
Economic Vulnerability & Conversion of Religion in India: An Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion has become the subject of passionate debate in contemporary India. From the early 20th century onwards, it has surfaced again and again in the political realm, in the media and in the courts. During the last few decades the dispute has attained a new climax in the plethora of newspapers, journals, and books whose pages have been devoted to the question of conversion. Apparently, a large group of Indians considers this to be an issue of crucial import to the future of their country.

Generally Speaking, Religion is a system of faith and worship of supernatural force which ordains regulates and control the destiny of human kinds.

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defined, Religion as an organized system of faith and worship, a personal set of religious belief and practice, a cause, principle or belief held to with faith and order. The Oxford Dictionary defined, Religion the belief in a super human controlling power, especially in personal God or Gods entitled to obedience and worship. Swami Vivekananda perceives religion as - it is based upon faith and belief and in most cases consist only of different sect of theories that is the reason why we find all religion quarreling with each other.

1. According to Sage Aurobindo, The quest of man for God is the foundation for religion & its essential function is the search for God and the finding of the God.
2. Hinduism in the view of Dr. Radhakrishnan -The main aim of the Hindu faith is to permit image worship as the means to the development of the religious spirit to the recognition of the Supreme who has his temples in all beings.
3. We can conclude from the above discussion that no universally acceptable definition as to what exactly "religion" is. There appears to be near unanimity that religion, generally, is a belief or faith in the existence of a Supernatural Being and the precepts which people follow for attaining salvation.

Religion may be regarded as belief and patterns of behaviors by which human try to deal with what they view as important problems that cannot be solved through the application of known technologies and techniques of organization. To overcome these limitations people turn to the manipulation of supernatural beings and powers.

Religion consists of various rituals, prayers, songs, dances, offerings and sacrifices, through which people try to manipulate supernatural beings and powers to their advantages. These being and power may consist of Gods and Goddesses, ancestral and other spirits or impersonal power either by themselves or in various combinations. In all societies there are certain individuals especially skilled at dealing with these beings and powers and who assist other members of society in their ritual activities. A body of myths rationalizes or explains the system in a manner consistent with peoples experience in the world in which they live. Every individual has a natural entitlement of religious faith and freedom of conscience, a right to adopt or abandoned any faith of his own choice. In this sense freedom of religion and freedom of conscience is fundamental right both constitutionally and conventionally. The freedom of religion and freedom of conscience has been recognized under the international law. The General Assembly of united nations adopted without dissenting vote on 10th December,1948 the Universal Declaration on Human Rights recognizing fact that the entire humanity enjoys certain alienable rights which constitute the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

In order to give effect to the Universal Declaration of human rights the members of the united nations of also adopted the two conventions in 1966 in this concern:-

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
2. International covenant on Civil and Political rights.

The Government of India by its declaration dated 10.4.1979 had accepted Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two international covenants with certain reservations which do not cover the right to freedom of religion. Apart from this the Constitution of India also enshrines the freedom of religion and freedom of conscience as fundamental rights under Article 25,26,27,28,30.

Religious Conversion is multifaceted and multi dimensional phenomenon. Indian society is a pluralist and heterogeneous society with multiplicity of races, religious cultural, castes and languages etc.

Religious Conversion has always been a problematic issue in India. Every incident of conversion causes lot of hue and cry in society; especially it causes nostalgic feelings to Hindu organization because of its inherent socio- political. Rigid and Stringent caste system prevailing in Hindu Religion is one of the most significant factors behind the religious conversion. This is because of this caste system Dalits (in most comprehensive and inclusive sense the word Dalit includes Untouchables, Shudras and Adivasis) are the most susceptible section of the society to religious conversion . The other causes of conversion are

1. Polygamy which is prevailing in Islam.
2. To get rid of unwanted matrimonial ties.
3. To get reservation benefits.

Polygamy is a system wherein a male person is authorized to keep more than one wife/wives where all the other wife/wives are still alive, or where a male person is authorized to solemnize more than one marriage. Polygamy is just opposite to the system of monogamy. In the past almost all the societies in the world have been either polygamous or polyandrous. Monogamy was never a rule but an exception. Amongst all the religions resourceful persons were allowed to keep as many wives as he can afforded. But Islam has been exception to his general rule. The Prophet Mohd. (571 AD-632 AD) the last

messenger according to Quaran laid down the principle for his followers that a person may keep as many as four wives only and that too only in exceptional circumstances prevailing in those days.

The Prophet had allowed the followers of Islam to keep four wives at one time because of the contemporary reasons. During the life of Prophet the Arabian society was the society of innumerable tribal communities and war was constant phenomenon of those days in Islam. Hundreds of wars were fought amongst those tribals can themselves, sometimes in the name of Jihad, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes for the sake of established political hegemony. Only men were allowed to participate in the wars and not the women. One of the obvious consequences of these wars was that innumerable women became widows. One of the most burning problem before the prophet was that how to manage the lives f these destitute widows and the children. Nobody was there take care for these helpless widows and children. So the prophet evolved out a workable solution of the problem. He permitted the men that every man would keep as many as four wives along with their children. So that no widow or child would die out hunger starvation or illness. Through the system every widow and her children were taken care of.

Here two important points are worth mentioning that:

1. The permission given by the prophet to keep more than one wives was not a permanent prescription for all the times to come. But it was only a temporary provision just to manage the cotemporary problems. Along with the provision of keeping four wives the prophet imposed a mandatory conditions upon the persons who might keep more that 1 wife that if a person keeps more than one wife he must have an equal eye upon all the wives. That is the principle of equality which was to be observed and not to discriminate on any grounds whatsoever.

2. Keeping more than one wife was not prescribed as general rule. But only an exception and that is only to deal with the above mention contemporary problem. But after the life of the profit, the Muslim leaders especially in India have misinterpreted the dictates of the prophet in his concern and started receiving undue advantage of this dictate of the prophet. Muslim religious leader and Ulemas have maintained that the dictate of the prophet to keep four wives was not a temporary provision rather it was a permanent dictate for all time to come. This is how they have misconceived the dictates of the prophet and justified and legitimized polygamy almost 1500 years after the life of the prophet.

It is significant to mention that the practice of polygamy has been abolished even in the constitutionally declared Islamic states long ago but in India this practice is still valid under the Muslim personal law. It is also pertinent to mention that the practice of polygamy is anti feminist and it is discriminatory against Muslims women because polygamy is a unilateral right provided only to Muslim men. Therefore, it is suggested that the privilege of polygamy should not be given Muslim community under their personal laws and uniform civil code is the need of the hour.

The Impact of Religious Conversion:

The religious conversion into Islam by a person from non-Islamic faith is not valid if the conversion is done for the purpose of polygamy. Neither Islam nor the law recognises any such conversion in India. In

the case of **Sarla Mudgal vs Union of India** a married Hindu male converted in to Islam for the sake of solemnising another marriage as polygamy is permitted in Islam. The Hon'ble SC held that conversion in to another faith Ipso-facto does not dissolve the first marriage because no one is allowed to take the benefit of his own wrong. Moreover the court held that the married person converting into Islam is not entitle to marry another woman after conversion. It was held to be an act of bigamy prohibited U/S 17 of Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and punishable U/S 494 of IPC and it was further observed that the second marriage is void.

In **Vilayat Raj vs Smt. Sunita** it was observed by the court that if both the parties to the marriage were Hindu at the time of marriage , pre-nuptial law i.e. Hindu Marriage Act applied even after conversion in Islam.

In **Lilly Thomas vs Union of India** it was observed that an apostate husband is guilty of bigamy U/S 494 of IPC if he marriage another woman after converting into Islam. It was observed that holding such person guilty of bigamy is not violation of freedom of religion U/Article 25 of the Constitution, hence, Section 17 of H.M.A. 1955 is applicable.

From the above it is clear that after the pronouncement of the aforesaid judicial verdicts, polygamy is no more a valued person for religious conversion into Islam.

A person does not cease to be Hindu nearly because he declares that he has no faith in his religion. A person will not cease to be Hindu even if he does not practice his religion till he does not renounces his religion or starts living and behaving like an atheist or agnostic or starts eating beef or insulting God or Goddesses. He does not ceases to be member of the religion even if he starts expressing his faith in any other religion , he continuous to be a Hindu Chandra Shekharan vs Kulundurivalu.(7)

If a person converts from Hindu religion to Sikh , Budhism or Jainism he does not cease to be Hindu since all these religions do not fall beyond the definition of 'Hindu' in the relevant section of Hindu Marriage Act . He ceases to be Hindu if he converts into Islam Christianity or Jews or Zoroastrain, conversion into these religion is a ground for desolation of marriage for the other spouse and not for the spouse who converts into any such religion (U/S 13 H.M.A).

Under Section 80 of the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956 if the husband gets converted into Non-Hindu faith wife is entitled to live Separately without forfeiting her right of maintenance but if she herself also ceases to be Hindu, she looses her claim of maintenance under the section, But she is entitled under section 24 of H.M.A in 1955 for pedente-lite and permanent alimony.

Special Marriage Act 1954 reflects the true sprit of Indian Secularism as it is in consonance with India 's heterogeneity and multiplicity of religious faith. Conversion does not make any effect on matrimonial ties as the Act is the secular legislations and itself contemplate inter caste and inter religious marriages. The Indian Divorce Act, 1869- If the husband gets converted into non Christian faith, wife is entitled for divorce but vice versa is not possible. If wife gets converted into non Christian faith husband can not apply for divorce. NANG vs LABYA.(8)

Under Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939 Section 4 says if a wife renounces Islam, the marriage does not Ipso-facto dissolve unless the circumstances warrant otherwise.

The picture is complete if we account for the fact that most of these laws are aimed to keep the low caste Hindus within the fold of Hinduism. And so while law prohibits conversion, 're-conversion' of low caste Hindus is permissible. If a low caste Hindu who had converted to another faith or any of his descendants reconverts to Hinduism, he might get back his original caste In Kailash Sonkar. (9)

Major Events of Conversion

Major events of conversion are not reported unless they are highlighted by media or a hue and cry is made by Hindu Organization. Following are the major incidents of religious conversion in post independence.

Nagpur: - The 1st and the biggest mass conversion which the country has ever witnessed, took place on the 14th day of October 1956. Place Nagpur, Maharashtra, the city where the headquarter of Rastriya Swayamsewak Sangh is situated. About a half a million Dalits said good bye to Hinduism from their life and embraced Buddhism under the leadership of the greatest social reformer, the great visionary and the prophet of Dalit emancipation Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

Meenakshipuram:- The significant event of religious conversion took place on Feb 19th 1981 at Meenakshipuram of Kanyakumari District in Tamil Nadu. Where 280 families got converted to Islam. All of these 280 families cited social reasons behind their conversion. These reasons were persecution, ill treatment and humiliation they constantly had to face at the hands of upper caste of Hindus which made their lives miserable and worst than animals.

Dulina :- Another significant event of religious conversion which created a lot of hue and cry in the society took place at Gurgaon, Haryana 2002. This all had happened after a very pathetic incident of burning Five Dalits Alive by a mob of upper caste people in a police station at Dulina in Jhajjar District in Haryana. Police remain silent spectator. Now nothing was left for the families of these massacred Dalits to remain in such a violent and hatred preaching system of faith, where in Dalit have no place. All the five families of massacred Dalits got converted in to Buddhism at Rabidas Mandir, Gurgaon, Haryana on 28th October 2002 under the banner of All India Confederation of SC/ST organization and the Lord Buddha club in the presence of famous film director, All India Christian Council , Jamait Ulma-I Hind and in the presence of Media Persons.

Another dimension of this event of conversion is that after these event of conversion all the Saffron Hindu Organizations rushed to these families and threatened them to face dire consequences on account of the above said conversion. Due to assaults and threats and under the pressure of these Hindu Organization, ultimately, these sacred Dalit Families broke down and had to make a public statement that we did not leave Hindu religion , we did not convert.

In July 2002 another incident of religious conversion took place Guntur distt. Andhra Pardesh were 70 Dalits converted in to Christianity.

Delhi:- In the year 2002 Udit Raj the Chairman of All India Confederation of SC/ST Organizations and the Lord Buddha Club give a national wide call for conversion. This conversion ceremony was supposed to be performed at Ram Leela Maidan of Delhi . Around one million Dalits were supposed to get convert

into Buddhism.

The preparation regarding the conversion programme were on . This nation wide call for the conversion got an unprecedented coverage in national and international media. Dehydration to saffron Hindu organization regarding such a massive programme of conversion, was oblivious. These organization resorted all means to shut of the mouth of media , so that this call may not reach the public at large. The Ram Leela Maidan , where the programme was supposed to be organized , declared as prohibited area and Section 144 of Crpc was imposed in and around the area, all borders of Delhi where from influx of Dalits, to take Diksha, was possible were sealed. The Government was determined to ensure by hook or by crook let the programme may not be organized. Finally, the organizer had to change the spot for the proposed programme . The Government could not succeed to curb the enthusiasm of dalits and ultimately more than 10,000 Dalits succeeded to say good bye to Hinduism and embraced Buddhism.

Right to freedom of faith is not a conferred right but a natural entitlement of every human being. In fact law does not assign it but it asserts, protect and insures its entitlement. Indian Society has nourished and nurtured almost all the established religion of the world like Hinduism , Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism etc. from it s time immemorial. Article 25 incorporates right to practice, profess and propagation of faith not only this , the Article guarantees the freedom of conscience. Right to possess adopt abandoned faith is ascribed by a person since his birth. India is a heterogeneous and pluralist society with multiplicity of faith and cultures. India most fundamental code of governance. i.e. The constitution of India also asserts, protects and ensures this right to all individuals irrespective of their religions, under its various provisions especially Art. 25.

Every human being has a natural entitlement of religious faith and freedom of conscience and right to adopt or abandon any faith of his own choice. This being so , the freedom of conscience has been recognized as a basic human right both constitutionally and conventionally.

The Constitution of India aims at securing freedom of religion and freedom of conscience under Article 25 ,26,27,28,30 and at the same time it seeks to create a harmony among all religions. Being suitable to the pluralistic society and historical lineage. Such freedom needs to continued. Any other policy will not be unconstitutional but also extremely harmful and suffocative for the public. It. However, need to be realized that an incessant process of transformation and change is also going on as change is the rule of nature.

The ideas , faith, psyche, behavior and attitude of people have always been subject to change, though, the factors of change are spatial and temporal. An important aspect with respect to change of faith is the state of One's awareness and ignorance. More awareness and enlightenment does definitely have an impact on the thought, belief and action of a person, faith and elements of conscience. Thus as regards conscience , state of knowledge is itself under a constant process of change and every human being is undergoing a metamorphosis of understanding with continuing with continuing process of experience of life and learning . Therefore , it is advisable to tie up someone to a particular faith for all the times.

But in Indian perspective , an aspect of freedom of conscience which has attained a problematic

dimension, is the right to propagate faith. The meaning of propagation is to promote, spread and publicize one's relating to his own faith for the edification of others. The term propagation implies persuasion and exposition without any element of fraud, coercion and allurements. The right to propagate one's religion does not give a right to convert any other person to one's own religious faith. It may be pointed out that the right to convert other person to one's own religion is distinct from and individual right to get converted to any other religion on his own choice. The latter is undisputedly in conformity with the freedom of religion and freedom of conscience under Article 25 of the constitution while the former is the subject of long prevailing controversy with reference to propagation of faith.

Religious conversion has always been a very sensitive social issue not only because of the reasons that it has psychological concerns of religious faith but also because it has wider socio-legal and socio-political implications. It has also been revealed by the recent incident of conversion in Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Orissa and in Delhi (in Delhi according to official sources around 20,000 dalits got converted into Buddhism in the year 2002 under the nation-wide call for conversion by Udit Raj, the leader of Justice Party). On the one hand due to these recent incidents of conversion the Hindu Saffron Organizations like R.S.S., V.H.P., Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, etc. have made a lot of hub-bub and not only this Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the former prime minister called for a nation-wide debate on conversion. The legislative history relating to the issue of conversion in India underscores the point that the authorities concerned were never favorably disposed towards conversion. While British India had no anti-conversion laws, many Princely States enacted anti-conversion legislation: the Raigarh State Conversion Act 1936, the Patna Freedom of Religion Act of 1942, the Sarguja State Apostasy Act 1945 and the Udaipur State Anti-Conversion Act 1946. Similar laws were enacted in Bikaner, Jodhpur, Kalahandi and Kota and many more were specifically against conversion to Christianity. In the post-independence era, Parliament took up for consideration in 1954 the Indian Conversion (Regulation and Registration) Bill and later in 1960 the Backward Communities (Religious Protection) Bill, both of which had to be dropped for lack of support. The proposed Freedom of Religion Bill of 1979 was opposed by the Minorities Commission due to the Bill's evident bias.

However, in 1967-68, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh enacted local laws called the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967 and the Madhya Pradesh Dharma Swatantraya Adhiniyam 1968. Along similar lines, the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1978 was enacted to provide for prohibition of conversion from one religious faith to any other by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for matters connected therewith. The latest addition to this was the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Ordinance promulgated by the Governor on October 5, 2002 and subsequently adopted by the State Assembly. Each of these Acts provides definitions of 'Government', 'conversion', 'indigenous faith', 'force', 'fraud', 'inducement' (and in the case of Arunachal, that of 'prescribed and religious faith'). These laws made forced conversion a cognizable offence under sections 295 A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code that stipulate that malice and deliberate intention to hurt the sentiments of others is a penal offence punishable by varying durations of imprisonment and fines.

As early as 1967, it became evident that the concern was not just with forced conversion, but with conversion to any religion other than Hinduism and especially Christianity and Islam. In the Orissa and Madhya Pradesh Acts, the punishment was to be doubled if the offence had been committed in respect of a minor, a woman or a person belonging to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe community.¹⁰

Moreover, Jayalalitha government in Tamil Nadu has gone to the extent of enacting ant-conversion legislation (Tamil Nadu prohibition of forcible conversion ordinance 2003) to put a check on the incidence of religious conversion. In April 2006 The Rajasthan Dharma Swatantrata (religious freedom) Bill, introduced by the BJP government, was passed by a voice vote. The Chhattisgarh Government passed an anti-conversion bill in form of Chhattisgarh Religion Freedom (Amendment) Act, 2006 providing for a three-year jail term and a fine of Rs.20,000 for those indulging in religious conversion by force or allurement. The Madhya Pradesh Government also passed a controversial bill to amend the state's Freedom of Religion Act of 1968 to prevent religious conversion by force or allurement. The contention of the Hindu organization is that most of the minority religious organization, especially, Christian Missionaries are actively involved in the activities of mass religious conversion in the name of social service. According to them the target groups of these Christian missionaries are generally illiterate and poor Dalits and Poor tribes.

On the other hand many dalit organizations and Dalit thinkers have perceived these recurrent incidents of religious conversions as great events of Dalit emancipation from the clutches of the vicious Hindu Caste System which is and has been a constant stigma on the face of Indian society. According to them, Hindu Caste System is founded on rigid and the stringent Caste hierarchy . Due to this inhuman and hate worthy Caste system Dalits and Shudras (Untouchables) have always been treated inhumanly, they have been subjugated, oppressed and persecuted by the so called upper caste Hindus or Manu vadis in the name of caste. Dalit thinkers also allege that Hindu Soceity could not make a adequate reforms in Hindu religion during last more than 3000 years , so that a lower caste Hindu could not live with human dignity in Hindu religion.

According to them majority of Dalits and shudras (untouchable) are illiterate deplorably poverty stricken and living in sub- human conditions. They have been denied basic human rights even after 59 years of independence, Moreover, in day today life they often to face atrocities and exploitation at the hands of upper caste Hindus in the name of caste. Hindu religion does not treat its all follower alike, Hinduism discriminates against one segment of its followers vis-à-vis the other and does not treat all of them equally. It has failed to provide social dignity to dalit and shudras. Therefore, they think that it is better to kick our such an obnoxious and suffocating religion from one's life and to convert in a religious which does not discriminate against them in the name of caste and which given them equal treatment and dignified human life. That is why Dalits and other progressive minds have supported the incidence of mass religious conversion and consideration them to great events.

We can conclude from the above discussion that any protest against religious conversion is always branded as persecution, because it is maintained that people are not allowed to practice their religion, that their religious freedom is curbed. The truth is entirely different. The other person also has the freedom to practice his or her religion without interference. That is his/her birthright. Religious freedom does not extent (sic) to having a planned programme of conversion. Such a programme is to be construed as aggression against the religious freedom of others.

Finally, as far as Hinduism is concerned, besides it being vindicated as a way of life, efforts must be made to augment its role as a form of religion, that is, Hinduism must be practiced as a religion that

upholds the principles of personal freedom, self-dignity, social equality and economic security. This will reduce the chances of transgression by way of conversion in any manner. Scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita should gather larger weight age and reach the necessary quarters for sufficient lobbying to match the access and emotional respect gained by the Bible and the Koran. The image of a Hindu will go up not by blaming others for conversion but by creating conditions that will make conversion by and large unnecessary for the fellow members of his religion.

The process of modernization in India, well under way during the British colonial period (1757-1947), has brought with it major changes in the organizational forms of all religions. The missionary societies that came with the British in the early nineteenth century imported, along with modern concepts of print media and propaganda, an ideology of intellectual competition and religious conversion. Instead of the customary interpretation of rituals and texts along received sectarian lines, Indian religious leaders began devising intellectual syntheses that could encompass the varied beliefs and practices of their traditions within a framework that could withstand Christian arguments.

One of the most important reactions was the Arya Samaj (Arya Society), founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda (1824-83), which went back to the Vedas as the ultimate revealed source of truth and attempted to purge Hinduism of more recent accretions that had no basis in the scriptures. Originally active in Punjab, this small society still works to purify Hindu rituals, converts tribal people, and runs centers throughout India. Other responses include the Ramakrishna order of renunciants established by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), which set forth a unifying philosophy that followed the Vedanta teacher Shankara and other teachers by accepting all paths as ultimately leading toward union with the undifferentiated brahman¹ (The Tradition of the Enlightened Master). One of the primary goals of the Ramakrishna movement has been to educate Hindus about their own scriptures; the movement also runs book stores and study centers in all major cities. Both of these paths are directly modeled on the institutional and intellectual forms used by European missionaries and religious leaders.

During the 1930s and 1940s, again responding to institutional models from Europe, the more activist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS--National Volunteer Organisation) emerged to protect Hinduism. The RSS had been founded in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1944), a native of Maharashtra who was concerned that Hinduism was in danger of extinction from its external foes and needed a strong, militant force of devotees to protect it. Members believe that the Indian nation is the divine mother to whom the citizen devotes mind and body through karma-yoga , or disciplined service. Training consists of daily early morning meetings at which the saffron, white, and green Indian flag and the swallow-tailed, red-ocher RSS banner are raised as rows of members salute silently. There are then group drills in gymnastic exercises, sports, discussions of patriotic themes from a primarily Hindu viewpoint, group singing of nationalist songs, and a final assembly with saluting. Throughout India in the early 1990s, there were cells (shakha) of fifty to 100 members from all walks of life (the RSS rejects class differences) who were devoted to the nation. Although it has attracted hundreds of thousands of members from all over India, the RSS has never projected itself as a political party, always remaining a national club that is ready to send its members to trouble spots for the defense of the nation and the national culture, embodied in Hinduism. The Jana Sangh, established in 1951, was the RSS's political arm until it joined the Janata Party in 1977 and its membership split away in 1980 to form the BJP.

¹The Tradition of the Enlightened Master

Another activist organization is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP--World Hindu Council), founded in 1964. The VHP runs schools, medical centers, hostels, orphanages, and mass movements to support Hinduism wherever it is perceived as threatened. This ultraconservative organization played a role in the extensive agitation for the demolition of a mosque in Ayodhya, leading to the destruction of the structure during a huge demonstration in 1992. As a result of the VHP's complicity in the affair, the Ministry of Home Affairs imposed a two-year ban on the Vishwa Hindu Parishad under the Unlawful Activities Act. When the ban expired in December 1994, the government reimposed it for two additional years.

The spread of Hindu "communal" (that is, religious) sentiment parallels a similar rise in religious chauvinism and "fundamentalist" ideologies among religious minorities, including Muslims and Sikhs. Against this background of agitation, the periodic outbreak of communal riots in urban areas throughout India contributes to an atmosphere of religious tension that has been a hallmark of the national political scene during the twentieth century. Hindu-Muslim riots, especially in North India, reached a peak during the partition of India in 1947 and periodically escalated in urban areas in the early 1990s (see *Political Impasse and Independence*, ch. 1). This strife typically involves low-income groups from both communities in struggles over land, jobs, or local resources that coalesced around a religious focus after seemingly trivial incidents polarized the two communities. In practice, although members of other religious communities are the victims of violence, rioters are rarely motivated by religious instructors, although fundamentalist agitators are often implicated. The situation in North India became complicated during the 1980s by Sikh terrorism connected with the crisis in Punjab, the widespread anti-Sikh riots after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in November 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards, and a series of terrorist or counterterrorist actions lasting into the 1990s. In all of these cases, many observers believe that religion has appeared as a cover for political and economic struggles.

The perception that one's religion is in danger receives periodic reinforcement from the phenomenon of public mass religious conversion that receives coverage from the news media. Many of these events feature groups of Scheduled Caste members who attempt to escape social disabilities through conversion to alternative religions, usually Islam, Buddhism, or Christianity. These occasions attract the attention of fundamentalist organizations from all sides and heighten public consciousness of religious divisions. The most conspicuous movement of this sort occurred during the 1950s during the mass conversions of Mahars to Buddhism (see *Buddhism*, this ch.). In the early 1980s, the primary example was the conversion of Dalits to Islam in Meenakshipuram, Tamil Nadu, an event that resulted in considerable discussion in the media and an escalation of agitation in South India. Meanwhile, conversions to Christianity among tribal groups continue, with growing opposition from Hindu revivalist organizations.

Alongside the more publicized violent outbreaks, there have been major nonviolent changes, as new sectarian movements continue to grow and as established movements change. For example, the Radhasoami Satsang movement of North India, which includes adherents in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, encompasses yogic ideas on the relationship between humans and the universe, the bhakti saint tradition including select Sikh influences, and the veneration of the enlightened guru. The dominant tendency of these new religions, following the example of the great teachers of the past that was reiterated by Mahatma Gandhi and most modern gurus, remains nonviolence to all living beings and acceptance of the remarkable diversity of Indian religion.

Religious diversity has been a defining characteristic of India's population for centuries. The country has no official state religion, but religion plays a central role in Indian daily life through its temple ceremonies, festivals, pilgrimages, family religious traditions, and the like. While Hinduism has been the dominant religion for several thousand years, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism have also flourished.

Religion is taken far more seriously in India than it often is in the West and by virtually the entire population. It is often difficult for a foreigner to fully appreciate religion's importance in this officially secular country. Followers of India's religions, particularly Hindus and Muslims, have created what Indians call "communities," groups who largely coexist peacefully but live and worship in separate social circles. Accordingly, when violence does break out between groups, it is referred to as "communal" violence.

Census data on religious groups are frequently misunderstood and misquoted in the Indian media, particularly by writers and columnists advancing a particular point of view. Some non-Muslims, in both national and regional political parties, worry that faster population growth among Muslims will cause a societal imbalance in the Hindu-majority country.¹ Thus, it is worthwhile to look at the actual numbers before considering this issue further.

Communities Growing at Different Rates

According to the 2001 Census, 81 percent of the 1,028 million people enumerated in India were Hindu, leaving 200 million people who adhere to other religions (see Table 1). Hindus are the majority in all the larger states, except for Jammu and Kashmir, where they accounted for 30 percent, and Punjab, where Hindus make up 37 percent. In the other states, Hindu majorities ranged from 56 percent in Kerala to 95 percent in Himachal Pradesh.

Nationally, Muslims are the next largest religious group, outnumbering all other religious groups taken together. In 2001, among every 1,000 Indians, there were 134 Muslims but just 23 Christians, 19 Sikhs, eight Buddhists, and four Jains. Unlike Hindus and Muslims, Christians, Jains, and Sikhs are concentrated in a few states. The four southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka accounted for half of the Christian population of the country. Sikhs are concentrated in the Punjab, which accounted for 76 percent of the 19.2 million Sikhs in 2001. Buddhists are mostly confined to Maharashtra, where 73 percent of India's 8.0 million Buddhists live. Many Buddhists are from the Dalit, or Untouchable, Hindu caste who converted to Buddhism (which does not have castes) in the belief this will negate their low caste status.

Differing growth rates can be a cause for alarm but the actual figures show that the changing balance is much less significant than it first appears. Looking at the absolute numbers, Hindus increased by 140 million between 1991 and 2001, while Muslims grew by 37 million. Even over the 40-year span between the 1961 and 2001 censuses, the Hindu proportion of the total population showed a scant decrease, from 84 percent to 81 percent. The Sikh proportion remained unchanged throughout the entire period at 2 percent. Thus, census data show that, decades from now, India's religious makeup will look very

much as it does now. And, with the use of family planning rising among all groups, the prospects for further stabilization are quite real.

Social and Economic Differences

Female literacy ranges from 91 percent among Jains to 53 percent among Hindus and 50 percent among Muslims. The Muslim population is slightly younger than other groups because of somewhat higher fertility, with the under-7 age group accounting for 19 percent of the population. Jains are often among India's most successful businesspeople and their level of urbanization and literacy reflects this.

The sex ratio of the population ages 0 to 6 sheds light on the degree to which the preference for male children results in sex-selective abortion. A "normal" sex ratio is about 950 girls per 1,000 boys, and it is near that level for Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Others. The below-average ratio for Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs signals a strong preference for male children.²

Some of the social and economic differences among religious communities are reflected in local and national politics and occasionally lead to violence.³ But in general, India's record on religious toleration for the past 40 years has been remarkable, particularly in view of efforts by some radical groups to upset it. Further, terrorism, often intended to incite communal violence, has done nothing of the sort.⁴ Census data and population trends suggest that there will be no major upheaval in India's makeup; and demography, after all, is destiny.

Deconversion

Research of conversion is paralleled to a lesser extent by research on deconversion. Research on deconversion has been divided into two subgroups, new religious movements (NRM) and mainstream groups.

New religious movements

There are many reasons why people de-convert from new religious movements. A key factor to consider is that many times a NRM occurs in isolation from the outside world; when this isolation is broken de-conversion may occur. NRM typically regulate interpersonal relationships, as the development of unregulated interpersonal relationships may lead to de-conversion. Followers of a NRM may become frustrated when their efforts produce no success or social change and eventually abandon the movement. Finally, followers may become disillusioned with the movement or its leader and leave the movement.

De-conversion may occur suddenly or be a gradual process. Generally de-conversion will be a quiet process for those who have only been a member of the NRM for one year or less. However, for those who have been a follower for longer than a year tend to go through confrontational, emotional, and dramatic de-conversion processes.

Mainstream

A minority of mainstream religious followers truly reject their faith and de-convert. Apostates make up just 7% of de-conversions from mainstream religion. However, 80% will withdraw and later return.

Generally there are two disengagement measures for the mainstream religious. In the first, behavioral, followers will go one month or longer without attending a religious service. The second type of disengagement, belief, sees followers go for a year or longer without religion being a part of their life.

Laws and Indian Constitution

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution has the word "secular", thereby implying that the State will not discriminate, patronise or meddle into the profession of any religion. However, it shields individual religions or groups by adding religious rights as fundamental rights. Article 25 says "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health." Further, Article 26 says that all denominations can manage their own affairs in matters of religion. All these rights are subject to be regulated by the State.

Article 25 (2b) uses the term "Hindus" for all classes and sections of Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs. Sikhs and Buddhists objected to this wording that makes many Hindu personal laws applicable to them.^[13] However, the same article also guarantees the right of members of the Sikh faith to bear a Kirpan. Religions require no registration. The government can ban a religious organisation if it disrupts communal harmony, has been involved in terrorism or sedition, or has violated the Foreign Contributions Act. The government limits the entry of any foreign religious institution or missionary and since the 1960s, no new foreign missionaries have been accepted though long term established ones may renew their visas. Many sections of the law prohibit hate speech and provide penalties for writings, illustrations, or speech that insult a particular community or religion.

Some major religious holidays like Christmas (Christian), Eid (Muslim), Guru Nanak's birth anniversary (Sikh) and Holi (Hindu) are considered national holidays. Private schools offering religious instruction are permitted while government schools are non-religious.

The government has set up the Ministry of Minority Affairs, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) to investigate religious discrimination and to make recommendations for redressal to the local authorities. Though they do not have any power, local and central authorities generally follow them. These organisations have investigated numerous instances of religious tension including the implementation of "anti-conversion" bills in numerous states, the 2002 Gujarat violence and the 2008 attacks against Christians in Orissa.

For Shia Muslims, the Grand Ashura Procession In Kashmir where they mourn the death of Husayn ibn Ali has been banned by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir from the 1990s. People taking part in it are detained, and injured^[18] by Jammu and Kashmir Police every year.^[19] According to the government, this restriction was placed due to security reasons. Local religious authorities and separatist groups condemned this action and said it is a violation of their fundamental religious rights.

Against conversions

The Article 25 of the Indian Constitution is a basic human right guarantee that cannot be subverted or misinterpreted in any manner. It is in this context that the anti-conversion laws in India must be viewed. Anti-conversion laws are promulgated on the premise that forced or induced conversions happen and need to be prevented. Such laws are controversial because they run the risk of being abused by

communal forces who may have the tacit approval of the dominant political party in the state or country.

A consolidation of various anti-conversion or so-called "Freedom of Religion" Laws has been done by the All Indian Christian Council. Several Indian states passed Freedom of Religion Bills primarily to prevent people from converting to Christianity. Orissa was the first state to bring such law named as 'Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967'. It was followed by Madhya Pradesh in 1968 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. Catholics protested against this saying that propagation of their faith was an important part of Christianity. Both laws enacted by the Orissa and Madhya Pradesh high courts were challenged stating Article 25 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court supported the laws saying, "What is freedom for one is freedom for the other in equal measure and there can, therefore, be no such thing as a fundamental right to convert any person to one's own religion". This move was criticised because it ignored Article 25 and it did not differentiate between forced conversion and conversion by persuasion.

Chhattisgarh in 2000 and Gujarat State in 2003 passed anti-conversion laws. In July 2006, the Madhya Pradesh government passed legislation requiring people who desire to convert to a different religion to provide the government with one month's notice, or face fines and penalties. In August 2006, the Chhattisgarh State Assembly passed similar legislation requiring anyone who desires to convert to another religion to give 30 days' notice to, and seek permission from, the district magistrate. In February 2007, Himachal Pradesh became the first Congress Party-ruled state to adopt legislation banning illegal religious conversions. It was followed by Rajasthan in 2008.

In 2013, the Bharatiya Janata Party general secretary Venkaiah Naidu has declared that his party would bring anti-conversion laws nationwide if his party is elected to power in 2014. However, as of April 2015, the party does not yet have a majority in the Upper House of the Parliament. The president of party Amit Shah has challenged the opposition parties to support it in enacting such a law. The US State Department has said that the recent wave of anti-conversion laws in various Indian states passed by some states is seen as gradual increase in the Hindu nationalism (Hindutva).

Freedom of religion in India is a fundamental right guaranteed by Article 15 and Article 25 of the Constitution of India. Modern India came into existence in 1947 as a secular nation and the Indian constitution's preamble states that India is a secular state. Every citizen of India has a right to practice and promote their religion peacefully. However, there have been a number of incidents of religious intolerance that resulted in riots and violence, notably, the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, 2002 Anti-Muslim riots and the 2008 Anti-Christian riots. The perpetrators of the violence are rarely brought to justice despite widespread condemnation. India is one of the most diverse nations in terms of religion, it being the birthplace of four major world religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Even though Hindus form close to 80 percent of the population, India also enjoys multiple regions with majority populations of other religions: notably, Jammu and Kashmir with Muslim majority, Punjab with Sikh majority, and Nagaland with Christian majority. The country has large Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain and Zoroastrian populations. Islam is the largest minority religion in India, and the Indian Muslims form the third largest Muslim population in the world, accounting for over 14 percent of the nation's population.

Rajni Kothari, founder of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies has written, "India is a country built on the foundations of a civilization that is fundamentally non-religious.

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