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***Ghar Wapsi* and the ethics of conversion in India and other non-Abrahamic countries**

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Abstract:

The controversy over the *Ghar Wapsi* (homecoming) conversions in India has brought to focus the problematic ways in which freedom of (and from) religion and secularism have been idealized and enacted in the country since its independence. This paper looks at the state of discourse on conversion - especially the idea of predatory proselytization - and how *Ghar Wapsi* could compel both Christian and Muslim groups to re-examine the ways in which they convert non-Abrahamic populations. Borrowing from postcolonial frameworks, this paper seeks to problematize the idea of conversion itself in societies such as India - and why *Ghar Wapsi* is just as much a product of centuries of aggressive proselytizing and coercive conversion as it is a response to it.

Keywords: *Ghar Wapsi*; conversion; India; Northeastern India; Southern India; Christianity; Hinduism; Colonial religion; Post-Colonial Society and religion; Non-Abrahamic religions

Introduction

In Chinua Achebe's groundbreaking *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the novel's protagonist Okonkwo, is faced with the destruction of everything he knew as a proud member of an Igbo village. Okonkwo, after being exiled, returns to his village, only to find his community's once proud animist way of life transformed into one dominated by a Christian church with more converts each day. Okonkwo discovers that the society he knew had been torn apart by the church, which had also brought in a new government and hired his village people to administer "foreign" laws. Prior to his ill-fated attack on the church, Okonkwo pleads with a small group of fellow villagers to overthrow the government that had divided the community. His friend Obierika tells him that it is too late, and when pressed by Okonkwo about whether the white man knew the village's customs, responded:

How can he when he does not even speak our tongue. But he says our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe, 1994: 176).

Achebe's work is regarded as a pillar of anti-colonial fiction, but the happenings of the novel are not fictitious. Indeed, Achebe was simply chronicling what was happening across Nigeria, particularly in the southern half of the country, as colonial rule had become institutionalized - and Christianity had obliterated many of the tribal customs of Ibo and Yoruba people. Many of the legacies of the colonial period, as Mamdani (1996) notes, continue to manifest themselves in post-independent Nigeria. But the Nigeria example - and

Achebe's book - barely scratch the surface of the centuries of impact that conversion has had on indigenous peoples, traditions, and the ways that societies as a whole function. As Perkinson (2013) argues, the theology of European Christian missionaries was predicated upon one of destruction and replacement of indigenous traditions, creating deep fissures in societies that had been based upon oneness of beings and their environments.

While much has been written about the implications of conversion in developing countries, its ethics and practical ramifications have not been fully grasped in the academy, particularly as indigenous traditions become co-opted, marginalized, or altogether obliterated in the wake of mass conversions. This is why the *Ghar Wapsi* (homecoming) effort embarked by right-wing Hindu groups in India has become an opening to not

only discuss the ramifications of conversion (or re-conversion), but also to address the longstanding failure by Indian society to examine how much predatory proselytizing has impacted the country socially, politically, economically, ecologically, and most importantly, spiritually. The sheer audaciousness of the attempts by Hindu, Sikh, and Jain groups to re-convert those supposedly lost to Christianity and Islam is not only a caricature of the nature of conversion, but a public mimicry of what has gone on in India virtually unnoticed for centuries.

In this article, I examine how the legacy of colonialism, centuries of Orientalism's impact on Dharmic faiths, post-independence politics, and social constructions of communalism in Indian public discourse converge at the site of *Ghar Wapsi* as a contested idea.

Drawing from postcolonial and critical race perspectives, I argue that the very existence of *Ghar Wapsi* serves to problematize the idea of conversion in non-Abrahamic countries, particularly those resulting from unethical or coerced conversion, also known as predatory proselytizing. By its very nature, predatory proselytizing is exploitative of its attempts to coerce or provoke conversion from religion or another. Finally, by highlighting the debate between the groups conducting the re-conversions and those who have criticized it as an onslaught on religious minorities, I intend to show the contrast between the rhetoric of pluralism and its limitations in practice.

Conversion in India: Colonialism, Spiritual Violence, and the Orientalist Gaze

While the relationships between Hindus - who make up about 80 percent of India's population - and religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims have focused on communalism in the years after partition of the subcontinent and the adoption of the Indian Constitution, much of contemporary discourse is often de-contextualized. Scholars such as Doniger and Nussbaum (2015) assert, for example, that the rise of the Hindu Right in India undermines long histories of pluralism within the country without explaining the buildup to independence and the communal dynamics among and within India's various faith communities.

However, such assertions fail to account for the history of conversion - and the elimination of heterogeneous cultures - in the Indian subcontinent and in other lands in which organized religions imposed

themselves upon decentralized belief systems, a form of spiritual violence. Some scholars such as Long (2007) and Rambachan (2015) note that the idea of religion itself was awkwardly applied to Dharmic ways of belief. To this end, conquest and co-option has been part of every society, and as scholars such as Nicholson (2010) assert, Hinduism itself has evolved through some co-option of various localized practices bound together by attempts at philosophical cohesion. However, the sacking of Delhi by Timur in the 13th century, the on-again, off-again imposition of the *jizya* during Mughal rule, the Goan Inquisition, and the introduction of systematic conversions by Christian missionaries during the British colonial era all represent singular events or periods of macroaggression towards Indian native populations. But while those were marked by overt violence or symbolic

violence, the deeper trauma was sustained in daily practice and in a culmination of daily microaggressions against Dharmic faiths and tribal beliefs throughout the Indian subcontinent. As scholars such as Galtung (1990), cultural violence is not necessarily tied to blood and weaponry, but rather systematic de-legitimization of indigenous social practices.

Galtung notes that alienation is one of the most powerful forms of cultural violence, noting that the systemic internalization of culture has “a double aspect: to be desocialized away from own culture and to be resocialized into another culture -like the prohibition and imposition of languages. The one does not presuppose the other. But they often come together in the category of second class citizenship where the subjected group (not

necessarily a 'minority') is forced to express dominant culture and not its own, at least not in public space” (Galtung, 1990: p. 293). The interactions between Abrahamic religions and dharmic traditions in India (and animist traditions that fall outside of the definitions of dharma faiths) were not purely violent and antagonistic, as some Hindu activists are wont to claim. While scholars such as Truschke (2012 & 2015) and Jaffrelot (1998) write that relationships among Hindus and Muslims were more syncretic and collaborative prior to partition, such claims also overlook forms of cultural and spiritual violence - including the imposition of the *jizya* on non-Muslims for several centuries (Khan, 2001). It also deeply oversimplifies complex class and cultural relations in which religion sometimes ameliorated or exacerbated tensions.

Still, while Hindu-Muslim relationships and interactions were frequently shaped by cultural, linguistic, and geographical considerations over a period of centuries, the introduction of widespread, Eurocentric missionary Christianity had much more sustained consequences. For example, Christian education enforced a doctrinal view of religion, which shaped both converts and those who identified as part of dharmic and tribal traditions. The interactions between Christian missionaries and Indians of all non-Christian faiths were expansive, and to argue that it was limited to only systematic conversion would be to overlook many of the ways in which missionaries were influenced by Indic thought. Moreover, while the Goan Inquisition is considered the most violent means of coercive conversion, the more “peaceful” attempts at conversion

either took place indirectly or through what postcolonial scholars call the hybridization of exchange (Henn, 2014). As Bhabha (1985 & 1990) argues, the hybridized position allowed colonizers to adopt certain practices so as to be seen as local, including the idea that in India, converts to Christianity were still allowed to abstain from eating beef. However, as the East India Company became more entrenched in the subcontinent, the tactics of conversion became more focused on “educating” Indians on their uncivilized ways. This was especially evident in the ways that 19th century Indology developed in Germany and the United Kingdom, where missionary interpretations of classic Indian texts were considered the “proper” interpretations of Indic belief systems.

As Adluri and Bagchee (2014) argue, Indology was closely tied to the idea of systematically discrediting

Indic beliefs, often in ways that aligned with or exceeded missionary agendas. They note:

German Indologists...had accomplished something Jesuit missionaries over generations had struggled to do: they had found a way to make Hindu theology - at least from the perspective of those who were always already saved - redundant (**p. 301**).

The virtual erasure of Hindu theology and the re-interpretation of classic Indian texts from a Christian point of view largely shaped the way in which Hinduism would be defined in the academy, in Indian schools, and later, in the public sphere within in India and its Diaspora. However, it also created a platform from which conversion could be carried out along social and geographic lines. By the early 20th century, European missionaries had established “successful” conversion programs in the largely tribal areas of India’s northeastern and in southern areas such as Tamil Nadu (part of the

Madras presidency prior to India's independence). Moreover, churches were largely responsible for the publication of local texts, from which localized identities - including the Tamil Dravidian movement - became more prominent in the public sphere.

From this perspective, caste became a powerful arbitrator of religion and social capital. De Roover (2016) notes that contemporary language on caste draws directly from colonial lineage, creating an account that was both ahistorical and not grounded in daily social practice. As he notes:

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, European scholars, missionaries and colonial officials had developed a standard account about Hinduism and its caste system. By the early twentieth century, this account had achieved the status of a factual description of Indian culture and society. Yet, if we look at the conceptual building blocks that form the core of this account, these cannot be understood without the

Christian-theological framework that guided the Europeans in their reasoning about India. For centuries, it had been obvious to the Christian Europeans that Hinduism was a false religion and that the caste system was the evil social structure it had instituted. Against the background of this theological framework, they looked for the victims of the corrupt Hindu religion, the lowest of the low, who would obviously want to escape from its grips. (p. 21).

If conversion became part of the hybridized space between colonizer and colonized, then the passing down of converted traditions became a tradition of erasure. Moreover, conversion became introduced as a substitute for moksha, as Christian theologians and Indian converts lauded the merits of salvation. Indeed, as would later become an important part of conversion strategies in the 20th century, theologians and those sympathetic to British rule used the terminology of suffering and salvation as a means of endorsing systematic conversions. The idea of Hindu incivility also became an entrenched justification

for resisting Indian home rule, particularly as the British continued to be sceptical of a society in which local norms and customs did not comport with British ideas of functionality, masculinity (and femininity), and jurisprudence (Sinha, 1995). Moreover, as Sinha (2006) argues, India's social ills and perceived backwardness became conflated with Hinduism, leading writers like Katherine Mayo to compare Indians to children and the British as their protective parents. The racial justification for maintaining colonialism, in the eyes of Mayo and her supporters, was only matched by their belief that Hinduism enslaved its practitioners and subjected low-caste Hindus to the savagery of Brahmanical rule. As Mayo (1927) herself would write:

Given men who enter the world out of bankrupt stock, rear them through childhood in influences and practices that devour their vitality; launch them at the

dawn of maturity on an unrestrained outpouring of their whole provision of creative energy in one single direction; find them, at an age when the Anglo-Saxon is just coming into full glory of manhood, broken-nerved, low-spirited, petulant ancients; and need you, while this remains unchanged, seek for other reasons why they are poor and sick and dying and why their hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or to hold the reins of government? (p. 32)

Mayo became a crusading journalist in the missionary sense, arguing that the only way to “liberate” the lot of Indians from their enslaved ways was through conversion. She especially saw this as a means of emancipating Dalits, whom she and other missionaries viewed as India’s slave class. In praising conversion, she wrote: “the fact stands that these converts are set free, as far as they can grasp freedom, from caste bonds. The faces of the Hindus are fixed against them, to be sure. But of the converts of the third generation many experienced persons are found to say that they are the hope of India.”

While Mayo's arguments drew heated criticism from Indian nationalist leaders, including Gandhi, her social critique of India remained prominent during the transition from colonial rule to independence (and partition). It also provided the ideological impetus for Christian missionaries to continue their work, fueled largely by their own self-perceptions as the only ones who could save India from its irreconcilability with Western civilization. Moreover, Christianized understandings of suffering became the dominant framework from which both Westerners and Indians viewed Indian society, creating an impression that Hinduism was incompatible with the day to day realities of human existence.ⁱ

Secular ideals, conversion, and coercion

For India's transition to independence, the question of state and religion became critical as partition turned communal tensions into infernos across the western and eastern borders. As Wolpert (2009) observes, the drawing of partition lines in contested regions such as Punjab and Bengal - and the subsequent violence that ensued - created a dilemma for Indian leaders such as Jawarlahal Nehru. Nehru, as Nussbaum notes (2015), sought to limit and ultimately disconnect the role of religion from the public sphere, limiting the scope of Hinduism in the lives of millions of Indians and yet also fostering a climate in which any discussion of faith was seen as taboo. As Guha (2013) adds, Nehru did not so much as enter a temple, as he and other educated Hindus from the late colonial period made a conscious effort to de-link Hinduism from secularism, choosing to categorize Hinduism instead as a

system of superstitions and cults. More importantly, the Nehruvian mindset towards Hinduism ironically echoed the views of 19th century German historical materialist philosophers such as GW Hegel and Karl Marx, who dismissed Hinduism and Indian spiritual traditions as cults of plants and animals. As such, the educated public sphere that developed in post-independence India was inherently suspicious of religion. This suspicion became institutionalized in academic spaces, when, according to historians such as Guha, Marxist scholars - following in the tradition of DD Kosambi - began to dominate university appointments, helping to cultivate an idea of India's Hindu population as a monolithic, hegemonic group dominated by "Brahmins." In this lens, non-Hindus and scheduled caste communities became part of a defined subaltern among scholars. Ironically, while the

Marxist approach intended to decolonize the study of India, it mimicked some of Indology's most egregious claims, decontextualized important Indian classical texts, and framed the study of India as a dialectic of Hindu majoritarianism and a non-Hindu subaltern. Some of European Indology's attempts to project anti-Semitism towards Brahmins were unwittingly adopted by Marxists, who regurgitated anti-Brahmin positions espoused nearly a century earlier by German Indologists (Adluri & Bagchee, 2014). As Adluri and Bagchee (2014) note, the "Brahmins" of Indologists (and later Marxists) "were creatures of their own imagination, caricatures of rabbis drawn with brown chalk" (306).

From this lens of power and privilege, and the codification of laws that defined "caste Hindus" and "depressed classes" in India, secularism was seen as

preventing the majority of imposing its religious practices, but allowing special consideration and expression of minority religious practice (de Roover et al 2011; de Roover, 2016). As de Roover, Claerhout, and Balagangadhara (2011) note, the Indian idea of secularism - adopted from western political frameworks - was ill fitting to complex social, cultural, and religious dynamics. Moreover, the Indian government's "principled distance" approach simply called for a selective secularism (de Roover et. al, 2011). They add: "This is as good as saying that secularism in India does not have any general conceptual structure, but allows the state to decide on ad hoc basis which measures to adopt towards religious communities, as long as it is able to justify these in terms of some secular 'values'" (p. 577). It is within this notion of secular space and the protection of freedom to practice

religion that proselytizing became a daily part of the Indian social fabric. Hinduism, rather than being viewed from the lens of spiritual practice, became an oppressive hegemon. As Juluri (2014) notes, Hinduism soon became framed as incompatible with a secular nation struggling with modernization. Indeed, Hinduism was symbolically viewed as a relic of India's past. Within these discourses, the idea of freedom of religion became more prominent, particularly after the rise of Ambedkarist activism in central India, political mobilization of Sunni Muslims in large Indian cities, and the increasing political influence of Christian missionaries in India's northeastern and southeast coast. The discourse, as scholars such as Jaffrelot note, was shaped around two Nehruvian notions of majoritarianism and the practice of the minority: the right to be *against* religion (primarily Hinduism) and,

conversely, the right of minority (Abrahamic) religions to proselytize. In the latter frame, the promotion of secular ideals in India involved the unrestricted permission of practice for religious minorities, as well as accommodations to ensure that Christians and Muslims were allowed the maximum amount of religious liberty. This included, among other things, the Indian government's subsidizing of Indian Muslims' hajj, and the indirect logistical support to aid organizations that also actively proselytized Christianity.

However, by the late 1970s, the rise of Evangelical Christianity in the West, particularly the growth of political Christian movements that relied upon not only conversion, but adherence to dominionist ideologies, began to take effect in India. While some, like Shah (2003), note that Evangelicals in countries such as India

are more diverse ideologically than their American counterparts, the type of Christianity preached and proselytized in India was largely predicated upon on rejection of pluralism and embrace of socially conservative norms (Caplan, 1987). The most heavily proselytized communities were isolated tribal communities such as Nagas, and by the mid-1980s, three Indian states in the restive northeastern states were majority Baptist. Similarly, the conversion of Harijan communities in urban areas and of fishing jati communities in the Southeast had significant impacts, both on cultural norms and in the ecology of the communities. As such, scholars such as de Roover, Lamb and Perkinson, note that such conversions - often done in mass settings - were a form of sustained and systemic spiritual violence that dislodged communities from

ancestral practices and created adversarial relationships among groups that had formerly coexisted and cooperated.

By the 1990s, conversion had become a significant part of Indian social discourse. Some states, particularly those that embraced a Nehruvian ideal of secularism, saw conversion rates skyrocket between the once-a-decade census surveys. Moreover, the practice of what some call predatory proselytization - unethical proselytizing and conversion - became commonplace in areas where economic and educational opportunities were tied to religious conversions. Some states, including Tamil Nadu, briefly implemented anti-conversion laws, but for the most part, conversion rates rapidly increased as the 20th century ended. More significantly, U.S.-based Evangelical groups increased the amount of money they

spent on mission trips, echoing similar expenditures made in Africa and other parts of Asia. Groups like the Joshua Project helped facilitate more institution-based conversions in India, while Indian Christian groups - backed largely by U.S. donors - began more public attempts at proselytizing. Much of this was buoyed by Evangelical writer Luis Bush's idea of the 10/40 window - the part of the Eastern hemisphere between 10 and 40 degrees north of the Equator, which includes the Indian Subcontinent - as the primary target for proselytization efforts (Bush & Pegues, 1999; Claerhout & de Roover, 2008).

It was from this dynamic that *ghar wapsi* emerged as an almost exclusively reactionary movement led by Hindu, Jain and Sikh groups intent on "returning" communities they saw as part of their fold. While many

of these groups openly embraced the often xenophobic and ultranationalist rhetoric of Indian political organizations such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), others operated independently, making *ghar wapsi* more of a decentralized effort rather than a systematic one. As such, attempts to “bring home” those who had converted were often met with little success or public mockery in India. Even the Bharatiya Janata Party, which shared some of the ideological views as the VHP, did not openly endorse *ghar wapsi*, even after the 1998 election of Atal Vajpayee as prime minister. Instead, the BJP, while localizing their pro-Hindu rhetoric, attempted to foment a more uniform Indian nationalism, driven largely by a hawkish foreign policy and minimal attention to domestic social issues.

Changing discourse on the idea of pluralism and religious freedom in India

The issue of conversion, freedom of religion, and pluralism has changed in the last decade, however. Much of this has been due to the rise of a more politically potent right wing in parts of India - particularly in northern states like Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh - relying upon Hindu iconography and rhetoric that creates a Hindu/Dharmic ingroup and a non-Dharmic outgroup. Violence against Muslims, particularly during the 2002 Godra riots in Gujarat, became more prominently discussed in public discourse as the integration of Indian Muslims into the country's social fabric became a key point of discussion among intellectuals, policy makers and activists. Similarly, violence between Hindus and Christians in states such as Orissa, created a perception in the West that Hindu majoritarianism was oppressing non-Hindu

populations. Some writers, including Pankaj Mishra and Arundhati Roy, even likened India's social policies to Saudi Arabia's. Additionally, the language of slavery became intertwined with caste dynamics in India, despite the two having no parallels. Thanks to missionaries and even converted Indian scholars, however, the idea of untouchability as a form of slavery became both a subject of academic study and a rallying call for Christian activists (Manickam, 1982; Nair, 1986; and Kent, 2004). Through this narrative, missionaries, particularly those in Southern India, were hailed as progressives and as liberators from human bondage. As Perkinson (2013), such framing diminishes the extent of damage done by missionary activity, particularly in undoing the social fabric of communities.

However, as predatory proselytization has flourished, its results in India are not fully known beyond the tribal communities that converted en masse. Currently, the Indian Census estimates between 2.3-2.7 percent Christian population, though Christian advocacy groups estimate the number as high as 6 percent. Beyond tribal and scheduled caste communities, the efforts at evangelizing and proselytizing are also especially prominent following natural disasters. Following the 2004 tsunami, reports out of Tamil Nadu showcased how missionaries tried to capitalize upon displaced populations. While accurate data collection has been problematic, the effort to systematically convert Hindus is ongoing, even as missionaries continue to boast of the inroads they have made in different parts of India. Similarly, conversion to Islam in urban areas has

particularly impacted scheduled caste communities. As noted by scholars such as Hardgrave (1993), even scheduled caste communities who converted to Islam found life difficult within Muslim communities, due to jati divisions among Muslims.

But proselytization in India has never been solely a spiritual issue. In a country where vote-bank politics have become institutionalized, conversion is also a powerful political tool. Religious minorities and caste groups have formed voting blocs in regional elections, and have fueled national party dynamics. None of this is inherently problematic, given that diverse religious, ethnic, and caste interests often cultivate political alliances and governing coalitions. Moreover, some of these coalitions change over time. However, in some

areas, the growing political influence of religious minority parties increased the volatility of traditional party politics (Singh, 1993).

Within this context, the growth of Indian nationalist movements in northern India created a newfound call to “bring home” Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains who had converted to Christianity or Islam. This reactionary effort, led by groups such as the VHP and RSS, with independent efforts by affiliated Hindu and Sikh organizations, purported to re-convert thousands. However, their claims have largely been unsubstantiated. The public announcement of *ghar wapsi* in 2014 caused alarm among Indian intellectuals, who condemned the efforts as an attack on groups deemed un-Indian by Hindu extremists. While the rhetoric might have given some basis for the

concern, the criticisms missed a more important point: unethical conversion and predatory proselytization has created objects out of target groups, dehumanizing them and ultimately facilitating a series of systematic and localized micro (and macro) aggressions against vulnerable communities. The impact of proselytizing and conversion in India is not dissimilar from other indigenous societies, whether in North America, South America, Africa, or other parts of Asia. Perkinson (2013) notes that proselytizing and Evangelism can have disastrous ecological impacts, taking communities away from indigenous traditions that have helped to sustain livelihoods and the environment for centuries.

In that regard, it is important to ask whether Indians are doing more to question *any* attempt to

coercively convert others, whether it is *ghar wapsi* or the decades of predatory proselytizing by Christian and Muslim groups. It is also important to question whether *ghar wapsi* has achieved something beyond its organizers' intent: the re-examination of what it means to have religious freedom in India. In more than one sense, *ghar wapsi*'s sheer outrageousness could have the potential of reversing the damaging effects of "principled distance" in India, which has led to a disproportionate application of secular ideals. A more equally applied secularism could actually preserve freedom of religion while protecting communities from systematic proselytizing. For those who such as Mishra who argue that Gandhi would be appalled at the state of religious freedom of India, they might be right, but not in the way they think. After all, Gandhi would likely be vehemently

opposed to unethical attempts at conversion, reflected in his prescient quote from nearly a century ago.

“It is impossible for me to reconcile myself to the idea of conversion after the style that goes on in India and elsewhere today. It is an error which is perhaps the greatest impediment to the world’s progress toward peace. Why should a Christian want to convert a Hindu to Christianity? Why should he not be satisfied if the Hindu is a good or godly man?”

ⁱ It should be noted that these claims continue to be made in academia, as works such as *Disorienting Dharma* by Hudson (2014).

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