

## Article

# Coming Home (*Ghar Wapsi*) and Going Away: Politics and the Mass Conversion Controversy in India

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**Abstract:** This article addresses two recent socio-religious trends in India: mass conversions to Hinduism (*Ghar Wapsi*) and mass conversions from Hinduism. Despite officially being a secular nation, organizations allied with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are actively promoting mass conversions to Hinduism. Other religions organize mass conversions, usually of Dalits, away from Hinduism and its legacy of caste discrimination. While several states have controversial laws placing restrictions on mass conversions from Hinduism, mass conversions to Hinduism are often seen as being promoted rather than restricted.

**Keywords:** Hindutva; religious conversion; ghar wapsi; mass conversion; India; Dalit

## 1. The Hindutva Ideology Underlying the Ghar Wapsi Movement

*Ghar Wapsi*<sup>1</sup> is a Hindi term, usually translating as “homecoming” or “coming home”, which seeks to describe the arguably coerced mass conversions arranged by Hindu nationalist organizations of Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, or other Indians to Hinduism. The Hindutva point of view is that all Indians were originally, at least ancestrally, Hindu and hence such conversions are merely “coming home”, returning to their ancestral traditions. Locating these religious conversions in the context of India’s peculiar brand of secularism and diverse religious ideologies, this trend becomes increasingly important to the changing understanding of the citizen-body, both as a social as well as a legal entity. In light of the change in political power at the capital starting in 2014, these debates became particularly relevant.

Fundamental to the *Ghar Wapsi* trend is the definitional question of who is a Hindu and its evolution across the colonial and post-independence eras. At the core of this definitional debate stands the concept of Hindutva, a right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology that makes a strong connection between being Indian and being Hindu. To understand the Hindutva ideology’s true definition of the Hindu, one must read V. D. Savarkar, who coined the term *Hindutva*. He famously raised a call to “Hinduise all politics and militaize (sic) all Hindudom”, (Savarkar 1967) seeing aggression and violence as a justified means of protecting the Hindu-Indian nation (Rashtra). For Savarkar, there were three criteria to be Hindu—paternal descent, common blood (racial bond or *jati*), and common civilization (*sanskriti*)<sup>2</sup> (Katju 2011). While post-colonial, post-Independence India may seem to be at

<sup>1</sup> Though multiple spellings have been put forth in the transliteration of the Hindi term, this paper will use “*Ghar Wapsi*” unless quoting directly from sources that adopt alternate spellings.

<sup>2</sup> According to Savarkar, Hindutva “is not a word but a history. Not only the spiritual or religious history of our people as at times it is mistaken to be ... but a history in full. Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva”. By his

odds with this definition given its basis in a seemingly secular law, this article looks to argue that the apparent contradiction between legal and religious discourse in the Indian state is in fact a convenient but false opposition.

Understanding the construction of the Hindu identity in India requires a foundation in the history of the Hindutva as an ideology in itself. The Hindutva, or the Hindu nationalist, movement is pledged to the attainment of the Hindu Rashtra<sup>3</sup>, or a nation “of the Hindus for the Hindus”. Perhaps what is more important for present discourse is, however, the re-emergence and revival of this school of thought with the Arya Samaj movement in the late nineteenth century, seemingly in response to British colonialism and western supremacy.

J. Zavos, a researcher on the relationship between religion, identity, and politics in South Asia, explains the birth and growth of the Arya Samaj movement. He argues that the tenets of the Arya Samaj (of a unitary God, the Vedas as the ultimate truth, and the Vedic Age as the Golden Age) “maintained its presence within the broad framework of established Hinduism ... (retaining) its potential viability as an alternative framework” (Zavos 1999). Thus, this “alternative framework” posited itself against the work of proselytizing Christian missionaries, professing a strong association with the pursuit of dharma. By this measure, everyone could be “returned” to their “real” Hindu religion. The Arya Samaj movement proved to be the cornerstone of what later evolved into the political nationalist campaign.

Following the birth of the Samaj movement and the Sangh Parivar<sup>4</sup> (commonly shortened to “the Sangh” or “the Parivar”) in the early 1920s, the Hindu nationalists began contributing to the independence movement, understanding freedom in terms of Hindu nationhood (the Rashtra). Thus, the victory of 1947 was merely political gain, not an ideological win and true freedom would involve religious independence and access to political power (Katju 2011). In this spirit, the nationalist struggle for freedom extended beyond gaining political independence. It is at this crucial juncture in Indian history that the roots of what can be understood as the Hindutva’s primary definitional strategy emerge. With the Samaj primarily adopting the Orientalist conception of India as a land of spiritual superiority, civilizational glory, and other such self-aggrandizing claims, a deep-seated contrast against the Muslim Other was posited as the fundamental differentiator of the Hindu. Thus, the Hindu nationalist movement grew because of what T.B. Hansen, a leading commentator on religious and political violence in India, characterizes as a “highly successful strategy of cultural mobilization of Hindus against alleged threat of Muslim conversion” (Blom Hansen 1996).

This characterization, coupled with the political atmosphere of anger and disappointment following the Emergency between 1975 and 1977 during Indira Gandhi’s term as Prime Minister, catalyzed the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a political force to reckon with in the early 1980s. This rise of the BJP thus, according to some scholars, “does not constitute a threat to parliamentary democracy ... The rise of the BJP is best construed as a response to social, economic, and political fragmentation in India, which itself is a reflection of the numerous fissures that already exist in the Indian morass” (Datta 1999).

Though A. Basu, an expert in South Asian politics, wrote in 1996 that “many observers assumed that the BJP’s influence would be short-lived, for Hindu nationalism violated the principles of centrism, socialism, and secularism that had governed Indian political life since independence”, (Basu 1996) the growth trajectory in the last few decades has spoken otherwise. It is evident, thus, that the birth

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definition, a Hindu is “a person who regards this land of Bharatvarsha, from the Indus to the seas as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland, that is the cradle land of his religion” (Pandey 1991). Thus, by definition, Hindus cannot be anti-nationalist or even “un-nationalist”.

<sup>3</sup> Translating to Hindu ‘country’ or ‘polity’, the Hindu Rashtra is a term used to refer to the formulation of state as imagined by Hindu nationalist forces. It is rooted in Savarkar’s ideology that “not territorial unity, but the religious, racial, and cultural unity counted more in the formation of the national unit” and that “the Hindus were the bedrock on which the Indian independent state could be built” (ShodhGanga n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> The Sangh Parivar is a term used to refer to the group of Hindu nationalist organizations started by or inspired by the RSS. As explained by Jaffrelot, “taken together, these ... are presented by the mother organization as forming the ‘Sangh Parivar’, or the ‘family of the Sangh’, that is, of the RSS” (Jaffrelot 2007).

of Hindu nationalism, the rise of the BJP and the spate of conversion campaigns are all in pursuit of the singular goal—the establishment of the Hindu Rashtra. This brings into focus the fundamental definitional question posed earlier—who is a Hindu? This construction was (and continues to be) based largely in opposition to the Muslim; what T.B. Hansen calls the “operational Other”, posited as the reason that India has been unable to develop fully and occupy its rightful place in the world economy (Blom Hansen 1996). Thus, S. Muralidharan, a journalist-turned-political science researcher, argues that “Hindutva is 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” (Muralidharan 1994). We will return to this theme in further detail shortly.

The second operative (and related) strategy in the construction of the Hindu by nationalist ideologues is, in the words of S. Clarke, a professor of culture and theology, “the enterprise of representing themselves (the East) within the already established representational discourse of the West” (Clarke 2002). This is evidence of one of the Hindutva’s main approaches, the claim that “in order to be respected as different, we must imitate the Western—or Islamic—model of strength” (Blom Hansen 1996). Thus, the Sangh locates itself firmly within the language of the opponent, appropriating the argument into a position of strength.

It is this appropriation, the “invention of tradition”, that C. Jaffrelot, a leading authority in South Asian politics, refers to famously as “strategic syncretism”. According to him, “the content of this ideology has been supplied to a large extent by material taken from the cultural values of groups who were seen as antagonistic towards the Hindu community. This “syncretism” is “strategic” because it underlies an ideology that aims to dominate the others, in terms of prestige as well as on a concrete socio-political plane” (Jaffrelot 1993). Thus, the nationalist movement was both provoked by and inspired by the Other, usually depicted as the Muslim, but with the occasional Christian juxtaposition. At the core of this identity construction thus lies a two-fold argument. Firstly, we are not Muslim. Secondly, we are Western and Hindu simultaneously.

In keeping with the argument that Hinduism has adopted the strategies of the “enemy” to become more accessible and acceptable, it is argued that “Hinduism has made an attempt to define itself as a faith that can attract converts. Internet sites describing Hinduism today speak the language of mission and talk of creating a global community. In such sites, Hinduism is depicted along the lines of Christianity and Islam ... Hinduism is defined as having canonical rituals, with precepts and obligations like Islam, with sacraments (sic) like Christianity and with a conversion strategy that models itself on both” (Robinson and Clarke 2003).

Thus, the ability to adopt or the choice to convert to Hinduism was enabled by “the process of the construction of “Hinduism” as a distinct religion ... belief in the Vedas, it insisted, was the central pillar of this new Hinduism” (Sikand 2003). This Hinduization was most evident in the process of conversion of non-Hindu groups into the Hindu caste order, the trend that serves as the precursor to the *Ghar Wapsi* phenomenon.

## 2. Mass Conversions to Hinduism: The Ghar Wapsi Movement

With the BJP taking over control following the 2014 general elections, it has been commonly accepted that the Hindutva ideology now not only wields socio-religious control but also access to political power as well. Though no copy of the Sangh constitution seems easily available, sources confirm that Article 4 of the document reiterates the organization’s identity as a cultural unit. Unofficial online sources that have sought to compile their constitution cite Article 4 (b) as reading:

In consonance with the cultural heritage of the Hindu Samraj, the Sangh has abiding faith in the fundamental principle of tolerance towards all faiths. *The Sangh as such, has no politics and is devoted to purely cultural work. The individual Swayamsevaks, however, may join any political party, except such parties as believe in or resort to violent and secret methods to achieve their ends; persons owing allegiance to such parties or believing in such methods shall have no place in the Sangh.* (Curran 1950; Sabhlok 2015) (italics added)

Given the ability of individuals to straddle the lines between the two organizations of the RSS<sup>5</sup> and BJP, it is then evident that locating the current juncture of Indian politics is imperative for understanding recent socio-religious activity such as *Ghar Wapsi*.

Notwithstanding the impressive 8.2% growth rate during the first quarter of 2018–2019 and foreign exchange reserves touching a record high of USD 399.21 billion in April 2018 (ET Online 2018) (PTI 2019b), the new government has run into difficulties on socio-political fronts. Being perceived as the political front of the right-wing RSS, the BJP is often seen as unfriendly to minority communities and as chasing a blatantly pro-Hindu position. The *Ghar Wapsi* trend proves to be a clear instance of this claim, acting out Jaffrelot's theories of both "invention of tradition" and "strategic syncretism".

*Ghar Wapsi* has been variously translated as homecoming, conversion, reconversion, and return. It has its roots in the Arya Samaj and Sangh movements. In the words of Sumit Sarkar, "a whole battery of terms was developed from the late 19th century onwards as expansion directed towards marginal groups and tribals became more organized: "reclamation", "shuddhi" ("purification"), "paravartan" ("turning back", the term preferred by the Vishva Hindu Parishad<sup>6</sup> today). Common to all these labels is an insistence that all that is being attempted is to bring people back to their "natural" state (Sarkar 1999). While the concepts of *shuddhi* and *Ghar Wapsi* are often spoken of as interrelated, their present-day manifestations cannot be conflated. Yet, it is worth noting that both share common roots in the work of Savarkar, Dayanand Saraswati, and other Arya Samajis.

Adding to the Muslim Other and the belief in a "natural" state, another important contribution to the mass conversions and the increased popularity of the *shuddhi* movement was the British Raj itself, with voting rights and other political benefits being distributed on the basis of numerical proportions. Thus, it became increasingly important to artificially construct a Hindu majority by including the fringe populations in order to protect the interests of the upper caste Hindu minority in power (Sikand and Katju 1994). This line of reasoning is further supported by Hobsbawm's "threshold principle", arguing that for a community to attain viable nationhood, it must attain a minimum size (Muralidharan 1994). Other factors, according to some academicians, include the rise of Sikh militancy and Pakistan's declaration as a Muslim state, relegating Hindus to a position of second-class citizens in Pakistan (Malik and Vaypayi 1989). Understanding the current spike in *Ghar Wapsi* conversions is therefore inherently dependent on the lens of Hindu nationalism and its birth and growth in the socio-political history of the country.

As clearly portrayed in a majority of academic scholarships on the subject as well as mainstream public Hindutva discourse, the Hindu is defined as the non-Muslim. In the words of A. Varshney, a political scientist affiliated with Brown University specializing in South Asian ethnic and religious conflict, the fundamental goal of the Rashtra is that of Hinduization, creating a nation from emotional loyalty as opposed to political institutions and rule of law.

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

<sup>5</sup> The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is a right-wing Hindu nationalist volunteer organization that is seen as the parent organization for many other right-wing organizations including the ruling BJP. The vision and mission section of the official website of the RSS opens with a quote from the organization's founder that "... if Hindustan is to be protected, we should first nourish the Hindu culture" (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh 2012).

<sup>6</sup> "In 1964, in association with Hindu clerics, the RSS set up the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP—World Council of Hindus), a movement responsible for grouping the heads of various Hindu sects in order to lend this hitherto unorganized religion a sort of centralized structure" (Jaffrelot 2007).

religious personal laws, nor demand special state grants for their educational institutions. They must assimilate, not maintain their distinctiveness. (Varshney 1993)

Speaking of the indigenous Muslim population in India, Bhaskarteerth, the deputy to the Shankaracharya of the Sharada Peeth, is known to have said that barring a “few hundred thousand” Muslims whose ancestors had come to the country from “Afghanistan and Baluchistan”, the Muslims of India were descendants of Hindu converts and that, therefore, they should all be made Hindu once again (Sikand 2003). This notion of the Hindu identity being “true” and “real” (and simultaneously, the Muslim being the “enemy” to be overcome) is integral to the motivation behind reconversion campaigns.

The call to assimilate and “de-Muslim-ize” is echoed by politicians regularly as well. Following the 2011 bomb blasts in Mumbai, Subramanian Swamy, an Indian politician and economist affiliated with the BJP, published an editorial<sup>7</sup> in which he suggested that “fanatic Muslims consider Hindu-dominated India “an unfinished chapter of Islamic conquests” and thus, “Islamic terrorism is India’s number one problem of national security”. (Swamy 2011) He went on to write that:

We need a collective mindset as Hindus to stand against the Islamic terrorist. The Muslims of India can join us if they genuinely feel for the Hindu. That they do I will not believe unless they acknowledge with pride that though they may be Muslims, their ancestors were Hindus. If any Muslim acknowledges his or her Hindu legacy, then we Hindus can accept him or her as a part of the Brihad Hindu Samaj (greater Hindu society) which is Hindustan. India that is Bharat that is Hindustan is a nation of Hindus and others whose ancestors were Hindus. (Swamy 2011)

The article then set out strategies aimed at negating the goals of this “Islamic terrorism”. Amongst these goals were propagating the development of a Hindu mindset and the desire to convert India into *Darul Islam* or the “House of Islam”.

### **Goal 3: Turn India into Darul Islam.**

Strategy [to overcome this goal]: Implement the uniform civil code, make learning of Sanskrit and singing of Vande Mataram mandatory, and declare India a Hindu Rashtra in which non-Hindus can vote only if they proudly acknowledge that their ancestors were Hindus. Rename India Hindustan as a nation of Hindus and those whose ancestors were Hindus. (Swamy 2011)

This point of view is not isolated and Swamy has received much support from other right wing organizations. VHP General Secretary Surendra Jain publicly agreed with Swamy’s statement that “God does not live in mosques but in temples”, saying that “this is a truth that even Muslims agree to. Ask any Muslim if Allah lives in mosque and he will reply in the negative” (DNA Web Team 2015).

**Varanasi 2015, an Example of Ghar Wapsi:** To understand the context and depth of the *Ghar Wapsi* trend in the Indian socio-political context today, it is perhaps useful to analyze an example of this and its portrayal in popular media. A popular news source, *Z News*, reported in October 2015 that 300 people were converted to Hinduism in Ausanpur village, sixteen kilometers from Varanasi, a city considered holy by parts of the Hindu community (Zee News 2015). The report, quoting *The Times of India* as a source, says the Dharma Jagran Samanvya Samiti claimed the individuals used to frequent a church that had been built in the area a few years ago. Following the conversion which included a *shuddhikaran* or cleansing, the newly returned Hindus were presented with a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, often described as the closest thing to a canonical Hindu text, and the *Hanuman Chalisa*, another book of religious hymns. Other reports claim the number was 315 individuals spanning 38 families,

<sup>7</sup> Swamy was later arrested for this editorial, with a case being registered under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code, pertaining to crimes “spreading enmity between communities” (PTI 2011).



who had “gone away from the Sanatan Dharma (and) were brought back to the religion of their forefathers”, as was apparently claimed by the organizers (Sharma 2015). What is perhaps interesting is the distinction that the report draws between religion and faith, quoting villagers as saying visits to the Church do not equate to official conversions to Christianity as that would mean losing the economic benefits that are associated with the Scheduled Caste (Hindu) identity (Dikshit 2015). “Interestingly, the report [in the *Times of India*] quotes an unnamed villager as saying that those converted had never left Hindu religion at the first place. He said that they had changed their faith not their religion as they feared losing the benefits that come from their SC status”.

It is perhaps worth noting that Ausanpur village is in Prime Minister Modi’s constituency. However, police officials denied the incident and an organizer who was detained following a complaint claimed he was celebrating the birth of a son at the temple, not facilitating a *Ghar Wapsi* (Sharma 2015).

A few months following this incident, Vishva Hindu Parishad leader Pravin Togadia claimed that the VHP alone had reconverted more than five lakh (500,000) Christians and two and a half lakh (250,000) Muslims. He is reported to have said “our rate of *Ghar Wapsi* used to be around 15,000 each year. But last year, we have crossed the mark of 40,000, which is excluding the figures of RSS ... If Hindus need to be in majority in India and to save our religion, we have to engage in many more *Ghar Wapsi* drives to bring crores of others into our religion” (PTI 2016).

Earlier, in July 2015, the VHP had claimed that it had brought back 33,975 people to their “original faith” through the *Ghar Wapsi* campaign and had prevented a total of 48,651 people from converting out of Hinduism in the last year. The trend has increasingly drawn the attention of various political stakeholders, with the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government being the subject of much criticism and officially asking Hindu organizations to slow down at the risk of overshadowing their public development agenda. To this, however, it is reported that the VHP General Secretary Champat Rai responded saying “The programme has been on for long and it will continue. Look at Mahatma Gandhi, he wanted his son brought back to Hinduism, so did many other leaders. All minorities in India have converted from Hinduism. They should accept their original faith” (The New Indian Express 2015).

Violence and intimidation are tactics used by Hindutva-inspired organizations such as the Dharma Jagran Samiti (Hindu-Religious Awakening Front) in Uttar Pradesh. Saurav Datta describes how some Christians in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, huddled in fear in their church at Christmas 2015. Hindu zealots had already burned two other churches in the area, so they had reason to fear (Datta 2015). The anti-Christian outbreak had been touched off by the publicity given to a large *Ghar Wapsi* in the region celebrating the mass conversion of thousands of Christians and Muslims to Hinduism.

The RSS boasted about having “returned” 53 tribal families as part of its 2017 goal of forming a “Christianity-free block” in Jharkhand. The purification ceremony involved having their heads marked with sandalwood paste and their feet washed by priests. A local BJP official explained “You cannot call it conversion. We are only bringing our lost brothers and sisters back to their religion” (Roy 2017; HuffPost Staff 2017).

Thus, it is evident that while the official state apparatus is increasingly trying to differentiate between and distance itself from vocally Hindu organizations, the power of such groups is evidently increasing and their activities are increasingly more public. With the official representatives publicly announcing the intent to continue these campaigns, no evidence of strict state action against them, and complications associated with welfarism and the caste hierarchy, trends like the *Ghar Wapsi* are becoming integral to not only the religious but also the socio-economic identities of many communities in the country. Asserting the Hindu identity is being portrayed as the right option, both from an economic as well as a spiritual standpoint.

### 3. Mass Conversions from Hinduism

**Mass Conversions to Islam:** There has been, however, much backlash against these claims. Drawing on the Islamic understanding that all creatures, including humans and even animals, are

“Muslims” by nature because they follow their God-given inner nature, some Muslim political leaders have turned the tables on the Hindutva *Ghar Wapsi* stance by themselves claiming that every Indian was born Muslim and thus, the very definition or understanding of *Ghar Wapsi* needs to be revised. “Everyone is born a Muslim, and then he is converted to other religions. *Ghar wapsi* is for these people to return to Islam”, said Mr Owaisi [Asaduddin Owaisi, Indian politician and three-time Member of Parliament], referring to the Hindi phrase for homecoming used by right-wing hardline groups who organize conversion ceremonies for religious minorities (Sudhir 2015).

Historically, the mass scale attempt at “*shuddhi*” or “cleansing” by the Arya Samaj was met with much resistance from local Muslim powers as well, countered through the campaign of “*tabligh*” or “propagation”. While this was once restricted to being the duty of the *ulama* or clergy, it came to be seen as the most fundamental religious duty of all Muslims, resulting in the arguable democratization of Islam. While this usually involved spreading the word of the Quran to neo-Muslims as well as others, there have been particularly interesting cases of co-option between the formal faiths of Hinduism and Islam. This process is most clear in the case of Siddiq Hussain, the founder of Deendar Anjuman, who, after hearing a Sufi saint predict that the savior of the Lingayats would be born into a Muslim family, declared himself the savior Deendar Channabasaveswara. Sikand writes of how, “in a booklet, titled *Deendar Channabasaveswara*, Siddiq Hussain claimed that the Hindu and Lingayat scriptures predict that through Deendar Channabasaveswara, “the entire Hindustan will turn Muslim”. . . . Deendar Channabasaveswara would then set about “uniting all hundred and one castes” by making all Hindus Muslim” (Sikand 2003). Thus, to be a good Hindu (and believe in the saving powers of Channabasaveswara), one must be(come) Muslim.

There are, in multiple ways, parallels that can be drawn between the purposes served by the *shuddhi* and *tabligh* movements. In the words of Sikand (2003), once again,

Like issues such as Urdu-Hindi, cow-slaughter, and music before mosques, *shuddhi* and *tabligh* emerged as powerful mobilization tools and symbols of community honor and identity. If through its *shuddhi* campaign the Aryas were able, at least temporarily, to bridge the gulf that divided them from the Sanatani Hindus and to mobilize the support of large numbers of Hindus, including many non-Aryas, in their project, so, too, did *tabligh* serve as a means for Muslim leaders to gather the support of a wide cross-section of Muslim opinion. In stressing the fundamental duty of all Muslims in the *tabligh* enterprise, *tabligh* played a central role as a symbolic tool in the process of the construction of a pan-India Muslim community transcending differences of caste, region, sect and linguistic affiliation.

**Mass Conversions to Christianity:** Though a large percentage of the literature, both academic and popular, focuses on the discrimination against India’s Muslim minority, the Christian population has also borne its share of the brunt. Christian missionaries are criticized for being too aggressive in the efforts to convert. There has been an increasing trend towards attacks on churches and violence against nuns, a development that Surendra Jain, the international Joint General Secretary of the VHP, said would continue if the Christian proselytizing did not stop. An article in the *International Business Times* quoted him as justifying such action by questioning whether “Christians would allow us to make a Hanuman temple in the Vatican?” (Singh 2015).

Rajnath Singh, the BJP government’s Home Minister, expressed concerns over the mass conversion trend in a January 2019 speech. Singh went out of his way to assure the Christian audience that he strongly favored the government’s commitment to protecting a person’s freedom to choose any religion they wish. He then said, “But if mass conversion starts happening, (and) large numbers of people start changing their religion, then it could be a matter of concern for any country”. (PTI 2019a) The implication seemed to be that the government would give at least some protection to Christians as long as they did not become too numerous.

**Mass Conversions to Buddhism:** Having been born a Dalit and then, after earning a doctorate in economics, representing Dalits in Parliament and serving as the principal author of the new Indian

Constitution adopted in 1950, Dr. Ambedkar made good on a longstanding promise. He had often said that even though he was born a Hindu, he would not die a Hindu. After studying several religions, he chose Buddhism because it was native Indian and had resisted caste discrimination from its beginnings. Through his study of the early history of Buddhism, which traces itself back well beyond the time of the Buddha of this era, he came to understand Buddhism as the original religion of India's Dalits. At a well-known mass conversion ceremony held at Nagpur in 1956, he and his wife converted to Buddhism. Then hundreds of thousands of other Dalits who had gathered for the occasion also converted. Since then more Dalits have become Buddhists. Several mass conversions were held to mark the 50th anniversary of the original mass conversion at Nagpur, including the conversion of 50,000 Dalits in Mumbai. These conversions have become even more frequent under the leadership of Rajratna Ambedkar, who frequently oversees mass conversions, often of 500 or more Dalits, who are angry at the continuing discrimination during the Modi era (Varagur 2018). These conversions are seen as a threat by the Hindutva advocates, and their fears grow with the increasing popularity of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), with its Dalit and tribal constituencies, during the run up to the 2019 Parliamentary Election.

#### 4. The Anti-Conversion Laws Controversy

While the temptation to read *Ghar Wapsi* as a recent phenomenon is large, religious conversions have been the subject of much controversy and legality from the pre-colonial era. Interesting, however, is the fact that most laws pertaining to religious conversion had the stated objective of curbing the trend, claiming to protect otherwise gullible and economically impoverished possible converts.

Post-independence, these restrictions resulted in individual states enacting various anti-conversion laws. Some of these pieces of legislation are the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantrya Adhiniyam (1968), Orissa's Freedom of Religion Act (1967), Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religious Ordinance (2002–2004), Gujarat Freedom of Religion Bill (2003), and the Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill (2007). Most of these bills, apart from outlawing forceful conversion through coercion and/or fraud, also interestingly require individuals to give notice to local authorities a stipulated number of days in advance of their intended conversion. It is thus evident that the State has defined for itself the role of a "protector", giving itself the window needed to affirm M. Galanter's view that "no secular State is or can be merely neutral or impartial among religions, for the State defines the boundaries within which neutrality operates". (Jenkins 2008) With this legislation, what was thus far strictly restricted to the private realm (matters of religion) gets converted to public acts and objects of legislation. The convert is thus no longer merely an individual but also a citizen and an object (and not subject) of the law.

In the continuing discussion regarding reconversions and anti-conversion laws, it is useful to take a closer look at one specific piece of state legislature. The Rajasthan state anti-conversion bill did not become a law as the then-governor Pratibha Patil (later President of India) refused to sign it. However, its contents provide useful insight into how religious conversions are understood by the Indian state today. As Jenkins writes, "controversial aspects of the Rajasthan bill include allowing the immediate arrest of the accused and exempting "reconversion" via a "clause that a person could be lawfully converted (back) into one's original religion". (Jenkins 2008). Following this, other states have also come forward with similar exemptions, with Gujarat looking to exempt conversions from Hinduism to Buddhism and Jainism, "on the grounds that Buddhism and Jainism were "denominations" of Hinduism". (Jenkins 2008) The amendment was not passed.

It is in the midst of this dialogue that the definition of "the Hindu" seems murky, being almost entirely defined by negation. Theoretically, Hindus are born into a caste and this membership is inherent to the identity of being Hindu, making it impossible to "convert" into Hinduism. Yet, with the inclusion and involvement of fringe communities and the increasing popularity of *shuddhi* campaigns and *Ghar Wapsi* movements, the practice of the Hindu identity has evidently gotten further complicated. In most cases, this inclusion is largely through a process of what Y. Sikand and M. Katju call "cultural



transformation” to a state of acceptance of various brahminical notions and practices. According to them, “the Arya Samaj and the VHP missionaries seem more concerned with weaning Muslims away from Islam than with the spiritual instruction and development of their converts” (Sikand and Katju 1994).

To further complicate this identity construction, the definition provided by the Constitution of India considers Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains as lying within the ambit of the “Hindu” umbrella. This is evident in Article 25 of the Constitution, speaking of freedom of conscience and religion. This Article reads as follows:

“(1) Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practice and propagate religion.

(2) Nothing in this article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law—

(a) regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice;

(b) providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.

Explanation I.—The wearing and carrying of kirpans shall be deemed to be included in the profession of the Sikh religion.

Explanation II.—In sub-clause (b) of clause (2), *the reference to Hindus shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion, and the reference to Hindu religious institutions shall be construed accordingly*”. (Government of India 1950) (italics mine)

Thus, the attempt to agree upon a shared definition of the Hindu throws up more questions than answers. Is the legal structure conflating Indian-ness with Hindu-ness? Does Hindu-ness represent a hereditary identity? In which case, can it be adopted across the caste hierarchy or only by (the men of) twice-born castes? On the other hand, if one were to buy into the arguments of the nationalists, are Hindus the inhabitants of Hindustan? If so, are the borders of Hindustan in sync with post-independent India or what the RSS has come to refer to as Akhand Bharat, the Undivided India?

The vagueness of defining the Hindu identity in contrast to the Other was evident in a promise made in the run-up to the 2019 elections by Amit Shah, the president of the BJP. In a tweet that received much backlash, Shah wrote, “We will ensure implementation of the NRC in the entire country. We will remove every single infiltrator from the country, except Buddha (sic), Hindus, and Sikhs” (Griffiths and Suri 2019). NRC, or the National Registry of Citizens, is a controversial register in the northeastern state of Assam that seeks to list all citizens. The fear was that, after forcing all residents of Assam to register, the government will then undertake to deport the estimated four million Bengali Muslims, many of whom have been living in Assam for generations or at least since being refugees from the 1971 civil war in Bangladesh (Gupta 2018). In a speech at a campaign rally, he later clarified that the government “won’t send Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, and Buddhists coming in from Bangladesh or Pakistan because they are our brothers and they’ve come here because they’ve faced persecution in those countries” (The Daily Star 2019). His statements reveal the Hindutva tendency to define the Other as Muslim while, when politically astute, allowing members of many other traditional religions of the country to reside under the Hindu tent.

## 5. Cultural and Political Implications of Mass Conversion

Irrespective of whether the individual state bills became laws or not, the trend in Indian legislation reveals important details on the public perception of religious conversions today. By these laws,

“*Ghar Wapsi*” or reconversions no longer are seen as religious conversions at all, but rather the correction of a previous, ancestral mistake. This point of view is further augmented by a second strand of thought that argues that Hinduism itself is not a religion, but rather a way of life. Vocal support of this argument came in the form of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s speech in Vancouver, Canada in April 2015, where he said “the Supreme Court of India in India has given a nice definition of *Hindu dharam* ... the Supreme Court has said that *Hindu dharam* is not a religion but a way of life ... ” (PTI 2015) Thus, if Hinduism is seen as a lifestyle choice (as opposed to an organized religion), one cannot “convert” into/from it. By this logic, the argument of *Ghar Wapsi* is no longer about coerced conversion/reconversion but rather the re-adoption of a lifestyle or set of cultural practices.

Problems regarding the status of Hinduism as a uniform religion also contribute to this debate. This has been evident in R. Robinson and S. Clarke’s introduction to their volume on religious conversions in the country, where they write:

For some scholars of South Asia would recognize Christianity or even Buddhism as a religion, but would refuse to accord Hinduism the same status, referring to its loose structure and its location as a “way of life” rather than a set of tenets. The term Hinduism, it is pointed out came to be used only in much later times. (Robinson and Clarke 2003)

Tapan Basu et al, as quoted by Robinson and Clarke, traces the history of the process of creating a bounded Hinduism, writing:

Savarkar’s definition of Hinduism was an overtly “secular” one, linked to devotion to the Holy Land alone, but then land was immediately sacralized through a Hinduization of its geographical, historical, even zoological features. Golwalkar had prescribed a shared “respect for the cow” as the only basis for Indian unity whereas Seshadri describes a true Hindu home as a space sanctified by domestic shrines and holy icons, and a Hindu disposition as marked by regular temple attendance, daily worship and, at least, “minimum samskaras” like naming, marriage, and funeral ceremonies ... Having first been freed from all observances ... [Hinduism] transforms itself into a series of observances, of “musts”, of the very external commandments which are supposedly the marks of non-Hindu Semitic cultures. (Robinson and Clarke 2003)

Adding to this, the issue with speaking of religious conversions is the assumption of watertight categories marking a conversion “from” and a conversion “to”, a situation which often does not find resonance in real world scenarios. This artificial separation is further complicated by the common conflation of religion and culture, seen especially in the arenas of ritual and practice such as puberty rituals or ancestral rites. It has therefore been argued that it may perhaps be useful to read what is usually written off as conversions as transformations, a “gradual acculturation into the faith with few discernible radical shifts” (Robinson and Clarke 2003). Especially given that common understanding reads marital alliance as the most common entry-point as opposed to an identifiable ritual moment of “conversion”, it may be useful to read this shifting religiosity as a long-term process rather than a marked moment in time.

In the most commonsensical understanding, “conversion betokens foundational rupture with prior faith and heralds inaugural displacement of religious affiliation, individually and collectively” (Dube and Dube 2003). However, if one were to read religiosity as transformation, it must also be kept in mind that not all transformation is motivated by strictly religious intent. Given the intrinsic link between the spread of religion, trade, and political power, it has also been argued that the promise of economic benefit and political power can be a strong influencing factor in the adoption of a different religion. With osmosis between local cultures and formal religions being common, the day-to-day practices of many communities were not subject to much change. What religious “conversion” did offer them, however, was a higher position on the socio-political hierarchy. Thus, the “religious conversion in the case of Dalit communities involved entering a liminal world: a world of possibilities that is weaved out within a limbo between the real and the utopian” (Clarke 2003b).

In support of this argument, R. Eaton writes on Bengali Muslims in particular, describing how

... the frontier folk of the eastern delta do not appear to have perceived Islam as alien, or as a closed, exclusive system to be accepted or rejected as a whole. Today one habitually thinks of world religions as self-contained “culture-boxes” with well-defined borders respecting belief and practice. But such a static or fixed understanding of religion does not apply to the premodern Bengal frontier, a fluid context in which Islamic superhuman agencies, typically identified with local superhuman agencies, gradually seeped into local cosmologies that were themselves dynamic. This “seepage” occurred over such a long period of time that one can at no point identify a specific moment of “conversion”, or any single moment when peoples saw themselves as having made a dramatic break with the past. (Eaton 1993)

It is thus arguable, as S. Clarke did, that “religious conversion need not be a community contract, which inaugurates a relationship between tribals and Dalits and homogeneously intact symbolic constellations. Rather conversion involves a process of creative and constructive assemblage of eclectic religious resources garnered from a variety of sites” (Clarke 2003a).

It is to explain this fabric of multiplicity that P. Dundas introduces the concept of “spiritual cosmopolitanism” with regard to a characterization of religious life in the country (Dundas 2003). Applying this lens to India, it can be argued that “what people “converted from” was probably not substantively different from what they “converted to” (Fenech 2003). Thus, “conversion implies movement and we cannot hope to understand it without thoroughly examining both the place of arrival and the place of departure in each instance” (Brekke 2002).

Integral to this understanding of the trend of reconversions and its relationship with state power is the subject of conversion. While the argument is based on a certain construct of the Hindu in opposition to the primarily Muslim Other, the question of who converts is one that is key to decoding the *Ghar Wapsi* trend. SF Dale puts forth a rather blunt description when he writes:

The great majority of conversions must have come from the lower castes, who most strongly felt the “inconvenience” of their subordinate, degraded status. It must have certainly been the lower caste women who married or became the concubines of Muslims; no Nambudiri or Nayar women are ever likely to have taken such a step unless they had already been outcasted for some profound social transgression. Lower caste concubinage followed by conversion, or the direct conversion of men or women for other reasons, would also have been more likely to have occurred in relatively heterogeneous commercial centers such as Calicut rather than in the conservative, predominantly Hindu countryside. (Dale 1990)

While there have been instances of upper caste conversions being recorded in history, Dale’s writing from the context of the state of Kerala is often the common perception regarding conversions in the country. Evidently, “at least in the Indian context, one cannot separate the conversion of the individual from the conversion of the community. Conversion is a process leading to a new identity, but that identity is going to be both personal and social (caste/religious community) as the two are inexorably linked together” (Webster 2003).

It is also important to pay heed to the role of geography in the trend towards religious conversions across the country. In traditional settlement plans where residence was decided on the basis of caste, Dalit communities were relegated to the periphery of the villages, not only putting physical but metaphysical space between them and the organized form of majority religion in the area. This made them more susceptible to conversion (Clarke 2003b).

This counteracts interestingly to claims that non-Hindu groups living on the fringes of Hindu caste societies have, over centuries, been co-opted into the caste structure as Shudras or “untouchables”, a process often referred to as Hinduisation (Sikand 2003).

## 6. Conclusions: Political Implications of the *Ghar Wapsi* Approach in a “Secular” State

The trend towards *Ghar Wapsi* reconversions and the cultural as well as political implications of this tendency cannot be understood independent of the current political climate of the country and its traditional stance with regard to the interface between religion and politics.

The 2014 general elections saw the return of an NDA (National Democratic Alliance) government, following the previous stint between 1998 and 2004 under the Prime Ministership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The Modi-led government swept the elections with 38.5% vote share between the various members of the NDA alliance amidst much fanfare and expectation. True to the rise of the BJP as a political party, the win was heralded importantly as a change from the disappointment of the UPA<sup>8</sup> government and Congress era while also being positioned as the “rightful representative of Hindu interests” (Basu 1996). It was evident that goals of secular economic development were not achieving the targets that were promised and sections of the population were coming to question the need for this secularism at all. Why couldn’t the Centre be explicitly pro-Hindu? Given the inability to achieve the numerous India 2020 targets, was this the missing link? Narendra Modi’s government inherited this political atmosphere.

Constitutionally, the relationship between Indian politics and religion is defined by secularism. India’s secular identity is not, however, devoid of its own debates, not least of which are the challenges in the Indian social fabric and even the Indian understanding of the term itself. Sen delineates the biggest challenges to secularism in the Indian context as being communal fascism (use of violence to achieve sectarian threats, victimizing specific communities, etc.), sectarian nationalism (discourse of “two nations” in undivided India followed by “misdeeds” of Muslims) and militant obscurantism (using archaic beliefs to generate extremism) (Sen 1993). It is, however, arguable that the bigger debate at hand is the very definition of secularism itself. While the Western world perceives this concept as heralding the separation between state and church, India adopts the Gandhian notion of “*sarva dharma samabhava*” or tolerance towards/equidistance from all religions.

At the time of framing the Constitution in the years leading up to its adoption in 1950, the secular nature of the Indian state was never explicitly stated on the argument that it was evident, assumed, and natural. A watershed act of law in multiple ways, the 42nd Amendment is famously known for introducing the words “secular” and “socialist” into the Preamble of the Constitution. Passed in 1976 and enacted through the course of 1977, the timing of this Amendment is crucial, coming during the Emergency declared by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It is equally important to note that there is no definition of “secular” put forth in the Constitution and thus, more often than not, the concept is seen to have “more affinities with multiculturalism” (Jaffrelot 2011).

It is, therefore, unquestionable that the biggest cost of this socio-political trend is the veracity of India’s claims to secularism. With the BJP already accusing the Congress of “pseudosecular politics” (The New Indian Express 2018), the political core of the Indian state seems to be up for debate.

In the short run, this has resulted in heightened insecurity amongst religious minorities, many of whom have been subjected to increasing violence in recent times. In a report by Open Doors, a religious freedom watchdog working towards serving persecuted Christians worldwide, “the number of reported incidents in the first three months of 2018 was greater than the total number of attacks in the whole year of 2014”. (World Watch Monitor 2019) The report, titled ‘We’re Indians Too,’ identifies four key drivers of persecution, two of which are particularly relevant to the argument of this article:

An analysis of the data highlights four main drivers of persecution . . . First, the increased dominance of “Hindutva ideology” within Indian society appears to have created the conditions necessary for increased persecution. Second, state Anti-conversion laws operate

<sup>8</sup> The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is a coalition of left and centre-left political parties in India. The largest member of the UPA is the Indian National Congress (INC). The UPA and NDA (National Democratic Alliance, of which the BJP is a part) form the two largest actors in Indian national politics.

to increase religious persecution. (... a substantial number of incidents of persecution occur around the false perception of what constitutes “conversion” activities.) ([Open Doors 2019](#))

Another report, released in 2017, also described similar findings, saying that “members of civil society and religious minorities stated that under the current government, religious minority communities felt increasingly vulnerable due to Hindu nationalist groups engaging in violence against non-Hindu individuals and their places of worship”. ([PTI 2018](#)) This increasing unease amongst religious minorities was recognized even by individuals of public standing, with the outgoing Vice President of the country, Hamid Ansari, saying in his final official interview that there was a feeling of unease amongst Muslims in the country because of growing intolerance ([Scroll 2017](#)). In 2015, research conducted by Pew reported that India was ranked fourth in the world (behind Syria, Nigeria, and Iraq) for highest social hostilities involving religion ([S 2017](#)).

To those subscribing to the Hindutva ideology, it seems valid to claim that all persons native to greater India (Akhand Bharat or Undivided India) are Hindu by virtue to having an Indian, and therefore Hindu, ancestry. By understanding “the Hindu” as the traditional spirituality of the Indian subcontinent, this ideology can make the seemingly self-contradictory claim that conversion from Islam or Christianity is not a religious conversion but rather a “coming home” or a “returning” to one’s true, ancestral spiritual identity. In stark contrast, the citizens of India who do not share the Hindutva stance—be they Muslims, Christians, secular Hindus or others—look upon *Ghar Wapsi* as an alarming trend which threatens both individual religious freedom and the constitutional mandated secularism of India governance.

When is religious conversion “coming homing” rather than conversion? Given the increasingly porous boundaries separating the space of religion and politics in India, this is a question without an explicitly apparent answer. While the arguments of “culture boxes” and “spiritual cosmopolitanism” give us the theoretical frameworks within which to understand the trend and India’s political leadership peddles the language of “way of life”, it remains that the identity of the Hindu citizen, the minority communities and the Indian citizenry are caught in an uncomfortable and arguably dangerous state of fluidity and flux. Complicated by the presence of affirmative action for specific caste identities and the resulting differentiation between personal faith and organized religion, the *Ghar Wapsi* trend is positioned squarely in the spaces of grey amidst definitional debates and socio-cultural practices unique to India.

It is evident that this “homecoming” then becomes a multi-layered process; one that sees the transformation of the citizen-body from a subject into an object of the law, the shift of focus from individual to community as primary actor, and the evolution of ‘conversion’ from a momentary shift of identity to a long drawn out process of change. When these processes and spaces of grey are facilitated by those in power, it would seem, is when religious conversion can be described in the language of “homecoming”.

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