**Forced conversion and religious zealots**

[Makhdoom Shahab-ud-Din](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/makhdoom-shahab-ud-din/" \o "More Articles by Makhdoom Shahab-ud-Din)

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I was appalled upon learning that yet another family fell a victim of a religious zealot-another forceful conversion had taken place in Pakistan. To be born in a country which was created on a rationale that offered equality for all minorities, I was nothing but flabbergasted over this surreal yet heinous act of a conversion of two Hindu girls that were abducted from Ghotki.

Whenever I hear about forceful conversions of Hindu girls in Pakistan, the conversion always surfaces as a post factum news. In other words, many forceful conversions in Pakistan are harnessed as a mean to an end and not based on logic or actual religious guidance. This form of “ethnic cleansing” is more deemed as an insurrection against Islam rather than helping the religion prosper.

The rate of forced conversions is higher in Sindh, and any effort to criminalize the practice is met with strong opposition from the religious quarters, that reign supreme in the country. Not too long ago, Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) was claiming credit for introducing the forced conversion bill, officially titled ‘Criminal Law (protection of minorities)’ in the Sindh Assembly. But the bill seems to have been brushed under the carpet after religious parties termed it a ‘conspiracy of enemies of Islam to destabilize the country’.

Take the example of Kasturi, a girl from Tharparkar, who was allegedly kidnapped and raped by the son of a local influential landlord. After the case had become public, the landlord suggested to convert Kasturi to Islam and to marry her to one of his sons. Conversion in this case merely served as a way to conceal the sexual assault. Similarly, this case also sparks the same modus operandi of using male dominance to forcing women from other religions for their own needs. This is not only shameful but also goes against all Islamic teachings, laws and jurisdiction. In recent years, incidents of alleged forced conversion have increasingly polarized the Islamic Republic. Religious conversions, of course, have a long history in South Asia and, in fact, all over the globe. Cases of Hindu women willingly – or unwillingly – converting to Christianity or Islam have occupied colonial courts and have repeatedly served as disruptive moments for communal harmony. Then as well as today, such discourses reduce women’s suffering to a by-product of a crime which was ultimately inflicted by one male community on another male community. It seems that notions of honor frequently form the basis of cases of forced conversion, and therefore, “men” often emerge as the apparent victims of such incidents – while the fate of the women involved remains secondary. The act converting mostly women shows how narrow minded and misogynistic we are as a nation.

*The two sister’s forceful conversion to Islam has shown how religious zealots turned her body into a mute token of male honor, bereft of the ability to speak for herself*

Now, the spate of conversions to Islam is changing the way Hindus live in a province that has been their home for generations. Lajpat Meghwadh said that Hindu families, including his in-laws, are leaving their villages for other cities in Sindh. Accurate counts of the Hindus leaving their villages are difficult to come by; there is only anecdotal evidence. As for Hindus leaving Pakistan altogether and migrating to India, one estimate put the number at 5,000 per year. Similar forceful conversion like that of the two sisters from Ghotki is making an international outcry for equal rights of minorities quite inevitable. It’s not too soon when Pakistan will be deemed as a religious extremist country just like India thus tearing out international image to shambles. It seems that notions of honour frequently form the basis of cases of forced conversion, and therefore, “Islamists” often emerge as the apparent victims of such incidents – while the fate of the women involved remains secondary.

Finally, if we wish to fully understand why these girls disappear, I believe it is crucial to engage with the Hindu community’s patriarchal structures. I believe that behind some cases of forced conversion we actually find a family’s attempt to avoid social stigma.

Rural parts of Sindh (but also other parts in Pakistan) are highly patriarchal and daughters who decide to marry a man of their own choice are frequently a reason for shame. By labelling an eloped daughter as the victim of a crime, Hindu families avoid ridicule and embarrassment. I base this assumption on my lengthy collaboration with Hindu rights groups in Sindh as well as the study of affidavits taken from Sindhi newspapers. Similarly, as the families are in minorities and cannot fend off for their selves they seek no other way but to let their women tangled in the red threads of their unsightly fate by giving them in the hands of extremists