

# **Dangerous Ramifications of Recent Ghar Wapsi Efforts**

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## **Introduction**

For as long as the nation of India has existed, its populace has practiced religious acts later enveloped in the term Hinduism. While the term "Hinduism" was introduced much later, this term describes a plethora of religious practices that have been observed for centuries. India has a long history of nationalistic sentiment seeking to establish a theocracy of an exclusively Hindu India. For the Hindu nationalist, one cannot separate Hindu influence from national identity. However, as other traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, begin to attract converts, these Hindu nationalists have sought to bring converts back to their Hindu roots in an effort known as Ghar Wapsi or "reconversion." While reconversion efforts are not in and of themselves harmful practices, many overzealous Hindu nationalists have taken reconversion efforts too far with manipulation, extortion, and even acting violently against potential converts. These practices must be acknowledged and stopped immediately as egregious acts against the religious liberties of fellow human beings.

## **What is Ghar Wapsi?**

Ghar Wapsi describes the reconversion of those born Hindus who have left the faith and returned. Usually translated as "coming home," this practice describes any Hindu who practiced another religious tradition and seeks to return to the faith. Ghar Wapsi builds on the cultural

understanding that an individual born Hindu is an unchangeable state. These people were always Hindu at their core; therefore, this reconversion denotes a person “coming home” to their true roots.

This idea is built on the concept of Hindutva and the Hindu nationalist movement. Hindutva, literally translating to “Hinduness,” denotes a national ideology rooted in Hindu beliefs. According to Hindutva theology, all people born in India would be inherently Hindu, even if they were never practitioners themselves.<sup>1</sup> India has been dominated by Hinduism throughout most, if not all, of its history. Hindutva describes a culture that has merged with the religious practices of Hinduism to create an atmosphere wherein the two are inseparable. V.d. Savarkar first expounded Hindutva in his work *Hindutva* (1923). There were three essential criteria to be a Hindu, according to Savarkar: the first being paternal descent, the second, common blood (racial blood or Jati), and last, common civilization.<sup>2</sup> With Hindutva at its core, the Hindu nationalist movement has been gaining support, with supporters’ central goal being to establish a Hindu *Rashtra* or “nation.” The Hindu nationalist movement aims to see India renounce its secular standing that it has held since 1976.

As of a 2021 study, 79.8% of people in India identify as Hindu.<sup>3</sup> While this is an overwhelming majority, many scholars have attempted to create a definition of “Hindu” that more accurately reflects people who engage with the culture of Hindu tradition without explicitly identifying as Hindu. Savarkar provides a great example of this practice as he suggested that a

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<sup>1</sup> Savarkar, Vinayak Damodar. *Essentials of Hindutva*, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Katju, Manjari. The Understanding of Freedom in Hindutva. *Social Scientist* 39: 2011, 3–22.

<sup>3</sup> Kramer, Stephanie. Key findings about the religious composition of India. Pew Research Center, September 21, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>.

“Hindu” is any person who regards India as their Fatherland (*pitrbhumi*) and Holyland (*punyabhumi*).<sup>4</sup> By this definition, more residents of India would fall under the category of Hindu than those who explicitly define themselves as practicing religious individuals. By such means, we see Hindutva enlarge the umbrella term of “Hindu” to encapsulate all of India conceivably.

The Hindutva movement took hold slowly. The idea quietly circulated until its re-emergence with the Arya Samaj (Society of Nobles) movement between 1880 and 1930, founded by Swami Dayanand Sarasvati in 1875 and centered in Punjab.<sup>5</sup> At the time, Hindu identity was challenged by the colonial efforts of Europeans who brought enlightenment-era rationality popularized by thinkers such as Kant, Hume, and Voltaire. Hindu intellectuals were challenged, prompting a reformation and revival of Hindu thought within a rationalist framework. These Hindus observed a conversion phenomenon during this period, leading them to conclude that the Hindu majority in India was threatened. Many feared the extinction of Hindu practice altogether, as demonstrated by U.N. Mukherji in his calculation that Hinduism would be erased within 420 years if current trends continued.<sup>6</sup> Within this context, the Arya Samaj movement emerged with central tenants of a unitary God, the Vedas as the ultimate truth, and the Vedic Age as the Golden Age.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Savarkar, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jaffrelot, Christophe. ‘Militant Hindus and the Conversion Issue (1885–1990): From Suddhi to Dharm Parivartan. The Politicization and Diffusion of an “Invention of Tradition”’, in Jackie Assayag (ed.), *The Resources of History: Tradition, Narration and Nation in South Asia*. Paris, Pondichery: Ecole Francaise d’ Extreme-Orient, Institut Francais de Pondichery, 1999, 128–38.

<sup>6</sup> Sraddhananda, *Hindu Sangathan: Saviour of the Dying Race*. Delhi, 1926, 14–15, 42–68.

<sup>7</sup> Zavos, John. *The Arya Samaj and the Antecedents of Hindu Nationalism*. *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3: (1999), 57–81.

The first well-organized and well-known attempt at Hindu reversion conducted by the Arya Samaj responded to British colonialism and Christian missionaries and was known as *shuddhi* (purification). The namesake was built on the understanding that Hinduism of the past was pure, untainted Hinduism as opposed to the corrupted contemporary Hinduism, thus needing to be "purified" to its former glory. The Discovery of the *Devlsdmtiyi*, which supposedly contained instruction for reversioning to Hinduism, supported and provided rigid guidance for the Shuddhi practice.<sup>8</sup> The *Devlsdmtiyi* has even influenced some scholars to believe that Hinduism was traditionally a proselytizing tradition.<sup>9</sup>

The shuddhi campaign was successful for several years and gradually gained popularity. Today, one of the best-known Arya Samajis, Swami Agnivesh, distances himself from reversion efforts. He claims his reason for doing so is that present-day reversion proponents "trumpet 'ghar vapasi/wapsi' (come home) without the willingness to offer a 'ghar' (home) to those who respond."<sup>10</sup>

### **Brief History of Hindu Nationalism**

The Arya Samaj movement is not entirely synonymous with the Hindu Nationalist movement but may be understood as Hindu nationalism incorporating the rational thought process of European influence. Given that the practice of ghar wapsi emerged from Hindu

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<sup>8</sup> Jordens, J.T.F. 'Reversion to Hinduism: The Shuddhi of the Arya Samaj', in G.A. Oddie (ed.), *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1991, 146.

<sup>9</sup> A tradition that seeks to make converts. Sharma, Arvind, 'Ancient Hinduism as a Missionary Religion,' in *Numen-International Review for the History of Religions*, Vol.39, no.2, 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Swami Agnivesh, Bandhua Mukti Morcha office, New Delhi, August 16, 2007.

nationalists seeking to marry the national identity of India with the religious identity of Hindus, it would be prudent to provide a brief history of the Hindu nationalist movement.

The opposition to the Hindu nationalist movement continues to be the Indian National Congress. The Indian National Congress first convened in 1885 as a party opposed to British rule. The group's tactics toward independence for India began with boycotting British goods but quickly turned violent after heavy insolence from extremists such as Bal Gangadhar and Annie Besant. However, in the 1920s and 30s, the group found a new leader, Mahatma Gandhi, who advocated nonviolent noncooperation. Conflict continued between Indians seeking independence and the Europeans who believed India was too underdeveloped to govern itself. However, at the beginning of World War II, Britain made India a belligerent without consulting Indian elected councils. Consequentially, the elected officials declared that they would not support the war effort without independence. They were awarded that independence in 1947, and this ultimately ended the harmonious relationship between Hindu nationalists and the Indian National Congress.

The Hindu Nationalist Movement was unified with the Indian National Congress to establish a self-governing India, accomplished in 1947. After being granted independence, the question arose of what sort of nation India would be. Would India defer to its overwhelming Hindu majority and cultural roots to establish a theocracy, or would they align with the modernist ideals brought about by Europe establishing a secular democracy of religious tolerance? This is when the Hindu Nationalist Movement split from the Indian National Congress.

For Hindu nationalists and supporters of the Hindutva movement, the independence of India did not constitute a job finished. For them, the new opponent became the popularization of

Muslim conversion.<sup>11</sup> Identifying this new opponent, coupled with the fracturing of Congress's support, led to the establishment of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) in the 1980s, which advocated strongly for Hindutva, prompting some to readdress the definition of the term. For example, in 1994, S. Muralidharan defined Hindutva as “a phenomenon defined by negative association—that which is not Islamic within the cultural framework of the Indian sub-continent is by definition Hindu in its provenance.”<sup>12</sup>

The BJP is rooted in the Bharatiya Jana Sangh movement of the 1950s, carrying on pro-Hindu political philosophies. In many ways, the BJP became the face of the Hindu nationalist movement advocating for Hindutva in place of the secular policies and practices of the Congress party. The BJP capitalized on anti-Muslim sentiments, taking a very public stance on the issue of the Mosque of Babur. The BJP called for the erection of a Hindu temple at the site of this mosque, and leaders took a public movement across the country to demolish it. In 1992, the mosque was demolished by supporters of the BJP, leading to widespread outbreaks of violence, which led to the death of more than 1,000 people. The fallout hurt the image of the BJP, pushing an increasing number of Hindus toward secularism.

In the decades since, the BJP and the Hindu nationalist movement as a whole have developed their ideologies by ridding Hinduism of “superstition,” “irrationality,” and “idolatry.”<sup>13</sup> They have adopted the language of Western thinkers, a notion supported by Blom Hansen, who states, “To be respected as different, we must imitate the Western—or Islamic—

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<sup>11</sup> Blom Hansen, Thomas. Globalization and Nationalist Imaginations: Hindutva's Promise of Equality through Difference. *Economic and Political Weekly* 31: (1996), 603–16.

<sup>12</sup> Muralidharan, Sukumar. Patriotism without People: Milestones in the Evolution of Hindu Nationalist Ideology. *Social Scientist* 22: 1994, 3–38.

<sup>13</sup> Kalyani, K. "Repertoires of Anti-caste Sentiments in the Everyday Performance." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 4, no. 2 (2023): 213–229.

model of strength.”<sup>14</sup> These efforts to reform how Hinduism is presented aim to demonstrate the rationality behind the tradition and make the Hindu faith tradition more accessible and acceptable. By doing so, Hinduism has begun presenting itself as a tradition that attracts converts, a notion virtually unseen in its history. Modern Hinduism presents itself as a tradition with canonical rituals, precepts, obligations like Islam, sacraments like Christianity, and a conversion strategy that echoes them.<sup>15</sup>

### **Emergence of Ghar Wapsi**

The revival of conversion efforts emerged during the 1950s with the popularization of the ghar wapsi movement. Two levels of reconversion play out.<sup>16</sup> The first involves massive public ceremonies that engage many people in reconversion. The second involves a less visible conversion resulting from numerous long-term programs. Central to both of these practices is typically an oath that stresses the abandonment of false religion and the exchange of it for pure Hindu practices.<sup>17</sup> There are also instances wherein reconverts abandon their former names and take on their old names reflecting their caste. These ceremonies are often co-ordained by different affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)<sup>18</sup> While the leading role is often

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<sup>14</sup> Blom Hansen, 1996.

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, Rowena, and Sathianathan Clarke. Introduction. In *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings*. Edited by Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, (2003), 1–21.

<sup>16</sup> Vandeveld, Iris. "Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu Nationalist Reaction Against Conversion to Christianity and Islam." *South Asia* 34, no. 1: (2011), 31–50.

<sup>17</sup> Lochtefeld, James G. 'New Wine, Old Skins: The Sangh Parivar and the Transformation of Hinduism,' in *Religion*, Vol.26: 1996, 108.

<sup>18</sup> The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer organization that is dedicated to India's resurgence.

played by members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) (a right-wing subgroup of the RSS), most critiques published are of the large reconversion practices, as these are the most public. The subtle long-term programs are aimed at community leaders. The idea here is that if a community leader converts, the rest of the village will follow, attempting to capitalize on the social and psychological phenomenon of the herd mentality.<sup>19</sup>

It has been reported that Hindu nationalist organizations such as the VHP will often engrain themselves in local villages to set the context for reconversion.<sup>20</sup> This is done by reminding former Hindus of their ancestors and the importance of a united country, providing social services, swaying the environment to accept converts, or warning against the dangers of Christianity, Islam, and other traditions. Hindu nationalist groups may research local communities to identify those who hold social influence and then form a team or committee to decide how best to influence them.

The bulk of Hindus converting to Christianity or Islam historically were lower-class Hindus. The lower castes willingly embraced Islam because of its egalitarianism, experienced through the Sufis, Islam's mystics, who preached love and compassion in an idiom that appealed to them. The lower castes also became Christians seeking liberation from caste oppression. These Christian missionaries have been readily present in these communities and have a long history of building schools and supporting lower caste communities in India.<sup>21</sup> Where they felt

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<sup>19</sup> Kurdi, Abdurhman. "The Effects of Herd Mentality on Behavior." PhD diss., Houston Baptist University, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Fieldwork in Patiya Kodar, Banswara District. Rajeshwar, Yashasvini, and Roy C Amore. "Coming Home (Ghar Wapsi) and Going Away: Politics and the Mass Conversion Controversy in India." *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 10, no. 5: 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Teltumbde, Anand. "Ghar Wapsi: Welcome to the Hellhole of Hinduism." *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 1: (2015), 10–11.



discriminated against in Hindu circles, they were invited and encouraged by these traditions that accepted them and disregarded their caste.

Naturally, Hindu nationalists who seek to establish something akin to a theocracy in India find this increasing trend of converts to “foreign” faith traditions challenging as it further reinforces the secular state. The more religious diversity found in India, the more rational a secular government becomes. A secularly founded government has the potential to put forth standards applying to all religious communities and refraining from bias policies that, in the case of Hindu nationalist leadership, would otherwise award preferential treatment to Hindu citizens, further marginalizing and incentivizing Muslims and devotees of other religions traditions to relocate. Therefore, the ghar wapsi movement emerged. The belief among many Hindu nationalists was that the parts of India wherein people had embraced Christianity or Islam would try to break away from *Akhand Bharat* (“united India”). Seeking to bring these converts back to Hinduism, many tactics were employed. For example, one suggestion proposed by VHP member Narayan Rao Tarte stated that “the VHP should make efforts to make the age-old Hindu dharma compatible with the present requirements of society so that it can face the challenges of the modern world.”<sup>22</sup> This early expression of the anti-caste movement continues to gain traction today. However, the main stratagem to combat the feared division of India was the ghar wapsi movement.

This is not to say that Hindu nationalist organizations hold no place for religious tolerance. However, their philosophies surrounding religious tolerance still demand one identity

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<sup>22</sup> Tarte, Narayan Rao. "Vishva Hindu Parishad Ki Kalpana" (Formation of Vishva Hindu Parishad), *Hindu Vishva*, Silver Jubilee Issue. 1989, 14–15.

first as Indian (aligning with the Indian identity inspired by Hindu identity). A. Varshney describes the requirements for religious tolerance as:

The generic Hindu nationalist argument is that to become part of the Indian nation, Muslims must agree to the following: (1) accept the centrality of Hinduism in Indian civilization; (2) acknowledge key Hindu figures like Ram as civilizational heroes and not regard them as merely religious figures of Hinduism; (3) accept that Muslim leaders in various parts of India (between roughly 1000 and 1857) destroyed the pillars of Hindu civilization, especially Hindu temples; and (4) make no claims to special privileges such as the maintenance of religious personal laws, nor demand special state grants for their educational institutions. They must assimilate, not maintain their distinctiveness.<sup>23</sup>

As seen here, the conditions of religious tolerance require one to put their national (i.e., Hindu) identity before their religious identity. This is especially problematic for the Muslim population of India, that have been practitioners for generations. The call for assimilation has been echoed both from a religious evangelical perspective and through a political platform. As the BJP's popularity increased, especially after winning the 2014 general elections, there has been a strong movement to "de-Muslim-ize" India with explicit legal acts taken against Muslim populations.<sup>24</sup>

### **Challenges of Reconversion**

Part of the reason conversion to Hinduism was never notably popularized before the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the issue of caste. Essentially, when one is born into a Hindu family, their caste is exemplified in their very name. Members of the same caste will very frequently live in the same villages. The village's people will have a shared caste, and their last names will indicate that

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<sup>23</sup> Varshney, Ashutosh. Contested Meanings: India's National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety. *Daedalus* 122:1993, 227–61.

<sup>24</sup> Rajeshwar, Yashasvini, and Roy C Amore. "Coming Home (Ghar Wapsi) and Going Away: Politics and the Mass Conversion Controversy in India." *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 10, no. 5: 2019.

caste. However, when one has decided to convert to Hinduism, there is a question of what caste they will be in. When asked this very question, Yogi Adityanath, the Hindutva face of the BJP, stated that “those being subjected to ghar wapsi will be given the Gotra and caste from which they converted.”<sup>25</sup> This means that those who converted to escape caste-based oppression would find themselves in the same social status they sought to escape.

Notably, on February 26, 2015, placing converts in their newly recovered caste became legalized.<sup>26</sup> A two-judge bench of the Supreme Court passed a judgment that new revert K P Manu was entitled to the quota benefits reserved for Dalits on the condition that the Hindu community accepted his return. This case was particularly significant as it acknowledged second-generational reversion on a political level. This case built on the previous case of *The Principal, Guntur Medical College, Guntur & Ors vs. Y Mohan Rao* ([1976] 3 SCC 411), which allowed first-generation Dalit reverts to the scheduled caste reservations.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of the incredible incentive offered for reversion, accurate statistics on reversion can be problematic to procure. Often, attendees of these rituals may participate merely to get a certificate to demonstrate participation and reap benefits such as government employment or education. These participants may need to be more earnest in their engagement and, therefore, may be officially counted as Hindu but practice another religious tradition such as Christianity or Islam. In these instances, it is also possible for converts to undergo a re-reversion (*punarvartan*) after the ceremony. By pointing out these narratives of insincere

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<sup>25</sup> Teltumbde, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> “Judicial Ghar Wapsi.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> To ensure hegemonic communities, specific geographical locations have been assigned to members of particular castes, which makes it easier to maintain purity.

conversion, Christians and secularists often downplay the number of reconverts that Hindu nationalist organizations so proudly advertise.

Once conversion processes have been completed, discrimination may often continue. In the case of 70-year-old Rahmat and his sons, this family had converted to Hinduism from Islam with the promise of land and jobs. After converting, the family found that they were ostracized by the community (due to their previous religious affiliation) and were unable to find a husband for their daughter approaching marriageable age. They did not receive land or offered employment opportunities as promised. After several years of social ostracizing and financial hardship, the family reconverted to Islam in the hopes of a better life.<sup>28</sup> In this case study, social stigma involving reconverts to Hinduism may lead to social discrimination.

Discrimination is not just seen on the part of the convert themselves but may often extend to the convert's family. This phenomenon is demonstrated through the case study of Hussain Ali and his family.<sup>29</sup> Ali's daughter had converted to Islam after her marriage to her Muslim husband. However, her husband delivered "instant triple talaq," exercising the Muslim right of a man to near-instant divorce. The divorce came after the husband had learned that Ali's daughter had been born to a Hindu mother. Ali declared publicly that his family had "voluntarily" contacted a Hindu Samhati.<sup>30</sup> organizer in Assam's Silchar after "being systematically isolated in

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<sup>28</sup> Manjari, Katju. "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi.'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 1 (2015): 21–24.

<sup>29</sup> Khanna, Rohit. "Showcased 'Ghar-Wapsi' Family Is from Assam." *The Times of India* (Bombay, India). New Delhi: Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Samhati is an organization of and for Bangladeshi women, founded in 1984 by Bangladeshi women living in the Washington, D.C. area. For many years, Samhati worked with Mahila Parishad (Bangladesh's largest women's organization) to build, establish, and support the first women's shelter in Bangladesh, Rokeya Shadan. For this, Samhati has provided a total of over \$160,000.

the community in their village.”<sup>31</sup> After Ali’s daughter returned to his family household, the family was socially ostracized to the point that they felt they had to relocate. The Hindu community wherein Ali had lived for years turned on him and his family for the dishonor that was his daughter leaving the Hindu faith. The incident sent the scholarly community into an uproar, with many claiming it was an egregious display of majoritarianism.<sup>32</sup>

### **Corruption and Ghar Wapsi**

By the late 1990s, many of these reconversion efforts were well underway. Reconversion drives occurred in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa (now Odisha), and many other locations across India. Many of these reconversion efforts were accompanied by violence against Christian institutions and missionaries. For example, leaflets calling upon Hindus to "wipe out" Christians from the district were circulated in the Dangs.<sup>33</sup>

The Sangh Parivar, a collection of Hindu nationalist organizations such as the BJP, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Sewa Bharati, and more, have strategically targeted their efforts of reconversion on the Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Christian fault lines such as the Cheera-Merat Raajputs or the Maul-e-Salaam Muslims. The emphasis in these places has been on convincing these hybrid Hindu-Muslim/Christian practitioners to give up the aspects of their faith related to Abrahamic tradition, such as circumcision and reverence of Abrahamic texts. In these instances, one can observe the effects of Christian missionaries and the wave of Muslim conversion seen decades prior. Their influence on the native Hindu culture yields a melting pot

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<sup>31</sup> Khanna, 2018

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Venkatesan, V. "Communalism: A Hate Campaign in Gujarat," Frontline, 16-29 January 1999. [http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl16\\_02/16021070.htm](http://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl16_02/16021070.htm),

of tradition and practice that is not exclusively Hindu, Christian, or Muslim. Reconversion efforts in these areas can be more challenging as devotees point to certain aspects of their faith, indicating a connection to Hindu tradition. By these means, many individuals practicing hybrid religion do not see themselves as having left the Hindu tradition at all and, therefore, do not see a need to reconvert.

Hindu nationalist groups will also target lower-income, often destitute areas that see conversion to be an advantageous strategy for securing welfare and jobs.<sup>34</sup> In these instances, it is not uncommon for nationalist groups to offer ration cards in exchange for going through conversion rituals.<sup>35</sup> Many have also offered Aadhar cards and school admission for children. Unfortunately, promises made by nationalist groups are not always kept.

Violence has often been used to create fear and discourage conversion from Hinduism.<sup>36</sup> India has even seen the rise of vigilante forces, such as the Bajrang Dal, performing sociocultural policing to prevent mass conversions.<sup>37</sup> Involuntary ghar wapsi have proliferated in previous decades, changing the global impression of Hinduism. Those engaging in unethical reconversion efforts are a small subset of Hindus as a whole. However, as seen in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack on the Twin Towers, a small, overzealous religious group can impact the impression of a tradition as a whole, regardless of accuracy.

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<sup>34</sup> Manjari, Katju. "The Politics of 'Ghar Wapsi.'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 1 (2015): 21–24.

<sup>35</sup> India Today. Muslims who 'converted' will get ration cards, says Bajrang Dal, 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/north/story/muslims-converted-to-hinduism-agra-bajrang-dal-rss-bangladeshi-muslims-230517-2014-12-09> Accessed March 5, 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Farzand, Ahmed. 'VHP, BJP Leaders on Maoists' Hit-List in Orissa', *India Today*, 18 Oct. 2008 <http://indiatoday.digitaltoday.in>, accessed January 20, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See interview with Surendra Jain of the Bajrang Dal, *Outlook*, February 8, 1999, p 20.

The instances of unethical conversion coercion are numerous. In January of 2022, forty Christians were forcibly reconverted to Hinduism in Madhya, Pradesh.<sup>38</sup> In this instance, Indians such as Anandi Ben and her family were forced to engage in conversion rituals of breaking a coconut and eating food (Prasad) offered to the gods. In her statement to reporters, Mrs. Ben said, "I was threatened that I will lose Government subsidies, affirmative benefits if I continue as a Christian, I was also threatened that my agriculture land will be taken away from me, I had no choice."<sup>39</sup> In this region of the Pradesh, in particular, several churches have been shut down, and many others have been forced to practice in secret for fear of persecution. In partnership with VOM Canada, Madhya resident and Christian Kiara stated that "There is the fear that if you accept Christianity, we are going to rape your daughters, we are going to sell them...because you are accepting something that is not Indian. This is a foreign religion; this is a religion of the devil."<sup>40</sup> It is easy to see the negative impression of Hinduism being presented in these instances.

An independent study conducted by researchers at The Wire has found eighty-nine instances of hate crimes and hate speeches across four months leading up to the 2022 assembly elections.<sup>41</sup> These instances occurred across Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar and Haryana. Over half of these instances took place in October of 2021 against Muslims. In these instances, Indian Muslims were prevented from conducting their daily prayers or *namaaz*

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<sup>38</sup> "Hindu Nationalists Target India's Christian Women and Girls." Mission Network News, February 28, 2022. <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/hindu-nationalists-target-indias-christian-women-and-girls/>.

<sup>39</sup> "Forty Christians Forcibly Reconverted in India." Persecution, February 14, 2022. <https://www.persecution.org/2022/02/14/forty-christians-forcibly-re-converted-india/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Barton, Naomi. "89 Instances of Hate Crimes, Hate Speech across Six North Indian States in Four Months." The Wire, March 9, 2022. <https://thewire.in/communalism/89-instances-of-hate-crimes-hate-speech-across-six-north-indian-states-in-four-months>.

in public places, culminating with the withdrawal of earlier agreements to allow Muslims to offer namaaz on government-owned land by Haryana chief minister M.L. Khattar. Furthermore, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, there were six observed instances of Hindutva groups vandalizing churches and schools as well as interrupting events. These acts of discrimination based on faith continued to increase throughout this four-month sample period, with people barring non-Hindu individuals from public gatherings, forcing the closure of small businesses, and much more.

However, another notable instance occurred in November of 2021, involving Christians in Jaitaloor, a village in the Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh. These Christians were forced to shave their heads and perform conversion rituals under threat of land seizure and forced exclusion from public spaces.<sup>42</sup> Some of these instances go so far as to punish those who associate with converts from Hinduism, as is the case of a twenty-eight-year-old woman in Kerala.<sup>43</sup> Dr. Shweta of Thrissur was detained at a yoga center for twenty-two days, during which time she was physically and mentally harassed on account of her marriage to a Christian man. She also noted that over sixty other women were detained at the center for similar reasons. As per her statement, nine individuals were accused of her illegal detention, yet only one has been arrested. This instance demonstrates that it is not just the converts themselves who are suffering at the hands of forced reconversion but also the families of these individuals.

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<sup>42</sup> Carvalho, Nirmala. "Christians Publicly Shaved to 'Return' to Hinduism in Chhattisgarh." INDIA. Aisanews.it, November 5, 2021. <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Christians-publicly-shaved-to-%27return%27-to-Hinduism-in-Chhattisgarh-54435.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Haneef, Mahir. "Police Confirms 'Ghar Wapsi' Allegation Against Yoga Centre in Kerala." The Times of India (Bombay, India). New Delhi: Bennett, Coleman & Co. Ltd, 2017.



## Hinduphobia

If these practices are not stopped, there may be significant ramifications on the global image of Hinduism, resulting in "Hinduphobia."<sup>44</sup> Hinduphobia implies the existence of systematic hatred against Hindus and thereby evokes perpetual victimhood of Hindus.<sup>45</sup> Hinduphobia has existed in the margins of Eastern political discourse since the early 2000s, yet the rising violence of ghar wapsi efforts now threatens to bring it into popular discourse. Hinduphobia here is reminiscent of the term Islamophobia.<sup>46</sup> Which previously existed but skyrocketed in prominence after the attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. As a result of the attack conducted by a small radical group of Muslims, the global image of Islam was tarnished, and Muslims everywhere were labeled as extremists and terrorists. This is, of course, an inaccurate picture of Islam, yet it occurred, nevertheless. Should these manipulative acts of forced reconversion not be stopped, this same phenomenon may take place with the subject being Hinduism now instead of Islam. As these acts become more public and as the scale exponentially grows, there is a genuine possibility that Hindus may be labeled in much the same way Muslims have been. The possibility of such inaccurate generalization is only fueled by the lack of religious education in the West. Suppose Westerners, in particular, are unfamiliar with a tradition, and their only exposure is hostile radical acts conducted by a small portion of the tradition's population. In that case, they risk overgeneralizing and drawing false conclusions about the traditions, resulting in prejudice and hostility.

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<sup>44</sup> Juluri, Vamsee. "Hindu nationalism" or "Hinduphobia"?: Ethnocentrism, errors, and bias in media and media studies." In *Ethics, ethnocentrism and social science research*, 148–173. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Paleri, Dayal. "Hindu Nationalism and the Politics of Cultural Citizenship." *Contemporary Religion in Historical Perspective*. November 8, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Hussain, Asifa M, and William L Miller. *Multicultural Nationalism: Islamaphobia, Anglophobia, and Devolution*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

## **Conclusion**

In summation, we have seen how notions of Hindu nationalism and Hindutva have responded to the increasing conversion of Hindus (particularly to Christianity and Islam) with the popularization of reconversion practices to a degree never seen before. Proselytizing Hindu groups often target the low-class, lower-income, least-educated populations and manipulate them into reconverting with false promises or threats. Specific ghar wapsi efforts are focused on borderlines where religious and political borders meet. Even after conversion, many of these individuals find themselves still under discrimination and in an undesirable socio-economic location. These unethical, egregious acts are tarnishing the global image of Hindus. They may lead to a social phenomenon called "Hinduphobia," wherein this small group of extremists captivates the global impression of Hindus. The consequences of this movement manifest in discriminatory and prejudicial sentiments in both the social and political spheres.

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