

# Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions

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The fake claim by the Hindu right that there is a “Love Jihad” organisation which is forcing Hindu women to convert to Islam through false expressions of love is similar to a campaign in the 1920s in north India against alleged “abductions”. Whether 1920 or 2009, Hindu patriarchal notions appear deeply entrenched in such campaigns: images of passive victimised Hindu women at the hands of inscrutable Muslims abound, and any possibility of women exercising their legitimate right to love and their right to choice is ignored.

Inter-religious love and marriages are a tricky terrain. They challenge various norms and customs and arouse passions of religious fundamentalists. The “threat” of such intimacies has often resulted in “constructed” campaigns, expressing the anxieties and fears of conservative forces. In India, the Hindu right particularly has been a master at creating panics around expressions of love, be it the Valentine Day, homosexual love or inter-caste and inter-religious romance, posing them as one of the biggest threats to cohesive community identities and boundaries.

The latest in such constructs by the Hindu right is the alleged “Love Jihad” or “Romeo Jihad” organisation, supposed to have been launched by Muslim fundamentalists and youthful Muslim men to convert Hindu and Christian women to Islam through trickery and expressions of false love. In Kerala, Karnataka and Delhi, organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Sri Ram Sene, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and Hindu Janjagruthi Samiti have been holding meetings, distributing pamphlets and even filing court cases, declaring that the organisation, as part of an Islamist conspiracy, has devised plans for compulsive and deceitful religious conversions by winning over young women.

They even profess that Muslim youth are receiving funds from abroad for purchasing designer clothes, vehicles, mobile phones and expensive gifts to woo Hindu women and lure them away. The ramifications of such a campaign for fostering hate, for its anti-women overtones and for creating panic, abound. The protests against such a vicious campaign have been many. Various human rights groups, student organisations and secular bodies have voiced their concerns over this hate campaign of Hindu organisations.

At the same time, as a historian, one is struck by the uncanny resemblance of the

issue and its language to similar “abduction” and conversion campaigns launched by Arya Samaj and other Hindu revivalist bodies in the 1920s in north India, to draw sharper lines between Hindus and Muslims. Seen through the prism of a historical perspective, the dichotomy and falseness of the allegations of the Hindu right appear more starkly. It also points to how certain troupes have been deployed repeatedly in different circumstances by Hindu groups, where the body of the Hindu woman has become a site for both claims to community homogeneity and honour, as well as for cracks within its articulation.

## 1920s Events

In the 1920s, militant Hindu assertion reached new heights, especially in the context of *shuddhi* (purification movement to reclaim those who had converted from Hinduism to other religions) and *sangathan* (organisation in defence of Hindu interests) movements launched by the Arya Samaj. There were unprecedented communal clashes in Uttar Pradesh. What is significant in the present context is that in this period the Hindu woman’s body became a marker to sharpen communal boundaries in ways more aggressive than before. The period witnessed a flurry of orchestrated propaganda campaigns and popular inflammatory and demagogic appeals by a section of Hindu publicists and Arya Samaj against abductions and conversions of Hindu women by Muslim goondas, ranging from allegations of rape, abduction and elopement, to luring, conversion, love and forced marriages. Drawing on diverse sources like newspapers, pamphlets, meetings, handbills, posters, novels, myths, rumours and gossip, the campaign was able to operate in a public domain, and monopolise the field of everyday representation. Abductions and conversions of Hindu women by Muslims became one of the main determinants of Hindu identity and consciousness in the period, providing Hindu publicists with a common reference point. The abducted and converted Hindu woman was metamorphosed into a symbol of both sacredness and humiliation, and hence of the victimisation of the whole Hindu community.

Tracts appeared, written exclusively around the Hindu female victim and the

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Muslim male abductor. They had extremely provocative titles. One was called *Hindu Auraton ki Loot*, which denounced Muslim propaganda for proselytising female preys. Yet another was named *Hindu Striyon ki Loot ke Karan*, which was an Arya Samajist tract, showing how to save “our” ladies from becoming Muslim. The converted woman was a potential site of outrage of family order and religious sentiment, strengthening the drive for Hindu mobilisation. Allegations of abductions caused a number of localised affrays, and even occasional riot, for example in Kanpur in June 1924 and in Mathura in March 1928, where it was reported that a Muslim man had eloped with a Hindu woman.

### Striking Similarities, False Claims

In the unfolding of the tales in the 1920s and in 2009, there are certain common strains. I will highlight just a few. In both campaigns, one of the arguments given by Hindu groups has been that the conversions of Hindu women are linked with enhancing Muslim numbers. A tract published in 1924 from Kanpur and titled *Humara Bhishan Haas* dwelt on the catastrophic decline of Hindus due to increasing conversions of Hindu women to Islam. It claimed that a number of Aryan women were entering the homes of *yavanas* and *mlecchas* (terms used for Muslims in such writings), reading *nikah* with them, producing *gaubhakshak* (cow-killers) children, and increasing Muslim numbers. A poem written in 1928 and later banned, called *Chand Musalmanon ki Harkaten*, stated: *Tadad badhane ke liye chal chalai, Muslim banane ke liye scheme banayi... Ek-kon ko gali gaon mein lekar ghumate hain, parde ko dal Muslim aurat bethate hain* (Muslims are making new schemes to increase their population and to make people Muslims. They roam with carts in cities and villages and take away women, who are put under the veil and made Muslim). Pro-Hindu organisations in 2009 too, have claimed that forced conversions of Hindu women in the name of love are part of an international conspiracy to increase Muslim population. The issues at stake here are not only to construct a picture of numerical increase in Muslims but also to lament the supposed decline in Hindu numbers and to mourn the potential loss of child-bearing

Hindu wombs, and thus exercise greater control over women’s reproductive capacities to enhance Hindu numbers.

Both the campaigns construct an image of the Muslim male as aggressive, and broadcast a series of stereotypes and repetitive motifs, creating a common “enemy” – the Other. The luring of Hindu women by Muslim men is stated to demonstrate the “lack of character” of the sexually charged, lustful Muslim men, violating the pure body of Hindu women. In the 1920s, many Hindus came to perceive abductions and conversions of Hindu women as a characteristic Muslim activity. Such constructs had deeper historical roots. Even noted Hindi writers like Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85), Pratap Narain Misra (1856-94) and Radha Charan Goswami (1859-1923) often portrayed medieval Muslim rule as a chronicle of rape and abduction of Hindu women. The first generation of popular novelists in Hindi – Devakinandan Khatri, Kishorilal Goswami and Gangaprasad Gupta – who started writing in the 1890s, depicted similar prejudices. Lecherous behaviour, high sexual appetites, a life of luxury, and religious fanaticism were seen as the dominant traits of Muslim characters. These stereotypes of licentious Muslims were strengthened, with new contours added in the 1920s. It was claimed that now ordinary and all Muslims were indulging in such practices. In 1924 there was a case in which Raza Ali, the deputy collector of Kanpur, was accused of abducting, seducing and concerting a Hindu girl. The vernacular Hindi press launched a virulent campaign against him, using the case to argue that abduction activities were not just confined to low caste or loutish Muslims, but covered all of them. Meetings were held against Raza Ali. In 2009 too, Shahan Sha of Kerala was charged for forcibly abducting and converting Methula, a Hindu girl, and similar charges were made against him.

Whether it is 1920 or 2009, Hindu patriarchal notions appear to be deeply entrenched. In both campaigns, images of passive victimised Hindu women at the hands of inscrutable Muslims abound, and any possibility of women exercising their legitimate right to love and right to choice is ignored. In Meerut during June 1924, handbills, meetings and rumours dealing with the alleged kidnapping and conversion of

Hindu women were being circulated. The present campaign too, while focusing its anger on the Muslims, receives its emotional bonding from the victim. It is impossible for Hindu groups to conceive that Hindu women can voluntarily elope or convert. Thus every romance, love, elopement and marriage between a Hindu woman and a Muslim man is rewritten by Hindu organisations as forcible conversion. It is also assumed that the mere act of marrying and staying with a Muslim ensures that the woman is leading a dreadful life and her unhappiness is ensured. Behind it are also grave anxieties of Hindu women adapting to Muslim ways. Hindu organisations are deeply troubled with fantasies about possible relations between Hindu women and Muslim men. Portrayal of Hindu women as victims of false love shows the need felt not so much to protect them but to discipline and control them by restricting their movement, as various public places are declared unsafe for them.

### Reinforcing Patriarchy

The invocation of fear of elopement and conversion of Hindu women and related concerns with Hindu female purity allow Hindu male virility and prowess to reassert itself in a public-political domain in more forceful ways. The converted Hindu woman is a potential site of outrage of family order and religious sentiment, strengthening the drive for patriarchal assertions and restoration of family and community honour. In the 1920s, a whole series of meetings were organised, which addressed themselves exclusively to Hindu males. In 1925 the Hindu Sabha organised volunteer corps of Hindu men in Banaras to prevent Hindu women from eloping with Muslim men. They were particularly active at railway stations. In Allahabad and Jaunpur, various notices and appeals were addressed to Hindu men, asking them to keep a watch on their women and prevent their interaction with Muslim men. And in 2009 too, the Hindu woman is regarded as an exclusive preserve of the Hindu man, and safeguarding her virtue is identified as his exclusive prerogative. One of the arguments grounded by the Hindu communal organisations is that to protect “our” women, any steps are justified. What is involved here is a self-image of a community at war.

Often there are not just particular cases; there is a ready move from the particular to the general and the abstract. Reckless and venomous generalisations are made, with gossip and rumours adding spice. In the 1920s, such generalisations were made, and almost every day the Hindu publicists published statements, without concrete proof, of abductions and conversions of Hindu women. The newspaper *Pratap* of 28 May 1923 called the attention of the Hindus of Fyzabad to the seduction of Hindu women, generally by Muhammadans of the district. And again, a pamphlet released by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad during the present campaign, and distributed in Jawaharlal Nehru University, claims that 4,000 girls have been converted till now. Another pamphlet distributed by the Hindu Janjagruthi Samiti in Karnataka claims the number to be 30,000 within a year, without any proof. The fact that such generalisations about Hindu women's conversions due to "false" love and marriages can now be made openly often legitimises their public expression and increases the threshold of public acceptance for them; this also makes them "true". Propagating such stories through pamphlets, meetings, rumours and everyday conversations fed by them, sustains this as an active cultural, and therefore political, issue.

The concrete examples and stories also given in both cases have often been imagined, and there is sometimes immediate evidence to prove the depth of fallacy and fantasy involved. Thus, for example, on 13 April 1927, Hindus spread a rumour in Muzaffarnagar that a Hindu girl had been forcibly converted to Islam and was being married to a Muhammadan. They proceeded in crowds to inspect the alleged pervert and found that the girl had always been a Muslim. In Kanpur in 1939, in a statement given to the police, a Hindu youth accused Muslim volunteers of kidnapping Hindu women. This led to a search of the Muslim League office to find the kidnapped women, which yielded no trace of them. And in June 2009, when Anitha of Bantwal taluk in Karnataka went missing, several Sangh parivar organisations claimed that she was forcibly converted to Islam by a Pakistan-backed professional "jihadist lover". On 4 October protest meetings were held on the same. However, on 21 October 2009, a serial killer

Mohan Kumar was arrested, who confessed that he had poisoned Anitha to death.

### Many Culprits

It is ironical that the State and even the judiciary seem to have often been complicit and colluded with Hindu communalists in attempting to delegitimise such love. In the 1920s, not only did local newspapers start giving more and more space to alleged stories of abductions of Hindu women, lawyers and courts too provided additional space in which abduction and conversion spectacles could be produced. In present times too, the campaign of Hindu organisations against "love jihad" has some takers among the judiciary. Thus, the Karnataka High Court in a recent order asked a 23-year old woman who had converted to Islam to marry a Muslim man from Kerala, to return to her parents' home until the case was investigated. The court stated that the case had "national ramifications concerning security, besides the question of unlawful trafficking of women". Questions of national security are thus being mixed up with a simple case of a girl exercising a choice guaranteed to her under the law of the land. The State and judiciary thus seem to be aiding in building a range of stereotypes which, to an extent provide the basic grammar of conversions of Hindu women. They have taken on a Hindu patriarchal role for themselves, which is indifferent and even intolerant to choices made by a woman.

It appears that communication, more than direct experience, has created such ideologies of abductions and conversions. Representation, performance and events have fed into each other. Hate speech is always repeatable speech, drawing its strength from stereotypes and rhetoric. Here too, conversions of Hindu women are represented as a general phenomenon. Different events are made to appear to follow a similar pattern – a narrative of luring by Muslim male in the name of love and Hindu female victimhood. In repetition lies its strength, and one of the primary sources of communal power: its ability perpetually to renew itself through reiteration, and its authority as supposed truth and "common sense".

### A Far More Complex Reality

Though there are crucial continuities between the two campaigns, there are also

significant new dimensions to the love jihad campaign. In the wake of terrorist fear, threat of Muslim fundamentalism and increasing images of a violent and virulent Muslim, additional anxieties have been created of a foreign hand in the conversions, and the Muslim youth receiving funds from abroad to lure Hindu women. It appears that when confronted with the phenomenon of conversion from Hinduism to Islam, especially by Hindu women, certain kind of Hindus lose their logical faculties. The politics of cultural virginity is inevitably shadowed by a myth of innocence, combined with a ranting of violation, invasion, seduction and rape.

It causes grave fear about breaking down of community boundaries. Such couples question the authority of family and religious communities in determining their life. In spite of this hate campaign, actual incidents of conversions due to romance and love together weave a narrative thread, which illuminates certain ruptures in the Hindu logic. They are expressions of transgressive love. These cases belie the ideal of the Hindu family and draw attention to the woman's sexuality, needs and desires. The women here are perhaps "using" the instruments of conversion and elopement as a mode of coping with, challenging and, within limits, transgressing an oppressive social order. They are claiming a limited arena of independent action. Such alliances and conversions suggest that sometimes identities are recast to disrupt the logic of communal boundaries. The actions of these women provide moments of vulnerability in the dominant discourse and upset the relentless communal polarisation.

More important, elopements and conversions hint at love and romance. Particularly in a communally charged atmosphere, when maligning of the Muslim male has acquired increasing importance, inter-religious marriages, elopements and conversions due to love or material and emotional needs posit a different world. They highlight the messy complexities of reality and the inchoate ways of life, suggesting a different order of rationality against efforts to categorise, classify and project a homogenised community identity. Women, who were often perceived as victims by the Hindu communalists, may actually be actors and subjects in their own right by choosing elopements and conversions.