

In Pakistan, the problem of forced conversions

The recent conversion of two young girls from Hinduism to Islam in Sindh has once again compelled the country to explore the possibilities of enacting a law to prevent forced conversions. But it is an uphill task, reports **Mehmal Sarfraz**



"Minorities in Pakistan started to feel like 'minorities' during the time of General Zia-ul-Haq, says Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, who founded the Pakistan Hindu Council." Pakistani Hindus dancing on Holi, in Karachi. •AFP

For the Hindus of Sindh in Pakistan, March 20, the day Holi was celebrated, was a riot of colours. But for the Meghwar, it marked the beginning of a nightmare when two sisters, Reena Meghwar and Raveena Meghwar, suddenly disappeared from their home in Daharki, a city in Ghotki district of Sindh. Their disappearance not only brought back the spotlight on a persisting problem in the country, but also led to an online spat between Pakistan and India, which only recently saw simmering tensions reach a dangerous peak.

After a fruitless search for his sisters, Shaman, his father, and others from the community finally decided to go to the neighbourhood police station to lodge a complaint. The Station House Officer (SHO) there assured them on March 20 that the culprits would be caught. But when this did not look likely, the community staged a protest, forcing the SHO to file an FIR the next day against six men, three of them unknown, for abduction of the sisters.

Reena and Raveena, who are popular among their ten siblings, belong to a poor family. Their father is a tailor at a local clothes shop and makes PKR 400 (equivalent to about ₹200) for every suit he stitches. Shaman is a salesman, and earns PKR 10,000 per month. He is the only one in the family who has completed matriculation. A younger brother works at a motorcycle shop and does not earn much. The entire family's monthly income is between PKR 15,000 and 20,000. Apart from being poor, what further puts them at a disadvantage is that they are Hindus, the largest minority community in Pakistan. Sindh is home to nearly 90% of Pakistan's Hindu population and has a literacy rate of 55%.

The same day that the FIR was filed, a video of the two girls reading aloud the *Kalima* surfaced on social media. "We have converted to Islam," the two of them said, the colours of Holi still on their cheeks. It emerged that both the girls had left home and travelled to Rahim Yar Khan district in Punjab. It is unclear who took them there or accompanied them. There, they got married to Safdar Ali and Barkat Ali, both of whom were already married and have children. Safdar and Barkat's first wives left them as soon as news of the *nikkah* became public. The wedding took place on March 22 at an office of the Sunni Tehreek, a religious organisation, after the Bharchundi madrassa converted the girls to Islam. What remains a matter of dispute is the age of the two girls. While Shaman insists that his sisters are minors, the girls have claimed that they are above 18.

As though this rapid turn of events was not enough to digest for the Meghwar, the two sisters then filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court on

March 25 seeking protection from their family. The court ordered the government to protect the sisters until the matter was resolved.

Meanwhile, a war of words erupted between India and Pakistan, with India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj seeking a report from the Indian envoy in Pakistan on the case, and Pakistan's Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry retorting that this was an "internal issue". Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan ordered a probe to determine if the girls were abducted and then forcibly converted.

The issue of conversion

India's concern about the case was echoed on April 2 by the Chief Justice of the Islamabad High Court, Athar Minalah, who, when the sisters were produced before the court, asked, "Why are such incidents repeatedly being reported from one district [Ghotki] of the Sindh province?"

His is a valid question. According to the People's Human Rights Organisation, seven teenage Hindu girls have been kidnapped from Sindh province in the last two months alone, and forcibly

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Founder, Pakistan Hindu Council

converted to Islam.

The court formed a commission to establish the facts of the Reena-Raveena case. The commission presented its interim report to the court, soon after which the sisters were allowed to go back to their husbands. The court concluded that the girls were not forcibly converted. Das says his family is unhappy with the decision as they were not heard by the court.

Khawar Mumtaz, Chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women, who was part of the commission, says the sisters were sure about their decision. They knew before getting married that the two men were already married, she says. "These girls were institutionally facilitated. Everything appeared to have been well planned: they were taken to a religious seminary and travel arrangements were made for them. Besides, Dargah Pir Bharchundi Sharif [where the girls were converted] is known for such practices." The court has asked the commission for a larger report on the issue of conversions on May 14.

The role of madrassas

A 2015 report by the South Asia Partner-

ship-Pakistan in collaboration with Aurat Foundation found that that at least 1,000 girls are forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan every year. The report stated that the conversions take place in the Thar region, particularly in the districts of Umerkot, Tharparkar, Mirpur Khas, Sanghar, Ghotki and Jacobabad. People convert due to financial and economic reasons, the report said. It identified landlords, extremist religious groups, weak local courts and an insensitive administration as working together.

While in south Sindh, particularly in Umerkot and Tharparkar, the Hindus are mostly poor, in the north they are better off. Largely, it is girls from low-caste, poor Hindu families who are forcibly converted.

The Hindus in these regions say that two madrassas – Dargah Pir Bharchundi Sharif and Dargah Pir Sarhandi – are "symbols of terror and fear". Harris Khalique, writer and Secretary General of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, says madrassas provide an "institutional backing and that cannot happen if the state does not allow that. I rest the responsibility of such incidents squarely on the state, which fails its citizens." These conversions reflect a potent mix of patriarchy, economic deprivation, and religious hierarchy, he says. "Most of these girls come from Scheduled Castes. The men they marry are mostly financially better off. Even if they are just marginally better off, they belong to a more privileged segment of society. It becomes a power dynamic."

Under-age girls from poor farming communities are especially vulnerable to conversions, says senior journalist Shahzeb Jillani. "Wealthy Muslim farmers see them as fair game for abductions, rape, and prolonged sexual exploitation in captivity. Some notorious religious establishments proudly validate these alleged crimes. State institutions, the police and politicians have encouraged the trend by looking the other way," he says.

Jillani points out that Mirpur Khas, Tharparkar and Umerkot see the highest number of conversions. "The Pakistani military has traditionally viewed this population with suspicion," he says. "Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl runs a large well-funded madrassa, especially for new Muslim convert families near Chhor. In recent years, the army has increased its direct and indirect presence in the region by encouraging more madrassas and Islamic charity work. Jamaat-ud-Dawah and Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation are among those outfits whose presence and field work has expanded in Thar during the last five years." Therefore, the conversion of Hindu girls in border regions has to be seen in the context of these wider developments and the Pakistani state's se-



curity fears and paranoia vis-à-vis India, he adds.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's lawmaker Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, who founded the Pakistan Hindu Council, goes back in history to blame General Zia-ul-Haq for the present plight of minorities in Pakistan. "Minorities started to feel like 'minorities' during his time. As a result, low-caste Hindus were exploited by powerful people in the area. From 23% at the time of Partition, Hindus constitute around 5-6% of the total population today," he says.

Speaking of the role of madrassas, Vankwani says these institutions often give money to people to convert Hindu girls to Islam. "Whenever a Muslim boy runs away with a Hindu girl, the girl is taken in by one of the three madrassas and provided shelter," he says. "Nobody has taken notice of the threats given to the Hindu community."

Unlike in countries like Malaysia, where there is a process in place for conversions, there is no such process in Pakistan, Vankwani points out. "In Malaysia, those who want to convert submit an application/affidavit saying they are adults and want to change their religion. The process takes around three months. Then, a statement is recorded by a civic authority. Conversions cannot take place without the consent of the family in case of a minor. What kind of society is this where you convert and then don't allow them to meet their families and also get them married off within a short span of time?"

Asad Jamal, a lawyer, says madrassas should be prohibited from issuing conversion certificates. "Such an act should be penalised. Any law on forced conversions must have such a provision. Unless this is done, the market of conversions established by retrogressive religious groups will continue to flourish. It sustains their politics," he says.

Journalist Munizae Jahangir, who has conducted several shows on forced conversions, recalls reporting on a case many years ago in which three young girls from a poor Hindu family were offered boarding by a madrassa after converting to Islam. When Jahangir asked the girls why they had converted, she says they told her that they had done so after watching a popular TV show on 'Quran

TV'. While people have the freedom to convert, there is also a system that facilitates the process, Jahangir says.

Not all conversions are forced though. According to a report by Ayesha Tanzeem published in the *Voice of America*, "Some minor girls eloped with Muslim men against their family's wishes and changed their religion since marriage between a Muslim and a Hindu is not allowed in Islam. The parents often claimed kidnapping, since local police were unlikely to take action if it was determined the girls left willingly." Thus, determining whether or not a case of conversion is forced or voluntary is often tricky.

Preventing child marriage

Many believe that a crucial differentiation must be made between cases of conversion of minor girls and adult women. Legal expert Reema Omer says that in cases of conversion of minor girls, the primary failure is in ensuring the implementation of the law against child marriage. Conversion becomes a secondary issue in these cases, she says. "This includes the lax attitude of families as well as the state on timely birth registrations. It also includes the state's apathy in ensuring that such marriages are stopped and the perpetrators are penalised."

Given the conflicting reports on Reena and Raveena's age, the question to be asked is, why were their births not registered soon after they were born? While Das says birth certificates were "not really a priority for the family", locals say the process of registering births and deaths is cumbersome. This omission is what allows families to get away with child marriage, says Omer.

A medical report presented before the court stated that the two girls are not minors. In addition, a source in the Sindh government told *The Hindu* on the condition of anonymity that Reena and Raveena's call data show that they were regularly in touch with the men they married. The police also claim that the girls married of their own free will. Das and his family refuse to believe this. "We had never seen these men. We saw them for the first time in the *nikkah* video," Das says.

Sulema Jahangir, an advocate of the High Courts in Pakistan, says that while conversions of underage girls is a cause for concern, there are also instances of older women converting voluntarily to Islam to escape an abusive marriage, hinting at the complexities involved in the issue. When the Sindh Hindu marriage law was being debated a few years ago, a lot of Hindu groups protested against allowing women the right to divorce and remarry. Some experts believe that it is important not to give the state greater control over women's lives. Chaudhry says minorities face pro-

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FAWAD CHAUDHRY
Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting

blems everywhere in the world. "In this case, we have once again proved that the state of Pakistan stands with its minorities and marginalised communities/groups. The state has not abdicated its responsibility. The only problem is that if an adult takes a decision herself/himself, and gives a statement in the court of law, then we cannot interfere in such cases. Our policy, though, is very clear on minority rights – we are against any forced conversions and we will not let that happen," he says.

A Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf lawmaker says on the condition of anonymity that the Prime Minister is not too keen to dwell on this issue fearing backlash from powerful religious groups.

Pending legislation

Three years ago, the Sindh Assembly unanimously passed the Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill, 2015, which made forced conversions punishable by law. But following a backlash from conservative Muslim groups, the legislation never saw the light of the day.

Asad Jamal, a lawyer, says the main failure lies in preventing child marriage. But what makes the situation trickier is the fact that the minimum age for marriage varies across regions. In Punjab, it is 16 for girls and 18 for boys. In Sindh, it is 18 for both girls and boys. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the legal marriageable age for girls is 14 in accordance with the original Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. "There is a law against child marriage, but it is inadequate," says Jamal. "All child marriages under the age of 18 should be prohibited and declared invalid."

Murtaza Wahab, adviser on information and law to the Sindh Chief Minister, says that in principle, the Sindh government has decided to reconsider the forced conversions Bill. "We will start the consultation process again. We will have consultations with the Hindu community as well as those from the religious school of thought regarding the age limit for conversions, which was the main bone of contention the last time around," he says.

Pakistan's lawmakers are slowly realising that until such time that a law is enacted on conversions and strictly implemented, it will be an uphill task to put a stop to forced conversions.