Shakeel, 2017, p.1-2). The graphs and the statistic given in the report and claimed to be based on primary data are seemingly based on the opinion of those selective experts and without any actual data or study. On the basis of such selective engagements through qualitative survey, it implicates law enforcement authorities and the authorities at large to suggest that police failure to register complaints has left minorities without protection in Pakistan, and that the failure of government authorities to protect them has forced many to pay local gangs 'protection money' to avoid being kidnapped for ransom. Based on an unverified online source, which shows an error when accessed,<sup>48</sup> the report asserts that "Often, a family that is unable to pay 'protection money' and cannot afford the demanded ransom they are converted to Islam" (Shakeel, 2017, p.20). This portrays Pakistan as an entirely lawless and rogue society without indicating that the

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**Reducing 12-year figures to one year has been a trick that paints the problem in a way that it makes headlines across the world.**

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<sup>47</sup> Ashfaq Yusufzai, "Minorities in Pakistan Fear 'Forced Conversion' to Islam," Inter Press Service, May 19, 2014, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/05/minorities-pakistan-fear-forced-conversion-islam/>

<sup>48</sup> Asian Centre for Human Rights, <http://www.achrweb.org/Review/2007/179!07.htm>



failures of governance and administration, as much as they are, are not merely directed against religious minorities. The voice of both the alleged victims and the perpetrators is missing in the report.

In its 2018 report, HRCP has cited MSP for developing the argument (HRCP, 2018, p.172). The HRCP does not provide any link to the MSP report. However, on inspection, MSP's report was found to have cited Catholic charity NCJP's figures of newspaper reports from 2000 to 2012 (MSP, 2014, p.14). The MSP report actually further quotes NCJP to claim that 700 Christian women are forcibly converted and married to Muslims each year. The MSP doesn't quote any published report of the NCJP but refers to an apparently incomplete link of Vatican News which doesn't work.<sup>49</sup>

Reducing 12-year figures to one year has been a trick that paints the problem in a way that it makes headlines across the world. For instance, in a report funded by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, and prepared by Minorities Rights Group International and SDPI, the authors cite MSP (2014, p.12-13) and AHRC, noting that:

“Although it is not possible to determine accurately how common this practice is, recent estimates suggest that at least 300 Hindu women, and between 100 and 700 Christian women (including minors), are victims of forced conversion and marriage each year. These coercive conversions and marriages predominantly take place in Sindh, where, according to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), between 20 and 25 Hindu girls are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam each month.

(MRG, 2014, p.15)

Similar figures are cited by Farahnaz Ispahani (2013, 2017), former member of parliament in Pakistan and an affiliate of Woodrow Wilson Center. She writes, “Rinkle Kumari: She was abducted with the help of a ruling-party lawmaker and forced to marry and convert to Islam. This is just one case of abduction and forced religious conversion in Pakistan, with around 20-25 kidnappings and forced conversions of Hindu girls in Sindh every month according to a report by the Asian Human Rights Watch.” (Ispahani, July 2013, p.63). Ispahani does not provide any link to the report of Asian Human Rights Watch cited by her. And the fact is that there is no separate study or survey done by Asian Human Rights Watch/Commission on ‘forced’ conversion; like any other such reporting, it just picks the same figure from SAP-PK, NCJP or other such reports.

In 2018, a report titled ‘Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages in Sindh, Pakistan’ was published by the University of Birmingham in collaboration with CIfORB.<sup>50</sup> It was written by Reuben Ackerman, a graduate of London School of Economics, and assisted by Javaid Rehman, a doctor and Professor of Law at the Brunel University of London, and Morris Johns of All-Party Parliamentary Group for Pakistani Minorities, UK. This report is frequently mentioned by international watchdogs despite the fact that it is based on secondary data sources; primarily developed out of clichéd statements borrowed from other reports. For instance, the report begins by stating that:

It has been estimated that 1,000 women and girls from religious minorities are abducted, forcibly converted and then married off to their abductors every year (ref The Aurat Foundation and the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP)). Former vice-chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Amarnath Motumal, notes that 20 or more Hindu girls are abducted every month in Pakistan.<sup>51</sup> The volunteer group, Responsible for Equality

<sup>49</sup> Check, <http://www.news.va/en/news/asiapakistan-forced-conversions-to-islam-summit-of>

<sup>50</sup> Reuben Ackerman, “Forced Conversions & Forced Marriages in Sindh, Pakistan,” CIfORB, University of Birmingham, 2018, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/ptr/ciforb/Forced-Conversions-and-Forced-Marriages-in-Sindh.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> Submission to UNOHCHR during Pakistan's 3rd Universal Periodic Review, p.5, <http://unpo.org/downloads/2075.pdf>



and Liberty, also estimates that between 20 to 25 Hindu girls are forcibly converted every month.<sup>52</sup>

It repeats these statements on page 6 stating that “The Aurat Foundation and the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP) estimate that 1,000 women and girls a year are abducted, forcibly converted and then married off to their abductors”. The authors do not provide any reference to the reports by Aurat Foundation and MSP. The two other references were based on an online blogging site run by an unverified person. Nonetheless, the relevant MSP and Aurat Foundation documents offer no substantial evidence on which an allegation of this scale could be based. Aurat Foundation and MSP only repeated without any relevant primary data from NCJP report (January 2014, p.10) that reportedly documented 1,791 cases over the period of 12 years from newspapers.

The figure of 624 cases of Christian girls that NCJP alleges to have been converted during these 12 years, is also rounded off upwards. For instance, the Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, in its note (2013) on forced conversions in Pakistan cites four sources (i.e., USCIRF March 20, 2012, p.7; GHRD and HRFP [2012], p.10 note 12; Franciscans International July 29, 2011), to assert that “several NGOs estimate that at least 700 Christian girls are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam every year”.

The report by Birmingham University apparently defends the rights of minorities in the Muslim-dominated country but ends up fulfilling the patriarchal bias of family patriarchs who do not allow marriages outside caste and religion. This underlying factor is made invisible by the rhetoric of ‘forced conversion’ to which the Birmingham University’s report supplements yet another layer of concealment in the name of ‘minority’ and ‘human’ rights. Relying on the MSP report, the University of Birmingham report makes believe that the majority of the cases of ‘forced’ conversions are not even reported by the media because it is biased against non-Muslims, and also because journalists feel threatened by extremists. In an attempt to prove that Pakistan is explicitly and exclusively dominated by religious extremists in all walks of life, the author notes that:

There were only 286 separate incidents of women and girls being forcibly converted in English-language newspaper reports in Pakistan between January 2012 – just before the Kumari case – and June 2017. Many cases in which influential locals and religious leaders are involved go unreported because of pressure put on the media not to report the stories. Reporters are often afraid to investigate the existence or prevalence of forced conversions due to fear of

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<sup>52</sup> “Pakistan: 25 Hindu Girls Abducted Every Month; Forcibly Converted to Islam,” REAL, March 31, 2010, accessed September 3, 2019, <http://www.realcourage.org/2010/03/pakistan-25-hindu-girls-abducted-every-month/>;

See also, according to Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2013), “Sources report that the number of Hindu girls and women abducted for forced conversion per month is approximately 20 (*The Express Tribune*, March 11, 2012; US July 30, 2012, 12; Shirkat Gah 2012, 6). Sources also indicate that 15 to 20 such incidents take place each month in Karachi, Sindh Province (US March 20, 2012, 8; UN February 27, 2012).” It cites the following sources:

\* Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) and Human Rights Focus Pakistan (HRFP), (2012). Joint NGO Submission on the Situation for Minorities in Pakistan. [http://ghrd.org/FilesPage/4072/UPR\\_Submission.pdf](http://ghrd.org/FilesPage/4072/UPR_Submission.pdf).

\* Shirkat Gah, “Women’s Rights in Pakistan – Status and Challenges,” 2012, [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/JS13\\_UPR\\_PAK\\_S14\\_2012\\_JointSubmission13\\_E.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session14/PK/JS13_UPR_PAK_S14_2012_JointSubmission13_E.pdf).

\* US Department of State. “Pakistan. International Religious Freedom Report for 2011,” July 30, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193145.pdf>.

\* United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “USCIRF Annual Report 2012 – Countries of Particular Concern: Pakistan,” March 20, 2012, [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4f71a674c&skip=0&query=blasphemyPakistan](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=4f71a674c&skip=0&query=blasphemyPakistan).



attack, especially when influential members of the local community are involved.<sup>53</sup> They also contribute to the social milieu that encourages the process of conversion of religious minorities by celebrating conversions without inquiring into the circumstances. Television programs will hail recent converts to Islam and conversions and sometimes televised in religious programs, especially during the month of Ramadan.

(Ackerman, 2018, p.12).

The CCJP's report, like the Birmingham University's report prepared by Ackerman, borrows from the MSP (2014). It too mentions the statement of Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani by citing Inter Press Service Agency as a source<sup>54</sup> (Shakeel, 2017, p.26).

**The truth of faith conversions is thus hidden under the perfectly manufactured statistics of 20-25 per month and/or 1,000 per year.**

There is no traceable or accessible link given to the source of the report or the figures of 'forced' conversions so cited. Without giving any reference, the report further claims that "In 2013, there have been various cases of forced conversion in Hindu and Christian

communities. Around 250 Hindus and Christians have been converted to Islam in the Bharchundi Sharif Shrine seminary only" (Shakeel, 2017, p.24). It then quotes a "Hindu Panchayat",<sup>55</sup> claiming that every month around 20 girls are abducted and forcedly converted to Islam (Shakeel, 2017, p.24). Again no reference or source of the data is given. Interestingly, it then writes in an accusative tone that "Seven Hindu girls were targeted in the conversion to Islam campaign. Of the seven, five have been abducted and converted by Muslim assailants. The police recovered one Hindu girl who was abducted and forced to convert to Islam whereas in one case, the attempted abduction was foiled by the passer-by" (Shakeel, 2017, p.24).

The truth of faith conversions is thus hidden under the perfectly manufactured statistics of 20-25 per month and/or 1,000 per year around which human rights defenders, biased Hindu and Christian rights activists, Sindhi nationalists, international donor organizations, even governments and the Islamophobes in general play merry-go-round. Sindhi separatists use this narrative to pronounce and qualify their discontent towards the State of Pakistan by claiming that the nation made in the name of Islam is allowing persecution of Hindus (see Husain, 2019).

The statements from these segments about number of 'forced' conversions sound like the holy exegesis with the same 'data' circulating through all the reports without giving information on relevant dataset or methodology adopted to make such estimates. Clearly, different NGOs and rights activists deliberately magnify each other's statements, fudge the statistics, figures, and political statement to manufacture the 'truth' of 'forced' conversions.

NCJP's oft-cited report has contributed a lot in certain clichés but this report itself borrows similar clichés from its parent organization Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) compiled by Arifa Shakeel. NCJP's January 2014 report on 'forced' conversions illustrated a few examples of the cases of alleged 'forced' conversions based on newspaper reports. The alleged cases included three sisters Nadia, Naema and Nabila (15, 13 and 11 years of age respectively) (in 1997), Hervinder Kaur, a six-year old Sikh girl (in 2003), 13 years' old Hindu girl Mashu, three Hindu sisters Reena (21), Usha

<sup>53</sup> "Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions," MSP, 2014, [http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP\\_Report\\_-\\_Forced\\_Marriages\\_and\\_Conversions\\_of\\_Christian\\_Women\\_in\\_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215](http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/msp/pages/162/attachments/original/1396724215/MSP_Report_-_Forced_Marriages_and_Conversions_of_Christian_Women_in_Pakistan.pdf?1396724215).

<sup>54</sup> Ashfaq Yusufzai, "Minorities in Pakistan Fear 'Forced Conversion' to Islam," Inter Press Service, May 19, 2014, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/05/minorities-pakistan-fear-forced-conversion-islam/>

<sup>55</sup> 'Hindu Panchayat' is often a misnomer for caste-based association of the privileged caste Hindus. Some Hindu panchayats, however, enlist some members from among Dalits as well.

(19) and Rima (17) (in 2005) in Karachi, and Rinkle Kumari (17) (see NCJP, January 2014, p.11). Almost the same cases were presented without referring to the previous source in a report by CCJP (see Shakeel, 2017, p.22). This reproduction of the same data and the fudging of figures show that the so-called rights activists have to struggle for the necessary evidence that could support their argument. In many cases, HRCP too reproduced from the same data in different reports to create an impression that ‘forced conversion’ is happening on a large scale in Pakistan.

Based on the overall analysis of these NGO reports one can argue that their claims of huge numbers of ‘forced’ conversions are not substantiated by sufficient empirical evidence. It is also evident that both the media and the NGO reports quote the same highly exaggerated and deliberately twisted estimates. This lends them a circular argumentation and tautological statements based on data so manufactured. Hence, mostly based on the hunches and perceived fears, human rights defenders and biased Hindu and Christian activists try their best to depict the most shocking picture of the state of affairs in Pakistan.

**Both the media and the NGO reports quote the same highly exaggerated and deliberately twisted estimates. This lends them a circular argumentation and tautological statements based on data so manufactured.**

**Location of Media Outlets**

Like the tautological statements of NGO reports, it is also equally interesting to note the location of the media outlets that thrive on the clichés of NGO reports. Google search results on ‘forced conversion’ (Tables 3 and 4) show that the hue and cry against alleged ‘forced conversion in Pakistan’ interestingly emanates more from the internet and social media outlets located in India and abroad than from Pakistan. It also shows that the rhetorical claim that 1,000 forced conversions annually happen in Pakistan appear in searches more frequently in documents and search entries mentioning Sindh, BJP and the USA along with the issue of ‘forced’ conversion.

**Table 3: Popular Media that Amplify the Rhetoric: Social Media and Internet**

Internet Search Counts									
Search engine/webpage	Category	Total results without quotes	Total results with quotes	From Pakistan (without quotes)	From Pakistan (with quotes)	From India (without quotes)	From India (with exact word)	From USA (without quotes)	From USA (with quotes)
Google	Forced conversion	133,000,000	517,000	23,300	13,500	370,000	73,900	40,500,000	191,000
Google	Forced conversion	7,980,000	9,670	34,700	9	144,000	3,140	1,460,000	8,100

This suggests, not conclusively though, that elements antipathetic towards Muslims, Islam and Pakistan are actually adding their voices to promote and propagate the ‘forced conversion’ narrative.

**Table 4: Rhetoric on Social Media and Internet**

Internet Search Counts		
Search engine/webpage	Category	Total results without quotes
Google	Forced conversion	133,000,000
Google	Forced conversions in Pakistan	7,980,000
Google	Forced conversion in Sindh	217,000
Google	1,000 girls forcibly converted in Pakistan	365,000
Google	Forced conversion in India	27,100,000
YouTube	Forced conversion in Pakistan	6,600
Facebook (from researcher’s login)	Forced conversion in Pakistan	7,820
Twitter (from researcher’s login) <a href="#">#SindhRejectsForcedConversions</a>	Forced conversion in Pakistan	300,000 plus tweets on 6/6/20
Google	‘A privileged caste Hindu’ on forced conversion in Pakistan	7,090 (236 videos)
Google	BJP on forced conversion in Pakistan	474,000 (25,300 videos )

Table 5 shows that BJP tops the score when it comes to search results related to ‘forced’ conversion, followed by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Pakistan Hindu Council, and Centre for Social Justice (Christian NGO). PPP, WSC, PTI score average, whereas Jamaat-i-Islami (a vocal religious political party), BSP (a Dalit political party), and other national and Dalit organizations score the lowest. Interestingly, the political parties and social groups with which Dalits or the underprivileged sections of society identify more, often do not participate in the drive against alleged ‘forced’ conversion.

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**Table 5: Online Google Rating of Active Organizations**

Search entry	Total results	Videos	Pdf documents
“BJP” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan “Bharatiya Janata Party”	12,100	517	993
“RSS” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan “Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh”	5,050	190	526
“Pakistan Hindu Council” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	3,210	251	202
“Centre for Social Justice” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	2,680	208	880
“INC” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan “Indian National Congress”	2,610	60	640
PPP on forced conversion in Pakistan “forced conversion” “Pakistan People’s Party”	2,530	234	235
World Sindhi Congress on forced conversion in Pakistan “forced conversion” “World Sindhi Congress”	2,300	399	54
“PTI” on forced conversion in Pakistan “forced conversion” “Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf”	1,690	77	103
Jamaat-i-Islami on forced conversion in Pakistan “forced conversion” “Jamaat-i-Islami”	1,420	42	228
“BSP” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan “Bahujan Samaj Party”	1,220	99	137
“Institute of Policy Studies” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	766	3	388
“BIF” “Bheel Intellectual Forum Sindh” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	6	1	1
“DST” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan “Dalit Sujag Tehreek”	2	1	0
“Pakistan Derawar Ittehad” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	0	0	0

Similarly, the rating of some leading politicians and activists based on Google entry search (Table 6) shows that the privileged caste Hindus followed by Christian rights activists were at the forefront of the debate. Contrary to them, the Dalit activists and politicians, from whose communities most of the individuals and families convert to Islam, were far less vocal on the internet and social media than the privileged caste Hindus. This variation can be attributed to accessibility to the internet as well, but even the vocal sections among them did not apparently look very concerned about conversion. Yet, like Dalit

counterparts in India, Dalit in Pakistan are understood “in public discourse as psychologically vulnerable and prone to converting for the ‘wrong’ reasons” (Roberts 2009:2012).

**Table 6: Rating of Some Leading Politicians and Activists Based on Google Entry Search**

Search entry*	Total results	Videos	Documents	Religion/Caste
“A Hindu rights activist based in Islamabad, and Karachi” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	2,750	134	93	Jati Hindu/Bania
“A Hindu rights activist and a Sindhi nationalist” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	2,060	133	147	Jati Hindu/Bania
“A Hindu rights activist based in an international NGO” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	1,890	52	70	Jati Hindu/Bania
“A Dalit politician” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	832	13	10	Scheduled Caste/Kolhi
“A Christian rights activist” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	599	64	106	Christian/Maish
“A privileged caste Hindu” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	595	14	8	Jati Hindu/Bania
“A minority rights activist supportive of Scheduled Castes” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	430	5	61	Christian/Masih
“A Sindhi nationalist and Sufi activist” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	119	18	6	Muslim/Sammaat
“A leading Sindhi nationalist and leftist intellectual” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	96	13	1	Muslim/Sindhi Baloch
“A Scheduled Caste politician” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	74	0	4	Scheduled Caste/Meghwar
“A Dalit rights activist and an academician” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	7	0	0	Muslim/Sammat
“A politician of Dalit background” on “forced conversion” in Pakistan	1	0	0	Scheduled Caste/Meghwar

\* Note: The personal names of activists have been anonymized and replaced with the brief sociological description in the ‘search entry’ column.



The overall trajectory of online activism shows that while internet and social media (Twitter and Facebook) can be used to create awareness and give voice to the oppressed, it can also be used to manufacture the facts that either do not exist or exist in ways that greatly differ from their manifestation and construction. The NGO reports are avidly cited for the exaggerated figures to malign the religious clerics, Islam, Pakistan and Muslims. In due course of time, the allegation is transformed into ‘truth’ and an instance of minority persecution. It is further buttressed with some clichés blaming the State and the religious clerics of minority persecution.

### **A Comparison: Narrative of ‘Forced Conversion’ in Europe**

The rhetoric, so developed, creates an environment where every faith conversion may comfortably be pronounced as a forced conversion and an international engagement is readily initiated. In 2019, a 19-year-old Sikh girl, daughter of a *granthi* (priest) of Gurudwara Tambu Sahib in Nankana Sahib, converted to Islam and married a Muslim boy. Both were adults but despite the apparent indications of a love marriage, the Sikh community termed it as ‘forced conversion’.<sup>56</sup> Pressure was built by the international community of Sikhs and resultantly the girl was reclaimed.<sup>57</sup> No further details from or about the girl are known.

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For the sake of comparison and to understand the broader context of the narrative, it is important to note that the narrative of ‘forced conversion’ in Pakistan differs little from the narrative of ‘forced conversion’ in Europe, a Muslim minority region.

Keeping in view the above stated case of a Sikh girl, a look at similar phenomena in Europe should be interesting. Katy P. Sian, in her study on the conversion of Sikh women to Islam in Britain, notes that the Sikh patriarchs believe that the ‘forced’ conversions are “initiated by predatory Muslim males, who groom Sikh girls into converting to Islam against their will”. The narrative is so strong that most of the British people take it as true (Sian, 2011, p.115). According to Sian, the “forced conversions narrative is enunciated in a variety of sites: journalistic, popular and alas, even academic”. Sian (p.3) cites Marie Macey:

In recent years, the organization of religious and political extremism (inaccurately termed ‘fundamentalism’) has taken place both on and off educational premises. This presentation of political ideology under the guise of religious orthodoxy attempts to recruit and mobilize young men to become perpetrators of violence. For example, leaflets circulated in Bradford exhorting young Muslim men to rape Sikh women and murder homosexuals are traceable to extremist Islamic organizations operating across the UK but funded from outside it.

(Macey p.857 in Sian, 2011, p.3)

Sian argues that “reading such somewhat sensational account in which Muslim males are allegedly ‘urged’ to rape Sikh women, could either be interpreted as an effort to instill and encourage a fearless denouncement of ‘predatory’ Muslim males or as a symptom of the banal way in which Islamophobia

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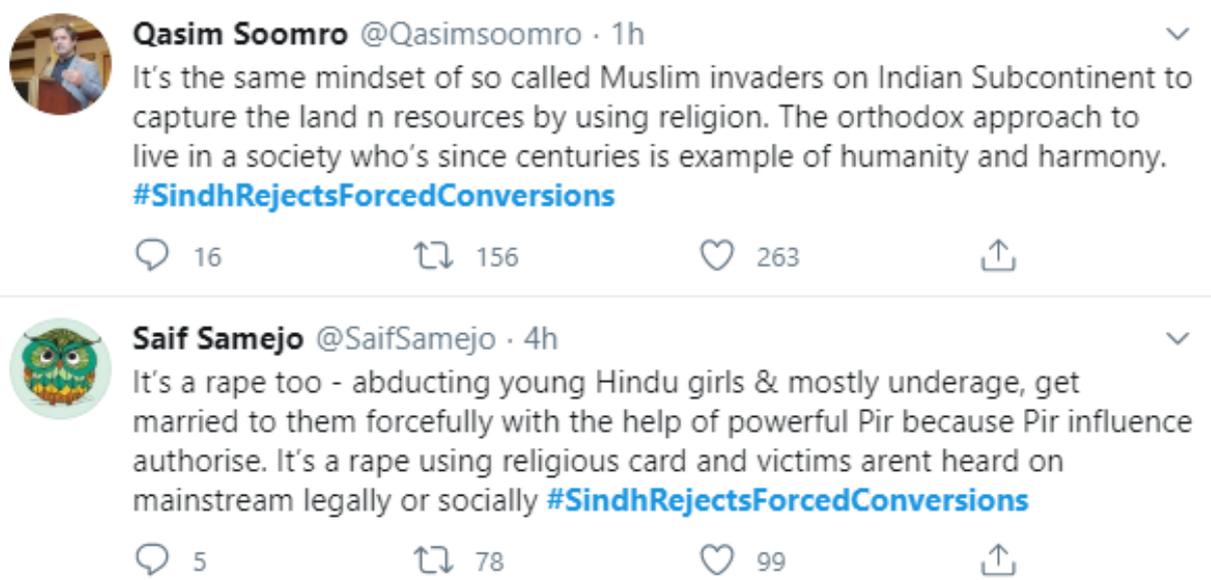
<sup>56</sup> A video available on internet shows the girl affirming her willful conversion of faith and her nikah being solemnized as a Muslim. The same video shows her family members alleging that the girl was forcibly abducted and converted to Islam. They urged the Government of Pakistan to take action to recover the girl. *Jammu Links News*, August 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXoFO3yJA5Y>

<sup>57</sup> Governor Punjab Chaudhary Sarwar resolved the issue between the families of Sikh girl Jagjit Kaur and Muslim boy. See, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O\\_QBIUR5w5o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_QBIUR5w5o).



circulates.” Similar statements can be seen featured on many Sikh/Hindu websites and organizational literature, and right-wing media articles.<sup>58</sup> Collectively these texts present the same narrative structure in which ‘vulnerable Sikh girl’ is ‘coerced, manipulated and groomed’ into the ‘folds’ of Islam by the ‘Muslim male sexual predator’. According to Sian, the conversion of Sikh girls is explained by Sikh individuals and families as a pre-planned process which is narrated in a scandalous way like: A free-going Sikh girl is approached, befriended by a Muslim disguised as a Sikh. “He uses a Sikh name and even drinks, to fool the girls into thinking that he is Indian/Sikh. According to this type of narrative the Muslim man is given an incentive; for every girl he converts there is a cash prize and a secured place in heaven (despite his drinking)” (Sian, 2010, p.117). In the process, a relationship is formed and a love affair ensues. Later, “The cracks begin to show as she is being pressured to convert to Islam; family ties are cut, and she is trapped. She tries to escape but compromising photos have been taken of her to use as blackmail, or she is impregnated, thus cannot risk shaming the family. She is then beaten up or taken to Pakistan to work as a prostitute; no one knows of her whereabouts.” (Sian, 2011, p.117)

The same is almost true about the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan in which Muslim male is depicted in NGO reports, on social media and the internet as the lustful fellow on hunt to lure non-Muslim women, convert them and marry to sell them into prostitution. For instance, a report by Birmingham University on ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan states that, “once kidnapped and forcibly converted they are raped, sold off, become victims of human trafficking or are forced into prostitution” (Ackerman, 2018, p.7).



**Figure 3:** Tweets by Qasim Soomro, a Sindh Assembly Member, and Saif Samejo, a vocalist, terming ‘forced’ conversion a continuation of Muslim invasion and an instance of ‘rape’. [https://twitter.com/hashtag/SindhRejectsForcedConversions?src=hashtag\\_click](https://twitter.com/hashtag/SindhRejectsForcedConversions?src=hashtag_click)

MSP also notifies that “Once in the custody of the abductor, the victim girl may be subjected to sexual violence, rape, forced prostitution, human tracking, and sale, or other domestic abuse” (MSP, 2014, p.2). USCIRF also noted that in Pakistan the pattern is that, “a Muslim man will kidnap, sexually assault, forcibly convert, and then forcibly marry a young Christian or Hindu woman, often with the collusion of State officials, such as the police and religious leaders, and neighborhood imams (USCIRF, 2018, p.7). In its Annual Report 2019, USCIRF again noted that “Forced conversion of Hindu and Christian young women into Islam and marriage, often through bonded labor, remains a systemic problem; [...]

<sup>58</sup> Examples of these websites include: Why I Chose Sikhism (<http://www.whyichosesikhism.com>); <http://www.sikh-lionz.com/hut.htm>; Hindu Unity (<http://www.hinduunity.org>.)



many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and subjected to rape.” Simultaneously, relating such narrative to a general Islamophobic narrative is also quite visible (Figure 3).

Keeping the above in view, there are certain aspects that ask for a closer scrutiny and better understanding in the narrative on conversions. The following discussion will help in understanding how the conversions from other faiths to Islam in Pakistan are construed to portray every such instance as a case of forced conversion and how human rights perspective is invoked to seek support and sympathy on a wider scale. This definition might not be given explicitly in a document but the way the conversions are construed and developed into a narrative shows that certain grey areas are deliberately left to manipulate as per requirement. Such ambiguities gradually develop into a narrative in which every phrase and expression seems to give a particular meaning. The force, too, is portrayed to work unilaterally without giving any hint to the pressure and force that is alleged to be applied by the family patriarchs of the person who may be considering to convert or might have converted.

### **The Issue of Defining Conversion**

Religious or faith conversion, its mechanisms and its sociological and psychological underpinnings have been studied for millennia (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998, 2005; Paloutzian et al, 1999; Stark & Finke 2000). Most of the theories of conversion defy the binary logic of ‘force-voluntary’ that is often employed in everyday politics to argue, accuse, claim, and propagate. Conversion can be defined and understood in various ways, depending on the nature, context or the given factors such as convert’s agency as a woman and level of religiosity along with “social integration, the temporal span of conversion, the nature of conversion’s consequences, and the roles that crisis, emotion, religion, and identity play in conversion” (Snook, Williams & Horgan, 2018). Therefore, to say that in Pakistan non-Muslims are often forced by religious clerics and the State will be a sweepingly naïve understanding of the very complex phenomena, and will be as flawed as the assertion that free-will conversions are always divinely inspired.

Religious conversion is not a perfect transformation from the state of unbelief to strong belief in the teachings of Islam. It is a social process of accommodation and assimilation in the Muslim family or a Muslim community. Louis R. Rambo’s (1993, p.16-17) model of conversion suggests that religious conversion is not an impulsive overnight decision and many converts undergo a difficult period of transition. According to him, a convert undergoes such stages as a given (social) context, crisis (that usually happens in the process to adjust to cultural anomalies), quest (to look for answers to the crises in religious texts), encounter (with the religious authority, a religious cleric), interaction (with a community of faith), commitment (to follow certain obligatory rituals) and consequences (such as racial discrimination and patriarchy) during the processes of conversion. No study, either academic or by any NGO, has so far aimed at explaining the variety of socio-psychological factors that lead a non-Muslim to convert to Islam in Pakistan, and how does such person and the society adjust to new realities.

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Donor-driven NGOs often work within the framework of the human rights paradigm. Yet, when it comes to defining the issue of ‘forced’ conversion, they take certain liberties to twist the meaning. Conversion is also defined in terms of an individual’s right to convert and profess any religion. To be consistent with freedom of religion or belief as per Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, non-discriminatory laws should protect people from being subject to coerced conversions, while allowing conversions based on the convert’s



free will and consent. In Pakistan, however, NGOs or the human rights defenders frequently provide definitions of “forced” or “induced” conversions that are so broad or clumsy that little, if any, room is left for explaining willful or consensual legal conversions.

Asif Aqeel notes: “Not all religious minorities report forced conversion to Islam and marriage of their young girls” (Aqeel, 2020, p.9) and that only Hindus, Sikhs and Christians allege it. He notes that “Ahmadis, who suffer the highest social and economic pressure, claimed that none of their women have been forcibly converted. Parsees and Baha’is also denied forced conversion of their women” (Aqeel, 2020, p.64). Though he confirms that “No known organization has ever provided data to verify that 1,000 non-Muslim girls are forced to convert every year” (ibid) but his research indicates that “In certain instances, marriages out of free will are not accepted by their families” (p.65) and one likelihood in such cases is to consider love marriages as instances of blackmail (p.65). This approach essentially means that love or friendship is meant to forcibly convert. Such generalization makes it impossible to know the genuine cases of love and friendship out of cheating. Similarly, based on the visit to Ghotki,

**It makes the issue look way bigger than it is by confusing willful or voluntary conversions with the induced conversions, and terming all as ‘forced conversions’.**

Sindh, to find the causes of ‘forced conversion’, HRCP reported that many believe that “90% of the cases were forced. Factors causing the problem included: escaping poverty, love, better social status, and forced conversion being treated by some as a business” (HRCP, 2019, p.6). HRCP does not explain how escaping poverty and love or the

conversion for the sake of socioeconomic uplift can be termed as causes of ‘forced’ conversion. Such illusive statements are often taken for granted as explanations of the phenomenon, and are gradually transformed into standard definitions of ‘forced’ conversion.

A statement of a privileged caste Hindu Member of Sindh Assembly Mangla Sharma is quoted by Aqeel which shows how even a marriage of choice is construed as a form of force to disallow agency of girls and women. This statement says, “mostly these young girls are allured to a relation and then blackmailed to contract a marriage” (Aqeel, 2020, p.65).

Similarly, SAP-PK in its 2015 report notes that “In rich Hindu communities, some cases happened on the basis of restriction of mobility and choice of educational institutions and the girls were tempted to have a free and fair life by coming into the fold of Islam” (p.7). With this rather reluctant expression, it attempts to develop a self-contradictory definition of ‘forced conversion’. It writes:

Though there are various other causes like social exclusion, economic vulnerabilities including political isolation and violence that influence people to convert willingly, but basically these categories too fall under the definition of forced conversion.

(SAP-PK, 2015, p.5)

Such a definition can, at best, be termed as an oxymoron as it is attempting to classify two opposing phenomena under a single term. It makes the issue look way bigger than it is by confusing willful or voluntary conversions with the induced conversions, and terming all as ‘forced conversions’.

Given this definition, all those who converted to Islam to get rid of social exclusion based on caste become forcibly converted; and all those who had converted from Hinduism to Buddhism, Islam and Christianity in history to escape social exclusion can be termed as forcibly converted. In Sindh, Sheikhs and Soomros, who were once Lohanas and Hindu Rajputs, and Solangis and Mallahs who once practiced a tribal faith akin to Bheels of Rajasthan, all can be termed as forcibly converted even if they converted by choice and free will. This approach to conversion is indisputably akin to the anti-conversion stance of Hindutvadis in India, who are currently adamant to reclaim all those indigenous



castes and tribes who have been converted to Islam or Christianity, and aim to prevent the conversion of Dalits ('untouchables') out of Hinduism (Jenkins 2008; Roberts 2008, 2009). For instance, the anti-conversion stance of the early leading Hindutva ideologue, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, who thinks 'Conversion is violence.' He writes:

"On the basis of reason, no non-verifiable belief is going to fare any better than any other non-verifiable belief. Therefore, according to reason there is no basis for conversion in matters of faith. . . . Religions that are committed by their theologies to convert . . . are necessarily aggressive, since conversion implies a conscious intrusion into the religious life of a person, in fact, into the religious person. This is a very deep intrusion, as the religious person is the deepest, the most basic in any individual. When that person is disturbed, a hurt is sustained that is very deep. The religious person is violated. . . . Religious conversion destroys centuries-old communities and incites communal violence. It is violence and it breeds violence."<sup>59</sup>

According to Nathaniel Roberts (2012):

"Religion in Saraswati's understanding does not describe a relationship between the human and a mind-independent (or non-cultural) reality; it is given in, and constitutive of a psychologically and culturally constituted self. This is not how religion was always understood in India. On the contrary, the fact that religious discourse referred to an extra-human reality in pre-modern India meant that religious beliefs were in principle subject to verification (or rejection) by a wide variety of empirical and rational tests" (p.279).

**The marriages induced by love between the couples are completely ignored and the conversion motive is presented in a complicated manner confusing cultural norms with legal remedies.**

This historically proven liminality of religious conversion is not taken into consideration by NGO report while defining or explaining 'conversion'. Additionally, they do not give weightage to women's or girls' agency to decide about their marriage, and speaks on behalf of the non-Muslim family patriarchs. Thus, the marriages induced by love between the couples are completely ignored and the conversion motive is presented in a complicated manner confusing cultural norms with legal remedies.

To cite another example, FIDH and HRCP in one of their reports explain forced conversion in this manner:

"While in Muslim law the consent of parents or a *wali* (guardian) of the bride (whether minor or not) is taken otherwise the marriage remains unrecognized, the same principle does not apply when a Hindu girl is being converted and married to a Muslim man, so many Muslim men seek out young Hindu girls to forcibly convert and marry, as they legally need not bother with getting the girl's guardian's consent or permission."

(FIDH & HRCP, 2015, p.16)

In fact, consent of *wali* (guardian) is suggested for the first marriage of a girl according to some Muslim jurists, but in practice women can exercise their right to marriage even without consent of their elders, and a number of women exercise this right through courts in Pakistan. Seeking consent and blessings of elders, and more particularly guardian, in Pakistani society is a way of giving respect and value to them and their opinions that are based on affection and experience. In most cases of love and romance, aspiring spouses either convince their parents to comply with their wishes or do not even seek the

<sup>59</sup> Swami Dayananda Saraswati, "Conversion is Violence," October 29, 1999 (Excerpt is taken from Nathaniel Roberts, 2012, p.272).



consent of their parents and marry. Both situations have their own social consequences, however. In many cases parents do not seek legal remedies and even if they do, it is not based on their right to complimentary consent as guardians but they too manipulate the facts to allege abduction and force marriage. Simultaneously, it is also a fact that some of them take this as a revolt against family and may go to the extent of taking the law in their hands. None of these practices can, however, be generalized to the whole society.

To put it briefly, the definitions or explanations developed by NGO-produced literature do not help in explaining the ‘force’ or the pressures exerted by the family patriarchs over women and girls. In fact, by virtue of such vague definitions, the majority of the indigenous castes and tribes of Sindh and Punjab can be termed as forcibly converted. Going by that logic all of those castes and communities that once converted willingly or under socioeconomic necessity need to be reconverted back to their original religion.

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**The gendered nature of conversion raises questions of how conversion to Islam affects women in their marital choices, their conjugal rights, immigration status in Pakistan and their work ethics. The monolithic narrative presented in these reports does not take into consideration such multifarious factors... which raises suspicion over the authenticity of the claims.**

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Interestingly, there again are no basis on which this definition was reached. Instead of giving any sources through which the SAP-PK authors reached a definition, statements like “social scientists have done a lot of research and have written plenty of literature on this definition” (SAP-PK, 2015, p.5) have been used to amplify the effect of rhetoric without appreciable basis. Unfortunately, most NGO reports concoct clumsy and broad definitions, present very sketchy data and

furnish unverifiable estimates terming almost every conversion of a non-Muslim girl a ‘forced’ conversion.

On the same pattern of strengthening patriarchy, when MSP report (2014) briefly described 10 case studies sourced out from “CLAAS archives” of Christian girls who were allegedly forced to convert, it purports to show “the usual pattern through which abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriages” occur. It does not, however, show the ways in which the respective families of the ‘victims’ may have been involved in forcing them against marrying outside caste and religion. All the cases reported put the religious motive of the abductors at the forefront and the marriage motive is almost completely omitted out.<sup>60</sup>

The gendered nature of conversion raises questions of how conversion to Islam affects women in their marital choices, their conjugal rights, immigration status in Pakistan and their work ethics. The monolithic narrative presented in these reports does not take into consideration such multifarious factors and invariably terms almost every conversion as ‘forced’, which raises suspicion over the authenticity of the claims. Initial understanding developed through direct interactions with members of minority communities indicates that it is less likely that girls who are alleged to have been forced to marry a Muslim and convert to Islam had, in fact, done so under actual ‘force’ (physical threat/blackmail). NGO reports do not take into consideration any alternate possibilities. Instead, socioeconomic push and pull factors and a likely genuine urge towards Islam or a Muslim is interpreted as a form of ‘force’. Many convert girls are 13 to 18 years of age, the liminal period, and below the statutory limit of 18 years in Sindh and 16 years in Punjab for a girl to marry. Statutory limits are not often respected by the parents,

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<sup>60</sup> MSP’s report was written by Emad Ansari and edited by Samuel Janis. The report was facilitated by Christian Study Center, Rawalpindi, members of the National Commission for Justice and Peace, and members of the Center for Legal Aid and Assistance (CLAAS); three prominent Christian rights organizations.

and the paramours, and consequently, marriages below 18 are often contracted by families without taking into account statutory legal codes. Customary law and cultural traditions are given credence over state laws (Hossain & Suzanne, 2001; Razack, 2004; Munir, 2015; Naveed and Butt, 2015; Rid, 2016). NGO reports, including the MSP report, do not explain this discrepancy in the customary and state laws that play vital role in marital contracts at the local level. In the presentation of case studies, the MSP report purports to demonstrate “the pattern of violence through which the law becomes complicit in providing immunity for perpetrators”. It, however, does not give the details with the minimal evidence (official document, script, or datum, etc.) through which one could verify the case studies. In presentation of case studies, the MSP report (‘Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan’, 2014) purports to demonstrate “the pattern of violence through which the law becomes complicit in providing immunity for perpetrators” it does not give the details with the minimal evidence (official document, script, or datum, etc.) through which one could verify the case studies.

Moreover, the report does not distinguish ‘forced’ conversion based on the age criterion or the variety of socially possible interpretations of the conversion and marriage. It paints a stereotypical scenario to suggest that all girls or women between the ages of 12 and 25 being the victims of ‘forced conversion’. It goes like this: “Cases for forced marriages and conversions can be distinguished by a specific pattern or process: Christian girls – usually between the ages of 12 and 25 – are abducted, converted to Islam, and married to the abductor or third party. The victim’s family usually files a First Information Report (FIR) for abduction or rape with the local police station. The abductor, on behalf of the victim girl, files a counter FIR, accusing the Christian family of harassing the willfully converted and married girl, and for conspiring to convert the girl back to Christianity. Upon production in the courts or before the magistrate, the victim girl is asked to testify whether she converted and married of her own free will or if she was abducted. In most cases, the girl remains in the custody of the abductor while judicial proceedings are carried out. Upon the girl’s pronouncement that she willfully converted and consented to the marriage, the case is settled without relief for the family. Once in the custody of the abductor, the victim girl may be subjected to sexual violence, rape, forced prostitution, human trafficking and sale, or other domestic abuse.” (MSP, 2014, p.2)

The CCJP report (2017) was prepared in collaboration with the European Union with the title “Forced Conversion of Religious Minorities in Pakistan”. The report purports to shed light on the socio-cultural aspect of the issue.<sup>61</sup> It borrows its definition from the Centre for Legal Aid and Assistance (CLAAS) to maintain that, “The Centre for Legal Aid and Assistance has categorized eight different types or forms of conversion: (1) willful, (2) fraudulent; (3) for shelter; (4) exploitative; (5) induced; (6) under threat or duress; (7) for greed; and (8) forceful”. Without explaining how ‘willful’ conversion is different from ‘induced’ and ‘exploitative’ or ‘forceful’ etc., the report hurries to make certain judgments about the belief and hidden motives of Muslims. The report fails to give detailed treatment to the nature of belief and practices of Muslims as they exist enmeshed with their culture. It writes:

The Islamic context on forced conversion has generally been accepted as authoritative conversion and undue stress on details is not allowed. Conversions, however, are justified and viewed as a desirable practice. This majority opinion, however, facilitates the work of those proselytizers engaged in such coercive evangelization, since underlying coercive factors are not investigated. Conversions are accepted without question, and the converting party gains respect for what is considered a service to the religion. Challenges to conversions, particularly from non-Muslims, are viewed with suspicion. Though no legal bar to conversion from Islam to another faith exists, social attitudes ensure that in practice only one-way conversion to Islam

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<sup>61</sup> Forced Conversion of Religious Minorities in Pakistan, report by Catholic Commission of Justice and Peace (CCJP) in 2017. <http://www.ncjp-pk.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/forced%20conversion%20of%20religious%20in%20pakistan.pdf>



is allowed. When directly coerced or forced conversion occurs, the State and authorities are often complicit.

(Shakeel, 2017, p.23)

The abstract of the report by CCJP mentions that the ‘research-based position paper’ will highlight the major reasons “to address this cruel issue of forced conversions” so that policymakers and legislators could make informed decisions (Shakeel, 2017). But in doing so, it does not take into consideration many crucial factors, particularly casteism, caste-based discrimination and patriarchy of the families or parents that vie with each other to win over alleged victim girls or women converts. It completely neglects the role of casteism and patriarchy, the notions of honor and honor killing prevailing among both Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Warraich, 2005). The report presents the issue of forced conversion as essentially religious in nature.

### How ‘Under-Age’ is Problematic?

A major claim in the rhetoric of all conversions being forced is that the girls who are allegedly abducted and converted are below the legal age to show that they do not enjoy agency. Arifa Shakeel (2017) tabulates some 49 cases of alleged forced conversion giving sketchy details about the religion and location of the likely victims and perpetrators. Of these 20 are alleged to fall in age bracket 12 to 17, 17 girls in the age bracket 18-30, five were above 30 years of age while age was not specified for seven cases. The report provides online link to the source of only a few of the cases and that too are news items, reports by minority rights groups without firsthand data and statements of activists.<sup>62</sup>

As the report does not provide sufficient data or information about other cases, it does not provide information about the age of the nine alleged victims that could perhaps be identified and traced for further verification and research. The list includes adult cases that may be of love marriages but presented as ‘forced’ conversions and ‘forced’ marriages. This suspicion emanates from the fact that out of 54, 10 cases show the ages between 12 and 15. Eleven cases of reported conversion of males and females fall between the 15 and 17 age group, whereas the 22 cases of alleged ‘forced conversion’ tabulated in the report lie in the 18 to 53 age group. The age of many other cases has not been given. This means that the majority of the alleged victims of ‘forced conversion’ are either adults (18 plus) or of marriageable age (16-17). These figures contradict the basic assertion of the report, “the women victimized by such illegal marriages usually include minors” (Shakeel, 2017, p.21). The 54 cases also include six cases of non-Muslim males converting to Islam. Most adult males are aged between 20 and 33 and might have converted so that their marriage with their Muslim paramour could be solemnized (Shakeel, 2017, p.28-29). The report mentions that the apparent motive presented by the perpetrators was to marry the girl or boy. However, it is interesting to note that the author of the report makes one believe that even the adult males are ‘forced’ to convert on the pretext of marriage or love affair. This

<sup>62</sup> See, \* “Pakistan: Jihad to convert Hindu girls to Islam rages on,” Asian Human Rights Commission, July 19, 2013, <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-136-2013>

\* “Pakistan: A Hindu girl was forced to convert to Islam and is now missing – the judge and police have sided with the perpetrators,” urgent appeal case by Asian Human Rights Commission, June 29, 2012, <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-115-2012>

\* “Pakistan: Jihad to convert Hindu girls to Islam rages on,” *Ahmadiya Times*, July 19, 2013, <http://ahmadiyyatimes.blogspot.com/2013/07/pakistan-jihad-to-convert-hindu-girls.html>

\* “Hindus Protest after Woman Converted to Islam in Pakistan,” Awami Awaz, <http://www.sociableinfo.com/hindus-protest-after-woman-convered-to-islaminpakistan/#.UeY5sG2bFVU&www.awamiawaz.net/jacobabad-protest-4>.

\* Ashfaq Yusufzai, “Minorities in Pakistan Fear ‘Forced Conversion’ to Islam,” Inter Press Service, May 19, 2014, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/05/minorities-pakistan-fear-forced-conversion-islam/>

\* Pakistan Christian Post. <http://www.pakistanchristianpost.com/headlinenews.php?hnewsid=4313>



is all the data that the report proffers to term the ‘forced’ conversion as one of the major issues that the minorities in Pakistan grapple with.

Contrary to what the author proclaims, the cases presented show that there is much more than revealed by the author(s), and requires to be verified and further explored. Many converts are older than 18. It invalidates the allegation that “conversion is taking place among women younger than 18” (Aqeel, 2020, p.65), and those young women are targeted by religious fanatics or the ‘lustful’ Muslims. The report itself demonstrates against its own assertions that both non-Muslim male and female paramours of marriageable and adult age have to convert to solemnize the marriage, and that *nikkah* is more of a necessary cultural ritual than a mere religious compulsion, to initiate the process of bride’s adjustment in the family of her husband. Cultural norms work quite imperceptibly and religion is not practiced independently of it. Every religious community has its own codes of marrying within or without the community. The inter-caste and inter-faith marriages violate the established norm in such cases, and the paramours have to make adjustments to the ritual and practices of each other’s community. More importantly, marriages below legal age are not uncommon in the socioeconomic classes, even among Muslims, that are allegedly the prime target of ‘forced conversion’. There are several pull and push factors that are discussed ahead that may possibly cause conversion.

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So far as the allegation of forcible conversion of Hindu girls is concerned, although criminal cases were registered in Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan yet generally it was found that most of the girls had eloped with persons of their choice and married at their own free will.

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### Legislation Against ‘Forced Conversion’?

NGO reports and lobbying has served as the ‘proof’ and motivation to push for legislation against ‘forced’ conversion. Such a move would mean legitimizing and validating the existence of forced conversion as a systematic and widespread phenomenon without assessing it through any research or actual data. There is a strong likelihood that religious groups which perceive that they are losing members to other faiths often problematize conversion in support of the patriarchs who feel ‘dishonored’ over a female making the choice for her life when such choice has been denied. Minority rights groups have aggressively been pushing for enactment and have proposed certain Bills to be passed by the provincial and federal assemblies. These Bills define conversion in a manner that makes freedom of choice extremely narrow and upholds the patriarchal primacy over individuals. Such a legislation would be risking objectivity observed also in a 2014 judgment of the Supreme Court of Pakistan that is celebrated as ‘landmark judgment’<sup>63</sup> for minority rights. The apex court had observed:

“So far as the allegation of forcible conversion of Hindu girls is concerned, although criminal cases were registered in Punjab, Sindh and Balochistan yet generally it was found that most of the girls had eloped with persons of their choice and married at their own free will. Nevertheless, the Court would not like to comment lest it may prejudice the case of either side as some of those cases are pending trial before the appropriate Courts.”

(PLD 2014 Supreme Court 699)

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<sup>63</sup> Naumana Suleman, *Beyond Commissions: Institutionalizing Minority Rights in Pakistan*, Minority Rights Group International, June 2, 2020, <https://minorityrights.org/2020/06/02/minority-commission-pakistan/#:~:text=The%20Supreme%20Court%20of%20Pakistan%20on%2019%20June,to%20the%20minorities%20under%20the%20Constitution%20and%20law.>



The Bills so far put forth for legislation (including those introduced by Sanjay Pervani in 2016, Nand Kumar Gokhlani in 2015<sup>64</sup> and Ramesh Kumar Vankwani in 2015 and 2019<sup>65</sup>) took forced conversion as a fact of Pakistani society with the narrative that current legal and constitutional guarantees as well

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**Despite being a Hindu majority country India has anti-conversion laws, mainly to restrict Hindus from conversion to Islam, a minority religion, it seems illogical to believe that in Muslim-dominated Pakistan, Hindus will have to be forced to convert to Islam.**

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as the law enforcement agencies and justice system were pitched against the religious minorities. They clearly define ‘forced conversion’ in relation to the family of the convert, not the convert himself or herself. The definitions given in the Bills invoke the question of empirical validity, the need of such a law, its utility, applicability and ramifications for the society at large. Endogamy is thus

given legal sanction. The terms so defined do not explain if the emotions and the psychological processes involved in love affairs or runaway marriages can be termed as causes of ‘forced’ conversion. The Bills do not explain the situations in which an individual converting of her free will was being ‘forced’ by her family not to convert.

Before passing a Bill in Pakistan, the regional logic behind such laws should also be taken into consideration. Anti-conversion laws have taken hold in countries where the dominant religious (and often ethnic) majority feels threatened by an active and growing religious minority, such as India and Nepal, to discourage Hindus to convert to Islam and Christianity (Fischer, 2018). Given the fact that despite being a Hindu majority country India has anti-conversion laws, mainly to restrict Hindus from conversion to Islam, a minority religion, it seems illogical to believe that in Muslim-dominated Pakistan, Hindus will have to be forced to convert to Islam. Muslim women tend not to marry with Hindu men as often as do Hindu women with Muslim men – in India and Pakistan – the Hinduvadis and Islamophobes often demonize such marriages terming them as ‘love jihad’ in India and ‘forced conversions’ in Pakistan.

Similarly, it can be argued that while the left and center-left in Pakistan, Hindu right and its diaspora wittingly or unwittingly serves the political interests of the right and far-right in India, the Indian left and Muslim right in India do the same for Pakistan and Muslims. The narrative of forced conversions and love jihad thus explain the empirical basis of Indo-Pak politics. Or to put it the other way round, Indo-Pak rivalry is thus explained away by the rhetoric of forced conversion and love jihad created or manufactured by political actors in both the countries. Conversions can be defined based on the socioeconomic pull and push factors as well as the genuine quest for an alternate worldview or spiritual solace. Socioeconomic vulnerability can be one of the push factors, particularly in the case of the conversion of Dalits. Socioeconomic backwardness of Dalits is rooted in their exploitation by both privileged caste Hindus and elite Muslims alike, and the Dalit woman is the worst victim of caste endogamy and patriarchy. This trans-religious and casteist and patriarchal nexus is the main endogenous push factor behind the conversion of Dalits.

### **Faith Conversions in a Regional Context**

As briefly indicated earlier, the conversion of Hindu and Christian girls to Islam in Pakistan cannot be merely construed as social domination of Muslims or economic opportunities available to majority

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<sup>64</sup> The Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill, 2015 presented by Nand Kumar Gokhlani. See, Open Parliament, <http://openparliament.pk/bill-details/?billId=2347>.

<sup>65</sup> “Lawmaker tables bills, resolution against forced conversions, child marriages,” *The Express Tribune*, March 26, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1937885/lawmaker-tables-bills-resolution-forced-conversions-child-marriages>.

population. Had it been so, there would have been several examples of Muslim conversions in India to Hinduism and their subsequent marriages with Hindus. On the contrary, the evident trend of individual and mass religious conversion in colonial and post-independence India is majorly towards Islam and Christianity.<sup>66</sup>

Given this tendency and the fear of mass conversion of ‘lower caste’ Hindus, the Hindu rights activists have got anti-conversion laws passed in India. Asma Jahangir, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief from 2004 to 2010, visited India in 2008 and reported that the laws were targeted at Christians and Muslims. She wrote in her report that the laws failed to clearly define what makes a conversion improper, and bestows on the authorities’ unfettered discretion to accept or reject the legitimacy of religious conversions.”<sup>67</sup> In her study on the impact of anti-conversion laws, Meghan Fischer (2018) wrote that anti-conversion laws had taken hold in countries where the dominant religious (and often ethnic) majority feels threatened by an active and growing religious minority, such as India and Nepal, to discourage Hindus to convert to Islam and Christianity. It gives “a license to extremists to perpetrate violence against minority religious communities under the guise of preventing forced conversions”, added Fischer (p.68).

Hence, while in the legal domain anti-conversion laws effectively ban conversion from the majority religion – Hinduism to a minority religion, in particular, Christianity and Islam, in the social domain, BJP, RSS and their fringe Hindutva organizations continue to build social and political pressure by linking such marriages with ‘love jihad’.

They tend to intervene in matters when even the voluntary mass conversions, mostly from indigenous tribal faiths to Christianity, happen and pressurize the convert to Hinduism, what they call *ghar wapsi* (the return back to home). This, in fact, is tantamount to ‘forced conversion’ under the excuse of alleged ‘forced conversions’. International laws exist that

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**In this mediatized age, the truth is not what actually exists at the grassroots level in one country, but the one that is construed by the local vectors, and its appeal depends on the intensity with which it is projected through media.**

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condemn such laws and schemes of converting tribals and neo-Christians to the Brahminic form of Hinduism. The anti-conversion laws have been condemned by the United Nations as they violate the fundamental rights of humans to convert to any religion and practice and preach it. Yet the sheer volume of Indian media enables the Hindu rights activists and journalists to manufacture the rhetoric of ‘love jihad’ and ‘forced conversions’ directed mainly against Muslims. Such a hegemonic role of Indian media and politics to manufacture the narrative of “forced conversion in Pakistan” can be easily had from the specific Google search results as given in Tables 4, 5 and 6. They show that the hue and cry raised by Pakistan Hindu Council is picked up by BJP and RSS to create and reinforce rhetoric. In this mediatized age, the truth is not what actually exists at the grassroots level in one country, but the one that is construed by the local vectors, and its appeal depends on the intensity with which it is projected through media.

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<sup>66</sup> Charu Gupta, “Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 661-87. Accessed September 29, 2020. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43553340>; Laura Dudley Jenkins, *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

<sup>67</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, p. 16-18: Addendum – Mission to India (A/HRC/10/8/Add.3), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/647317?ln=en>.



The problem of juridical conformity to the normative sanction of conversion aside, the outcome of inter-faith or faith-related marriages is often decided in the political arena based on prevalent norms in the society, and where not individuals but families, political and religious groups are pitted against each other. For instance, deviating from the constitutional provisions against religious and caste-based

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**With the Hindu nationalist party BJP in power, there has been a sharp rise in incidences whereby anti-conversion laws are invoked to undo interfaith marriages, and marrying couples are harassed and persecuted, particularly when it involves a Hindu girl marrying a Muslim boy or man.**

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discriminations, Hindus in India usually discourage interfaith marriages, as the normative rules of caste endogamy are violated. With the Hindu nationalist party BJP in power, there has been a sharp rise in incidences whereby anti-conversion laws are invoked to undo interfaith marriages, and marrying couples are harassed and persecuted, particularly when it involves a Hindu girl marrying a Muslim boy or man<sup>68</sup>. BJP and other

nationalist groups like RSS continue to tout anti-conversion laws, which in India are called “Freedom of Religion” Acts. Hindu nationalists’ stated rationale for anti-conversion laws is that Christians and Muslims are using coercion to convert vulnerable Hindus of the lowest castes, also known as Dalits or Untouchables.<sup>69</sup>

The demand for the passage of laws against ‘forced conversions’ in Pakistan should be seen in the generic context of Islamophobia at the global level, particularly in relation to the anti-conversion laws as passed by the Indian government, and further push for it in certain Indian states.

After independence, the Indian parliament considered several anti-conversion Bills but ultimately dropped all of them.<sup>70</sup> However, due to India’s federal structure, state legislatures have been able to pass anti-conversion laws. Seven states have such laws: Orissa (1967), Madhya Pradesh (1968), Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Chhattisgarh (2000), Gujarat (2003), Himachal Pradesh (2006), Jharkhand (2017)<sup>71</sup> and Uttarakhand (2018).<sup>72</sup> Nationalists have advocated for anti-conversion laws in other states and even in India as a whole<sup>73</sup> (Fischer, 2018, p.15).

The stated purpose of each of the anti-conversion laws is to prohibit conversion by force, fraud, or inducement. Each of the laws states, “No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet such conversion”.<sup>74</sup> (Fischer, 2018, p.15). The thrust of the laws tabled

<sup>68</sup> USCIRF, 2017 Annual Report, supra note 37, p.149.

<sup>69</sup> Tehmina Arora, “India’s Defiance of Religious Freedom: A Briefing on ‘Anti-Conversion’ Laws,” 2012, [https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/92149/iirf\\_reports\\_2012\\_02.pdf](https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/92149/iirf_reports_2012_02.pdf).

<sup>70</sup> Tehmina Arora, “India’s Defiance,” supra note 42, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> Arvin Valmuci, “Jharkhand Becomes Ninth State in India to Pass Anti-Conversion Law,” Sikh24.com, September 14, 2017, <https://www.sikh24.com/2017/09/14/jharkhand-becomes-ninth-state-in-india-to-pass-anti-conversion-law/#.WuelHdPwaT8>.

<sup>72</sup> “Anti-Conversion Bill Becomes Law in Uttarakhand State, India,” *Morning Star News*, April 30, 2018, <https://morningstarnews.org/2018/04/anti-conversion-bill-becomes-law-in-uttarakhand-state-india/>.

<sup>73</sup> Chaturvedi & Venugopal, supra note 43; Anita Joshua, “Rajnath pitches for anti-conversion law,” *Hindu*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/states-should-act-against-communal-incidents-rajnath/article7150757.ece>; “BJP calls for national law to curb conversions,” *Hindu*, December 11, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/agra-conversions-centre-advocates-anticonversion-laws/article6683116.ece>.

<sup>74</sup> Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, Act 2 of 1968, Art. 3 (1967) (India); Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, Act 27 of 1968, Art. 3 (1968) (India); Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, Act 4 of 1978, Art. 3 (1968) (India); Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act, Act 24 of 2003, Art. 3 (2003) (India);



by Hindu rights activists in Pakistan seems similar in political motives as that of the Hindu nationalists in India. It indicates that Hindu leaders in India and Pakistan are equally concerned about faith conversions and not merely about forced conversions.

### **The Problem of Religious Binaries**

Defining conversion in terms of religious binaries and converts as fundamentally transformed beings is a highly problematic proposition. To the secular observer, ‘religious conversion appears to need explaining in a way that conversion to modernity does not (Asad, 1996, p.263)’. Yet, there were times when the secular-religious binaries were almost non-existent, and conversion to any religion or creed didn’t need explaining. In most of the cases, people converted because their imagined “God had helped them to see the truth” (Asad, 1996, p.263). But this dramatically altered as the secular-religious binaries were introduced by the European colonizers. Scholars on ‘conversion’ such as Charles Taylor (1989) Talal Asad (1996) and Nathaniel Roberts (2012) see the roots of these binaries in the specifically European genealogy which is “foundational to the public-private distinction on which the political project of modern liberalism rests” (Roberts, 2012, p.287).

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**The thrust of the laws tabled by Hindu rights activists in Pakistan seems similar in political motives as that of the Hindu nationalists in India. It indicates that Hindu leaders in India and Pakistan are equally concerned about faith conversions and not merely about forced conversions.**

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The narrative of ‘forced conversion’ in Pakistan as it is inflated through social media outlets seems to be the continuation of that project that was injected into the body politic of South Asia by the British orientalist and the Indologists followed by Hinduvadi ideologues, Sindhi nationalists, and the neoliberal rights activists. Yet, they should not be wholly blamed for that. Religious clerics and leading protagonists on both sides of conversion conceive it as a black-and-white matter. The person either is a convert to Islam or not. He is either a Hindu or Muslim or Christian. There is nothing in between. The belief of those lying at the margins or in-between is these binaries is understood “as basically false or inauthentic, thereby ignoring the role of a subjective urge among the convert to experience and explore the new or different faith.

This social psychology probably does not corroborate with the actual conversion process and the level of religiosity among the (would-be) converts. Most of the Dalits known to the researcher, lived with a persistent sense of existential uncertainty about their current and future economic and social prospects. With this introspection into the ongoing miseries of Dalits, it becomes evident that the alarming rate of suicides among Kolhis and Bheels plays into taking the leap of faith to relinquish all the rituals, objects, and deities that they had some faith in.

Hence, while several socioeconomic push and pull factors may be involved in the conversion process, including the occasional use of ‘coercion’ in a few cases, the instinct to adopt or experiment with the relatively different faith as a form of transcendental ‘truth-seeking’ process, which functions relatively independently, cannot be reduced to the monolithic narrative of ‘forced’ conversion. Conversion as a process is related to the level of religiosity and the mix of rituals and cultural institutions of both old and newly found faith that a convert often carries. Tribal and caste loyalties, for instance, do not instantly break with the change of faith. Similarly, the level of religious commitment or religiosity is not constant achieved instantly at the time of conversion. According to Roberts (2012), “the leap of

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Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, Act 31 of 2006, Art. 3 (2006) (India);  
Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, Act 17 of 2017, Art. 3 (2017) (India).



faith is not a one-time event; it is repeated in major and minor ways throughout the remainder of the convert's life" (p.285), as the commitment to the new faith, and its rituals is progressively deepened. Hence, it is not easy to judge the level of commitment of any person to the old or new faith just simply by judging his/her external appearances, and then proclaim his/her faith as 'false' consciousness, the consequence of 'forced' conversion.

Among the Dalits in lower Sindh who are believed to be the victims of 'forced' conversion and with whom this researcher spent some time during ethnographic engagements in 2016, it was noticed that religion is not conceived by them as a kind of organized faith, but as a cultural practice; and the conversion to Islam or to stay within the so-called Hindu faith seems less important an issue. In most of the cases of group or mass conversions, families are already acculturated into the ways of the dominant Muslim culture. Most of them are not religiously organized around any particular Hindu cult or sect, and remarkably share many of the beliefs and practices with their Muslim counterparts and participate in their religious festivals, such as *ashura* (commemoration of the death of Imam Hussain), rituals like burying the dead, spontaneously invoking 'Allah' instead of 'Bhagwan' or 'Ram', and swearing in the name of 'Allah', 'Ali', and Prophet 'Muhammad' with the similar zeal of the faithful Muslim. This permanent liminality of the beliefs and practices is what defines the true nature of their belief. From such a state of belief that defies categorizing them into Hindu-Muslim or Muslim-non-Muslim binaries, conversion to Islam can hardly be 'forced' upon the subject.

In such a state of readiness, any social, economic, political, and moral trigger can lead a person to pronounce conversion, which s/he may only keep postponing because of the potential backlash from the community of earlier faith (Hindu or Christian) through which the convert is otherised as different and sometimes as an opponent. Some converts may tend to exaggerate the difference between their former religion and Islam, to bring their narratives in line with the narrative of Islamic religious clerics. This exaggeration, therefore, can be an expression of the post-hoc rationalization to better adjust in the organized form of religion. The social media debates, the relevant data on the internet, NGO reports, and a few academic studies do not explain these details of the culture that illustrate the conversion process's complexity.

## Part II

### Alternative Evidence from Academic Studies, and the Hidden Script

Reuben Ackerman (2018) claims that “Evidence provided by numerous NGOs, journalists and academics have shown that abductions and forced conversions are one of the most serious problems facing Hindu and Christian women and girls” (p.1). This is quite untrue of both the NGO reports and the academic studies. As discussed above, the NGO reports do not furnish sufficient evidence and rather grossly misrepresent and exaggerate the phenomenon. The few academic studies that we have on the subject (Schaflechner, 2016, 2020; Wajid, 2017), too, raise suspicions over the evidence marshaled by the NGOs, problematize their monolithic emphasis on religion or targeting of Islam, and suspect their claims of numbers and the nature of the issue. These studies have their own shortcomings, however. They raise serious concerns regarding the rhetoric of ‘forced conversions’, but do not proffer its critical appraisal, and do not verify the cases reported as allegedly forcibly converted. Moreover, they do not sufficiently take into consideration the standpoint of the State that has been alleged of facilitating this practice.

The cases of alleged forced conversion have apparently failed the validity test in the Supreme Court of Pakistan (PLD 2014 Supreme Court 699), and in district courts where such cases were reviewed and adjudicated. The academic studies do not proffer necessary insight into the proceedings of such cases. They could also have explained the discrepancy between the stance of NGOs and State functionaries vis-à-vis minority (mainly caste Hindu) that was persistently demanding the passage of a law against alleged ‘forced conversions’.

Academic studies on runaway marriages (Dhanda, 2012), and on the rhetoric of ‘forced’ conversions in the context of Islamophobia (Sian, 2011) could have helped the scholars who had looked into the narrative of forced conversion but these sources are not cited or engaged with by Schaflechner, Wajid and Pervaiz & Mahmood. As indicated, Sian’s (2011) work is focused on the rhetoric of ‘forced’ conversion against Muslims and Islam in the UK and makes convincing arguments

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**Mass conversion of scheduled caste Hindus in Sindh has more to do with the socioeconomic marginality of the converts than with religion.**

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against the rhetoric in relation to Islamophobia. Similarly, a paper by Meena Dhanda (2012) on runaway marriages in Punjab (India) shows that families of runaway girls may tend to politicize the issue by indulging in litigations in courts so that they could reclaim the girl. There were some other relevant studies that needed to be cited and that explain several other reasons behind the one-way conversion of non-Muslims, particularly of women to Islam to marry a Muslim man, such as H. Al Yousuf (2006), A. Vanzan (1996) and E. Ozyurek (2015).

Given this lack of academic depth, in the following sections each of the studies is analyzed to show that some extremely important aspects of the issue were not attended to by the previous scholars, partly because of the limited scope of their studies, and partly because of their capacity to explore deeper into the hidden scripts.

#### Muhammad Wajid on the ‘Myth of Reality’ of Forced Conversion

The only academic study of value on ‘forced’ conversion so far done by a native researcher is an MPhil thesis by Muhammad Wajid (2017) at the Department of Comparative Religions at the International Islamic University, Islamabad. In his thesis, Wajid has interviewed members of scheduled castes belonging to Bheel, Meghwar, Bhandari, Banjara and Oad communities living in Shahdadpur city in



Sindh. His goal was to know the reasons behind the mass conversion of scheduled caste Hindus in Sindh. He concludes that the problem of mass conversion of scheduled caste Hindus in Sindh has more to do with the socioeconomic marginality of the converts than with religion.

[The problem] finds its roots back in history. However, the recent projection of the issue by the media proves that it is a post 9/11 syndrome. The projection of the issue of forced religious conversion of Hindus in Sindh is a part of the media run campaign against Muslims and Islam. The national media adopted the same style of framing news regarding Muslims and Islam as the international media did. The issues regarding conversion of Hindus never came to the surface so forcefully before 9/11.

(Wajid, 2017, p.117)

Wajid cites Christopher Harding to argue that “Mass conversion was not the only feature of the 19th and 20th century in South Asia. This type of conversion to Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism finds its roots back to 15th century and continue to happen in the 21st century as well” (Harding, 2008, p.41). Wajid notes that “the examples of particular types of mass conversion among the scheduled caste Hindus in Sindh can be found during the British rule, or in the 19th and 20th centuries due to Christian missionaries’ activities”. He then terms the recent process of conversion as “the continuation of that historical process from its every aspect”. He substantiates his argument of the socioeconomic marginality of scheduled castes by citing Rambo who had contended that “[t]hose who convert in hostile settings are neglected people of society”, and that “These people are detached from sources of power and traditional culture. This marginality makes them more likely to convert”. Citing Rambo, he contends:

In a cultural crisis, it is possible that the most talented, creative people will take the lead in conversion because they may perceive advantages to themselves and to the group as a whole. The same did Dr. Ambedkar, a scheduled caste Hindu leader, in 1956 when he along with 365,000 followers converted to Buddhism.

(Wajid, 2017, p.119)

In the context of Sindh, argues Wajid, Islam exists as the “nearest shelter and best possible choice” for the socioeconomically marginalized and the disposed communities of scheduled castes. Agreeing with

**The assimilation through gradual socialization in the ways of Muslims, and the caste discrimination against scheduled castes by privileged caste Hindus are noted as two major pull and push factors respectively.**

Christopher Hardings, he, however, concludes with the pessimistic note that despite the fact that scheduled castes convert *en masse* with the hope that it will enhance their social status, the mass conversion “did not bear any fruit, no matter what religion they converted to. They remain unrecognized and unacknowledged due to their previous

caste” (Wajid, 2017, p.118). Their low status and caste follow them throughout their life. They remain the neglected part of society (Wajid, 2017, p.119).

Among other causes for conversions, Wajid notes certain pull and push factors. The assimilation through gradual socialization in the ways of Muslims, and the caste discrimination against scheduled castes by privileged caste Hindus are noted as two major pull and push factors respectively. During fieldwork, he found “so many people holding these certificates of conversion and begging in the name of religion” (Wajid, 2016, p.121). Wajid is very clear about the non-existence of ‘forced’ conversion in Sindh. Yet, he also hints at certain social factors that contain or compel non-Muslims to convert to Islam. He argues:

Although I could not find a single case of forced religious conversion to Islam in my fieldwork area as claimed by Media and Hindu activists and organizations but I found the factors that are working same like physical force and compelling them to change their religion. These factors are psychological, social, political and financial.

(Wajid, 2017, p.121)

This means that while Wajid thinks that some social customs exist that put pressure on non-Muslims to convert, he is reluctant to define these subaltern pressures as necessarily leading to ‘forced’ conversion. Similarly, Wajid does not wholly discredit the possibility of ‘force’, particularly in case of scheduled caste girls or women. However, his general verdict is that “it is not just the matter of forced or voluntary conversion. Investigation of this issue does not mean to get an answer in yes-or-no but to know the nature of conversion”. Notwithstanding that, he does not support the rhetoric of ‘forced’ conversion and considers most of the conversions either as voluntary or a result of a combination of socioeconomic constraints and social psychological and cultural factors (Wajid, 2017, p.126-27).

Wajid classifies converts into four basic categories, namely 1) converts of convictions who accepted Islam wholeheartedly and with sincerity of intention; 2) converts of compulsion who face the worst kind of poverty as they are landless, homeless and jobless people; 3) converts of assimilation, i.e. the social-psychological factors with the assimilative pull of Islam as a major factor, and 4) marginalization of scheduled castes as the major push factor. According to Wajid, all 32 converts under his study happened to be from scheduled castes.

Wajid also covers a mass conversion happening at Bait-us-Salam, a madrassah in Matli in Badin district. Bait-us-Salam “has the largest figure of converts that reach up to 1,500” (Wajid, 2017). Apart from ethnographic insights, Wajid also relies on newspaper reports to explain the social constraints that compel scheduled castes to convert to Islam (Wajid, 2017, p.119-120).

The study does not necessarily mean that the lives of the neo converts do fundamentally improve, but at least they believe so when they decide to convert. As this study unfolds, in reality a convert’s socioeconomic condition and social status improve little after conversion. Many scholars agree that conversion to Christianity or Islam did not help much to get rid of casteism but it did considerably reduce untouchability against ‘lower caste’ converts (Kumar, 2019).<sup>75</sup> There can be several explanations of why non-Muslims convert to Islam or Hindus and Dalits convert to Christianity. The explanations of conversions are often given in terms of push and pull factors. While the inherent proselytization by Muslims and Christians is understood as the major pull factors, the deeply entrenched caste discrimination is understood as the major push factor, particularly in case of underprivileged castes and Dalits.

### **Jürgen Schaflechner on ‘Forced’ Conversion**

Jürgen Schaflechner (2016, 2017) identifies the pivotal role of family patriarchs and the civil society to politicize the issue for their own vested interests thereby undermining the agency of the women. He, however, does not extrapolate the intersectionality of caste and gender as it informs about the key actors (individuals and caste groups) who proactively manufacture the rhetoric of ‘forced conversions’. In fact, he doesn’t see it primarily as the problem of rhetoric, but essentially an issue of ‘minority’ that cannot be reduced to Islamophobia. Based on the statements of privileged caste Hindu rights activists, Schaflechner argues that ‘Hindus’ are cautious in blaming Muslims and Islam in public as:

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<sup>75</sup> Arun Kumar, “The ‘Untouchable School’: American Missionaries, Hindu Social Reformers and the Educational Dreams of Labouring Dalits in Colonial North India,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 5 (2019): 823-844, DOI: 10.1080/00856401.2019.1653162.



“[they] use (unsubstantiated) notions of foreign intervention to produce Hindu–Muslim unity in the face of potential communal friction. The speakers do not make religious fundamentalism, Islam and/or Pakistani society responsible for their suffering (as, for example, the international and Indian media do), but opt instead for a rather conciliatory rhetoric. While, over time, national and international interest in the case helped an increasingly confident Hindu community to assertively articulate its demands publicly, the initial statements exhibit a ‘wary and aware’ public performance.”

(Schaflechner, 2020, p.16)

Contending this position of Schaflechner (2016, 2017), his thinness of evidence, lack of understanding of the complexity of the context and underestimation of ‘hidden scripts’ (a term borrowed from James

Schaflechner writes that when he began research in Sindh on Hindus, he “was told that religious zealots kidnap these girls from their homes and forcefully converted them to Islam”. But he exclaims, “Now, almost 10 years after I began following these incidents, I am struggling with this explanation.”

Scott, 1990), it can be argued that the public and hidden scripts vary depending upon caste location. Contrary to what Schaflechner maintains, scheduled castes are not as vociferous against alleged ‘forced conversions’ as Jati Hindu activists. For instance, Schaflechner writes that when he began research in Sindh on Hindus, he “was told that religious zealots kidnap these girls from their homes and forcefully converted them

to Islam”. But he exclaims, “Now, almost 10 years after I began following these incidents, I am struggling with this explanation. While I believe that some cases of forced conversion, in fact, involve religious zeal, it appears as if religion in many other instances often only surfaces ex post facto.”

While Schaflechner seems to have rightly noted this deliberate implication of religion in such cases, he could not furnish the thick description of the cases presented to make his argument. For instance, he presents the case of Kasturi Kohli in which, according to him, “conversion [...] merely served as a way to conceal the sexual assault”. The initial inquiry into counter-evidence, however, suggests otherwise to indicate that she had eloped but was turned back by the family of her Muslim lover, while the case was filed about two months later by human rights activists.

Similarly, while presenting the case of Chandavati, an adult woman of Baghri (Dalit) community, Schaflechner relies on privileged caste Hindus to collect the evidence. Pakistan Hindu Seva Council, an NGO controlled by privileged caste Hindu rights activists, which relied on Pakistan Hindu Council,

Given the fact that patriarchy cuts across religious boundaries, the returned girl happens to be controlled again under the similar patriarchal norms in the Hindu or Dalit family that reorients her voice so that the ‘shame’ brought about by her to the community due to her elopement could be hidden.

were resorted to by Schaflechner apart from Chandavati herself, who had escaped her ex-husband who allegedly converted her to Islam. Schaflechner assumes that no woman can expose herself to public ridicule and shame by telling that she was raped or sexually exploited. The fact that Chandavati publicly spoke how her ex-husband abducted her and forced her into prostitution was proof enough for

Schaflechner that she was telling the truth. Though a conclusive statement cannot be made without an actual verification of this case from various perspectives but unlike what Schaflechner assumes, probably it may not be an individual woman who speaks when she returns back to her parental family



after the elopement. Given the fact that patriarchy cuts across religious boundaries, the returned girl happens to be controlled again under the similar patriarchal norms in the Hindu or Dalit family that reorients her voice so that the ‘shame’ brought about by her to the community due to her elopement could be hidden. The woman speaks under that pressure, puts the maximum blame upon her ex-husband by showing that she was abducted, forced to convert, and even forced into prostitution. Adding the last blame was perhaps considered necessary to justify her running back to her parental family.

This tendency to hide elopement makes even the collection of evidence from a non-Muslim or a Muslim family almost impossible. In most cases, the self-serving narrative is constructed to prove that their girl or family member was abducted and forced to marry. Since in cases of elopement, Hindu girls have to convert for marriage, the blame of ‘forced conversion’ is invariably added to the list. There is a possibility of a woman shifting from one patriarchal location (husband) back to another (parents) and try to justify her elopement by expressing her redemption and disappointment at what she did. Telling the story of one’s choice becomes a family or community driven imperative and is guarded with the utmost care and secrecy. This holds true in most of the

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**There is no evidence so far that sex traffickers target any particular caste or religious community, although lower castes and poor women are likely to become their victims more often for being more vulnerable.**

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cases that may involve love affairs, elopements, or family and community honor. Women are pushed to apply such tactics to get rid of her husband or husband’s extended family for just or unjust reasons.

It is often heard while conversing with the native population that there is an organized network of sex traffickers operating in Sindh and locals do state incidences of luring young Muslim and Hindu girls into abduction to sell them into prostitution. Although it requires further research, particularly from the perspective of women’s agency when it is constrained by the parents, but one particular case is not proof enough to prove a whole phenomenon of ‘forced conversions’. There is no evidence so far that sex traffickers target any particular caste or religious community, although lower castes and poor women are likely to become their victims more often for being more vulnerable.

Additionally, Schaflechner’s study has two epistemological issues. 1) Its use of ‘Hindu’ as an overarching category undermines the Dalit predicament. 2) Schaflechner did not inquire into the positions of the ‘husbands’ of the converted women. Schaflechner tries to present the panoramic view of conversions showing the diversity of cases, and in particular, brings to relief women’s agency as against patriarchal values that constrain them.

Like Schaflechner, most of the accounts of such cases do not sufficiently give forth the local inter-caste and inter-religious background information about the individuals involved in making and taking up the issue at a particular time and place.<sup>76</sup> According to Schaflechner, the Muslim religious right puts forward the argument that ‘Hindu women wish to embrace Islam due to its inherent attraction’. He cites Rinkle Kumari case as an example. In this case, local Muslim clerics had in fact returned Rinkle Kumari back to her parents twice when she attempted to convert and marry a local Muslim boy. The third time, they did not return her and converted her of her own choice and to facilitate her marriage with her own free will.

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<sup>76</sup> Jürgen Schaflechner, “‘Forced Conversions’ of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan: Another Perspective,” September 20, 2018, <https://eacpe.org/forced-conversions-of-hindu-women-to-islam-in-pakistan-another-perspective/>



While explaining suppressed social location of Hindus in the context of ‘forced conversions’, Schaflechner suggests that Hindus adopt a conciliatory position by posing as the harbingers of inter-faith harmony. For instance, he quotes some of the Hindu activists and alleged victims saying that “Outside agents aim to create riots between the Hindus and the Muslims”, “Islam teaches peace and does not use force”, and “There is a conspiracy going on to cause Hindus and Muslims to fight”. Schaflechner argues that “[t]he speakers do not make religious fundamentalism, Islam, and/or Pakistani society responsible for their suffering (as, for example, international and Indian media do), but opt for rather conciliatory rhetoric.”

Preliminary ethnographic observations and social media analysis conducted for this baseline study suggest that such assertions are but an exception to the rule when it comes to the rhetoric or reality of ‘forced conversions’. The interaction with members of minority communities indicates that some of them believe that other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are funding religious clerics for their campaign to affect conversion towards Islam. While a few activists, particularly privileged caste Hindus, sometimes pose as anti-Indian and pro-Pakistani, most of them are quite clear that ‘forced conversion’ is primarily an endogenous issue. More often than not their fingers point towards Muslim religious clerics and the Islamic State of Pakistan. “Forced Conversion and subsequent marriages” in Pakistan are believed by some activists as “nothing but state-sponsored rapes!!” (Asghar, 2013).

The incidence of ‘forced conversions’ is understood as an explicit program in line with the State ideology and the dominant Sunni sect of Islam aimed at disrupting interfaith harmony in Sindh and to divide the Sindhi nation on the basis of religion. Contrary to what Schaflechner argues, the actual caution is observed by Hindus to keep the Sindhi separatist Muslim majority in good humor instead of appeasing the indomitable state. Looking the other way round, their strategy, thus, in a way seems working to divide Muslims on ethnolinguistic lines, instead of upholding inter-faith harmony across ethnicities.

Moreover, while Jati Hindus maintain the same position either in public or in private against ‘forced conversions’, the scheduled castes activists depart from what they assert publicly and what they tell surreptitiously in private. Notwithstanding these discursive differences, in public, both Jati Hindus and scheduled castes are supported by Sindhi nationalists and rights activists to manufacture the rhetoric of ‘forced conversion’. Theoretically, such position departs from Schaflechner (2016, 2017, 2020) who sees Hindus primarily as ‘wary and aware’ religious group ‘stuck between religious and nationalistic discourses’ (Schaflechner, 2020). Schaflechner borrows this term from Michael Warner’s work on the public sphere.

In the context of ‘forced conversions’, Hindus and Dalits do not seem to accommodate the supposed Muslim/Islamic hegemon. Dalits do it under the sway of Sindhi nationalist and privileged caste Hindu narrative, primarily to assert their patriarchy in the guise of religious persecution. They tend to project almost every runaway/conversion related case ‘forced conversion’. Although this implies that they are doing this with purpose as form of a strategy and resistance, to say that they do so to give vent to their ‘awareness’ of being suppressed by Muslims/Islam probably elides to inspect and assess the casteist and patriarchal dimension of the hegemony at play across religious binaries. In fact, the behavior of non-Muslims in terms of ‘forced conversions’ is quite the opposite of what Schaflechner tries to argue about the nature of their public performances. Non-Muslims are assertive in public against ‘forced conversions’, and pragmatically considerate in private life. They invoke intra-caste, inter-caste and intra-minority reformation in private but without suggesting to do away with patriarchal structures and caste endogamy. In public, they throw the whole burden of the issue upon religious clerics, State and Muslims.



**Figure 4:** A privileged caste Hindu girl Muskan with her husband. Source: Ganpat Rai (2020)

Those with the Sindhi nationalist bent of mind do not hesitate to express their hatred against the State and Punjab, the dominant province, and instead identify themselves with the land and culture of Sindh. Sindhi Muslims too get their sympathies if they are cherishing Sindhi separatist narrative and Sufi practices as against Islam of religious clerics. Schaflechner does not help explain this Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Sufi equation that undermines the casteist aspect of the problem.

An academic study on 'forced' conversion in a patriarchal society should also sufficiently explain the use of 'force' by the parents (Hindu or Muslim) to coerce paramours to marry outside kinship or caste, or to live peacefully. For instance, in Figure 4 above a privileged caste Hindu girl Muskan from Pano Aqil holds a matrimonial contract as a proof of her marriage with Ajay Kumar Keswani, who does not belong to her caste, at the court in Naushahro Feroze. She stated that her parents did not allow her to marry of her choice and want to kill her. This implies that girls or women marrying or wanting to marry outside the Hindu fold would be facing even greater threat from their family's side.

Schaflechner does not take into consideration that force implied by Hindu families to coerce young couples or paramours to marry out of caste or kinship within Hindus. Hence, although Schaflechner brings to the fore anxieties of Hindu minority in a Muslim dominated polity, he neither problematizes the possibility of such a transnational nexus that transcends the State suppression, nor the caste-related difference, which seems to lie at the core of the narrative of 'forced conversion'.

Schaflechner's work is theorized par excellence, and is essentially anti-patriarchal in approach, but it is premised on the verbal accounts of the protagonists taken down by Pakistan Hindu Seva. Hence, Schaflechner's study, instead of letting one infer any concrete way out for policymaking, leaves the reader in a quandary, and the layperson into believing that 'forced conversions' do in fact happen on a large scale and that it is probably one of the key minority issues in Pakistan. While Schaflechner seems to have rightly noted the deliberate implication of religion in such cases, he could not furnish the thick description of the cases presented to make his argument.



## Hidden Scripts

It will make an interesting complement to Wajid's and Schaflechner's analysis, to briefly discuss here the hidden and public scripts of Christians, Dalits and privileged caste Hindus related to the narrative of 'forced' conversion. The articulation of the two different scripts – one hidden, other public – pertains to the coping strategies of the oppressed or the subdued. While public script often reflects the influence of hegemonic narrative, the hidden script is the reflection back at their internal weaknesses and blind spots within community. Public script either reflects the dominant hegemonic narrative or questions the hegemon through counter-hegemonic narrative.

One can find some historical evidence of the narrative of 'forced' conversion as it was evolved by the privileged caste Hindus to counter the influence of dominant Muslim majority in Sindh. For instance, writing with a missionary zeal of civilizing the Sindhis, Richard Burton (1877) explained that the privileged caste Hindus endured religious persecution and took revenge 'indirectly' by exploiting the poor among the Muslims, by fomenting hatred and feuds, by corrupting principal officers of the State, and "by consuming all ideas of entente cordiale with neighboring and allied kingdoms" (Burton, 1877, p.274).

This probably explains the public and partly the hidden script of the privileged caste Hindu rights activists to this day. As Schaflechner struggles with the popular narrative that alleges Muslims of abduction and forceful conversion of girls, he seems to have rightly noted the deliberate and improbable implication of religion (and hence the State of Pakistan) in such cases.

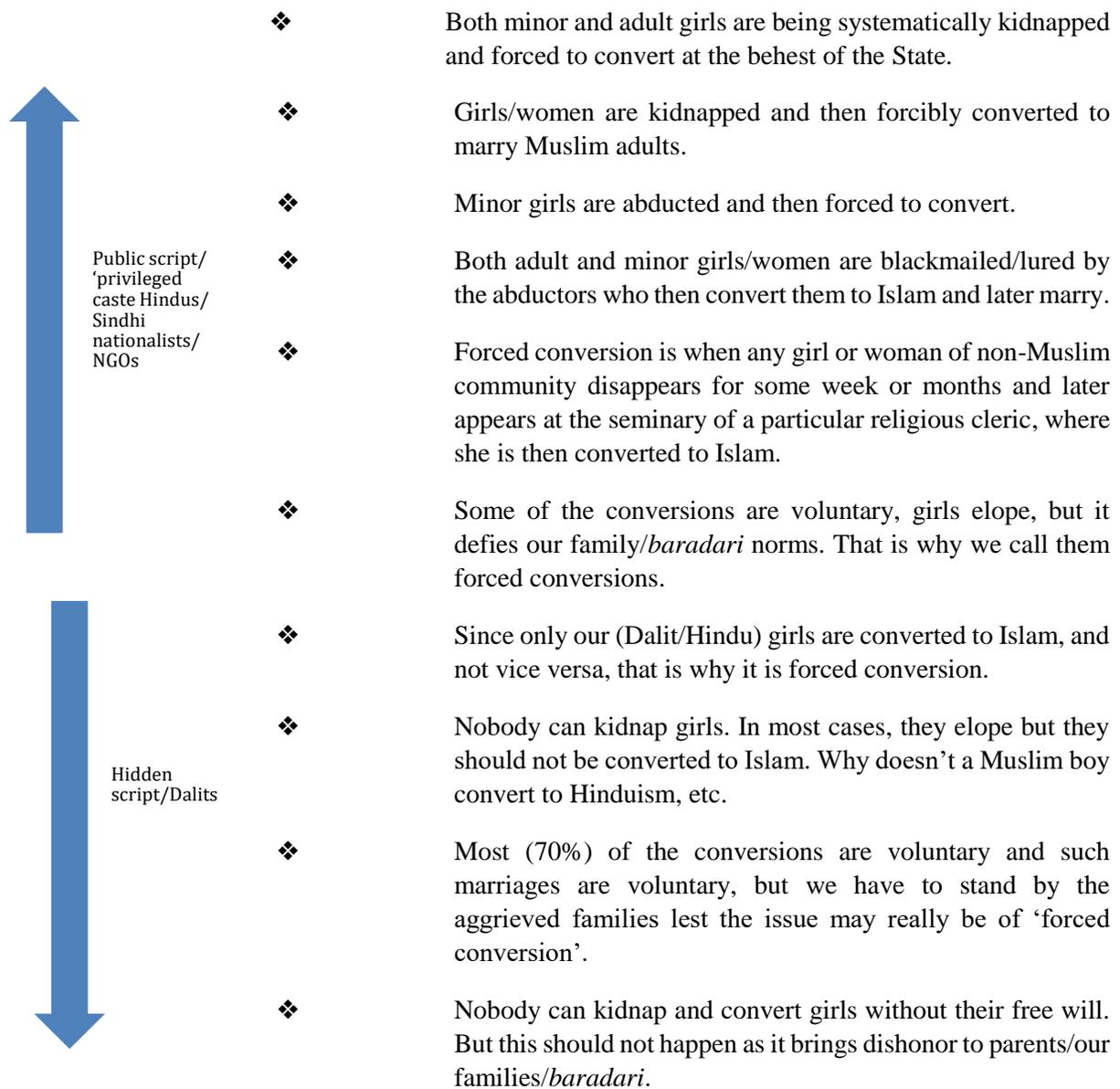
Initial observations for this study suggest the difference in the narrative of activists depending on their caste, class, and religion-based identities. For instance, in response to a question, Veerji Kolhi, a senior member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, a prominent human rights activist and now a special assistant to the Chief Minister of Sindh, had explained the rhetoric of 'forced conversions' as:

"... a girl converts or in other cases couples convert on their own. Yet, when the couple converts, it is not 'forced'. 'Forced' is when the girls were minor or underage and disappeared for six or twelve months, this is forced conversion. But when the couple converts, this is not 'forced', but our elders do not accept it. If I marry a Meghwar girl, they would not accept it."

(Veerji Kolhi in an interview with the author on May 7, 2015)



The shift in the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion to the narrative of elopement in the public and hidden script respectively can be roughly outlined along the continuum as given below:



### Hidden Patriarchy: Banning Dharmeelo

Both the NGO reports and the academic studies done so far on ‘forced conversion’ have neglected the patriarchal aspect of the issue that pertains to familial and community control over the female body. *Dharmeelo*,<sup>77</sup> a ritual kinship bond between Hindu and Muslim families, pertains to one such pivotal

<sup>77</sup> The culture of interfaith harmony, as it reflects from the existence of the institution of *dharmeelo* is not unique to Sindh and widely prevails across the Indian subcontinent. Citing M.K.A. Siddiqui (1992), J.J. Roy Burman (1996) writes that “A peculiar culturo-religious ritual of mock selling and buying of newborn infants between the Hindus and Muslims is prevalent in Assam. This ritual is believed to enhance the chances of survival of the babies. In this system if the purchaser is a Muslim, the seller is a Hindu and vice versa. Though these children grow up in their own communities the mock buyers are treated as foster parents. Some kinship terms are also applied to the purchaser who have appropriate roles on all important occasions in the life of the children thus purchased. Siddiqui also states that in Kamrup some of the Hindu and Muslim families enter into ceremonial friendships which compel them to help each other during periods of crisis. These families are treated as kin for all practical purposes.”



aspect of the issue that has been undermined by the scholars and activists alike. *Dharmeelo* is highly cherished and presented as the symbol of interfaith harmony. Yet, lately, owing to the mediatization of the cases of alleged forced conversion, the hidden patriarchal aspect of it has come to surface.

Last year Meghwar, Kolhi, and Bheel activists issued social media notices/pamphlets to control the elopement of girls. The pamphlets and posts indicted the parents and outlined different protocols for them to follow so that elopements could be curbed. The notable amongst them were:

- a. Keep an eye on the activities of their daughter
- b. Not to allow *dharmeelas* (socially tied Muslim brothers and neighbors) inside their houses.
- c. Better do not allow girls to use cell phones.
- d. Escort them when they go to school, field, market, etc.

Though it indicated a slight change in their stance against such elopements which, in their public script, they persistently termed as kidnappings and forced conversions, it goes against the logic of syncretism, the exemplary Hindu-Muslim harmony that should make marriages involving conversion less painful. On the one hand, Dalit patriarchs forcefully disallow love marriages on the excuse that Muslims do not allow their women to marry Hindu men with or without conversions, condemning it as a normative deviation from the Sufi culture of Sindh, on the other hand they suggest banning *dharmeelo*, the ritual kinship brotherly relations between Hindu and Muslim families.

### **Sindhi Ethos and Cross-Faith Marriages**

Minority rights activists in Sindh promote pluralistic ethos of Sufism and apparently interfaith marriages should please them. Yet this is not the case. They react intensely on the pretext that such marriages flow in one direction only; always a non-Muslim girl elopes with the Muslim boy, and it rarely happens vice versa.

Conversion to Islam or reconversion to Hinduism or any other faith should not be much of a worry in a society like Sindh which is syncretic in nature. This, more particularly, is the case with Dalit

**Conversion to Islam or reconversion to Hinduism or any other faith should not be much of a worry in a society like Sindh which is syncretic in nature. This, more particularly, is the case with Dalit communities and Muslims living in Dalit or Hindu dominated areas of lower Sindh.**

communities and Muslims living in Dalit or Hindu dominated areas of lower Sindh. A syncretic Dalit, Hindu or Muslim does not even feel the need to convert from Islam to Hinduism or vice versa, and it is in that religiously indifferent ethic that lies the essence of syncretic culture, and that reflects in the culture of areas of Sindh populated by both Hindus and Muslims. Yet, there are several instances of Hindus converting to Islam and then

reverting back without making any public pronouncements.

Most such conversions are not driven by any religious zeal but the socioeconomic and cultural compulsions, and neither a Hindu nor Muslim cleric guards their religious behavior or change of faith. More than total conversion, it is the temporal change of heart and mind along the scale of Hindu-Muslim religiosity that can be manifested in Sindh, and to some extent in areas of Sindh bordering Gujarat and Rajasthan.

In the cultural setting of Sindh, Dalit and Hindu bride and groom or even couples pay homage to Muslim Sufis to ask for blessings or as a necessary ritual to solemnize their marriage. The small shrine of Miyan

Moosa Ghazi has been the site where families from Oad (Hindu Dalit) community would frequently visit to seek blessings for their would-be grooms and brides. The same has been observed in other regions of South Asia. For instance, Hindu grooms in a locality of Delhi are said to proceed to marry only after praying at the shrine of Khwaja Moenuddin Chishti or Chirag Delhvi (Burman, 1996, p.1215).

Hindus are living in peace in taluka Daharki, for example, which is often presented as the hotbed of Hindu persecution and ‘forced conversions’. In the places that underlie between Dargah Bharchundi Sharif, a Muslim shrine, and Rehrki Sabhi, a Hindu shrine, syncretism and cultural harmony prevail. Hindus and Muslims cherish similar kinds of customs and traditions, language and literature, ethnic ethos, and etiquette. However, a rare occurrence of temple desecration and blasphemy last year in Daharki provided rights activists with a reason to raise voice of religious persecution. A legitimate problem gets politicized and an incident is overblown as a culture and ends up in sharpening of religious divide.

The unproblematic nature of marriages can be evidenced from the recent history of Sindh in the form of ruling class Hindu Rajput women given in marriage to the ruling Muslim Rajput men. In most cases, although these Rajput women too had to convert to Islam, it was performed merely as a ritual of Muslim Rajput caste. Such inter-caste and interfaith marriages in which often a Hindu privileged caste woman is married by her family into the privileged caste Muslim family, involving conversion of a bride, prove that conversion is not as such an issue as the inter-caste marriage. It means that more than religious endogamy, its caste endogamy and patriarchy that should be the matter of concern.

### Cases of Voluntary Conversion

In 2019, in the midst of the heat of propaganda against ‘forced conversions’, a young Hindu Sono Mal (son of Madan Lal) from Mirpurkhas converted to Islam to marry Maria, a Muslim widow and mother of a child.<sup>78</sup> The local Hindus and Muslims did not take any offense when they came to know that both



**Figure 5:** Sono Lal after conversion to Islam with his wife Maria. Source: Ganpat Rai (2020)

have married of their free choice, and the boy has converted to Islam. The minority rights activists deliberately avoided talking about it and raising voice against this conversion. Not only because the

<sup>78</sup> Mahnoor Sheikh, “Hindu Youth Converts to Islam to Marry Muslim Woman,” *UrduPoint*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.urdupoint.com/en/pakistan/hindu-youth-converts-to-islam-to-marry-muslim-614268.html>



convert was a boy and did enjoy agency to a greater extent than a female, but also because it offered answer to their argument of conversions only being of girls. The conversion of Sono Lal showed that in an affair of love, both Hindu men and women have to convert to Islam so that marriage could be solemnized. Conversion of a Hindu before marriage to a Muslim is the cultural ritual, which is embedded in Islamic values internalized by the local Muslims. It is, therefore, enacted independent of the pressure exerted by any religious cleric, although the local cleric is approached by the couples or the parents to honor their wish, which he often performs with a missionary zeal.

Similar was the response of both Hindus and Muslims in case of a Hindu woman who had converted to Islam and was married off by her own father Dr. Gordhan Khatri to a Muslim man of her choice. There have been some instances in which neo-Muslim converts have been married to Muslim women by their own parents. According to Dalit academic and activist, Ganpat Rai Bheel, a Muslim cleric Maulana Sattar Chawro also married his daughter to a neo-Muslim. Rai, however, lamented the fact that neo-Muslims, when they marry Muslim women, are not given protection by religious clerics. He said:

The roots of the issue lie in the caste system embedded in religion. The Islamic religious clerics can only be blamed for not protecting any neo-Muslim man when he converts to marry a Muslim woman. Even in terms of religion, but in these cases Islam should not be blamed, but the existing caste system. I have had discussions on that issue with many Molvis [Muslim clerics]. They agree that there is no concept of discrimination on the basis of caste in Islam, but regrettably, we are trapped in casteism.

(Ganpat Rai Bheel, 2020, personal communication)

On inquiry, Mian Abdul Haq alias Mian Mithoo, famous Muslim cleric who is often accused of forcefully converting Hindus and Dalits, in his telephonic conversation with the author of this report (May 8, 2020), denied any discrimination against neo-converts on the basis of gender and cited many examples in which neo-convert men were sought to be integrated into the Muslim fold through marriage with local Muslim women. He regretted that such cases were

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hardly highlighted on social media and were not even included in the lists of conversions prepared by NGO activists.

Though Mian Mitho and Ayub Jan Sirhindi are often accused of overseeing a systematic campaign of forced conversions, but no evidence is furnished from any quarter that could prove such allegations. Mian Mitho maintains that “his seminary has been converting people now for two centuries. It is his right to profess his own religion and, being Muslim, it is obligatory for him to welcome a person to Islam, if he or she wishes to”.<sup>79</sup> If this be true, such practice neither contradicts Islam, nor the latest protocols of human rights. Freedom to profess, practice and propagate religion is reckoned as a fundamental human right by international bodies.

<sup>79</sup> Jürgen Schaflechner, “‘Forced Conversions’ of Hindu women to Islam in Pakistan: Another Perspective,” September 20, 2018, <https://eacpe.org/forced-conversions-of-hindu-women-to-islam-in-pakistan-another-perspective/>

## Local Dalit Intellectuals on Conversion

### *Ganpat Rai Bheel on 'Forced' Conversion*

Ganpat Rai Bheel is a leading Dalit activist in Pakistan. He writes columns, mostly from the Ambedkarian perspective, in both Sindhi and Urdu on caste, class and nationalism. Within his own tiny Dalit community of activists, his writings carry great influence. In one of his Facebook blog posts (translated by the author for this study), he remarkably depicted the way Dalits are being fooled into politicizing cases of alleged forced conversion on religious grounds. This rather lengthy statement makes the points of departure very clear between the cultural, social and political priorities of Dalit (scheduled castes) from upper-caste Hindus. Alluding to a journalist, who interviews newly converted Dalit couples, he writes:

*That Sayed journalist of KTN [a local TV channel] clad in Ajrak and wearing a turban purposefully repeats the same question every time he interviews such couples. "Which attribute of Islam impressed you to become Muslim?" he asks. The neo-convert young man would not say much as he was not much literate, and for the sake of maintaining the sanctity of the event and respect, he would reply, "We have been inspired by the message of Islam". Actually, there lurks the ill-intention of the journalist who asks such a question.*



**Figure 6:** A videograb from the Facebook post of Ganpat Rai Bheel showing 20-year-old Suneel Meghwar and Varsha Meghwar, a Dalit couple who fled from Ayub Colony, Karachi, to Zainul Abidin Mosque, Nawabshah, to convert to Islam and marry. Source: Ganpat Rai (2020)

*By doing so, he wants to make a joke upon the process of conversion and that of the neo-converts. Instead, he must ask the patrons of Hindu religion why they have kept the fundamental human rights of their people suppressed in the name of religion? On the other hand, the neo-converts should have instead answered, "It does not matter if we are not familiar with the teachings of Islam. No issue if we did not learn the Quran by heart. We may have not remembered the five Kalmas, and were totally unaware of the fundamental elements of Islam before or after conversion. But we are impressed by the fact of Islam that it allows persons to live their life as per their wishes. It not only allows a person to marry, but it also offers complete protection. This is not allowed to us by Sanatan Dharam (Hinduism) even after slavery under it for centuries. The empirical evidence of being impressed with Islam lied in*

*the lack of freedom in Hindu religion to marry the person of one's choice. Islam does not put any such bar, and accepted us in its fold as Muslims."*



**Figure 7:** Jamna, 33, converted to Islam to marry Nazeer Shaikh, 19, at Amroth Sharif.  
Source: Ganpat Rai (2020)

*Such questions have always been asked from those who convert from Hinduism by journalists with the Brahminic bent of mind. When in 1956 Dr. Ambedkar abandoned Hinduism and adopted Buddhism along with 6 lakhs of his followers, then a day earlier in the evening journalists came to meet him. A Hindu journalist asked him, 'Why are you leaving Hindu Dharam?' Dr. Ambedkar got emotional after listening to that question, and replied angrily, 'Why don't you ask that question from your relatives who have humiliated us for ages? Did you ever consider us a human, now to dare asking such a question?' A similar naïve question was also asked from Khursheed Qaimkhani by a comedian and intellectual of Kumhbar*

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**The problem is not why some dozen girls convert to marry, but the real question to ponder over is why millions of humans were suppressed under the caste system?**

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*(potter) caste. He asked, 'Why did Dr. Ambedkar adopt Buddhism?' Khursheed Sahib told that comedian upfront that 'There have been found some utensils made of baked clay. These are the signature material left by your ancestors. You potters are also living in Indus*

*Valley for thousands of years. The religion of your ancestors was also Buddhism at one point in history. Why did they adopt Buddhism? And then, after being perturbed by the atrocities of Raja Dahir, why they converted to Islam? A human has an inborn tendency to react against oppression, and in different epochs humans have adopted that religion in which for them there is a higher probability of safeguarding their rights and freedoms."*

*Therefore, the myopic intellectuals and the blind national consciousness of Sindh should not ask the question, 'Why you accept Islam?' or that 'Which element of Islam inspired you to become Muslim?'. Instead, this question must be asked from the patrons of the Hindu religion, that 'Why you have sustained this inhumane system based on caste discrimination', and that, 'Why you persistently suppress the basic human rights of the people under this system based on casteism'. The drama of 'forced' religious conversion should be closed immediately. The problem is not why some dozen girls convert to marry, but the real question to ponder over is*



*why millions of humans were suppressed under the caste system? Why Hinduism based on the caste system kept deprived millions of Hindus and Dalits of their basic human rights?*

*You will find several hundred mosques and hundreds of Churches in Sindh where people of undefined faiths or non-Muslims go to convert before they marry of their free choice. But in Sindh, one cannot find a single temple where co-religionist Hindus were accepted within Hindu fold by recognizing their fundamental human rights and by ensuring the protection of those who may wish to transcend caste boundaries. Isn't it then in a dilemmatic fix? That very religion called Sanatan Dharam is a human tragedy. It is a joke upon humanity, which is rooted in the caste system and racism. Therefore, these questions should not be asked now. Which religion you adopt and why, and which elements of any particular religion inspired you do not bear any importance either. But the central question is to ask why you abandon Hinduism, and what are its causes? And also if Hindu Sanatan Dharam permits humans to have equal human rights? The answer to that query is certainly only 'no'.*

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**So long as the racist and discriminatory caste system, which is embedded in Sanatan Dharam, will continue to curtail the freedom of Sunil or Varsha, thousands of Sunils and Varshas would continue to rebel and adopt other religions.**

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*So long as the racist and discriminatory caste system, which is embedded in Sanatan Dharam, will continue to curtail the freedom of Sunil or Varsha, thousands of Sunils and Varshas would continue to rebel and adopt other religions. They cannot be controlled through false propaganda, or be stopped by the civil society and the nationalists who follow in the footsteps of RSS. Those who feel angry at couples converting to Islam or to Christianity, they should first reform their own Hindu Dharam. This tendency to convert to other religions will further speed up in the future and will prove to be the last nail in the coffin of Hindu society.*

*The so-called national consciousness of Sindh must wake up from slumber. The so-called mentality of Sindhiyat should not be taken that far that one may struggle to differentiate Sindhiyat of Sayed from the RSS of Savarkar. Instead of being used under the Hindutvadi agenda, they should make the real emancipation of Sindhi people their motto. They should correct their political posture by compensating for the enmity that had been done to Sindh by demi-gods of Sindhi nationalism. This non-issue of alleged 'forced' conversion does not deserve to be at the center stage of agitations. It does not relate to the issues of the people. The major issues of the Sindhi people include the occupation of Sindh by Pirs, Mirs and tribal chiefs, the socioeconomic marginalization of Sindhi people, nomadism, landlessness, and alarming rate of suicides.*

*Therefore, the need is to revisit narratives that undermine these issues. The need is to be realistic, and it requires annihilating the outdated idols of and fascist narrative embedded in Sindhi nationalism. The need is to make nationalism a weapon of the oppressed, instead of a fashionable tool in the hands of the exploiting class of Pirs, feudal and tribal chiefs. The so-called 'forced' religious conversion of Sindhi girls is a non-issue. The real issue, for instance, is the understand why the poorest of the poor commit suicide on a daily basis, and why traditional Pirs, Mirs and Waderas of Sindh continue to dominate politics and power corridors? This also needs to be understood as to why nationalists so shamelessly fabricate and ceaselessly raise the fake issue of 'forced' conversions, but not on 'suicides' and*



*feudalism? The question also can be asked as to why every time nationalists resort to emotionalism to appeal to Sindhi people to raise non-issues?*

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**This also needs to be understood as to why nationalists so shamelessly fabricate and ceaselessly raise the fake issue of ‘forced’ conversions, but not on ‘suicides’ and feudalism?**

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From this post by Ganpat, it becomes clear that Dalits are increasingly looking at the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion as politically motivated rhetoric, and caste-based discrimination lies at the core of the issue. It is also clear that partly pushed by their patriarchal instincts, Dalits are dragged into this issue by the privileged caste Hindus and Sindhi nationalists.

### ***Surendar Valasai on ‘Forced’ Conversion***

Surendar Valasai is a veteran Dalit activist and currently Member of Provincial Assembly (Sindh) on the reserved seat offered to him by PPP. He said in an online interview:

*Every conversion is not forced. There is no denying the fact that isolated incidents of forced conversions are reported involving criminal and exploiting elements. But since every conversion is treated by interest groups as forced, the real victim girls of forced conversion are also denied the required sympathy and justice in the media as well as the society and government.*

*I think everyone is united against forced conversion, but using the phrase as a propaganda tool like RSS does internationally should be avoided. Protecting every citizen is the constitutional obligation of the government, and it must ensure that no forced conversion occurs, and exemplary punishment is meted out to the culprits where the conversion is established as forced upon the victim. PPP is strongly against forced conversion and it stands tall as the only largest political entity which promotes and protects non-Muslims at every level.*

(Surendar Valasai, personal communication, 2020)

While, unlike many privileged caste Hindus, Valasai admits that much propaganda is involved in several cases, he does not seem to suggest any legal remedy against it. It had been more judicious and morally correct to suggest measures to discourage those interest groups as well which defame the religion of Islam, religious clerics, the State of Pakistan and/or a particular segment of the nation by blaming them of ‘forced’ conversion without necessary justification.

## Part III

### Summing Up and Conclusion

Drawing upon the content analysis of NGO reports, academic studies, and a body of information generated by civil society activists through the internet and social media, this study looked into the claims and blames of ‘forced conversions’. It sought to demonstrate how the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion has been constructed in Pakistan and the way it is accentuated by certain NGOs and social media activists at the global level. The analysis shows that the minority rights activists and the civil society in general insist on showing conversions as a process ‘forced’ upon the non-Muslims without proffering sufficient explanations or evidence. In the narrative of ‘forced’ conversions, non-Muslim girls appear to be at the core around which the rhetoric is articulated by positing the Muslim male as the ‘predator’ as a means to regulate non-Muslim female bodies. It establishes that the claims and blames are premised on the readymade template to generate the rhetoric of ‘forced conversion’, to reinforce ethno-nationalism and neo-communalism around which bodies of those who display agency and choose to follow their own scripts are disciplined. The narrative seems to be fueled by an ethnoreligious struggle for distinction amidst similarities of caste, color and creed.

This study contended that the monolithic narrative presented in NGO reports raises serious questions over the authenticity of the claims as almost every conversion is termed as ‘forced’ without clearly defining what they mean by it. Contrary to what popular narrative suggests, it is very likely that the girls who are alleged to have been forced to marry a Muslim and convert to Islam were in fact forced to do so. Neither any NGO revisits its reports to confirm the number of cases in which culprits were proven guilty or to inform about the percentage difference between voluntary and forced conversions or runaway marriages, nor do they comment upon the role of family patriarchs on both sides vying with each other. The whole thrust of the narrative is directed against the religious cleric, State and the Muslim majority.

The reports not only make exaggerations about the ages of the alleged victims but also suggest that all girls either of adult or marriageable age are forced to marry, while marriages at an early age are quite a norm in Sindhi rural and semi-rural society. But, in a traditional society like Pakistan, where families and communities can exert strong pressure, marriages are either forced upon by the families of the under-aged girls or contracted with the consent of the families. Since families do not encourage inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, there are ample chances that they will go to any extent to reverse any inter-caste or inter-faith love marriage.

Given these facts, the reports would have made more sense had they, in the first place, explained the prevalence of under-age and forced marriages within non-Muslim communities. This would have

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There may be a few exceptions but in most cases the apparent motives for conversion to Islam are found to be physical and spiritual needs, socioeconomic conditions and psychological factors.

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helped to better appreciate the relationship between conversion and marriage, the age of the converts and the element of ‘force’ used by either family or by religious clerics.

There may be a few exceptions but in most cases the apparent motives for conversion to Islam are found to be physical and spiritual needs, socioeconomic conditions and psychological factors. The intentions and motivations can change (Rambo 1993, Wajid, 2017). The psychological state of the converts may be multiple, complex, and often quite malleable. After a period of interaction, however, the person may change his or her rhetoric of motives, as deep spiritual or religious yearnings and aspirations are triggered. People change over time, and so do their motives. Indeed, change is the essence of conversion. Any person converted for physical gain can change into a sincere convert for spiritual growth. NGO reports do not take into consideration these factors.

The analysis of NGO reports, which are presented as the principal evidence of the existence of ‘forced’ conversion, shows that much of the outcry is politically motivated and that the reports lack requisite evidence. Each report is often presented by rights activists as the primary evidence based on substantive first-hand data and understood as such by civil and political society. Contrary to that, this study contends that in almost every case the reports lack primary evidence, and mainly rely on clichés cited from other similar reports to advance as evidence. Additionally, the reports rely on anecdotal evidence taken from newspaper reports and the statements primarily collected from human rights activists instead of from the alleged victims and so-called perpetrators.

It was found that most of the girls that eloped were either of marriageable age or were clearly adults but the NGOs deliberately reported them either under-aged or did not mention their age at all. The major issue with the reports was that the voice of the alleged victims was missing and the activists were doing

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**There is a consensus among Muslim religious circles that nobody can be forcibly converted in Islam as it is considered a subjective matter.**

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all the talking. The reports completely ignored to take into consideration the viewpoint of the alleged perpetrators of ‘forced’ conversion. ‘Marriage of choice’ was not factored in at all. The nature of religious communities involved, their

level of religiosity, and the demand for conversion before marriage were also not discussed. Largely the reports subsisted on repeating the narrative and figures quoted by other such reports claiming without any evidence that ‘1,000 girls are forcibly converted in Pakistan each year’. Human rights activists are very selective about their presentation of the cases of alleged ‘forced’ conversion. They do not highlight the *en masse* voluntary conversions or the conversions of adult individuals to Islam. They base their argument on fudged data, and the scant evidence marshaled by them often contradicts their claims.

One of the major issues relates to the way ‘forced’ conversion is defined or explained in NGO reports. Most of the cases that were highlighted as ‘forced conversion’ and contested in the court of law have so far failed to prove the culpability of the alleged victims. Moreover, the cases also have failed at the moral-ethical level as the majority of Pakistanis do not buy the argument that people can be forced to convert the way cases are projected. ‘Forced’ conversion, the way it is being projected by rights activists and in NGO reports discussed above, probably betrays the general perception of a common Sindhi and Pakistani as the least of possibility whereby a non-Muslim can be made the object of Muslim envy or persecution. There is a consensus among Muslim religious circles that nobody can be forcibly converted in Islam as it is considered a subjective matter.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This consensus comes from a clear verse of the Holy Quran that denounces any attempt to force Islam to anyone by saying, “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from



The precedent from the case law shows that even in cases in which minor non-Muslims converted to Islam apparently of their free will, the court cannot give a verdict upon the veracity of their conviction. For instance, the Lahore High Court in its decision on *Nasira v. Judicial Magistrate and 5 others* in 2019 gave a verdict that “the question of faith being a matter of heart and one’s conviction, no Court can declare [the] conversion [of Pummy Muskan, the alleged victim of forced conversion] invalid or void. It can only refuse to recognize or give effect to it for certain legal purposes”.

Although a religious cleric may often be found willing to convert a non-Muslim, in most of the cases it is probably an exogenous pull enacted through persuasion rather than through force. This kind of persuasion is part of almost every religion and is rooted in the very structure of society at the level of hegemony. It pushes the non-Muslim to convert to Islam to get assimilated in the larger and a comparatively organized community and cannot be termed as ‘forced conversion’ by any definition of the term. The academic studies on conversion such as by Snook et al (2018) suggest that individual or mass conversion to Islam is often opted as a secondary pre-requisite to better their socioeconomic standing or to get assimilated in the majority community of faith.

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**Owing to the complications involved in defining ‘forced’ conversions out of faith conversions, it would be wise not to rely on any definition that emphasizes any single dimension of the issue.**

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Owing to the complications involved in defining ‘forced’ conversions out of faith conversions, it would be wise not to rely on any definition that emphasizes any single dimension of the issue. As has been explained, the emphasis on ‘religion’, Islam, and the mullah/cleric relegates the equally vital role played by caste and gender or casteism and patriarchy. Similarly explaining ‘conversion’ in a manner so that only Muslim patriarch could be targeted will not help to understand the issue. In any analysis or study on ‘conversion’, the political location of each actor involved must also be interrogated at the intersubjective level, and the role of multiple underlying intersecting societal factors should be investigated to come up with a comprehensive definition and meaning of the terms ‘force’ and conversion.

While blaming the religious clerics, human rights defenders ignore the fact that women also have agency and can decide to marry out of caste and religion. In the name of human rights, they defend one patriarchy against another, i.e. the patriarchy of the parents against the patriarchy of the religious clerics or mullahs. The cultural factor is also ignored that conversion to Islam has become part of the cultural ritual of Muslims, which is not necessarily imposed by the religious clerics but is performed spontaneously as the part of rite of passage. In most of the cases, the non-Muslim women are not forced but convinced by their paramours to convert so that marriage could be solemnized. Hence, the love of religion Islam may not be the initial causal factor, but the cultural need of converting a Hindu or Sikh girl so that she could become part of a Muslim family within a particular social milieu. Notwithstanding that, both in the West as well in South Asia, the choice to convert to Islam would come with challenges. Such anxieties are also accentuated by the non-Muslim diaspora from South Asia or from Muslim

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the wrong. And he who rejects false deities and believes in Allah has grasped a firm handhold which will never break. Allah is Hearer, Knower.” Chapter 2, verse 256.



majority regions now living in Western countries as is evident from several studies (Rambo 1993; Köse, 1994; Vanzan, 1996; H. Al Yousuf, 2006; Kursin, 2006; Vitória de Oliveira and Cecília Mariz, 2006; Nieuwkerk, 2008; Brice, 2010; Hawwa, 2010; Sian, 2011; Dhanda, 2012; King, 2017).

Pakistan is not an exception to such rhetoric surrounding ‘forced’ conversion to Islam (Sian, 2011). Studies suggest that in most of the cases, non-Muslim men or women have to convert before marriage so that they could be initiated in the Muslim family. This holds true across the world in different countries including India, UK, Germany, France, and USA (Köse, 1994; H. Al Yousuf, 2006; Kursin, 2006; Nieuwkerk, 2008; Brice, 2010; Hawwa, 2010; Sian, 2011; King, 2017). These studies suggest that one-way conversions have much to do with the relative difference between the religious organization of Muslim and non-Muslim communities. The matrimonial rituals of Muslims have to pass the necessary passage of *nikkah* which is considered possible only if the non-Muslim, particularly Hindu, Buddhist, Jain or Sikh, converts to Islam. The marriage of a Muslim woman with a non-Muslim is disallowed. A similar condition probably does not imply with comparable force in other religious communities.

The findings suggest that while the causes of conversion lie in the socioeconomic marginality of scheduled caste community and deeply the entrenched caste system, the roots of the rhetoric lie in the orientalist bias of the British era writers, Indologists, Sindhi nationalists and Hindutvadis that feeds the patriarchal ego of non-Muslim activists in general. The studies on Islam and conversion by contemporary critical scholars Katy P. Sian (2011), Derryl MacLean (1984), Yohanan Friedmann (1984), Lewis Rambo (1993, 1999), Jhon Zavos (2001) and Manan Ahmed Asif (2012) show that the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion is rooted in the colonial history written by British Orientalists and Indologists such as Henry Miers Elliot (1867-77; see also Dowson, ed, 1964), E.M. Elphinstone (1911) and James Mill and the Indologists sympathetic to Hindutva such as R.C. Majumdar (1931, 1934:1954). Analysis of the Orientalist and Indological studies show that the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion has its roots in the sword theory of the spread of Islam (Hassam, 2018). Though this narrative of the spread of Islam by force in South Asia has long been questioned by contemporary postcolonial scholars such as Derryl MacLean (1984), Yohanan Friedmann (1984:2003), Jhon Zavos (2001), Manan Ahmed Asif (2012) and A. Ezzati (2002), its impact on the current global-religious politics continues to be ignored by local intelligentsia and the neoliberal intellectual elite that pushes for western secular ideals. The consensus over the severity of the issue expressed in NGO reports being rooted in the history of Islamophobia got a new lease on life in the wake of 9/11 whereby the Muslim identity, in general, was racialized (Ezzati, 2002; Moreno, 2010; Kalin, 2011; Helbling, 2013; Sayyid, 2014; Suleman, 2018). Given this historical trajectory that sees conversions to Islam being primarily driven by social and economic motives, the recurrent reports of alleged forced conversions in Pakistan raise doubts about the veracity of the reporting of such cases.

Neither Hindus nor Christians and Sikhs have been racially profiled as extremists like Muslims on the global stage. The overall impact of global Islamophobic sentiment at local level cannot be undermined. In such environment, local players find support of global networks in creation of the rhetoric of forced conversions to pressurize the State to achieve certain political goals. They raise pitch of the narrative of minority rights to the level that state begins resorting to minority appeasement by making occasional token concessions to reclaim the moderate soft image of Pakistan. In domestic context of Pakistan, the State did that by promoting the narrative of interfaith harmony and projecting Pakistan as the land of Sufis (Suleman, 2018). This reliance of the state to moderate image-making, along with increasingly available media outlets, has greatly added to the manufacturing of the narrative whereby traditional mainstream Islam and its beliefs and practices are being increasingly imagined as excessively forceful.

### Conversion-Conquest Trope as Defining Factor

The narrative of ‘forced’ conversion is a politically motivated hang-over of the popular trope of ‘conversion as conquest’ that, while defining the issue, evades the complexity of the conversion process, the liminality of religious boundaries, and the multiple push and pull factors that lead to conversion. The narrative of ‘forced’ conversion is rooted in a political-moral universe in which the autonomy of the individual belonging to a minority community is understood as of paramount value. It questions the organized religions such as Islam (and in India also Christianity, see Roberts, 2012) for their active preaching and propagation to pursue people of other faiths to convert. In Pakistan, this anti-conversion and anti-preaching rhetoric is generated by secular-popular Sindhi nationalist and neoliberal civil society circles. They project Islam as the hegemonic faith, the product of the colonization of Indian/Hindu territories. Premised on the flawed historical accounts of the orientalist and the Indologists who promoted the narrative of conversion by conquest and force, the narrative of territorial colonization is extended by the secular left and the popular Hindu right to the realm of the cultural and spiritual colonization of the minorities in Pakistan. The current narrative of ‘forced’ conversion in Pakistan is the renewed incarnation historiographical legacy that invokes the conversion-as-conquest metaphor. According to Nathaniel Roberts, such a narrative focuses “on power” (Roberts, 2012, p.276). This power factor is often imputed to the one-party (Muslim and Islam), ignoring the fact that non-Muslims in Pakistan are already living under the influence of one or the other religion, which regulates their religious activities through a particular regime of power relations. Roberts brings such a scenario into its proper perspective. He suggests that “to see conversion not as the subordination of a previously autonomous subject but as a movement of persons from one subjectifying regime to another” (Roberts, 2012, p.277). Understanding conversion this way, does not allow “conversion programs in terms of a ‘self’ that exists prior to and outside relations of power, or in terms of self-evident ‘interests’” (Roberts, 2012, p.277).

Islam and Christianity allow for preaching and active persuasion to convert the people who do not belong to their faith. This religious allowance is, nonetheless, in line with the United Nations protocols that defend the right of individuals to preach one’s religion and to convert to any other religion as the fundamental right of humans. There is, however, no denying the fact that in history as well as in the present some conversions may have involved an element of ‘force’. Yet, generally speaking, as the discussion in this article shows, neither history nor the contemporary evidence shows that conversions take place through systematic use of ‘force’ – physical or psychological. The fact that Muslims, particularly clerics and religious zealots, tend to actively pursue the goal of conversion-by-persuasion and gift exchange, does not suffice to argue that such conversions are actually ‘forced’ upon the soul of the convert. As discussed, the studies show that conversion involves multiple push and pull factors including the impact of acculturation and assimilation into the religion of the majority, and the urge to explore new faith (Rambo, 1993: 1999; Sian, 2011; Roberts, 2012), that cannot be termed necessarily and always often as ‘forced’ conversion, or to the ‘false consciousness of the converts. The “new structure of values that the convert is persuaded to accept” are connected to subject positions, and do not necessarily “stand in contrast to the convert’s own interests but are understood as indeed being those of the convert as well (correctly understood)” (Roberts, 2012, p.276).

Though the legislators, human rights activists, and those who write for NGOs may indeed feel compelled to defend the vulnerable minorities conceived as religious communities, this fact does not explain why they should conceive minorities strictly as religious communities different from the religion of Islam, and caste-based communities of different faiths, much less why religious conversion should always often be defined as ‘forced’ upon the religious minorities under duress. In essence, ‘religious conversion’ is not much different from secular conversion or, to put it paradoxically, conversion to the secular religion, in the public sphere in which the protagonists of different narratives vie with each other for dominating the social landscape. In Pakistan, the state, which is



relatively Islamic, tries to maintain its legal and constitutional hegemony against the protagonists of the secular religion of the neoliberals, the leftists, and human rights activists backed by the powerful neoliberal donor agencies, and are, in a way, aligned with the global imperialistic hegemon whose one of the primary goals is to displace the alternative models of faith and society and replace them with the Western capitalist model.

## Conclusion

To conclude, it can be argued that the ‘forced’ conversions narrative has been developed, promoted and propagated without any justifiable basis and is working towards the Islamophobic political goal of maligning the state and society of Pakistan and more particularly the religion and the religious characters in it. This narrative has a phantasmagorical structure which works to reproduce the historical battle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’; it is a tale mainly constructed by the privileged caste Hindus and Sindhi nationalists, the human rights and the minority rights activists to rescue the indigenous Hindu and Christian population from the Muslim ‘lust’, and to re-engage, stabilize and regulate the community through the articulation of the fear of ‘radical Islam’. Sian (2011) seems right in pointing out that “the ‘forced’ conversion narrative illustrates

the power of fantasy in which a vision of a nebulous threat has been established”. Like Western countries, in Pakistan too, the “constant overplaying of the reductive and hateful comments alleging ‘forced conversions’ are splashed across daily headlines, facilitating, empowering, and legitimizing Islamophobia”.<sup>81</sup> The Islamophobic rhetoric helps the privileged caste patriarchal elite of the non-Muslims

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to unite under the non-Muslim or a minority identity marker – not so successfully though – thereby enabling them to negotiate their patriarchal and communal concerns with their dominant Muslim counterparts. This, of course, does not mean to suggest that the ‘forced’ conversion narrative and the antipathy towards the figure of the Muslims are simply the consequences of the ‘war on terror’, nor should they be seen as lying dormant waiting for the events of 9/11 to ignite them. Nonetheless, the narrative in Pakistan seems to be spurred by that event that unleashed contemporary Islamophobia, although its roots lay in the Orientalist and Indological historiography of the subcontinent, which reinforced Islamophobic patriarchy mainly for the following motives.

1. To defend the authority of the family and its patriarch.
2. To target Islam and malign Pakistan so that the State could be pressurized to give Sindhi Ashrafia, privileged caste Hindus and the elite within Christians more space in the power corridors.
3. To organize the non-Muslim against the Muslim ‘a universal oppressor’, and against the ‘Islamic’ Republic of Pakistan.

The analysis of the narrative internal to minority communities, particularly Dalits, shows that faith conversions happen irrespective of the influence of religious clerics or dominant Muslim communities. One could legitimately suspect the role of religious clerics and the purportedly Islamic laws of the state being responsible for one-way marriages and conversions, if these conversions had been happening

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<sup>81</sup> Dr Katy P. Sian, “Change the record, Boris! The normalisation of Islamophobia,” *The Muslim News*, August 24, 2018, <http://muslimnews.co.uk/newspaper/comment/33443-2/>



only in Pakistan. Instead, one finds the similar trajectory across the world; a non-Muslim woman often converts to marry a Muslim man, and not vice versa. This shows that these conversions have something to do with the nature of religion and the religious rituals of Muslims vis-à-vis non-Muslim communities, instead of with the policies and programs of any specific Muslim state. There can also be some other factors involved in such conversions as well, such as renewed agency acquired by the subaltern classes due to modernization. The young girls and women have acquired some agency to transcend the domestic or familial pressure of the patriarchs to challenge ‘forced’ marriages, and to break caste-based and religious barriers. Dalit activists are acquiring a new agency to assert their differences with the privileged caste Hindus, terming the narrative of ‘forced’ conversion as the political gimmick by and for the privileged caste Hindus to maintain their political hegemony over the emerging’s political class of Dalits.

The study, therefore, concludes that ‘faith conversions’ in Pakistan have deliberately been portrayed to always mean ‘forced conversions’, even at the cost of concealing and fudging the facts. In fact, the issue of conversion is more complicated than it is made out to be in everyday politics. The rhetoric of ‘forced conversion’ at best reflects the failure of the privileged caste Hindu and Christian elite to organize the non-Muslims against the ‘Muslim other’ and to reclaim their privileged past. The antagonistic discourse subscribed by the privileged caste non-Muslims, particularly privileged caste Hindus, purports to

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**This study recommends to conduct a thorough exploratory study to verify the cases of alleged forced conversion so that the analysis presented here could be further validated, and rhetoric could be separated from reality and vice-versa.**

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explain the deeply entrenched sense of the loss of pre-partition privileges that they enjoyed in Sindh. The figure of the non-Muslim female body and the ‘predatory’ Muslim male helps to account for the homogeneity of the minority, which it lacks due to inherent religious ethnic divides and caste hierarchies. The utilization of the notion of ‘female honor’

and ‘chastity’ also helps them gain necessary support and sympathy from the male protagonists across religious divides, and from within the ethno-nationalist patriarchal groups.

The above discussion reveals that conversion of any sort in Pakistan is often projected through social media and the NGO reports as ‘forced’ conversion without clearly defining what ‘forced conversion’ means. Though ‘forced conversion’ is often imputed in cases when any runaway girl converts to marry her Muslim paramour, for some rights activists even a mass conversion involving whole families is also a kind of ‘forced conversion’. In some cases, the definition and meaning of ‘force’ in the conversion process remains blurred or probably intentionally undefined for vested interests. This projection shows the limits and scope of distorting facts through social media for advancing a particular political agenda. These insights resonate with most of the scholarship on conversion that discourages defining conversion in absolutist terms as ‘forced conversion’ or voluntary conversion. Both mass conversions and individual conversions involve social processes of accommodation and assimilation that are further regulated by several push and pull factors instead of ‘brute force’ or ‘coercion’.

Taking the lead from Nathaniel Roberts (2012) where he problematizes the cases of conversion to Christianity in Chennai in India, it can be concluded that there is probably an implicit moral psychology working behind the idea that conversion – especially non-Muslim conversion to Islam – often implies an element of ‘force’. That moral psychology that imputes the ‘Muslim’ is rooted in secular liberal notions and in the conversion-as-conquest trope with its focus on power. This trope enables the purportedly secular protagonist to see communities of conversion as the binary process, a bounded whole, the tendency that “most anthropologists today socially disown as both reified and essentializing” (Roberts, 2012, p.281). Contrary to that, this report argues that pushed by poverty and the caste stigma, at a certain point, the families venture to experiment upon their belief by participating in the spectacle



of conversion. Individual conversions are pushed by a mix of biological and social factors that may include love marriage, socioeconomic uplift, and in certain cases, the urge to discover or explore the ‘true’ faith. Given these social-psychological and socioeconomic constraints, it can be inferred that the simultaneous projection of the rhetorical statements through NGO reports, social media and the internet are mainly grounded in politically motivated rhetoric aimed at undermining the impact of the popular appeal of the ‘conversion-as-conquest’ trope as it unfolds in the form of Islamophobia. They also undermine the secular-liberal assumptions that blind them from seeing through the “most pervasive ways power operates today, namely through the reproduction of secular truths about religion, and by authorizing ‘autonomous’ secular subjectivities as normative” (Roberts, 2012).

While in India, “colonization of consciousness rhetoric plays a central role in violent anti-minority politics that the secular state supports both passively and actively” (Roberts, 2012, p.288), in Pakistan the rhetoric of ‘forced conversion’ plays a key role in maintaining the hegemony of privileged caste Hindus and in subverting actual issues of Dalit majority, such as the alarming rate of suicide, bonded labor, and caste discrimination, that are neither attended to by the state, nor by the so-called secular liberal human rights watchdogs. To disturb that rhetoric and to make sense of the nature of conversions actually happening, it is expedient to conduct an ethnographic study taking into account all forms of possible reasons that a convert chooses, including seeking truth, acculturation, socioeconomic advantage, etc., behind such conversions instead of a priori labeling such conversions as ‘forced’.

### Recommendations

- ❖ Based on the literature review, social media content analysis and findings of the preliminary study, this study recommends to conduct a thorough exploratory study to verify the cases of alleged forced conversion so that the analysis presented here could be further validated, and rhetoric could be separated from reality and vice-versa.
- ❖ To abet the propaganda, while at the same time giving relief to any real victims of ‘forced’ conversion, ‘forced’ marriage’, abuse, caste patriarchy, and endogamy, it is recommended to researchers, activists and legislators that women should not be treated as commodities for whom the choices have to be made solely by others, but as active actors who make rational choices to convert and/or to marry of their choice, to experience a relatively organized religious life and belief in the divine, or to better her socioeconomic standing and status.
- ❖ While making an assessment of the ‘force’ used by the religious cleric in marriages involving conversion of a non-Muslim, the normative factors, such as conversion as a form of cultural ritual, should not be ignored.<sup>82</sup>
- ❖ As this study suggests, there is a combination of factors that not only lead to the actual conversions (mostly of free will though), but also to the deliberate distortion of the issue by the media and rights activists. Casteism and patriarchy, in particular, are two key factors that often fail to find their due place in NGO reports or in media, which again reflects the normative constraints of the casteist and the patriarchal culture in which the issue is framed and recast. Therefore, it would be very naïve to conclude by accusing the religious clerics and the State or its laws only as being projected by the rights activists. In any analysis or future study on the issue, the researchers should ensure that they have taken into consideration the political location of each actor involved.
- ❖ Since the rhetoric, which often is inflated to the level of propaganda, has tarnished the image of Pakistan and Muslims, the Government of Pakistan should urge the concerned NGOs and the rights activists to desist from raising a ‘false’ alarm.

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<sup>82</sup> See also, The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Center (2015). <http://www.law.gov>.



- ❖ The succeeding federal and provincial governments have, however, proactively listened to the outcry against forced conversions. Even a Bill was passed by the Sindh Assembly in 2019 to that effect but could not get the governor's consent after public protest. Such counter campaign is often led by Islamists but there is more to the story than just 'radical' Islam that needs to be dug out. Given the lack of evidence of 'forced conversion', the study recommends that, under the circumstances in Pakistan, an anti-conversion law would be immature and flawed, and instead would recommend the State to ensure that laws be made to protect the fundamental rights of an individual to convert to any religion, to profess it, and the right to convert others to his or her religion through persuasion or any non-coercive means.
- ❖ The legislators and policymakers should make critical appraisal of the demands of any section of society including the human rights activists before making any law. They should, for example, consider if such demands are empirically grounded in an actual issue or are driven by certain vested interests that remain hidden under a fabricated rhetoric. They should assess if legal measures are necessary and sufficient to address socioeconomic issues or if the gradual, systematic and sensitive changes within existing frameworks could bring about a healthy change. In the present case, it must be considered if Islamophobia is a factor in operation that aims at preventing the conversions altogether. Simultaneously, if an anti-conversion law would go against the underprivileged minority of the scheduled castes who are hardly represented in policy debates and even on social forums, and undermine their real issues that are rooted in casteism, cultural peculiarities and age-old customs. If there is a law that limits its scope to forced conversions, how could a voluntary conversion be avoided from being portrayed and propagated as a forced conversion and how could the unabated defamation of Islam, Muslims or religious clerics on this pretext be stopped.

A field study to verify the alleged instances of forced conversion, and the phenomenon overall, as suggested above should aim:

1. To verify the cases of alleged 'forced' conversions reported by minority rights activists.
2. To enlist the narrative of both victims and alleged perpetrators of forced conversion.
3. To assess the impact of mediatization and the popular left and right politics on the agency of the women, oppressed classes, castes, and/or minority communities (to problematize caste, class, and gender disparities).
4. To inform legislators, policymakers and diplomats about the structural inequalities at the societal level, and as they are embedded in the politics of faith or alleged forced conversions in particular, and the alleged persecution of religious minorities in general.

The overall research process, data collection, analysis and presentation will open up new ways of doing research in the post-truth global political economy. It will remove the misperceptions of policymakers and the academia that stem from the widespread dissemination of misleading and biased information. It will explain how the info-tech turn in narrative-making has enabled unscrupulous actors with ulterior motives increasingly to circulate fake news, misinformation and disinformation with the help of trolls, bots and respondent-driven algorithms. It will help diminish the societal frictions between Muslims and non-Muslims by resolving many misunderstandings and will bring about interfaith harmony in the true sense. It will also harness Indo-Pak relations both at the bilateral and people-to-people diplomatic levels.





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