

# Myths and Prejudices about ‘Love Jihad’

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The case histories of seven Muslim-Hindu couples not only give the lie to assertions of the “love-jihad” propagandists, they also bust a lot of generally-accepted anti-Muslim prejudices.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s (RSS) “love jihad” campaign needs to be taken seriously not because there is an element of truth in it, but because it builds on deeply felt assumptions about Muslims among a majority of non-Muslims. That is one of the reasons it has found resonance among non-Muslims, not just Hindus, wherever the campaign has been unleashed in the recent past whether in Kerala or Karnataka and now in Uttar Pradesh (UP). Another reason to take this campaign seriously is the belief common among all Indians that young women cannot think for themselves and are easily swayed. Finally, of course, there is the age-old association of daughters with family and community honour and the resultant desire to control them.

It is generally assumed that Muslims are fanatics or at least conservative, violent beef-eaters who marry four times, suppress their women and breed like rabbits. Apart from the loss of face if their daughters marry outside their own faith, most non-Muslim parents fear for their daughters’ happiness were they to marry Muslims and live in a Muslim environment. This came across in a study conducted by this writer on interfaith marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims in 2002-03, the results of which were published in the book *Inter-religious Marriages among Muslims: Negotiating Religious Identity in Family and Community* by Abdullahi A An-Na’im of Emory University.

I recently spoke to Hindu women married to Muslim men to see if things have changed since that study, done over a decade ago. Alas, the assumptions remain unchanged. “Marry anyone but a Muslim or a dalit”, was the warning still being handed out to daughters. Interestingly, the addition of dalits to the category of Muslims, hitherto the only forbidden community

among Hindus, is new. Could it be that 10 years ago, non-dalit Hindu parents were sure that their daughters would never encounter dalits in their social circle?

Even at that time, most Hindu parents used to find to their pleasant surprise that their fears about Muslims were untrue. But now, these prejudices are proving to be even more baseless.

## Conspiracies and Facts

The propagators of the love jihad campaign have made conversion to Islam the cornerstone of their theory. They espouse the view that it is an international Islamic conspiracy to increase the Muslim population. It is true that most non-Muslims, women or men, do convert to Islam when they marry Muslims. That is because the Muslim marriage ceremony or *nikaah*, is not valid unless both parties are “people of the Book”. (Islam considers Christians and Jews as people of the Book. But the Muslim clergy in India allow only Muslim men to marry Jewish and Christian girls without converting them. They forbid Muslim women from marrying Christian and Jewish men arguing that these men will force the Muslim women to convert.)

Like all parents Muslim parents too insist on a religious marriage, and often the non-Muslim partner agrees to it to please the in-laws knowing it entails conversion. Sometimes of course the Muslim spouse-to-be also insists on it.

However, of the seven Hindu women I interviewed recently only three had converted – one on the insistence of her mother-in-law, the second on the insistence of her spouse, and the third of her own volition. In the first two cases, the conversion was a mere formality. Both women retain their maiden names, and do not practise Islam. Yet they continue to be treated with affection by their in-laws.

It is interesting to see how they reacted during the conversion. Rama Shyam who was then a student in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), told the maulvi conducting the *nikaah* that her name should be written down as it was on the *nikaahnama*. Her husband Masood Akhtar supported her. However, the maulvi wrote it as Raima. But she continues to be called

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Rama by her in-laws and by the Muslim neighbourhood where she lives and where she and her husband run Saher, a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

In the second case, it was the husband who wanted his wife to become a Muslim so that they could have a nikaah. "I am from a village, we are a conservative family, and I wanted a nikaah", said Tariq Ahmed (name changed), a professional from Malegaon working in Mumbai. Yet, it is interesting to see what he felt when the conversion actually took place.

His wife Indu (name changed), a working woman, narrated the episode without much emotion: "I knew I would have to convert to be accepted by Tariq's family, as they are traditional Muslims and Malegaon is a Muslim stronghold. It would have been very difficult for them to explain why their daughter-in-law had not converted; it was much easier for me to convert. Tariq's sister took me to a mosque in Mumbai and I got converted."

Tariq's narration however, is quite different.

After the conversion, when she was signing the gazette for recording her change of name, I saw her thumb trembling. I could see she was feeling this would change her life, her identity. As soon as the signing was over I assured her, "The gazette is a formality. You keep your own name, your own identity." I have explained to my father that in her profession she is known by her own name. What is in a name after all.

Tariq admits that he wanted Indu to become a Muslim. However, he has not insisted on her following any Muslim practices.

She has never been a devout Hindu, so how can I tell her to be a devout Muslim? I do not want to be called a fanatic. I do tell her to ask for *duas* (blessings) for us occasionally. Last year she fasted for a day during Ramzan and later made it two days. But she could not cope so I told her to stop. Some families are very strict about these things. But there are more women in my family. You can say it's women-dominated and therefore not very strict! When we visit Malegaon and my sisters-in-law sometimes comment on her not covering her head, I ask them whether they cover theirs all the time, and that shuts them up.

The third woman was a Hanuman *Chaalisa*-reciting Rajput, not allowed to socialise even with girls. Yet, she converted without hesitation.

It's the Indian tradition for the wife to adopt the husband's culture. That is how I was brought up. So I was mentally ready for conversion

says Uma (name changed), a lawyer who studied law after marriage.

Had I married the man my parents had chosen for me, I would have willingly adapted to life in Rajasthan, though I was a Mumbai girl. Had I married a Christian, I would have wanted to convert. In fact, I even wanted to wear the burqa, though no one in my husband's family does so. But he told me: 'No burqa when you come out with me!'

Indeed, the fear that their daughters would have to wear the burqa is one among the many that preys on the minds of Hindu parents. However, the women I interviewed had to dress traditionally and cover their heads when they visited their husband's village – which they would have had to do even if their husbands had been Hindu. Two of the women keep no idols in the house in deference to their husbands' wishes, but the men accompany them to Durga Puja pandals.

### Unfair Categorising

Why did not the rest of the Muslim men insist on conversion? This question annoyed Nadeem Shah, a lecturer in history in Delhi. He said

The media is so immature that it cannot conceive that there could be a substantial number of Muslim men who would give a damn about having a nikaah. That for many young Muslims, religious identity hardly matters when choosing a life partner. I'm from Saharanpur, culturally very rooted, but converting my wife did not even occur to me. And no one in my family would dare talk to me about it. But the media will simply categorise me as 'Muslim', like it does Yadavs or Jats, as if we are just herds of cattle.

Shah comes from one of the old, elite families of Saharanpur and his uncle is the *sajjaad-e-nasheen* (hereditary administrator) of a well-known dargah there. His wife Juanita Kakoti says this uncle received her with as much warmth as the rest of the family. In fact, after some initial talk of a change of name, rejected by Juanita, the marriage was finally conducted in Assamese Hindu style with a *havan* and *phas*, etc, in Guwahati. "Nadeem's parents told me 'we've had three nikaahs in our family. You are the only daughter and we know how parents dream about their daughter's wedding. So they should do it their way'", recounted Juanita. "Not only did they participate in the ceremony but after the wedding was over my father-in-law even called up his relatives in Saharanpur

and announced joyously 'Congratulations! *Shaadi ho gayi.*'" The Hindu ceremony was, for Juanita's family, the perfect end to six years of negotiations with a daughter who showed no signs of changing her mind over marrying not just a Muslim, but a north Indian at that. Interestingly they would have been less upset about an Assamese Muslim son-in-law!

Nadeem was not the only Muslim to willingly have a Hindu wedding ceremony. Asif Iqbal offered to do so to win over his reluctant parents-in-law to be but to no avail. He and wife Ranu Kulshreshtha, both hail from Uttar Pradesh and run Dhanak in Delhi, an organisation that helps inter-faith and intercaste couples marry under the Special Marriage Act (SMA). They had a civil marriage and have retained their original names and religious identities.

### Heroic Tales

Perhaps the story that most convincingly breaks the conversion myth is that of Masood Akhtar (mentioned above and married to Rama Shyam) and his father. Unlike the other Muslim men interviewed here, Akhtar is not highly educated. He is a standard XII dropout from a Muslim ghetto in Jogeshwari east, a Mumbai suburb that has seen repeated riots. He was picked up from his home during the 1992-1993 post-Babri Masjid demolition riots in the city, along with other Muslims. Just 18 years old then, he was charged with rioting and thrown into jail for two months. The police beat all those arrested along with him and taunted them about their religion, he recalls. He was finally acquitted almost 20 years later.

Here was a man who would have been expected to turn into a fanatic and a bitter man. Instead, Akhtar fell in love with a Hindu woman and announced to his family that she would not convert. When she seemed ready to give in to his family's pressure, he told her to stay firm.

Akhtar ascribes this to the way his father brought him up. A Bihari without any formal education he came to Mumbai to make his living. His father rarely offered namaz, warned his children to be wary of *daadhi-topiwalas* (maulanas) and every Diwali, took them to his factory to distribute sweets and crackers to his Hindu workers. His children grew up with Hindu

and Christian friends; one of his sons married a Christian. The father was the only one who supported Akhtar's decision not to have the woman he wanted to marry convert, declaring that even if no one else did, he would attend the court wedding. When his wife (Akhtar's mother) wanted her daughter-in-law to wear a burqa, he pointed out that she did not wear one herself. He also supported Rama's desire to continue her studies and work after marriage.

But despite his father's support, it took Akhtar eight years to marry Rama. Her parents were not ready, and he would not marry her without their approval. "I could understand their concerns. Given the image of Muslims, they would naturally be worried about their daughter's security", he says. The same circumspection was displayed by another Muslim who, like Akhtar, lives in a Muslim ghetto. When his Hindu girlfriend's family refused permission, saying they had already committed their daughter to someone else, he broke the relationship despite the girl's protests, advising her to obey her parents. He married her only after she ran away from home and told him to shelter her in his house. The parents brought the police to his house but they refused to interfere after realising that the bride was an adult. To persuade his in-laws, this young Muslim suggested they host a marriage reception for their daughter to which he would invite only his non-Muslim friends, not even his family. Even that did not work, and for seven years they refused to communicate with their daughter. Finally, it was their son who forced them to invite her for his marriage. They invited her, but not her husband. She refused to go.

The myth of Big Brother who swears to "protect" his sister's "honour" by preventing her from "going astray" was also blown apart in this survey. In most of these cases, it was the brothers and brothers-in-law who intervened on their sisters' behalf to convince the reluctant parents.

Krishna Dhamankar was one such Big Brother. When his younger sister insisted on continuing her relationship with her Muslim neighbour Krishna beat him and got the police to throw him into the lock-up. This was 30 years ago. Today, Krishna describes his brother-in-law as

God's good man. Though I beat him so badly at that time, he never raised a hand on me. He sends his sons to help me with my Ganapati preparations, and it's he who carries the idol for immersion. He consults me on everything – from buying a new house to choosing husbands for his daughters. At their wedding, he makes me sit near the *kazi*. And he treats my sister like a queen – even helping her wash dishes.

So does he see nothing wrong in Hindu girls marrying Muslims? "If the boys are like my brother-in-law, there is nothing wrong."

If the love jihad propaganda insults Muslim men, it demeans Hindu women, assuming that they get easily seduced. But none of the women interviewed had taken the plunge impulsively; instead, they had waited years for their parents to agree, trying all the while to convince them. Indeed, what emerges from these cases is the stubborn refusal of Hindu parents, whether in cosmopolitan Mumbai or small-town Durgapur, to see beyond the religious identity of the men chosen by their daughters. As Uma told her parents "You live in a modern city but your minds are closed. You educated me, but you don't want me to think for myself."

Indu's parents simply refused to take her seriously whenever she broached the topic of marrying Tariq, even when she announced the date, after having waited for them to say yes for nine-and-a-half years. They did not attend the wedding, and came to meet her only when she was in hospital during her pregnancy. The way Tariq tended to her in hospital won them over.

### Unmatched Hypocrisy

How deep the prejudices against Muslims are was best illustrated in Rama Shyam's case. While her college dropout husband Akhtar and his uneducated father living in a lower-middle-class Muslim ghetto were liberal enough to accept her as a Hindu, her own wealthy, educated, progressive parents, took eight years to accept her decision. They had brought up their daughters as uncompromising feminists and her mother had even retained her maiden name. Her father had made her learn the poetry of Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, and study Urdu under a maulvi so that she could appreciate Urdu poetry. The family had Kashmiri Muslim tenants, and her mother's tailor would break his Ramzan fast in their house in Durgapur

with her mother preparing his *iftaari*. Yet, when the Babri Masjid was demolished, Rama heard them tell their friends "Now Muslims will learn a lesson."

When Rama announced her decision to marry Akhtar, and stuck to it, her mother attempted suicide. Her parents refused to meet Akhtar. It was only the intervention by Rama's sister and brother-in-law, and the fact that she was planning to continue with her PhD after marriage, instead of being confined to her home as they had imagined that brought them around. However, even four years after her marriage, they have never invited their son-in-law home

These women do not fit the image of the love-struck, helpless with desire, giddy-headed girl who elopes with her irresistible Muslim lover, as portrayed by the love jihad campaigners. Most of them took years to convince their parents, a process far from pleasant. As Rama put it, "I would never wish anyone to go through the trauma I had to." But despite the odds, these women did not waver in their decision. Indeed, having married Muslims, they have come face to face with the prejudice Muslims face in society. Finding a house has been difficult for most. Rama, who lives with her husband in the same ghetto where they met when she was a student (she had been assigned to work among the Muslims there), has seen the way Muslim ghettos are neglected by the state. The couple live there though they can afford to move out, only because as Rama says, "we do not want to break my mother-in-law's heart." Uma was newly married and living in the heart of a Muslim area when the 1992-93 Mumbai riots took place. The partisan conduct of the police shocked her. "I'm from a services family. The armed forces risk their lives to protect all Indians. How could the police protect only Hindus?", she asks.

The men on their part, far from seducing these Hindu women and instantly converting them, as love jihadis are supposed to, have given the women the time and space they needed, both before and after marriage. They too have braved the taunts of officials. "Are you kidnapping her?" Danish (name changed) was asked by the district commissioner of Chandigarh when he went to give notice of his wedding to Chitra (name changed) accompanied by

Chitra's parents! The district commissioner refused to accept the notice on a technicality. When Ranu and Asif went to the Noida registrar's office, he praised them for their bold step but turned them away, saying he did not want any trouble in his area.

Dhanak's experience confirms that no interfaith couple wants to go against the wishes of their parents. "They need the blessings and support of their elders and often take the time needed", says Asif Iqbal. "Even if they are fortunate enough to solemnise their marriage under the Special Marriage Act, they have a religious marriage in addition, to remain associated with their elders. Often, they convert because that is the quickest and easiest way out. The state does not make it easy to register marriages; the procedures should be simplified."

### Media's Role

The other assumption of the love jihad campaign is that only Hindu women marry Muslim men. Though that is more common because Hindu girls have more freedom

than Muslim girls, the latter too are asserting themselves, says Ranu, and choosing their own partners. In fact, according to Dhanak's data based on the number of cases dealt with during the past 10 years, 37% Muslim and Christian females are marrying out of their faith in comparison with 49% Hindu females doing so. Of these 37% females, 32% are Muslim.

Dhanak's experience shows that Muslim women face the same opposition from their families as Hindu ones. In fact, Asif himself has received calls from Muslims asking him to stop Dhanak's activities as they "promote sin" by encouraging civil marriages, where neither side converts. Rama has seen Muslim women who have married Hindus having to change their names and give up namaz, in short, de-Islamise themselves. Is that not "love jihad", she asks.

Says Ranu, "Inter-faith marriages should be celebrated. The media should not make them into tales of misery." Among all these cases, one stands out for the lack of opposition from both

sides: the story of two Delhi academics. Chitra spent a year wondering how to tell her parents she wanted to marry Danish. When she did they astonished her by saying they had suspected it from the start and were wondering when she would break the news! There was no question of conversion; the couple had a civil marriage. Danish's parents had had an interfaith marriage, his mother was a Sikh who had retained her maiden name. Having faced tremendous opposition from her family during her marriage, she was determined to protect her daughter-in-law from similar treatment. Chitra's parents are proud of the way she has adjusted to a different culture. Danish ascribes it all to the class factor, the fact that he is a Doon school and St Stephen's product, that he did not fit the image of a "typical" Muslim. Most of these couples are bringing up their children to be familiar with both religions. Perhaps this new generation that will be simultaneously Hindu and Muslim will lay to rest forever the myth of "love jihad".