



Reinventing Hinduism

The Hindutva Discourse on (Re)conversion

MA Thesis Asian Studies (PSE)

Supervisor: Dr. Radhika Gupta

03-01-2021

Wordcount: 14892

M. Bethlehem

Index

Introduction	3
Chapter 1 - The context of (re)conversion	7
A short introduction to Hindutva ideology	7
A history of (re)conversion to Hinduism.....	10
The earliest forms: incorporation and the Shuddhi movement	10
Ghar Wapsi: modern (re)conversion	13
Legislation on conversion	15
Adivasi and Dalit Hinduization	18
Conversion to non-Indian religions	20
Islam.....	20
Christianity	22
Secularism in India	24
Chapter 2 - Analyzing the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion	26
Frequently Asked Questions, its audience and accountability	26
Conversion to non-Indian religions: an Indian problem.....	28
Hinduization and (re)conversion	30
The construction of narrative.....	32
Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography.....	37
Appendix A	40

Introduction

Many people living in the West believe religion is something that should be abolished from the public sphere. This idea was expressed in the popular secularization thesis, which envisioned the decreasing importance of religion in the public sphere.¹ Secularism is thus often interpreted as the disappearance of religion, and in this way is very much informed by notions of what religion entails.² These notions differ around the world and for that reason secularism's form can vary a lot per region and time period.³ It is often presumed that secularism is a characteristic of modernity and therefore, through the dynamics of globalization and modernization, religion is thought of as something that will eventually belong to the past.⁴

Events such as the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks have led to an academic rejection of the secularization thesis. Instead, the idea of a global resurgence of religion gained popularity amongst many scholars of related disciplines.⁵ Another frequently mentioned example of this supposed resurgence is the rise of religious nationalism in many different places around the world, including India where it is known as Hindu nationalism or Hindutva. The movement traces its name back to the writings of the founding father of Hindutva, Savarkar, in the 1920s.⁶ Written in the context of British colonial rule, the nationalism that Savarkar promoted was based on the notion of 'Hinduness', which advocated that those possessing 'Hinduness' could call India their ancestral home and the Holy Land of their religion.⁷

However, India is the largest democracy of the world and home to many different ethnic and religious identities that are protected by its constitution, which affirms secularism as integral to the identity of the nation.⁸ The Hindutva movement sees India as home of the Hindus, which contradicts the pluralist reality. This thesis investigates these tensions and contradictions

¹ Steve Bruce, "The Secularization Paradigm," in *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 1-44.

² Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, "Introduction," in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

³ Charles Taylor, "The Polysemy of the Secular," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1143.

⁴ Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," in *Secularism and its Critics* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 335.

⁵ Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1.

⁶ Sarbeswar Sahoo, *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 134.

⁷ Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.

⁸ Sebastian Kim, *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56.

between religion, religious nationalism and secularism by focusing on a fascinating phenomenon, namely reconversion to Hinduism.

Colonial governmentality made use of a census which documented the religious identities of Indians, leading to the formation of religious electorates. This practice placed emphasis on the importance of strength in numbers.⁹ During the struggle for Independence people who were previously considered outsiders of the caste system, such as Dalits (in the past also known as Untouchables) and Adivasis (the indigenous tribal people of India), were sought to be included into the Hindu fold in order to consolidate Hindus as the majority political constituency representative for India.¹⁰ However, many of these people from marginalized groups had felt the attraction of different religious systems that were less hierarchical, and carried a message of social justice and equality, such as Islam and Christianity.¹¹ Therefore large numbers had converted to these religions.

These conversions were seen as problematic for the unity of India, since Hindu nationalism dictated unification through a common culture and religion. Efforts were made from the early stages of Hindu nationalism until the present to halt conversions to non-Indian religions. When these efforts proved ineffective in raising the demographic number of Hindus, reconversion programs were introduced by Hindu nationalists in the 1980s.¹² In the past it was not possible to convert to Hinduism since it was a religion in which one was born.¹³ Nowadays reconversion programs allow people (mainly from marginalized groups with a Christian or Muslim identity) to return to the supposed religion of their ancestors, which is understood to be Hinduism. In this way, the Hindutva movement can incorporate people into the Hindu fold whilst not outright converting them. The question remains how this reinvention of Hinduism as a religion, which allows reconversion, is given form and why it is formulated as reconversion rather than conversion or Hinduization. Moreover, what kind of effect does this reinvention of Hinduism have on the perception of other religions making missionary efforts?

In order to further investigate these issues, the research question that this thesis will answer is as follows: ‘how does the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion reinvent Hinduism to accommodate Dalits and Adivasis?’ With this guiding question I want to look at the way in

⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot, “India: The Politics of (Re)conversion to Hinduism of Christian Aboriginals,” in *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, eds. Patrick Michel and Enzo Pace (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 197.

¹⁰ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (London: University of California Press, 2009), 6.

¹¹ Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 122.

¹² Jaffrelot, “India: The Politics of (Re)conversion,” 197.

¹³ Iris Vandeveld, “Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu Nationalist Reaction Against Conversion to Christianity and Islam,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 33.

which Hindu nationalist organizations involved in reconversion programs frame conversion to Christianity and Islam, and reconversion to Hinduism. In order to answer my research question, the first chapter of this thesis discusses the academic literature available on these issues to provide the needed context for the next chapter. This second chapter will make use of the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyze the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion by examining the document *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions*, produced by one of the main organizations involved in (re)conversion efforts.

All texts are shaped by the powers of social structures and actors.¹⁴ Therefore it is important to include the social context in which a text was written and to note what social practices it supports or rejects. CDA aims at showing how a discourse maintains the power balance of a society. It is often employed to investigate religious or political discourses on religious issues.¹⁵ In the context of this research, the discourse formed by the Hindutva movement comes from a position of political and societal dominance. (Religious) minorities in this context experience marginalization. Therefore, analyzing the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion will show how this status quo is maintained.

The CDA typically consists of textual analysis at both micro- and macro levels. At the micro level, the text is subjected to word for word inspection. It answers questions about the connotations of individual words and notes the used transitivity and modality. This aspect looks at the way in which the speaker relates themselves to their own claims. In this way the micro level of textual analysis focuses on the relationship between form and content of a text.¹⁶ The macro level of the textual analysis turns to rhetoric and narrative. It examines the persuasiveness of arguments and the order in which a story unfolds. CDA notes the relationship between the production and the consumption of a text as well.¹⁷ Finally, the CDA also analyses the social practice that the studied text supports. The use of CDA in my thesis will therefore show how the FAQ document builds and supports the Hindutva narrative on (re)conversion and how this reconstructs Hinduism as a religion to which (re)conversion is possible.

This thesis takes Christianity and Islam to represent non-Indian religions, since both of these religions have a foreign origin and do not regard India as their Holy Land, which is

¹⁴ Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 22.

¹⁵ See for example: Titus Hjelm, "National Piety: Religious Equality, Freedom of Religion and National Identity in Finnish Political Discourse," *Religion* 44, no.1 (2014): 28-45.

¹⁶ Titus Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 6 (2013): 862.

¹⁷ Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power," 863.

problematized by Hindu nationalists.¹⁸ Both Christianity and Islam have an intrinsic missionary goal, which has led their adherents to proselytize their faiths amongst the Indian population. This thesis focuses on conversion of the Dalits and the Adivasis since in the past these groups were considered outsiders of Hinduism, but in modern times they are experiencing an incorporation into the Hindu system. This reconsideration of who belongs to Hinduism will have its consequences for the construction of the concept of reconversion, since Hindu nationalists have to accommodate these marginalized people in order for them to (re)convert.

When discussing the efforts made through reconversion programs to have people identify themselves as Hindu, I use the term (re)conversion as Jaffrelot has used it previously, meaning that 'reconversion' could be described as conversion to Hinduism.¹⁹ With this term, drawing upon the work of Vandavelde, I refer to what in fact is an often first time conversion of Muslim and Christian people, but also Adivasis and Dalits, to Hinduism.²⁰ Hindu nationalists frame these conversions as reconversion, since Hinduism would be the religion of the ancestors of these people. However, this thesis takes a more nuanced point of view and therefore uses the term (re)conversion.

¹⁸ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 135.

¹⁹ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion," 205.

²⁰ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 42-43.

Chapter 1 - The context of (re)conversion

A short introduction to Hindutva ideology

Hinduism as a term refers to the different religious traditions that the early missionaries and later on the British colonizers found in India. In this sense Hinduism, and thus Hindu nationalism, is a modern invention.²¹ That is not to say that there are not any common characteristics between the different strands of Hinduism. For example, most share a common mythology with a similar pantheon of popular and local deities. The different traditions all adhere to the caste system of India as well, since caste structures Hinduism.²² In the modern process of ascribing certain characteristics to Hinduism, the influence of the tradition of the upper-caste groups, known as Brahmanism, was prevalent.²³

Because of its intertwinement with social hierarchy, Hinduism is sometimes understood to be more of an all-encompassing cultural system rather than a religious tradition.²⁴ However, by defining Hinduism as a cultural system rather than a religion, the Western (Protestant) paradigm of religion as individual beliefs is projected onto Indian traditions, displacing them outside of the religious realm. Hinduism does not adhere to this Western concept of the term religion, since it has different characteristics.²⁵ An important difference in characteristics for this thesis is the absence of the concept of conversion. Moreover, the way in which Hinduism perceives itself also differs from how many other (missionary) religions tend to see themselves. In Indian traditions religions are seen as different pathways to a common goal, namely salvation.²⁶ In the Western notion of religion, largely informed by its Judeo-Christian heritage, a religion is seen as an ultimate truth. In this way there can only be one path to salvation, which leads to the exclusion of other claims to truth.

Misplacing Hinduism outside of the religious realm provides evidence for the continuing orientalist perspective on Indian culture and religion, since the Western notion of religion as an ultimate truth is applied to exclude Hinduism from the religious realm and identify it as a cultural system. Through the orientalist discourse India was defined as the ‘other’ to the European ‘self’, which was mainly done in terms of spirituality versus rationality and femininity

²¹ Romila Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity,” *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 2, (1989): 110-113.

²² Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities,” 110-113.

²³ Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities,” 111-112; 118.

²⁴ Jaffrelot, “India: The Politics of (Re)conversion,” 197.

²⁵ Thapar, “Imagined Religious Communities,” 111; 118.

²⁶ Sarah Claerhout and Jakob de Roover, “Religious Freedom and the Limits of Propaganda: Conversion in the Constituent Assembly of India,” *Religions* 10, no.3 (2019): 20.

versus masculinity.²⁷ Academics have argued that Hindu nationalist have reproduced this orientalist view on Hinduism as a cultural system, and in this way have based their ideology on this notion.²⁸ This internalization is observable in the early Hindu nationalist organization known as the Arya Samaj, which aimed at reforming Hinduism to fit Western models of modernity, and contemporary Hindu nationalism.²⁹

Although Hinduism was a modern creation, it was eventually utilized to unite India under a common religious identity and mobilized against the British rulers. Early Hindu nationalist efforts articulated notions of cow protectionism and the idea of mother India.³⁰ The cow in Hindu mythology is seen as a holy animal (the boon granting cow of the creation myth is an example). Therefore there is a religious ban on killing cows and consuming beef for many Hindus. During colonial rule, this religious argument for sparing cows was not accepted by the British rulers. Therefore, the Arya Samaj used a more secular, economic argument for cow protectionism, making the fundamentals for cow protectionism less religious and giving it more legitimacy.³¹ The cow also became a symbol behind which all Hindus could unite (as the ban on beef cut across sectarian divisions) for the sake of Indian nationalism.³² This laid the foundation for the later exclusion of religious minorities in matters of national interests, since they could not rally behind these common convictions.³³

The formulation of contemporary Hindu nationalist ideology was found in the writings of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923. In his pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* we find the fundamentals for the Hindutva movement based on three identifiers of Hindutva (in English; Hinduness). These are a common nation (*rashtra*), a common race (*jati*) and a common civilization (*sanskriti*). Thus a Hindu is one who sees India as their homeland and simultaneously as their Holy land.³⁴ In this way other religions that originated from India, such as Jainism and Buddhism, were included in the notion of Hindutva.

Despite other interpretations of nationalism based on Hinduism, the most famous being exemplified in the figure of Mahatma Gandhi, the idea of Hindutva eventually led to the notion

²⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 67.

²⁸ Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism," 336.

²⁹ Nandy, "The Politics of Secularisms," 336.

³⁰ Sambaiah Gundimeda and V.S Ashwin, "Cow Protection in India: From Secularising to Legitimizing Debates," *South Asia Research* 38, no. 2 (2018): 157-9.

³¹ Cassie Adcock, "Preserving and Improving the Breeds': Cow Protection's Animal-Husbandry Connection," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1146.

³² Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 66.

³³ Gundimeda and Ashwin, "Cow Protection," 160.

³⁴ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 134.

that minorities should assimilate to the dominant culture and religion.³⁵ The religious movements that opposed this notion of an united India under Hinduism - for example strands of Indian Islam under influence of the Pan-Islamic movement – were, according to Savarkar, the real enemy of India.³⁶ This notion gained more influence over time, and nowadays Islam is seen by many as the main enemy of the Indian state.³⁷ According to the pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* Muslims and Christians who still valued their Indian heritage could be reintegrated into the fold of Hinduism.³⁸ Attempts to oppose this assimilation were seen as efforts to undermine the unity of India and divide the country. It was therefore considered unpatriotic to be anything other than Hindu.³⁹ Religious identities and consequently conversion (especially amongst the Depressed Classes who were seen as voter blocks) became political statements.⁴⁰

Based on Savarkar’s pamphlet, a new Hindu nationalist movement was founded, known as the Rashtriya Swamayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Society). A multitude of organizations are encompassed by this umbrella organization. Collectively they are known as the Sangh Parivar. The RSS was banned by the Indian state for a while, but this made it possible for the RSS to construct themselves as defenders of Hindu society against a hostile state that would favor the interests of religious minorities.⁴¹ In order to be able to protect Hindus from their enemies, the RSS organized training sessions for men on martial arts.⁴² In this way they created a strong structure of grassroots organizations. Paired with the physical training also came the transfer of moral teachings, which made these training sessions the ideal location for spreading the ideology of the RSS.⁴³

But what exactly is the ideology of the RSS and how is it communicated? The ideology of the RSS can be summarized as the goal of making India a Hindu *rashtra* where religious minorities must adhere to dominant Hindu culture.⁴⁴ An important role is played by the antagonists of this narrative, namely the non-Hindu religious minorities. The RSS has made use

³⁵ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 134.

³⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: a reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 85.

³⁷ Cassie Adcock, "Cow Protection and Minority Rights in India: reassessing religious freedom," *Asian Affairs: Special Issue: Ghosts from the Past? Assessing Recent Developments in Religious Freedom in South Asia* 49, no. 2 (2018): 347.

³⁸ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 86.

³⁹ Jaffrelot, "India: Politics of (Re)conversion," 197.

⁴⁰ Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 36.

⁴¹ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 86.

⁴² Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 87.

⁴³ Tapan Basu, et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993), 18.

⁴⁴ Basu, et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 13.

of the popular Ram myth in both its narrative and symbols to emphasize this religious otherness.⁴⁵ This came to a climax in the Ayodhya dispute, which saw the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque for the ‘liberation’ of the Ram Janambhoomi complex. By promoting the revisionist history on this sacred place, the legitimacy of the mosque (and on a larger scale Islam itself) was discredited.⁴⁶ This confrontation is seen by the RSS as an important milestone in the realization of its ideological goal.⁴⁷

One of the important branches of the Sangh Parivar that was involved in the ‘liberation’ is known as the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Council of Hindus), which seeks to represent and protect the Hindu *dharma* (which can be loosely translated to religion or teachings). This organization is the religious branch of the Sangh Parivar and concerns itself with religious issues and controversies related to Hinduism.⁴⁸ By having created a central organ for Hinduism, the Hindutva movement clearly demonstrates a form of isomorphism to Christianity.⁴⁹ This is also observable in the formulation of a common code of conduct for Hindus by the VHP, through which the Sangh Parivar tries to establish its form of Hinduism as mainstream.⁵⁰

The RSS created a political branch in the form of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951.⁵¹ At the end of the 1970s, as the Congress party and the coalition that followed it collapsed, the importance of representing Hindutva ideology reemerged in politics. In 1980, the RSS transformed its own political party into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This party was backed by the earlier founded grassroots movements of the RSS and therefore had a nationwide appeal, which was reflected in the governments of many states. In 1998, the BJP won the national elections and gained the power to form a coalition.⁵² Since then it has remained an important force in contemporary Indian politics.

A history of (re)conversion to Hinduism

The earliest forms: incorporation and the Shuddhi movement

(Re)conversion to Hinduism is not a new phenomenon. Although many academic studies portray Hinduism as a religion to which someone can only belong if they are born into it,

⁴⁵ Basu, et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 12-13.

⁴⁶ Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 146.

⁴⁷ Basu, et al., *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, 13.

⁴⁸ Vandeveldt, “Reconversion to Hinduism,” 33.

⁴⁹ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 19.

⁵⁰ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 2.

⁵¹ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 17.

⁵² Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 3.

conversion to (or maybe rather incorporation into) Hinduism has a long history.⁵³ The first conversions to Hinduism mainly took place amongst Adivasi groups. Pati writes about the way in which Adivasi people have been converted to Hinduism in Orissa for over 200 years. He identifies land reforms as one of the driving forces behind the conversions of Adivasis to Hinduism. When land that was previously inhabited by Adivasi groups was granted to Brahmins, the Adivasi people became considered part of the Shudra caste, whilst Adivasi chiefs became part of the Kshatriyas caste. The rise of feudalism in this region (and other regions) explains the early incorporation of some Adivasi groups into the caste system of Hinduism.⁵⁴ At the same time, these converts often kept their traditional customs, which was not seen as problematic by the Brahmins. So whilst the Adivasis were being incorporated into the Hindu system, they experienced a process of hierarchization.⁵⁵ This study by Pati illustrates that conversion (or maybe incorporation would be a better word) to Hinduism is not a new phenomenon, and a hierarchy within this system was applied on basis of material considerations. However, rather than labeling this conversion as Pati does, I would suggest that this is an early form of incorporation of Adivasis into the Hindu fold, and therefore an early example of Hinduization.

The Hindu hierarchy was not accepted by everyone. In medieval times, lower caste people converted to Islam in great numbers.⁵⁶ In the 1950s, through the example of B.R. Ambedkar, many Dalits converted to Buddhism in the hopes of receiving a more egalitarian treatment from society.⁵⁷ During British colonial rule many Christian missionaries were active in India. During these times, local variations of Hinduism were bound together in a collective Hindu consciousness to serve the purpose of Hindu nationalism in opposition to the colonial regime.⁵⁸ Combined with this nationalist goal, the conversion of lower caste people provided Hindu leaders with a problem, as Hinduism was not engaging in missionary activities and was thus in numerical decline.

For these reasons, a specific (re)conversion ritual for Hinduism was developed. This ritual was known as *Shuddhi* and was formerly a purification ritual of upper-caste Hindus.⁵⁹ Besides drawing upon this ancient purification ritual as a source of inspiration, the *Shuddhi* was also

⁵³ Biswamoy Pati, "Identity, Hegemony, Resistance: Conversions in Orissa, 1800-2000," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 44 (2001): 4204.

⁵⁴ Pati, "Identity, Hegemony, Resistance," 4205.

⁵⁵ Pati, "Identity, Hegemony, Resistance," 4206.

⁵⁶ Jaffrelot, "India: Politics of (Re)conversion," 197.

⁵⁷ Rao, *The Caste Question*, 40.

⁵⁸ A. Kakodkar, "Shuddhi: Reconversion to Hinduism Movement in Goa," in *Goa: Cultural Trends*, ed. P.P. Shirodkar (Goa: Directorate of Archives, Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Goa, 1988), 246.

⁵⁹ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion, 197.

clearly influenced by a Christian understanding of conversion and the accompanying ritual procedures.⁶⁰ This shows that orientalist ideas about religion were influencing the form the *Shuddhi* took.⁶¹ The ritual was used by the influential Hindu religious reform organization the Arya Samaj to reconvert individuals who had previously been converted to Islam or Christianity.⁶² The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand, a Shaivite ascetic who wanted to reform Hinduism to more closely resemble a ‘religion of the book’, such as Christianity or Islam, affirming the orientalist expectations of religion.⁶³ Since this conversion ritual was an innovation, many traditional Hindus did not support its development at first. They continued to hold on to the notion that one could only be born into a caste and thus considered a Hindu.⁶⁴ Only later on, with communal tensions rising, more orthodox Hindus were willing to accept the *Shuddhi* as a legitimate method for (re)conversion to Hinduism.⁶⁵

Through this ritual the pollution of a non-Hindu was removed and thus he or she was made into a pure caste member.⁶⁶ The *Shuddhi* was inaugurated by Swami Dayanand by applying it to individuals.⁶⁷ Only later on did the *Shuddhi* become a way to (re)convert whole communities. The ritual differs from western notions of conversion, as the *Shuddhi* does not so much mark a transition in individual beliefs, but rather it signifies the integration into Hindu society of people previously belonging to a different religious tradition.⁶⁸ From 1900 onwards this ritual was also applied to serve the social uplift of Depressed Classes and the transformation of Dalits into caste Hindus.⁶⁹

This shows another contextual influence on the development of the *Shuddhi*, namely the importance of colonial rule introducing trends like industrialization and urbanization. Through these developments the ties of traditional society weakened, and socio-economic mobility was encouraged.⁷⁰ Because of the presence of these missionary religions and colonialism, the need for the *Shuddhi* and the form it took was developed.

From the 1920s onwards the *Shuddhi* movement started to develop a more explicitly political tone. This was largely due to the tensions with Muslim groups over the issue of

⁶⁰ Kakodkar, “Shuddhi: Reconversion to Hinduism Movement in Goa,” 205-206.

⁶¹ Vandavelde, “Reconversion to Hinduism,” 35-36.

⁶² Kakodkar, “Shuddhi: Reconversion to Hinduism Movement in Goa,” 249.

⁶³ Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 65.

⁶⁴ R.K. Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India: A Study of its Socio-political Dimensions* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1990), 94.

⁶⁵ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 85.

⁶⁶ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 2.

⁶⁷ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 3.

⁶⁸ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 2.

⁶⁹ Vandavelde, “Reconversion to Hinduism,” 38.

⁷⁰ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 11.

(re)conversion. The census under colonial rule had forced people to adopt a more rigid religious identity. The Shuddhi movement had mainly targeted Muslims and Muslim-Hindu syncretic practices and not so much Christians, although the movement was heavily influenced by Christian notions of conversion as reflected in the form of the ritual.⁷¹ This tension eventually led to communalism and the weakening of Hindu-Muslim unity in India.⁷² Due to the development of communalism, the Shuddhi movement became less relevant, it was clearly established who belonged to which religious group and (re)conversion became out of the question.⁷³

Ghar Wapsi: modern (re)conversion

After the demise of the Shuddhi movement, (re)conversion efforts were no longer made on a large-scale basis.⁷⁴ Only from the 1980s onward the VHP, aided by organizations like the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) that focus on tribal development, started a campaign exclusively concerned with the (re)conversion of Indians.⁷⁵ Modern day (re)conversion to Hinduism often takes the form of so called *ghar wapsi* (home coming), *parivartan* (turning back), or *dharm parivartan* (religious return) programs.⁷⁶ These names already indicate how these forms of conversion are portrayed, namely as the return of a person to the religion of their ancestors. This would also include a return to the caste of one's ancestors.⁷⁷

Numbers on the effectiveness of (re)conversion programs are not always reliable.⁷⁸ The VHP in 2018 reported to have (re)converted 25,000 Muslims and Christians to the faith of their ancestors.⁷⁹ Reliable figures are hard to find, especially since (re)conversions are not always officially registered. This will likely also be the case for many (re)converts coming from groups labeled by Sahoo as crypto-Christians.⁸⁰ These people never officially converted to Christianity, therefore it is hard to count their (re)conversions since no records are left. Moreover, the VHP could be exaggerating these figures in order to receive more publicity.

⁷¹ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 34.

⁷² Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 119.

⁷³ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 119.

⁷⁴ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 40.

⁷⁵ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 40.

⁷⁶ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 40.

⁷⁷ Anand Teltumbde, "Ghar Wapsi: Welcome to the Hellhole of Hinduism," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 19, 2015, https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/1/margin-speak/gharwapsi.html?0=ip_login_no_cache%3Dd69c6d62d8c88ad1108ba8a7b2dabdd5.

⁷⁸ Vandavelde, "Reconversion to Hinduism," 41.

⁷⁹ PTI, "'Ghar Wapsi': VHP says 'reconverted' 25,000 Muslims, Christians in 2018," *Financial Express*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/ghar-wapsi-vhp-says-reconverted-25000-muslims-christians-in-2018/1746798/>.

⁸⁰ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 9.

Initially the Sangh Parivar targeted both Christians and Muslims through their (re)conversion programs. Nowadays, Muslims are no longer the targets of (re)conversion programs, although they are targeted in other ways. After the Ayodhya controversy, the anti-Muslim campaign arrived at an impasse and the focus shifted to Christianity.⁸¹

The (re)conversion programs can take the form of either public ceremonies hosted by different RSS affiliates in which rituals are performed to welcome people (often in groups) back to Hinduism, or of more subtle long-term developmental programs in peripheral areas.⁸² This latter way copies the tactics of Christian missionaries active in these areas. By providing social services (such as healthcare and education) the Adivasis would no longer need to resort to the help of Christian missionaries. Additionally, by providing these desolate areas with education, the VHP hopes to bring the brightest students into the RSS, transforming them into local leaders.⁸³ This practice relates back to the strong grassroots movements on which the RSS is based. The tactic in this sense works in two ways: firstly, the attractiveness of services provided by Christian missionaries is reduced and secondly, Adivasis can be drawn to Hinduism and the RSS.⁸⁴

From the 1990s onwards, the organizations occupied with (re)conversion programs no longer simply copied the strategies of Christian missionaries, as they started to use more aggressive ways of convincing people to come back to Hinduism, such as the promotion of social isolation and even violence aimed at Christians.⁸⁵ Such a violent event took place in Orissa in 1999, when missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were killed by an angry mob. Such violence is mainly undertaken by vigilante groups, who, with the support of these organizations and local authorities, face little to no persecution for their violent actions. This is described by Sundar as ‘a displacement of culpability’, leading to a sense of terror and helplessness among the targeted groups.⁸⁶ Moreover, Sundar states that:

“The use of civil defense patrols or gangs of renegade militants (..) not only has the convenience of distancing the government from direct responsibility for illegal acts, but also displaces culpability onto a section of the victims themselves. It destroys the moral

⁸¹ Vandeveld, “Reconversion to Hinduism,” 34.

⁸² Vandeveld, “Reconversion to Hinduism,” 40-41.

⁸³ Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 104.

⁸⁴ Jaffrelot, “India: Politics of (Re)conversion,” 206.

⁸⁵ Jaffrelot, “India: Politics of (Re)conversion,” 207-208.

⁸⁶ Nandini Sundar, “Vigilantism, Culpability and Moral Dilema’s,” *Critique of Antropology* 30, no.1 (2010): 116.

certainties of ordinary citizens, who are no longer sure who stands for what, and what the ends of revolution or resistance are.”⁸⁷

In the case of vigilante violence against Christians, Hindu nationalists point to the provocations made by Christians that would cause the violence. The RSS can distance itself from the violence since it was instigated by local groups. These local groups are, however, often connected to the grassroots movements of the RSS. People belonging to religious minorities have no one to turn to, since their own state has little concern for them. Thus (re)conversion programs do not stand alone, but are aided by many different social practices, policies and laws concerning religious identity and conversion.

Legislation on conversion

During the formulation of the Indian Constitution after Independence, another issue related to the history of (re)conversion surfaced. Here I am talking about the modern legal aspect of conversion. A debate on the exact meaning of the right to religious freedom was held by the members of the Constituent Assembly. The specific issue at stake was whether the right to propagate one’s religion should be included. On one side of the debate were supporters arguing that proselytization is a core aspect of many religious traditions and therefore it should be included as a component of the right to religious freedom. The other side of the debate argued that proselytization actually intervened with the individual’s right to religious freedom.⁸⁸ They understood the term ‘to propagate one’s religion’ as being the same as to do propaganda for a religion. This group saw proselytization, and additionally conversion, as the result of allurements. Through this allurements, people were drawn away from their original religion. In this way, the right to propagate one’s religion would interfere with the religious freedom of other groups.⁸⁹

The supporters of proselytization and conversion, however, had a very different interpretation of these terms. For them, spreading the message of their respective religions was integral to their religious experience and to their rights as a minority.⁹⁰ They stated that they had the duty to spread their religion to other people and convert them so they may also be included in God’s realm. Conversion in this interpretation was an individual affair concerned with a person’s relation to God and their salvation.⁹¹ These different views on proselytization and conversion can be explained by looking at their fundamental assumptions. The supporters

⁸⁷ Sundar, “Vigilantism,” 116.

⁸⁸ Claerhout and De Roover, “Religious Freedom,” 1-2.

⁸⁹ Claerhout and De Roover, “Religious Freedom,” 2-3.

⁹⁰ Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 45.

⁹¹ Claerhout and De Roover, “Religious Freedom,” 2-3.

of proselytization consisted mainly of people belonging to missionary religions (namely Christianity and Islam). According to these religions only belief in God can lead to a person's final salvation. Therefore, there is only one truth and it is important that everyone should hear it. The opposition to the right to propagate one's religion, however, mainly came from Indian traditions. In Indian thought, different religions are different paths leading to the same goal, being salvation. A person should not stray from their path. Therefore, conversion was regarded as unnatural, and proselytization was seen as provocative and interfering with one's religious freedom.⁹²

The interpretation of conversion being caused by allurements was also associated with the common methods of Christian missionaries. During colonial rule, the need to learn English in order to gain favorable positions was present. Christian missionaries often possessed native knowledge of the language and the (financial) tools to set up schools. This educational work gave missionaries prominence and a lot of influence.⁹³ Higher castes wanted to learn English to gain favorable positions within the colonial regime, and Depressed Classes wanted to improve their social status through education as well (as a process of Sanskritization, to which this chapter will later turn). When this educating of marginalized groups was opposed by upper-caste members, conversion to Christianity also became popular among the Depressed Classes to raise their social status.⁹⁴ This, however, also led to accusations of un-genuine conversions, since they would be motivated by material benefits rather than spiritual convictions.

A second accusation leveled at converts was their perceived betrayal of India. By accepting Christianity, these people would 'turn away from the bosom of mother India'.⁹⁵ Conversion was thus seen as assimilation to Western culture and submitting to the colonizer. In this context, the boundaries between religion (as represented by Christianity) and culture (which in this view is connected to being Hindu) are hard to define. Moreover, Christianity has been accused of 'colonization of the consciousness', through its conversion of previously Hindu individuals, Dalits, and Adivasis.⁹⁶ By equating conversion to allegiance, the issue of conversion became politicized. Christianity and Islam continue to be associated with Western imperialism and foreign conquest.⁹⁷

⁹² Claerhout and De Roover, "Religious Freedom," 17-21.

⁹³ Ghai, *The Shuddhi movement in India*, 14-15.

⁹⁴ Ghai, *The Shuddhi movement in India*, 14-15.

⁹⁵ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion," 197.

⁹⁶ Nathaniel Roberts, "Is Conversion a 'colonization of Consciousness'?", *Anthropological Theory* 12, no. 3 (2012): 271-94.

⁹⁷ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion," 201-202.

Although the right to propagate one's religion was included in the Constitution, since then laws putting restrictions on this right have been implemented in nine different states of India.⁹⁸ These laws are popularly referred to as anti-conversion laws, but are officially known as Freedom of Religion Acts. The oldest of these acts is the 1967 Orissa Freedom of Religion Act. All later anti-conversion laws are very similar to this act in their language, since they all prohibit conversion through means of fraud or allurement.⁹⁹ After the creation of the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, it was challenged in the Supreme Court of India. In its verdict on the case *Rev Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh*, the Supreme Court stated that religious conversion was already safeguarded by freedom of religion and therefore converting someone to another religion cannot be considered a fundamental right.¹⁰⁰ Conversion continues to be seen as something that is 'done' to vulnerable people, rather than the Christian interpretation of conversion as motivated by individual choice.¹⁰¹

Anti-conversion laws forbid conversion through means of force or inducement. They stipulate a heavier punishment when the convert belongs to the categories of children, women, Adivasis and Dalits.¹⁰² These laws state that anyone that converts someone categorized as belonging to these groups will receive a fine or even possibly face imprisonment. In this way, all these marginalized groups are belittled by the idea that they need protection from Hindu upper-caste males, and cannot make their own decisions with regards to their religious identity.¹⁰³ A very recent anti-conversion law that illustrates this sentiment is the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion from 2020. This law aims at targeting 'love jihad', a conspiracy theory which believes that Muslim men are marrying Hindu girls to convert them. This law targets interfaith couples by putting importance on the permission of the woman's family for the marriage, taking autonomy away from adult women, and by making these couples vulnerable to vigilante violence.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, anti-conversion laws are aimed at preserving the Hindu identity, and reimplementing the status quo of the marginalized positions of women and these other groups compared to upper-caste men.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁸ Nilay Saiya and Stuti Manchanda, "Anti-conversion Laws and Violent Christian Persecution in the States of India: A Quantitative Analysis," *Ethnicities* 20, no. 3 (2019): 588.

⁹⁹ Goldie Osuri, "The Concern for Sovereignty in the Politics of Anti-Conversion," *Religion Compass* 7, no. 9 (2013): 389.

¹⁰⁰ Saiya and Manchanda, "Anti-conversion Laws," 588.

¹⁰¹ Kim, *In Search of Identity*, 171

¹⁰² Osuri, "The Concern for Sovereignty," 389.

¹⁰³ Nathaniel Roberts, *To be cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 7.

¹⁰⁴ Tanika Sakar, "Love, Faith and Consent in a Hindu Rashtra," *The Wire*, December 6, 2020, <https://thewire.in/communalism/hindu-rashtra-love-faith-consent>.

¹⁰⁵ Osuri, "The Concern for Sovereignty," 389.

This protection of the status quo is also reflected in the fact that these laws prohibit conversion of marginalized groups, but do not prevent them being targeted by (re)conversion programs. Anti-conversion laws can only limit the amount of people turning away from the Hindu identity, but cannot increase the number of Hindus. For this purpose, programs promoting (re)conversion to Hinduism have been created by the Sangh Parivar. What is claimed to be ‘reconversion’ to Hinduism, which is made out to be the religion of the convert’s ancestors, is often in reality a first time conversion of marginalized people to Hinduism as the dominant religious system. In addition to (re)conversion, the process of Hinduization is essential for making the number of Hindus increase as well.

Adivasi and Dalit Hinduization

Hinduization is a process by which groups that previously did not belong to the Hindu fold are incorporated into Hindu society. This process was observable first among Adivasi groups and later on also among Dalit communities. Adivasis were originally not seen as Hindus, but as the native inhabitants of the Indian peninsula. These groups had their own religious customs.¹⁰⁶ Christian missionaries first targeted these groups by providing them with Western education, which would allow these people to enlarge their social and economic status. As a consequence, some Adivasi groups are now largely Christian. Hindu nationalists saw this shift of Adivasi religious allegiance to Christianity as a threat to the unity of India. Therefore, several tactics were employed to incorporate Adivasis into the Hindu fold.

First of all, Hindu discourse started to re-label Adivasis as Vanvasis (Forest Dwellers).¹⁰⁷ As India was home of the Hindus, the Adivasi identity as the original inhabitants of India was problematic to the view of Hindus being the autochthonous group. The RSS had claimed India as land of the Hindus, and their supposed indigenous status was essential to their ideology.¹⁰⁸ Reframing Adivasis as Vanvasis additionally served to weaken traditional claims to land that these groups had, which was in the economic interests of the state.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, Adivasi groups were incorporated into the mythology of Hinduism. The deities and spirits worshipped by Adivasi groups were identified as the Hindu monkey god Hanuman. Hanuman in the Ramayana was the helper of the protagonist Ram. The importance of the Ram myth for the RSS ideology has been discussed earlier. By associating the Adivasi groups with Hanuman, Hindu discourse was able to reinforce the orientalist idea of the ‘good savage’;

¹⁰⁶ Jaffrelot, “India: The Politics of (Re)conversion,” 205.

¹⁰⁷ Jaffrelot, “India: The Politics of (Re)conversion,” 205.

¹⁰⁸ Amita Baviskar, “Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 48 (2005): 5107.

¹⁰⁹ Osuri, “The Concern for Sovereignty,” 390.

although primitive, the intentions of the savage are pure. Like Hanuman was the well-intentioned but beastly helper of Ram, the Adivasis were subordinated to pure caste Hindus. Adivasis were therefore labeled by default as backward Hindus.¹¹⁰ In order to reinforce this narrative into Adivasi communities, many temples for these deities were created in areas with dense Adivasi populations.¹¹¹ Rather than acknowledging the autonomous traditions of Adivasi groups, these religious expressions were incorporated into Hinduism, and altered by Hindu influence from outside.

During the period of Gandhian politics, the efforts of Hinduization were extended to Dalits.¹¹² About a quarter of the Indian population was considered to be Dalit. This group was excluded from dominant society by the concept of untouchability. However, with their large numbers they formed a serious electoral block. Under the influence of social reform, as well as these more pragmatic considerations, practicing untouchability was banned by the Constitution in 1950. The Hinduization of Dalits also made use of specific tactics. Joel Lee discusses the influence of benefits for Scheduled Classes as a pull factor for many Dalits and (Muslim) lower castes to adopt a more Hindu appearance. He describes transnomination as one of the ways in which communities tend to gain these benefits.¹¹³

Another key concept connected to this phenomenon is Sanskritization, a process which describes the assimilation of lower castes to the social and religious practices of higher castes in order to climb the social ladder.¹¹⁴ Similar to the Hinduization process experienced by Adivasis, Dalit autonomous religious tradition is disregarded and incorporated into the Hindu fold. An example of this would be the abolishing of the consumption of beef. Dalit cuisine culture often incorporated beef, as it is a cheap source of protein.¹¹⁵ High caste Hindus, however, have a religious ban on this consumption. In order to climb the social ladder, the consumption of beef is abandoned by Dalits and other low caste people. At the same time, by adopting these high caste Hindu practices, the autonomous religious tradition of Dalits is transformed into something that resembles more Brahmanical practices, although the genuineness of these newly adopted practices remains contested and old beliefs are often preserved.¹¹⁶ These types of

¹¹⁰ Baviskar, "Adivasi Encounters," 5107.

¹¹¹ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of Reconversion," 207-209.

¹¹² Pati, "Identity, Hegemony, Resistance," 4208.

¹¹³ Joel Lee, "Jagdish, Son of Ahmad: Dalit Religion and Nominative Politics in Lucknow," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 11, no. 11 (2015): 3.

¹¹⁴ M. N. Srinivas, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 56.

¹¹⁵ Gundimeda and Ashwin, "Cow Protection in India," 170.

¹¹⁶ Lee, "Jagdish, Son of Ahmad," 16.

processes, however, cannot be identified as outright conversion. Conversion in the Indian context seems to exclusively refer to changing one's religion to a non-Indian tradition.

Conversion to non-Indian religions

Islam

Islam made its arrival into India through Arab traders. Islam's spread was aided by the popular agency of Sufi saints.¹¹⁷ These were incorporated by the local people into the already existing pantheon of local deities.¹¹⁸ As a result, Islam in India had a highly eclectic character. After the Muslim conquests most of the Muslim rulers did not make a particular effort to subject the Indian believers to 'proper' Islamization, likely because they did not want these converts to make claims of equality.¹¹⁹ At the same time, it is suspected that many lower caste people converted to Islam to escape the oppressive nature of the caste hierarchy and gain favorable positions under the Muslim rulers.¹²⁰ However, it is unlikely that conversion freed people of this caste hierarchy, since Muslims too started to adopt caste identities for their communities.¹²¹

Only after the establishment of British colonial rule and their governmentality based on numbers, it became important to arm Muslims against the (re)conversion attempts made by the Arya Samaj's Shuddhi movement. In order to defend their numbers, Muslims took up the effort to educate their fellow believers about the basic tenets of Islam. In this way, Islam in India became less localized, and as a result less vulnerable to assimilation or (re)conversion to Hinduism.

Nonetheless, some basic tendencies of Hindu society are reflected within Indian Islam. First of all, the caste system was not abandoned when adopting Islam. Despite the equalizing character of Islam, Muslim groups developed into castes of their own and often held on to many Hindu practices. The Arya Samaj made use of this in their attempt to (re)convert Muslims through the *Shuddhi*. However, the Arya Samaj realized that (re)converted individuals would become social outcasts of both Hindu and Muslim groups. This prevented many people from (re)converting to Hinduism. As a solution, the Arya Samaj promised (re)converts a restoration of the original (high) caste status if their whole community would convert.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Yoginder S. Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Response to the Shuddhi of Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century India," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997): 65.

¹¹⁸ Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 65.

¹¹⁹ Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 65-66.

¹²⁰ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 9-10.

¹²¹ Thapar, "Imagined Religious Communities," 224.

¹²² Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 68-75.

An example of this process is the (re)conversion of the Malkanas. These people lived in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, and had been under the influence of Muslim rule for centuries.¹²³ Nonetheless, although the Malkanas considered themselves to be Muslims, they practiced many Hindu customs. They were therefore a good target audience for the efforts of the Arya Samaj. It became important for Muslim leaders to teach believers about the basic tenets of Islam, so that Hindu customs would no longer be practiced. In this way, the Muslim communities would be less receptive to the message of the Shuddhi movement. Moreover, the missionary tendency of Islam was reprioritized.

In previous centuries, due to the eclectic nature of Indian Islam, proselytization was not a priority for many Muslims. When Islam became targeted by the Shuddhi movement, the resurgence of missionary efforts (known as *tabligh*) could be seen as a response to (re)conversion to Hinduism.¹²⁴ These missionary efforts of Muslims mainly focused on properly Islamizing the population that already affiliated with Islam. The efforts did little to convert Hindus to Islam, although some exceptions are found among the lower castes and Dalits.¹²⁵ These efforts contributed to a worsening in the relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities.¹²⁶ It led to the development of communal politics, whilst at the same time Mahatma Gandhi was trying to unite the country in the noncooperation movement.¹²⁷ The communalism resulted in multiple riots in the 1920s throughout India's major cities, and eventually the murder of a key figure in the Shuddhi movement, Swami Shradhdhanad, proved to be the final blow to Hindu-Muslim unity.¹²⁸ Eventually this disunity resulted in the Partition of Pakistan in 1947.

This history left a permanent scar on the relationship between Hindu and Muslim communities. It reaffirmed the idea of Muslims as the religious other. In many Hindu myths and narratives, the otherness of Muslim communities is emphasized.¹²⁹ The narrative of cow protectionism is a clear example of this otherness. As explained previously, the cow became utilized by early Hindu nationalists as symbol for the unification of Hindus in India. This uniting symbol, however, also pointed out who did not belong to this nationalist ideal, namely those

¹²³ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 90.

¹²⁴ Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 70-76.

¹²⁵ Sikand, "The Fitna of Irtidad," 70-76.

¹²⁶ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 113.

¹²⁷ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 114.

¹²⁸ Ghai, *The Shuddhi Movement in India*, 118.

¹²⁹ Chad M. Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 50.

who consumed beef. The most obvious outsiders thus were Muslims, but also some Dalits and Christians belonged to this group.

Christianity

Christianity has been in India in the form of Syriac Christianity since before the Middle Ages. Because of its historic presence in India, this type of Christianity is integrated into the caste system.¹³⁰ At the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese came to India and their encounters with these Syrian Christians led them to continue their Catholic mission in Syriac, which was regarded by the Syrian Christian community as a language with similar importance as that of Sanskrit to Brahmins.¹³¹ The Portuguese soon extended their mission to non-Christian Indians, which was done by means of force.¹³²

Under British rule, the missionaries, now also including Protestants, changed their tactics. The missionaries started to spread their message through means of social services and through the promise of equality, something that was attractive to many people from marginalized groups of Indian society.¹³³ For similar reasons, people in the past had converted to Islam in order to escape the caste system, although this has often been without the desired result.¹³⁴ Although the British were careful not to seem like strong supporters of Christianity,¹³⁵ the religion nevertheless became associated with Western imperialism. This is not an unfair assessment, as missionaries often established first contact with what would later become colonized grounds. Additionally, the missions were often backed by foreign money which (directly or indirectly) derived from the profits made off of colonies.¹³⁶

The missionary tactic of social services and the promise of equality continued after Independence, especially since the postcolonial state of India was often not able to provide these things to people living in poor and desolate areas.¹³⁷ This tactic, however, also led to the accusation that converts only changed their religion for material benefits, rather than out of spiritual conviction. Foreign funds continued to be the backbone of many Christian missions in India, which only contributed to this accusation. However, the converts do not seem to mind the foreign source of the money, since many think that people abroad seem to care about their

¹³⁰ István Perczel, "Syriac Christianity in India," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London: Routledge, 2019), 653.

¹³¹ Perczel, "Syriac Christianity," 654.

¹³² Kakodkar, "Shuddhi: Reconversion to Hinduism Movement in Goa," 242.

¹³³ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion," 198.

¹³⁴ Teltumbde, "Ghar Wapsi."

¹³⁵ Partha Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," in *Secularism and its Critics* ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 351.

¹³⁶ Roberts, "Is Conversion a 'colonization of consciousness?'," 274.

¹³⁷ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 22-23.

situation, unlike other Indians.¹³⁸ The missionaries specifically target Adivasis and Dalits, since they were supposed to be people with no religion, outsiders of and oppressed by Hinduism.¹³⁹

The issue of conversion to Christianity was taken up by Hindu nationalists in their (re)conversion programs. The threat of Christianity was mainly found in the possibility that Christians would want a separate state.¹⁴⁰ The idea that Catholicism could become a strong voter block was also feared, since the central leadership would potentially transform Catholicism into a strong electoral force.¹⁴¹ Because of the (violent) targeting of religious minorities, the Catholics and 'mainline' churches, that is to say more established and centralized Protestant churches, became less active in their proselytization efforts.¹⁴² Moreover, due to assimilation into local culture, church leadership continues to be influenced by caste hierarchies.¹⁴³

An exception to these trends are churches of a more charismatic nature. Most notably, Pentecostals have continued to gain significant success with their proselytization efforts in India. They continue to be very active in trying to reach new converts, but as a result also receive most of the violence aimed at Christians.¹⁴⁴ Additionally, they are condemned by other churches as too rash in their proselytization effort.¹⁴⁵ In return, Pentecostals condemn these other Christian groups and other religions, including Hinduism, causing social tensions.¹⁴⁶

Pentecostalism has likely been able to gain many converts because it is different from these other churches. First of all, Pentecostalism exhibits some similarities to local beliefs, such as faith healing.¹⁴⁷ The (previously worshipped) Hindu deities are represented as evil spirits.¹⁴⁸ This allows conversion to be a clean break with the past, whilst not completely erasing the previously held beliefs. Secondly, it is possible for people from marginalized groups to hold leadership positions within a Pentecostal church. Pentecostalism has therefore become more 'dalitized', as Bauman puts it, than many other churches.¹⁴⁹

Pentecostalism around the world has a highly eclectic character, allowing for local variations of the tradition. However, this localized character has received a lot of critique in

¹³⁸ Roberts, *To be cared for*, 21.

¹³⁹ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 50.

¹⁴¹ Jaffrelot, "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion," 203.

¹⁴² Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 160.

¹⁴³ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 54.

¹⁴⁴ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 7-15.

¹⁴⁵ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 15, 81.

¹⁴⁶ Arun Jones, "Faces of Pentecostalism in North India Today," *Society* 46, no. 6 (2009): 508.

¹⁴⁷ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 89.

¹⁴⁸ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 85.

¹⁴⁹ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 80.

India, since the Pentecostals are accused of making their tradition seem too much like local (Adivasi) culture in order to attract converts. At the same time, since the Pentecostals are Christians and often receive funds from abroad, they are accused of carrying out an imperialist mission.¹⁵⁰ Christianity, even in its most eclectic forms, is still regarded with much suspicion since it derives from a foreign source. However, other convictions originating from the West (and formed by Christianity) have been embraced by (parts of) India, such as capitalism, democracy and secularism.

Secularism in India

Hindu nationalists do not disapprove of the secular state (although they claim it has failed in its current form) and actually accuse their critics of being pseudo-secular, meaning that these critics are accused of supporting religious bigotry that would benefit minorities.¹⁵¹ The secular state would be biased in favor of the interests of religious minorities and disregard the concerns of the majority, which in the case of India would mean that Hindus are the victims of the secular state. Therefore, the Hindutva movement, in the name of true secularism, is trying to erase the religious and ethnic particularities of the law to encourage the formation of a ‘national culture’ and eliminate the supposed advantages that the state would grant religious minorities.¹⁵²

The idea of secularism originally developed in Christian Europe as a response to religious pluralism.¹⁵³ This Christian heritage of the idea has led some academics to argue that secularism is inherently connected to Christian values of equality and freedom.¹⁵⁴ However, Asad points out that this argument is often made by ‘secularists’ when they want to exclude other religions from influencing politics.¹⁵⁵ Although many people living in the West believe that secularism entails the abolishment of religion in the public sphere, secularism nonetheless carries its own religious bias in the Western context. Therefore it is more accurate to see secularism as the rearticulation of religion in accordance with the modern state, rather than a complete separation of religion and state.¹⁵⁶

Ideas like secularism can spread into other societies that lack the historical context in which the concept originally developed.¹⁵⁷ It is often said that Indian secularism is quite distinct from

¹⁵⁰ Bauman, *Pentecostals*, 86.

¹⁵¹ Chatterjee, “Secularism and Tolerance,” 347.

¹⁵² Chatterjee, “Secularism and Tolerance,” 347.

¹⁵³ Taylor, “The Polysemy of the Secular,” 1153.

¹⁵⁴ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-state, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 14-15.

¹⁵⁵ Asad, *Secular Translations*, 14-15.

¹⁵⁶ Saba Mahmood, “Is Critique Secular?,” *The Immanent Frame and SSRC*, March 30, 2008, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/03/30/is-critique-secular-2/>.

¹⁵⁷ Taylor, “The Polysemy of the Secular,” 1143.

the Western notion of secularism.¹⁵⁸ Chatterjee points out that, rather than ideas transforming by being reinterpreted by a new environment, these concepts change once their original form fails in the new context. In this way a new interpretation is given to the term. In contemporary India secularization and religious tolerance seem to be on different ends of the spectrum.¹⁵⁹ Where Western secularism is often interpreted as abolishing religion from the public sphere, Indian secularism is seen as accommodating continued dialogues between religions, and between the secular and the religious.¹⁶⁰ This Indian view on secularism promotes the interpretation of those against state intervention in religious affairs as pseudo-secularists.

The observation that Western secularism and Indian secularism seem to be employed for different purposes also points back to the incommensurability between the notions of religion earlier observed in the debate of the Constituent Assembly. Calhoun points out that our understanding of secularism is intertwined with our understanding of religion.¹⁶¹ Since religions are understood in Indian thought as pathways to a common goal, it is not surprising that the goal of secularism is also understood differently in India. Secularism in this context is to serve the purpose of enabling these different pathways.

Secularism also influences our understanding of religion. Nandy argues that secularism perceives religion as providing people with rigid religious identities. He states that in South Asian cultures religious identities were more fluid than those in Europe. The introduction of secularism, and the emphasis that it places on the rigidity of religious identity, forced people to adopt a more exclusive religious identity.¹⁶² Secularism, after being transplanted into India, promoted the formation of fixed religious identities, which led to more polarized religious differences. Religion, through the transplantation of secularism, became understood as more of an ideology.¹⁶³ To an extent, this interpretation is a result of the internalization of orientalism.

As secularism is seen as a characteristic of modernity, it is employed by Hindu nationalist for their political goals within the modern state. Thus, secularism and religious nationalism have become intertwined in India. This becomes important for the way in which the Hindutva movement portrays (re)conversion, as the next chapter of this thesis will illustrate.

¹⁵⁸ Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," 349.

¹⁵⁹ Chatterjee, "Secularism and Tolerance," 348.

¹⁶⁰ Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism," 327.

¹⁶¹ Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen, "Introduction," 6.

¹⁶² Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism," 324-325.

¹⁶³ Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism," 325.

Chapter 2 - Analyzing the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion

Frequently Asked Questions, its audience and accountability

The text that this thesis uses to investigate its research question is a frequently asked questions (FAQ) document provided by the VHP on their website on the issue of conversion. The title is *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions* (the full document is disclosed as Appendix A). Besides being available on the internet for free, the text can also be ordered in India as a book for twenty rupees. The format of frequently asked questions is not so much a genre, but it does adhere to a stable set of conventions. A FAQ takes the form of hypothetical questions (which is taken to construct a chapter or paragraph), which is then answered. The question is asked by no one in particular, but it is presumed that the publishers of the FAQ often receive similar questions. This leads to the assumption that there are a lot of readers interested in what the publisher of the FAQ has to say on a particular topic. This type of text therefore holds a certain amount of authority. The format of the FAQ is also used by religious groups to answer questions of possible converts and believers, and, through the rise of the internet, is a way of restructuring the manner in which a religious narrative is communicated.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, it is an interesting choice of the VHP to use this format to argue against religious conversion, given the way that it is often used by other religious organizations.

By choosing this format the VHP is partially copying the example set by other religions. One can wonder if the document *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions* serves a similar purpose as those FAQ documents of missionary groups. The goal of this FAQ is convincing the reader of the immorality of conversion to non-Indian religions. The FAQ reaches possible (re)converts by using a similar tactic as the missionary groups of other religions. The FAQ also restructures the way in which the Hindutva narrative is told, which is quite similar to how other religious organizations are exploring this format.

It is important to note that the document is written in English. This is not surprising, since English is the official language of the judiciary of India. Additionally, English in India is seen as a sign of a good education, and holds a level of prestige.¹⁶⁵ On the last page of the document *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions* it is stated that the document is a publication of the HVK (*Hindu Vivek Kendra*), another organization belonging to the Sangh Parivar. The HVK describes itself as a resource center for the promotion of Hindutva and claims

¹⁶⁴ Rosa Scardigno and Giuseppe Mininni, "An Authentic Feeling? Religious Experience through Q&A Websites," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2020): 212.

¹⁶⁵ Sahoo, *Pentecostalism*, 83.

a pseudo-academic identity in its self-description.¹⁶⁶ Since the text was produced by the scholarly organization of the Sangh Parivar, it could be that this use of the English language is not only ensuring accessibility for people from all regions of India, but to give the document a more academic and legitimate nature.

Concerning the choice of English, it is also important to note that people from outside India who might not be fluent in Hindi or any of the other local languages can also refer to the document. Connected to this is the strong support that Indian diasporic communities show for the Hindutva movement, in particular in North America.¹⁶⁷ Especially younger generations that might have grown up learning other languages may be more receptive to the message of the FAQ when it is written in English. Moreover, the HVK states on its site that “most people who live abroad and write on India rely for their information on the English media and writings, which paint an essentially negative picture of Hindutva.”¹⁶⁸ In this quote the wish for a pro-Hindutva source in English is expressed in order to inform people abroad, both from Indian heritage and those without that heritage, about the goals of the Hindutva movement from a Hindutva perspective. The target audience is all those interested in the issue of (re)conversion in India, ranging from foreign media outlets reporting on the activities of the VHP to possible (re)converts in India.

The text can be downloaded from the VHP website in PDF format. It is 27 pages long, and on every page at the left top corner the VHP logo is present. The text can also be found on the website of the HVK listed under their own publications. However, there is no date present on the website or in the document. The document does talk about Tony Blair being the present prime minister of UK¹⁶⁹ and the recent killings of missionary Graham Staines and his sons in Orissa.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, it is presumed that the document dates back to around 2000. On every page of the PDF document taken from the VHP site, it states that the copyright belongs to the VHP and originates from 2020. No author is mentioned, meaning that the document was likely produced by a collective of writers of the HVK.

This lack of accountability both in date and in author are also reflected in the claims the text makes about violence against Christians. The text never mentions who committed these crimes and only cites the presumed provocations coming from Christians as a reason for the

¹⁶⁶ “About Us,” HVK, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.hvk.org/about.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Ingrid Therwath, “Cyber-hindutva: Hindu Nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web,” *Social Science Information* 51, no. 4 (2012): 555.

¹⁶⁸ “About Us,” HVK, accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.hvk.org/about.html>.

¹⁶⁹ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 6.

¹⁷⁰ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 17.

violent events. The issue of vigilantism in India relates back to the earlier discussed displacement of culpability, meaning that mainly Hindus, who feel that the secular state is failing them by the perceived favoring of the interests of religious minorities, take matters into their own hands and act this way without the threat of repercussions. The text condones this practice by pointing at the provocations made by Christians and the inept functioning of the state as an excuse for this vigilantism. Thus, the text shows how (re)conversion extends to other social issues, such as vigilantism.

It is presumed that this document represents the viewpoint of the VHP on (re)conversion, and is representative of the views of the Sangh Parivar as well. Since the BJP is in power in government, the Hindutva movement is currently the strongest ideological power in India. Therefore, the document shows the way in which the discourse was created by this power, contributes to maintaining the current balance of power, and supports the ideological goals of the Sangh Parivar.

Conversion to non-Indian religions: an Indian problem

When looking at *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions*, it becomes evident that the wording of the text creates a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’. The document starts off by answering the question “What is the essence of Hinduism?,” followed by the question “What is the essence of Christianity?” on page 1. By starting the text with these two questions, the two opposing camps of this narrative become clear immediately. Hinduism’s essence is “pluralism, in which tolerance is a by-product (...) it means that each person has a unique way towards salvation, which is best suited for him/her.”¹⁷¹ On the essence of Christianity the following is stated:

“Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is the ONLY son of God. He is supposed to have been sent to earth to wash away the sins of the people, and so redeem them. Of course, this happens only to those who accept him as the ONLY son of God. All the others do not get the benefit, and so will be consigned to that place where one is eternally barbecued.”¹⁷²

By contrasting “tolerance” with “the ONLY son of God,” the religions are depicted as essentially being polar opposites of each other. It is also noteworthy that the notion of hell in this passage is described as being “eternally barbecued”, which expresses a tone of ridicule. In this way from the first page of the document onwards a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is created. Moreover, this is done by repeatedly and consistently using the words “Christians”, “foreign”

¹⁷¹ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 1.

¹⁷² VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 1.

and “English media” to refer to the group that is portrayed as the opposites to the Indian people as described by this text. The Indian people are often referred to with the word “Hindus”.

Islam is also mentioned, together with Christianity, as being introduced into India through “the power of the sword” on page 3. However, Islam is not the focus of this document, since conversions to Islam nowadays occur less frequently than those to Christianity, and because the (re)conversion programs of the VHP currently mainly focus on Christians, as has been established in the previous chapter. In the document, the Christians are accused of converting Indian people through “allurement” and “force”, and of carrying out an imperialist mission. These terms all carry a connotation of violence. Following this connotation, the document describes conversion as “a method of trying to dominate” on page 3. The social services that churches and missionaries provide are described as a “guise” for the strive for conversion.¹⁷³ This resembles the continuing association of Christianity with Western imperialism, and the interpretation of conversion as colonization of the consciousness, which this thesis addressed in the previous chapter. In contrast to this violent language, Hinduism is described as having “resisted” this pursuit of dominance, and its teachings as being “gifts (...) to mankind” and “spiritual heritage”.¹⁷⁴

The document mainly makes use of active transivity to tell its story. The Christians are active actors, which leaves the reader with the sense that all of their actions and their consequences are conscious choices: the Christians, through the use of active language, indeed seem to be aggressors trying to seduce people to convert, and making them abandon the spiritual heritage of their ancestors. In this way, conversion is something done by Christians to someone, rather than an individual choice. The document also goes into this issue on pages 3-5. Consider the following quote:

“While a person cannot be denied a right to convert himself on his own free will, and after his own study of the religion he wishes to adopt and the one that he wishes to leave, the right to ask someone else to change should be questioned. At the same time, conversions due to force, inducements, and fraud have to be determined as illegal. While today the use of force (in physical terms) is limited, given that the proselytising religions do not have the state power to back them while being in a minority, conversions due to inducements and fraud are quite rampant.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 4, 10, 27.

¹⁷⁴ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 3, 6.

¹⁷⁵ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 4.

In this quote it is also suggested that, were proselytizing religions to gain power in the state, the likelihood that physical force would be used to convert others would grow. This gives the impression that minorities pose a threat to the religious freedom of the Indian majority (being Hindus).

In order to waive the criticism that India is targeting religious minorities, examples of religious violence in other countries are mentioned on pages 19 and 20. The text states that in other countries, religious minorities are treated far worse than in India, but these states do not receive any criticism from Western countries and media. In this way, the text is pointing fingers at these (Christian) countries for being hypocrites as to deflect from the problems present in India.

This line of argumentation, like the earlier mentioned wording, creates a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, constructing the Hindus as one group against the rest of the world (and all its different religions). In this sense, the Hindus are portrayed as victims of both the international field and the secular state, which, in the eyes of the Hindutva movement, seems to be biased against them in favor of the interests of religious minorities. In this way, the Hindutva movement is not only painted as the protector of Hinduism and traditional culture, but also of ‘true’ secularism, as the Indian interpretation understands the term to be the ‘equality’ of religions for the state.

Hinduization and (re)conversion

The document discusses the issue some people take up with the (re)conversion programs specifically targeting Adivasi groups on page 25 and 26. The religious practices of Adivasi groups are described as appearing “primitive”, “animist” and “indigenous”, but are nevertheless “recognized as” and “participate in” Hindu practices. This is contrasted to Christianity in the following passage:

“However, what is clear is that animism has no convergence with Christianity. So, if a tribal is made a Christian, then a conversion definitely takes place. What the Hindu organisations are doing is to ask the tribals to come back to their traditional faith – whether one calls it a Hindu faith or an animist. There is no attempt to either impose upon them something different from what their ancestors practised or to homogenise the Hindus into one unique way of belief.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 25-26.

This passage connects the Adivasi religious practices back to the supposed pluralism of Hinduism, which was found to be the essence of the tradition earlier in this text (p. 1). The document *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions* addresses the incorporation of Adivasi traditions into Hinduism. According to the text, no distinction can be made between Adivasi and Hindu practice, since Adivasis often participate in Hindu festivities and practices. Therefore, the text states that:

“The Hindu tradition is so vast, that all the indigenous faiths fall within the scope. Each tradition, either regional or started by persons, borrow from other traditions. At the same time, they are all rooted in the essential ethos of the Hindu tradition of tolerance.”¹⁷⁷

This passage refers back to the supposed essence of Hinduism, namely pluralism and tolerance. In this way, Adivasi religion has always been part of Hinduism, although it might not have been at the core. Moreover, the text states that conversion to Christianity is definitely different from adhering to the beliefs of the Adivasi ancestors, whilst for Hinduism, this is more ambiguous, although the VHP frames it as straightforward. Adivasi tradition, according to the organization, has always been part of Hinduism, and therefore the programs that aim at (re)converting Adivasis to Hinduism only bring them back to the religion of their ancestors. By using the term ‘reconversion’, Adivasi religious practices are also denied the recognition of constituting an autonomous religious tradition, since they are deemed to have always been within the Hindu fold. The term ‘reconversion’ thus contributes to the Hinduization of Adivasis.

At the same time, the religious practices of Adivasis are said to be animist and primitive. This places them in a clear hierarchy within the Hindu fold (which puts Brahmanism at the top). Therefore, although Adivasis are now considered Hindu, they are not deemed to be on equal footing with high caste Hindus. In this way, the status quo of high caste dominance is maintained and supported by this text. Hinduism is reinvented as a pluralist and tolerant religion in order to accommodate marginalized groups by formulating conversion to Hinduism as reconversion, by which caste and social hierarchy are maintained, whilst still allowing the number of Hindus to increase.

Additionally, the text states that (re)conversion is not “attempting to impose” something upon the Adivasis.¹⁷⁸ This connects back to the idea that Christian conversion is something done to people, rather than an individual choice. Contrary to this, (re)conversion is painted to

¹⁷⁷ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 25.

¹⁷⁸ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 25-26.

be completely voluntarily. This image of (re)conversion seems to resemble the Christian interpretation of conversion as a spiritual choice made by an individual. The framing of (re)conversion therefore seems to be influenced by Christian notions of conversion.

Besides this rhetoric behind the Hinduization and (re)conversion of Adivasi groups, other marginalized groups are also addressed by the text in a more subtle way. This is done by mentioning a few authoritative figures to give the document's claims more legitimacy: for example, Mahatma Gandhi is mentioned several times by the text as one of the historical figures who spoke against religious conversion.¹⁷⁹ This is done to get the more moderate Hindus on board with the (re)conversion programs. Ambedkar, an important figure in Dalit emancipation, is also mentioned.¹⁸⁰ By referring to these authoritative figures, an appeal to different groups of Indian society is made to reject conversion to non-Indian religions. However, these figures are taken out of their historical context, and their words are given a new meaning, as they are reframed to support the efforts of the Hindutva movements. The appropriation of these figures into supporters of the Hindutva movement is aimed at making sure that these marginalized groups can also rally behind the Hindutva ideology, since they are needed to keep India a Hindu majority country, and to keep the BJP in power through their electoral strength. This type of legitimization thus gives an incentive to these groups to participate in (re)conversion programs, since the famous activists of their groups are portrayed as (would have been) supporters of these programs.

The construction of narrative

The text *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions* can be sorted into the sections of definitions (question 1-2), conversion (question 3-8), the Christian missionary goal (question 9-19), violence against the Christian population (question 20-29), Hindutva influences on halting conversion (question 30-33), and the Hindu influence in other contexts (question 34-35). When examining the order in which the questions are posed, the construction of a narrative is found: first, two opposing groups are identified, namely the Hindus (taken to represent India) and the Christians (who also stand in for Western imperialism). Then the issue of the narrative is revealed to the reader: conversion is improper, as it turns people away from their spiritual heritage, and strives for dominance. The 'rigid' truth held on to by Christianity directly contradicts the pluralism and tolerance of Hinduism. In this way, Christianity is a threat to all

¹⁷⁹ VHP, "Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions," 5, 10, 17, 21.

¹⁸⁰ VHP, "Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions," 5.

Hindus and thus to the national unity of India. Therefore, according to the FAQ, Hindus need to stand up to this threat, either through appropriate violence or anti-conversion laws.

Question 36 (“While many Hindus complain about the conversion activities of the Christians, they have no hesitation in sending their children to their schools.”) is not easily put into a category, and is likely here to reject the possible critique that it addresses. More interesting is the final question of the document, namely question 37 (“Is it true that the number of people going to church in the Christian countries is declining?”). This question seems to provide a final act to the narrative created throughout the FAQ document, namely that Christianity in the end is not an everlasting truth. Even in the regions which were originally associated with the religion, the numbers of Christians are falling. If Christians cannot keep their numbers up in these regions, why should Indians then convert to Christianity? Christianity is painted to be a fading power, whilst Hinduism, with its “long spiritual heritage” and “oldest surviving civilization”,¹⁸¹ is seen as the religion that will exist eternally, and essentially is the true religion. This forms a strange contradiction to the earlier emphasis on “the ONLY son of God” as the essence of Christianity, and it’s role as the supposed opposite of tolerant Hinduism. Therefore, this document reconstructs Hinduism as the ultimate truth in the same way Christianity seems to do for itself.

What contributes to this interpretation is the earlier mentioned format of the document. Many missionary groups make use of FAQ to answer the questions of possible converts. The VHP seems to make use of this tactic as well. Moreover, as Hinduism originally was a collection term for the many different religious sects found in India, the attempt to address collective religious issues through the central organization of the VHP similarly copies the example set by missionary religions such as Christianity. In order to accommodate converts, Hinduism has been framed by the VHP as pluralist (in order to incorporate all indigenous traditions) and has also experienced isomorphism to missionary religions, since these seem to possess a winning recipe in attracting converts. Even the idea of (re)conversion as an individual’s choice seems to go back to Christian ideas about conversion.

Additionally, by framing the religion as pluralist and tolerant, Hinduism is by the VHP aligned to the Indian interpretation of secularism. This interpretation consists of continued dialogue between religions, and between the religious and the secular, as discussed in chapter 1. Hinduism is transformed to fit this notion of secularism. In this way, anyone opposed to the influence of Hindu nationalism in politics can be labeled a pseudo-secularist. The religion is

¹⁸¹ VHP, “Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions,” 5.

thus formulated through the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion as essentially pluralist, which makes it able to accommodate both Adivasis and Dalits and function in the political realm.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out to find an answer to the question ‘how does the Hindutva discourse on (re)conversion reinvent Hinduism to accommodate Dalits and Adivasis?’ As has become evident from both the discussed literature and the CDA of the document *Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions*, the Hindutva movement constructs Hinduism as a pluralist and all-encompassing religious tradition by framing (re)conversion as a return to the religion of one’s ancestors. In this formulation, Hinduism encompasses all indigenous traditions of India. This specific formulation, and the discourse that surrounds it, serve multiple complex ideological goals.

Firstly, in order to serve the main goal of India remaining a Hindu majority country, the number of Hindus needed to increase. This was first done by a process of Hinduization among Adivasi and Dalit communities. However, it turned out that significant portions of these groups had converted to Islam and Christianity. To undo these conversions, the *Shuddhi* was created by the Arya Samaj. The Shuddhi movement mainly targeted Muslims, but the movement lost its relevance when communal tensions had made clear who belonged to which religious identity.

From the 1980s onward, (re)conversion programs to Hinduism that were set up by the VHP and similar organizations mainly targeted Christians. These (re)conversion programs take the form of a public ceremony or of a long-term developmental program. More ethnographic research needs to be done in order to fully comprehend the influences of these developmental programs on the religious identities of those it targets. Besides employing the same tactics as used by Christian missionaries, more aggressive strategies, such as social exclusion, and even violence, were promoted by these organizations, aided by the grassroots network of the RSS. This phenomenon relates back to the issue of vigilantism, and the displacement of culpability in India, together with the status of religious minorities as second-class citizens.

In order to evade the accusation that these programs were transforming Hinduism into something new, or entailed outright conversion like the Christian mission, these practices were labeled as ‘reconversion’. By making use of this term, Adivasi and Dalit religious practices were denied their recognition of autonomy. Therefore, the term ‘reconversion’ contributes to the Hinduization of these groups. In this way, (re)conversion constructs Hinduism as an all-encompassing tradition, which supports the idea that the Indian state could be based upon a common culture and religion.

At the same time, we can see that these (re)conversion programs transform Hinduism into a tradition that is more similar to Christianity and Islam. Hindus are given a missionary mission

of (re)converting those that have been led astray. The tactics used to reach possible (re)converts are those of social services, copying Christian missionaries. The rituals used in (re)conversion ceremonies draw heavily upon Christian baptism. Even the documents trying to inform possible (re)converts take on the same form as those used by other missionary groups. Moreover, in order to coordinate all these efforts, a central organ has been created for Hindu religious affairs, namely the VHP. In these ways, Hinduism is also constructed to be something of an ultimate truth, like Christianity and Islam. Whether this isomorphism is deliberate remains up for debate.

Secondly, this supposed pluralist essence of Hinduism aligns with the Indian interpretation of secularism. Secularism has been reconstructed in the Indian context to indicate the continued dialogue between religious groups, and between the religious and the secular. Opposers of state interference in religion are labeled pseudo-secularist by the Hindutva movement. The pseudo-secularists, with their Western notion of secularism, are accused of being biased in favor of the interests of religious minorities, making them pseudo-secular. The Hindutva movement, on the other hand, searches to abolish these religious particularities of the law, such as the right to propagate one's religion. This alignment of Hinduism with secularism also legitimates the dominant role of Hindu nationalism in politics, which serves the political goals of the Hindutva movement.

As I have argued in this thesis, not only does our notion of what religion exactly is influence our understanding of the secular, this process works the other way around as well. Since secularism was introduced into India as a Western concept, the idea forced people in South Asia to adopt more rigid religious identities. In this way, secularism is one of the factors in the polarization of religious differences in India. Combined with the internalization of orientalist views on Indian religion, Hinduism has been appropriated to fit the ideological goals of the Hindutva movement. The invention of (re)conversion to Hinduism can be traced back to the two paradigms of secularism and orientalism contributing to the creation of an ideology based on majoritarianism. Where then lies culpability for the current mistreatment of religious minorities in India?

Bibliography

- Adcock, Cassie. "Cow Protection and Minority Rights in India: reassessing religious freedom." *Asian Affairs: Special Issue: Ghosts from the Past? Assessing Recent Developments in Religious Freedom in South Asia* 49, no. 2 (2018): 340-354.
- Adcock, Cassie. "'Preserving and Improving the Breeds': Cow Protection's Animal-Husbandry Connection." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1141-1155.
- Asad, Talal. *Secular Translations: Nation-state, Modern Self, and Calculated Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Basu, Tapan, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen. *Khakhi Shorts and Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*. New Delhi: Oriental Longman, 1993.
- Bauman, Chad M. *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Baviskar, Amita. "Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP." *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 48 (2005): 5105-113.
- Bruce, Steve. "The Secularization Paradigm." In *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, 1-44. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- Calhoun, Craig, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. "Introduction." In *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, 3-30. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Secularism and Tolerance." In *Secularism and its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava, 345-379. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Claerhout, Sarah, and Jakob de Roover. "Religious Freedom and the Limits of Propaganda: Conversion in the Constituent Assembly of India." *Religions* 10, no.3 (2019): 1-23.
- Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Ghai, R.K.. *The Shuddhi Movement in India: A Study of its Socio-political Dimensions*. New Delhi: Commonwealth Publishers, 1990.
- Gundimeda, Sambaiah, and V.S Ashwin. "Cow Protection in India: From Secularising to Legitimizing Debates." *South Asia Research* 38, no. 2 (2018): 156-76.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom. *The Saffron Wave : Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Hjelm, Titus. "National Piety: Religious Equality, Freedom of Religion and National Identity in Finnish Political Discourse." *Religion* 44, no.1 (2014): 28-45.

- Hjelm, Titus. "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution towards a Critical Sociology of Religion." *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 6 (2013): 855-72.
- HVK. "About Us." Accessed December 15, 2020. <https://www.hvk.org/about.html>.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. "India: The Politics of (Re)conversion to Hinduism of Christian Aborigines." In *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Patrick Michel and Enzo Pace, 195-215. Leiden: Brill, 2011.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Hindu Nationalism: a reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Jones, Arun. "Faces of Pentecostalism in North India Today." *Society* 46, no. 6 (2009): 504-509.
- Kakodkar, A. "Shuddhi: Reconversion to Hinduism Movement in Goa." In *Goa: Cultural Trends*, edited by P.P. Shirodkar, 242-263. Goa: Directorate of Archives, Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Goa, 1988.
- Kim, Sebastian. *In Search of Identity: Debates on Religious Conversion in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Lee, Joel. "Jagdish, Son of Ahmad: Dalit Religion and Nominative Politics in Lucknow." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 11, no. 11 (2015): 1-18.
- Mahmood, Saba. "Is Critique Secular?." *The Immanent Frame and SSRC*, March 30, 2008. <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/03/30/is-critique-secular-2/>.
- Nandy, Ashis. "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance." In *Secularism and its Critics*, edited by Rajeev Bhargava, 321-344. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Osuri, Goldie. "The Concern for Sovereignty in the Politics of Anti-Conversion." *Religion Compass* 7, no. 9 (2013): 385-393.
- Pati, Biswamoy. "Identity, Hegemony, Resistance: Conversions in Orissa, 1800-2000." *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 44 (2001): 4204-212.
- Perczel, István. "Syriac Christianity in India." In *The Syriac World*, edited by Daniel King, 653-697. London: Routledge, 2019.
- PTI. "'Ghar Wapsi': VHP says 'reconverted' 25,000 Muslims, Christians in 2018." *Financial Express*, October 26, 2019. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/ghar-wapsi-vhp-says-reconverted-25000-muslims-christians-in-2018/1746798/>.
- Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.
- Roberts, Nathaniel. "Is Conversion a 'Colonization of Consciousness'?" *Anthropological Theory* 12, no. 3 (2012): 271-94.

- Roberts, Nathaniel. *To be cared for: The Power of Conversion and Foreignness of Belonging in an Indian Slum*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.
- Sahoo, Sarbeswar. *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Sakar, Tanika. "Love, Faith and Consent in a Hindu Rashtra." *The Wire*, December 6, 2020. <https://thewire.in/communalism/hindu-rashtra-love-faith-consent>.
- Saiya, Nilay, and Stuti Manchanda. "Anti-conversion Laws and Violent Christian Persecution in the States of India: A Quantitative Analysis." *Ethnicities* 20, no. 3 (2020): 587-607.
- Scardigno, Rosa, and Giuseppe Mininni. "An Authentic Feeling? Religious Experience through Q&A Websites." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2020): 211-31.
- Sikand, Yoginder S. "The Fitna of Irtidad: Muslim Missionary Response to the Shuddhi of Arya Samaj in Early Twentieth Century India." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1997): 65-82.
- Srinivas, M. N. *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Sundar, Nandini. "Vigilantism, Culpability and Moral Dilemma's." *Critique of Antropology* 30, no.1 (2010): 113-121.
- Taylor, Charles. "The Polysemy of the Secular." *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1143- 66.
- Teltumbde, Anand. "Ghar Wapsi: Welcome to the Hellhole of Hinduism." *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 19, 2015. https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/1/margin-speak/gharwapsi.html?0=ip_login_no_cache%3Dd69c6d62d8c88ad1108ba8a7b2dabdd5.
- Thapar, Romila. "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity." *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 2, (1989): 209-231.
- Therwath, Ingrid. "Cyber-hindutva: Hindu Nationalism, the Diaspora and the Web." *Social Science Information* 51, no. 4 (2012): 551-77.
- Thomas, Scott M. *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Vandavelde, Iris. "Reconversion to Hinduism: A Hindu Nationalist Reaction Against Conversion to Christianity and Islam." *South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies* 34, no. 1 (2011): 31-50.
- VHP. "Religious Conversion – Frequently Asked Questions."

Appendix A

| 1 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 1 Religious Conversions – Frequently asked questions 1. What is the essence of Hinduism? What does tolerance mean? The essence of Hinduism is its pluralism, in which tolerance is a by-product. This pluralism is expressed in a shloka made famous by Swami Vivekanand during his tour of the West at the time of the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. The shloka goes as follows: *ekam sad viprah bahudda vadanti*. It is translated by him in English as follows: “That which exists is One, sages call It by various names”. In short, it means that each person has a unique way towards salvation, which is best suited for him/her. To be able to do this, each person has to generate his own spiritual experience. One may take advice from gurus, friends, books, etc. But, one has to apply one’s own mind and come to a conclusion of the suitability of a path for one’s ownself, and one takes responsibility for the decision. Tolerance means that while one has chosen a path for oneself, one accepts that another may choose a different path and that eventually, both will meet at the same place in salvation. This tolerance is the reason why there has been infinitesimally small religious strife in India throughout the ages. 2. What is the essence of Christianity? Christianity believes that Jesus Christ is the ONLY son of God. He is supposed to have been sent to earth to wash away the sins of the people, and so redeem them. Of course, this happens only to those who accept him as the ONLY son of God. All the others do not get the benefit, and so will be consigned to that place where one is eternally barbecued. Christianity says that it has a unique path to salvation, and all the other paths are false. While there is supposed to be some modification in these views, the acceptance is that all the other paths may at most be second best. Therefore, it is better if people accept Christianity and not take a chance. Christians believe that they have been commanded by Christ to go and convert the people of this world. This is also supposed to give them special merit when it comes to the day of final judgment. | 2 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 2 Christianity is a hierarchical religion, and the commands of the clergy are supposed to be final. It is also this clergy that is supposed to be a link between man and God through Christ. So, if a person has sinned, and wants God to forgive him/her, he/she has to go to a priest, to ask him to speak to god on his/her behalf. While there are many Christians who today do not believe in this exclusivity, the statements of the clergy leave no doubt that the clergy believes in exclusivity and the concept of saving souls. 3. If people convert due to spiritual reasons, should there be any objection? When there are true spiritual conversions, there is no objection. This happens when the person does it on his own inquiry, and not motivated by another to make a study. For example, a person who has some emotional problems may make a change if approached by a missionary. This cannot be called a spiritual conversion. True spiritual conversion implies that a person not only understands the new religion well but also that he is well-acquainted with his present one. In this way, he will be able to understand why the religion of his forefathers does not give him the spiritual satisfaction that he will find in his new religion. At the same time, since a man or a woman is always seeking to go on a higher spiritual plane, such a change becomes an enlightened one. Such an inquiry can be done by one who is materially contented, and one who has the necessary education to make the inquiry. It was in this context that Mahatma Gandhi said to the missionaries that before converting the poor, they should first convert him. They did not pick up the challenge because they knew that the Mahatma had done sufficient study of Christianity and had found that his own dharma was adequate for his purpose. 4. Hinduism is a pluralistic philosophical concept. Why should there be an objection to conversions? In a pluralistic society – one that believes in multiple paths of salvation – accommodating another religion is not a problem. In this respect, Hinduism has a unique record. It was only in | 3 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 3 a Hindu land that Jews were never persecuted due to religious reasons. Similarly, the holiest place for the Parsis is in a Hindu land. The earliest Christian arrivals in India in the 4th century were what are called Syrian Christians. All of them came because of religious persecution in their land of origin. Followers of all three religions prospered not only in terms of their religion but also in social and economic terms. This happened because they accepted the civilisational norms of the

Hindu society, and worked within its parameters. They did not try to convert or propagate that their system was better than the ones of their host. The tensions started when first Islam and then Christianity came here with the power of the sword, and tried to subjugate the Hindus of the land. A pluralistic society works in harmony only when all the members accept the norms of pluralism. However, when one tries to dominate another, then the problem starts. Conversion is a method of trying to dominate.

5. If Hinduism believes in “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”, why is there an objection to conversion? The concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava” is one of the many gifts that Hinduism has given to mankind. It means that Hinduism accepts that all religions are equal and that there are multiple paths to salvation. Thus, new systems always keep evolving, and this has added to the dynamism in Hinduism. Thus, perhaps at a logical level, there should not be objection to conversions. There is, in fact, no objection if the conversions take place due to spiritual reasons. However, other forms of conversions will have to be resisted. At the same time, Hindus would like to ask followers of the monotheistic religions, like Christianity and Islam, whether they believe in the concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”. And, if they do, why do they go about converting? After all, the process of conversion is to save souls – that is going to heaven instead of hell. And if the follower of another religion also goes to heaven, his soul is also saved, making conversion redundant. According to our reading of what the clergy of these two religions say about themselves, they | 4 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 4 do not accept the concept of “Sarva Dharma Samabhava”, and so there is an objection to their conversion activity.

6. Is there a legal right to convert? This is a subject that is coming up for discussion quite a lot. There is a Constitutional provision that gives a right to propagate one’s religion. The proponents of the conversion programme say that this also implies that there is a right to ask people to convert. However, all rights are subject to maintenance of public order, and if there is a threat to it, then the right has to be restricted. This is the way all civil societies function. The issue of conversions due to force, fraud, and inducements were debated at the time of framing the Constitution immediately after the independence in 1947. A specific provision was not put in since it was said that such conversions are immoral – a fact accepted by the Christian members of the Constituent Assembly. In the aftermath of the Niyogi Committee, Madhya Pradesh, followed by Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh, had to enact a law specifically prohibiting such activities. In all the cases, the governments belonged to the Congress party. In 1977, when these acts were challenged, the Supreme Court ruled that the states had acted legally and within the spirit of the Constitution. Thus, a fundamental right to convert has been denied by the Supreme Court. While a person cannot be denied a right to convert himself on his own free will, and after his own study of the religion he wishes to adopt and the one that he wishes to leave, the right to ask someone else to change should be questioned. At the same time, conversions due to force, inducements, and fraud have to be determined as illegal. While today the use of force (in physical terms) is limited, given that the proselytising religions do not have the state power to back them while being in a minority, conversions due to inducements and fraud are quite rampant. Mass conversions, the so-called faith healing programs, conversions in the guise of offering social service, etc., will fall in the illegal category. When discussing the legal provisions on conversions, it has to be understood that it causes tremendous social tensions. Thus, conversions have to be looked at from a social angle and not merely a legal one. | 5 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 5

7. What are the objections to conversions? Conversions create social tensions. The targeted community feels that it will lose out on its culture and civilisational values. Mahatma Gandhi said, “In India, one finds that conversions bring about deep disdain for one’s old religion and its followers, i.e., one’s old friends and one’s relatives. The next change that takes place is that of dress and manners and behaviours. All that does great harm to the country.” Similarly, Babasaheb Ambedkar said that by joining Islam or Christianity, the Depressed Classes would ‘not only go out of the Hindu religion but also go out of the Hindu culture...Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes.’ Swami Vivekanand has expressed himself in even stronger terms. He said that a convert from Hinduism is not only one Hindu less, but an enemy more. A non-Islamic student of Islamic theology wrote: “Islam’s aversion to the past should be viewed from the perspective of conversion. Islam aims at destroying the

past completely lest it should hark the converts back to the pre-Islam days. There is always a fear of the past which threatens to jeopardise the very existence of Islam. The “fear of recantation” is more often than not dealt with violent measures. Since conversion is not without its past, Islam tries tooth and nail to expunge all the traces and remnants of the past.” This would apply equally to Christianity. All societies try and protect the collective consciousness of the past. The destruction of a culture is not only in terms of physical structures like places of worship but also the destruction of amassed wisdom. The great library of Alexandria in pre-Christian and pre-Islam Egypt was destroyed by the followers of these two systems. In South America, we see only mute monuments of what were obviously great civilisations. The Hindu civilisation is today the oldest surviving civilisation. This has been achieved at a great cost in terms of resisting those who came to destroy. It is easy to destroy, but difficult to preserve. 8. How do Christians react when members of their religions | 6 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 6 convert to another? Members of all religious sects detest conversions. They feel that it is an attack on their beliefs and their way of life. Christians are no different. The Pope (a Catholic) has frequently complained about the activities of the Protestant missionaries in South America. During one of his visits, he called them ‘rapacious wolves’. The ex-Catholic still believes that Christ is the ONLY son of God, but is practising his belief in another church and under another priest. According to the Christian theology, such a person will go to heaven. But the Pope thinks that it must be he alone who should save the person’s soul. The Pope is also unhappy when Catholics leave Christianity and become either Hindu or Buddhist. He asks his flock that they ‘should know (their) spiritual heritage well and consider whether it is right to set it aside lightly.’ Yet, the Pope has no compunction of asking the Hindus to set aside their even longer spiritual heritage aside and become Christians. To counteract the growing popularity of the ISKCON movement among the Christian youth, one organisation said that it would be legitimate for the Christian parents to defy the law on kidnapping, false imprisonment, assault and battery, to prevent their children from joining ISKCON. The Christians in India are also concerned when the ones whom they have converted go back to their original faith. In Northeast India, they say that if the plans of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) for reconversion go ahead they will resist it and even said that there will be a physical and religious war. The present Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Tony Blair, is a member of the Church of England, while his wife is a Catholic. Once he went to a mass in a Catholic church alone. There were a hue and cry from the Church of England clergy, who feared that he might be converting to Catholicism. One of the clergy wrote an article saying that Rome is not for Blair, and implied that the views of the Vatican may influence the decision taken by Blair as the Prime Minister. Islamic countries prohibit Christian missionaries from operating in their countries, even to provide pure social service. In Russia, the only Christian sect that is permitted to operate is the Russian Orthodox variety. In Israel, a law prohibiting conversions was dropped when 50 Christian groups agreed not to carry missionary activity in the country. They also agreed to avoid ‘activities which alienate (the Jews) from their tradition and community.’ | 7 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 7 9. Should not one distinguish between the various Christian sects? The attempt to make a distinction is a new tactic used to deflect the charge of conversions made against the Christians. It is said that the conversions by improper methods are being done by what is called fringe churches and that the so-called mainline churches are epitomes of virtue. The ‘mainline churches’ have the same ethos as ‘fringe churches’, that is Jesus Christ is the ONLY son of God, and that salvation is not possible to those who do not accept this exclusivity. The ‘mainline churches’ have not given up their objective of conversions, except that they pretend to do in a subtle way. Even while complaining of the activity of the ‘fringe churches’, the ‘mainline churches’ do not publicly distance themselves away. The ‘mainline churches’ do not specifically identify who the ‘fringe churches’ are. In fact, if the ‘fringe churches’ are attacked even when provoked, the ‘mainline churches’ will stand by them, and not criticise the provocation. For example, the church distributing the Bible in Rajkot is said to be of the fringe variety. But this incident is on the ‘mainline’ churches’ list of the ‘attacks on Christianity’. Unless the ‘mainline’ churches give clear signals to the contrary, it is not possible to distinguish between them and the ‘fringe’ churches. 10. It is said that after the meeting of Vatican Council II in the late 1960s, there is a change in the

exclusivist thinking of the Catholic church. Hindu believe in pluralism, and will welcome any relaxation of the changes in the theological thinking of the exclusivist faiths. Many Hindus have tried to build bridges with the Christian theologians to get them to change their rigid thoughts. Due to changes in the intellectual environment, even the Christian churches have felt the need to change. What has to be seen is whether the change is genuine and enduring. The change in the Catholic thinking is supposed to contain in the following sentences in the document of Vatican II: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrine | 8 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 8 which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless, often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” These are the only sentences that are said to reflect the changes in the thinking. However, ‘rejects nothing’ is qualitatively different from ‘accepts everything’. The latter is part of the Hindu ethos, which accepts that salvation can be achieved even by an atheist. The grudging manner in which even these sentences try and project the change is clear when the Catholic church says that the other religions ‘often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.’ When one says ‘a ray of truth’, one is not accepting that there is a complete process. At best, the Catholic church seems to accept that other religions are second best. This conclusion is confirmed when one reads the sentences immediately following the ones quoted above. It goes as follows: “Yet she proclaims and is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (2Cor 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life.” Thus, while other religions ‘reflect a ray of truth’, it is only in Christianity that ‘men find the fullness of their religious life.’ In Vatican II, at many other places, the ethos that Christ is the ONLY son of God is reaffirmed. Statements of the Catholic clergy subsequent to Vatican II, and even in the last few years, attest that the change is really not there. Christ is held to be supreme and unique. This Catholic view of the uniqueness of Christianity is confirmed by other churches as well. In June 1994, Prince Charles of the UK expressed a desire to change his oath if he ever became the monarch. He wants to be the defender of all faiths, instead of only the Anglican variety of Christianity. In response, one senior member of the clergy said, “If (the Prince is) saying Christianity is equal with other religions, we should differ profoundly with him. As men we’re all equal before God, but are you talking about religions and saying one is as good as another? I hope he is not saying that.” There have been cases where there is a disobeying by members of the church of the exclusivist ethos, leading to ex-communication – that is, throwing the person out of the church. This has happened to a Sri Lankan priest, who took the so-called liberal interpretation of the Vatican document produced in 1969 literally. His ex-communication was revoked only after he apologised. Also, there is the case of an Italian priest, Dom Mario Mazzoleni, who said that following the teachings of Satya Sai Baba gave him a better meaning to his belief in | 9 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 9 Christ. He was excommunicated, and since he did not apologise, the ex-communication has remained in place. The books of the Indian priest, the late Fr Anthony de Mello, have been determined to fall outside the purview of the official teachings of the Catholic church. 11. So many of the intellectuals have gone through missionary schools, and there does not seem to be an attempt to convert them. It is not correct to say that no attempts were made at conversions. It has always been the practice of the Christian missionaries all over the world to try and convert the elite in society first. This too was attempted in India – but it failed. The intellectuals go to missionary schools located in urban areas, where an overt attempt to convert will create controversy. So, the missionaries have to show a ‘sophisticated’ face in the cities. The reason why the Christian attempt failed is the resilience of Hinduism. In the early 1800, some missionaries thought that Raja Ram Mohan Roy was ‘ripe’ for conversions because he gave the impression that he found nothing wrong with Christ. A priest was allotted the task of bringing him to the Christian fold. Not only did the priest fail in his task, but, under the influence of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the priest became a Hindu. 12. Why do Christian missionaries undertake social service? The objective of the social service is to get access to the people who are targeted for conversion. Once the missionaries come to close the people, and the latter become obligated to them, the ‘benefits’ of believing in Christ are explained to them. This is done not

on the basis that there is any special merit in the new system, but because Christ is supposed to have told them that praying to any other god will make them go to hell. This social service is of many forms – education, medical facilities, etc. In the past, these services were concentrated in urban or rural areas. During colonial times, these services were financed mostly by the taxes that were levied on the local people. In many cases, land and facilities belonging to Hindu organisations were appropriated and given to the missionary organisations. Also, Hindu organisations were discouraged from starting social service projects. | 10 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 10 Hence, the social service was done by utilising the money of the people who are Hindus. Even today, many of the established social service activity is funded by the state. For example, all the colleges, whether run by the missionaries or the Hindus, get state aid. Many of the other projects also receive government support through grants being given to those registered as NGOs. The funds received from outside India are then used for setting up the organisation for conversions. 13. If someone does a benefit to me, in terms of undertaking a social service, what is wrong with it being used as a vehicle for conversion? True social service should be done without expecting anything in return from the recipient. Otherwise, it becomes a debased and at best can have an accidental redeeming value. If the motive is bad, then the social service has no real merit. There are many organisations that are doing noble service without expecting anything in return. And in offering such services, the Hindus are very actively involved. During his meetings with the Christian missionaries, Mahatma Gandhi had said that they are doing social service with the ulterior motive of conversions. He asked them to give up this offensive program. He also said to them that if this situation continued in a free India he would ask the foreign missionaries to leave the country. 14. What is wrong with receiving foreign funds for service activity, since they come as a grant and there is no outflow for repayment? The flow of foreign funds should not be viewed from only an economic perspective. The objective of sending the funds is of prime importance. If this objective is to work against the interest of the nation, then there has to be objection to the flow of funds. When the service activity has used a guise for conversions, then the funds are coming here for an ulterior purpose. The flow of funds from these missionaries is quite huge. They have well documented fundraising programmes, where the main lure for the donor that is offered is the number of | 11 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 11 people converted. This is supposed to give special merit to the donor, on the day of final judgment. Given the vast funds, it is obvious that the donors will have control of the organisation that receives these funds. Since the headquarters of the churches are all outside India, this control has been used in the past for activities which are inimical to the interest of our nation. It has also ensured that an independent leadership in the Indian churches has not developed. The Niyogi Committee went into the issue of how the foreign funds have been used for ulterior purposes. Many of the aggressively proselytising churches figure still receive foreign funds, as reported in an English national weekly. The use of foreign funds for subversive activities has also been documented in the Northeast. 15. Why do Hindu organisations not do social service, as a counter measure to what the Christians have done? It is an anti-Hindu propaganda that Hindus do not undertake social service. If one looks at the post-independence period, one will see that the Hindus have come forward in substantial numbers to undertake social service. This is not only in terms of establishing educational facilities, but also health service, and other noble causes. However, such institutes are not identified as Hindu organisations – as per the practice of secularism in our country. Social service organisations like Rotary and Lions are manned by Hindus in very large numbers. During the colonial times, Hindus were restricted from undertaking charity which is an integral part of Hindu culture. Simultaneously, the colonial masters gave large assistance to the missionary institutes, both administrative and financial. The latter was from the taxes that were levied on the people of this country. Given that the prosperous section of the society was Hindu, obviously it was the Hindu money that was provided for the missionaries. In addition, land and institutes belonging to the Hindu temples were appropriated and given to the missionaries. In the post-independence period, these missionary institutes continue to receive state aid for much of their activities. In quite a few cases, because the infrastructure was built and in place, the missionary institutes were not disbanded or replaced. A Hindu sees nothing wrong in this, and rightly so. But, to call such state-funded institutes

as a missionary is a misnomer. | 12 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 12 To give an example of the work done by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the field of education, the number of schools in the Vidya Bharati fold is 10,945, and 55 colleges. The total number of teachers in these schools is 74,000 and there are 17 lakh students. In addition, there are more than 2000 one-teacher schools being run in the tribal areas. Other projects of the RSS amount to 17,071, with and involvement of nearly 50,000 volunteers. The number of beneficiaries is more than 50 lakhs, of which 23% are from the rural areas, 42% in tribal and 35% poor urban. The Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, a unit promoted by the RSS to service the tribal population, runs nearly 10,000 projects, out of which half are in education and others in social-cultural areas. There are 1200 full time workers, besides thousands who devote part of their time. As part of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad itself, there are more than 1390 service projects all over the country. There are other Hindu organisations that are running education institutes, like Ramkrishna Mission, Swami Chinmayanand Mission, etc. In addition, there are Hindu philanthropists that are also doing similar work all over the country. 16. Does Christianity use force to convert people today? When one talks about force, it is commonly assumed to be the use of the sword, that is a weapon. The use of force to convert people in the past was the standard practice wherever in the world Christianity went. India was no exception. This was possible because Christianity went along with the programme of colonising non-Christian lands, and hence had state support. Thus the force was provided by the secular arm of the country, namely the colonial administration. With this support no longer available, it is rare that force is used. However, one does find cases of use of force now and then. In the Dangs district, the nephew of the one of the former tribal raja was twice beaten for not falling in line with the desire of the Christian missionaries. 17. Does Christianity today use inducements and fraud to convert people? With conversions by force not being possible, the methods that are applied are inducements and fraud. Inducements are the so-called social service activities, and these have been | 13 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 13 documented by the Niyogi Committee. In most cases, the social service benefits were provided only to those who agreed to convert. A loan given to a tribal is cancelled if he, along with his family, becomes a Christian. While the commission dealt with Madhya Pradesh only, the practices that have been narrated are the ones that are a common practice all over India, and indeed in the rest of the world. The fraud that is done is to pretend that a person has become well because of the 'power' of Christ. While treating an illness, a missionary gives medicine of no value and asks the tribal to take it while offering prayers to his present deity. Of course, there is no cure. Next, the missionary gives real medicine and asks the tribal to take it while offering prayers to Christ. The recovery is attributed to Christ and not to the medicine. Fraud also takes place when there are programmes of what are called faith healing. 'Lame' people are said to be cured, and 'blind' recover their sight. These 'miracles' are used to establish the superiority of Christ. 18. Since the Christian population is only 2.6% of the total, how does Christianity become a threat to India? One has to look not only at the overall percentage of Christian population, but how it is dispersed. The concentration of Christians is in a few pockets like the states of Kerala and Goa, and four of the seven north-eastern states. In Kerala and Goa, the churches have utilised the numbers to interfere in politics all the time. A prime opponent of the alignment of the Konkan Railway was the Catholic church in Goa. This caused delays as well increased the cost of the project. In the north-east, the involvement of the churches in the secessionist movements has been well documented. During the reign of Jawaharlal Nehru some foreign missionaries had been asked to leave the country because they supported these anti-national movements. Another area which is targeted is the tribal belts all over the country. These conversions have created a lot of social problem since the converts are asked to deny their past and not participate in the ancient social rites of the area. The Niyogi Committee stated that it was due to the influence of these missionaries that a demand for an independent Jharkhand nation was made. | 14 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 14 19. The share of the Christian population in the country has come down by 0.3% over the last ten years. Does this not prove that there is no conversion? The main reason for the fall is the steep decline in the growth of the Christian population in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Goa and Maharashtra, which constitute 65% of the Christian population of the

country. Due to improved literacy and economic prosperity, the size of the families has come down drastically. What this fall in the share of the Christian hides is the large increase that has taken place in the Northeast. In Manipur, the share has gone up from 12% in 1951 to 30% in 1991. In Meghalaya, the share has gone up from 23% to 63%. In Nagaland, the share has gone up from 46% to 90%. In Mizoram, the share in 1991 is 90%. (The 1951 figures is not available.) 20. If the issue of conversions is to deal with the attitude of the churches, why is the Christian community being targeted? It is wrong to say that the Christians are being targeted. The theological issue is being addressed to the churches. Unfortunately, they do not respond. Except for one missionary, no one has been killed in the recent attacks. There have been no wanton attacks on the community. Secular property of Christians has not been damaged. Also, one has to see that there has been a lot of provocation. Unfortunately, most of the Christian laity does not wish to address this issue, and they refuse to forcefully admit that conversions do create social tensions. 21. There has been violence against Christians in Gujarat. What are the reasons for it? Much of this violence has been due to the provocation by the Christians. It is, of course, not a justification for the violence, which has to be condemned. However, unless one understands the reasons behind it, a sane society will not be able to prevent the future occurrences of the violence. If the violence is wanton, then there is one set of solution. But if there is a provocation, then, unless the provocation is removed, the violence will continue. | 15 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 15 We will deal with three cases here. The first is the desecration of the Bible in Rajkot. The provocation was the distribution of a Gujarati (the local language) translation of the book. In addition, a pledge was taken from each student that he/she is a sinner, and that Christ is his/her saviour. This is a clear sign of arrogance on part of the authorities of the school with more than 95% Hindu students. When the parents protested, the school agreed to take the book back. Some parents, in their anger, did tear up the book and burn some copies. It is pertinent to note that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has immediately condemned the incident of the desecration. While the school authorities admitted their mistake, other churches have not condemned the distribution of the Bible. Even when the provocation has come out in the open, this incident is still listed as an attack on Christianity in India. The second is the alleged exhuming of a dead body of a tribal Christian. In Kaparvanj town of Kheda district of the state, next to a temple there is an open plot of land which was used by the Hindus for religious, cultural and social functions. The converted Christians claimed that this has been allotted to them for burial purposes, and the dispute has been going on for a long time. On July 19, 1998, all of a sudden a dead body of a Christian was brought, and an attempt was made to bury it. This was resisted by the Hindus, and there was a tussle. The Christians left, leaving the body behind. When it was returned to them by the Hindus, a cry was raised that it was exhumed and then brought. No burial had taken place at all. The third is the violence that has happened in South Gujarat in the last week of December 98. It has been the practice of the Christian missionaries for the last five years to hold what are called Christmas mass on December 25. However, this event was also used to lure Hindus to attend the programme and an attempt was made to convert them. For the last three years, the Hindu Jagran Manch has been holding a function for Hindus, to prevent them from going to these public masses. In 1998, the missionaries instigated the Christians to throw stones at the Hindu rally, and even made a physical assault on the participants. This was the provocation for the subsequent violence. It has to be remembered that in all the violence that took place in Gujarat, there has not been a single death, and very few injuries. In fact, the one time there was private firing, it was indulged by a Christian, when nine Hindus got injured. Even in the late December violence, the estimated damage has been less than Rs 5 lakhs. The whole event has been blown out of proportion. | 16 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 16 22. Please tell us about the letter given to the Prime Minister by a Sarvodaya leader working in Dangs. The name of the leader is Ghelubhai Nayak, and a letter was given not only to the Prime Minister during his visit in January 1999, but also to the National Minorities Commission which had visited Gujarat in connection with the alleged attacks on minorities in the state, and the National Human Rights Commission when it visited Dangs district in January 1999. Ghelubhai says that he has no connection with any of the Sangh organisations. He has been working in Dangs since 1948 and so has good knowledge of the area's social issues. He is

‘anguished’ to narrate the ‘ground realities behind the recent violent incidents in Dangs’. They have been ‘deliberately ignored by large sections of the media’, which has ‘violated the atmosphere further.’ There is ‘no dearth of evidence’ to prove that the violence is a ‘reaction to the organised conversion activities of the Christian missionaries’. The means are ‘clearly questionable and even illegal’, and a ‘curious mix of blind faith and allurements’ have been used. The Christian population of Dangs has increased from 500 in 1951 to more than 35,000, or over 30% of the population in the district. Ghelubhai accuses the missionaries of ‘poisoning’ the minds of the tribals, and ‘inculcating a spirit in them which clearly goes against true secularism.’ On Christmas day ‘some Christian youths pelted stones on the rally of the Hindu Jagran Manch and burnt a jeep of a tribal participant.’ The ire ‘against the Christians in the area has been rising for past few years and has reached a boil now because of the provocative activities of the Christians, under influence of their preachers.’ There have been 15 cases of desecration of idols of Lord Hanuman, ‘who is worshipped by the tribals for ages’. Tension has been created by the Christians ‘publicly calling Hindu Gods as Shaitans (demons), again under the influence of their preachers.’ These preachers also entice the tribals to desist from participating in the traditional festivals of the area. The social conflicts increased on account of conversions, which tended to divide the families. The nephew of the former Bhil Raja of L for his refusal to marry his son to a Christian. The Christians there have also opposed to the construction of a Hanuman temple on land owned by the Raja of Linga, Bhavar Singh. | 17 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 17 Ghelubhai wrote in his letter that both Mahatma Gandhi and Vinobha Bhave were against conversions, and the latter wanted a ban on them. 23. Please comment on the rape of nuns at Jhabua. Rape of any woman is a dastardly act, and can never be justified under any circumstances and has been severely condemned by all. What is reprehensible in this case is that on the very day that it happened, the Sangh parviar has been blamed for the act. This has been without any justification and without any evidence. Subsequently, the Madhya Pradesh police stated that out of the 24 culprits, 12 were converted Christians, and the others had no connection with the Sangh parivar. Even then, this incident is listed as an event which is one of the causes for the Christians in particular (and minorities in general) to be concerned about the Sangh parivar. This incident has been internationalised as well, even when there was no basis for it. One has to wonder about the motives of those who have done this, along with its politicisation. 24. What are your views on the burning of the foreign missionary in Orissa, along with his two young sons? All violence has to be condemned. Like rape, killing of children is also a heinous crime, going against the Hindu tradition. The perpetrators of the crime have to be identified and the maximum penalty should be imposed on them. On this issue, there can be no second opinion. However, one has to inquire if the activities of the missionaries have caused any social disturbance. It has been reported that due to the missionary activities, there has been a social divide between the converts and those who have retained their ancient traditions. For example, the local tradition says that it is inauspicious to plough land on the day of Makarsankrant. But, the converts used to do the ploughing, apparently under the instruction of the missionaries. As in other events, the Sangh organisations have been charged of the crime right from the beginning, and without any basis. | 18 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 18 25. Is there any concerted plan to attack missionaries? There is no programme of any Hindu organisations to attack missionaries, either singly or on a concerted basis. It is not part of the Hindu cultural values to indulge in violence. At the same time, Hindus have to protect themselves, at the physical and civilisation levels. If the Christian missionaries are creating harm to them, then the Hindus have every right to defend themselves. All legal methods will be first employed. If the missionaries persist in their efforts of creating tensions, then some sort of reaction will always take place. Most of the physical reactions has taken place in the tribal areas, where the Hindus are probably more sensitive, and the missionaries more aggressive. It does not take place in the urban areas, where access to legal remedies is more easy. Ultimately, the prime cause of the violence is the action of conversions. One Christian writer said, “Whatever may be the merits of proselytism, there are demerits also. Foremost, is that it keeps the Hindus irritated, annoyed, angered and responding violently from time to time, because simple arithmetic tells them that more Christians means less Hindus, which is absolutely true. Christians, under the same

circumstances, everywhere, have also felt likewise – irritated, annoyed, angered and have responded violently.” 26. Has the issue of the attacks on Christians been politicised? If so, why? That there have been attacks on Christians is not denied. What has to be inquired if these attacks have been for communal reasons or for secular reasons. In case of the former, there is a further need to inquire if there was a provocation or not. Analysing the cases, one will find very few which have been of an unprovoked communal type. Thus, making an accusation that the Hindus are attacking the Christians deliberately, is a clear sign that there is an attempt to politicise the issue. The media, particularly the English variety, has been a willing tool in this game. When Hindus in Kashmir were under a genuine threat, with hundreds being killed, and three lakh having to become refugees in their own country, the same media has been a silent spectator, or treated the events as not being significant. The Christian organisations, both clergy and laity, have blown the incidents way out of proportion. Even when it has been well established that there were no Hindu organisations | 19 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 19 behind some of the most publicised attacks, these events are still listed as attacks on Christianity. One event of the past that is listed under this list is the killing of two nuns in Mumbai in 1989. It had been established then that this was a secular crime, and yet it is still listed as an attack on Christians. The Christian organisations have no hesitation of taking the help of Islamic fundamentalists, like the Naib Imam of the Jama Masjid of Delhi, to take the protest to the streets. The intriguing part is that the so-called secular media finds nothing wrong in this collaboration. The reason for doing this can only be speculated. The Defence Minister, George Fernandes of Samta Party, has alleged there is a conspiracy to defame the BJP-led coalition in the centre. There could also be a programme to defame Hindus. 27. Has the issue of attacks on Christians been internationalised? If so, why? The use of Christianity by western powers for their diplomatic games is well known all over the world. In the past, during colonial times, this was done openly, and the missionaries used to evaluate their work in terms of the commercial benefits that the colonial masters obtained. In the recent past, the association has been more covert. In 1982, in a secret document, the American Vice-President said, “The Catholic Church has ceased to be an ally in whom the United States can have confidence.” This was revealed by an American missionary in the Philippines. With the nuclear tests of May 1998, and a growing independent stand being taken by the BJP-led coalition in the centre, there have been reports of exasperation by some of the diplomats in the western countries. While many have expressed sympathy to India’s position, some felt that the new situation will not enable them to play the games that they have been doing. The programme of the Christian churches of calumnising the Hindus coincided with the western governments anti-India programme. These governments have lent a hand to the Christians in India for taking up the issue at the international level. These western governments have double standards. In Indonesia, hundreds of Christians have been killed, obviously on a communal basis and mostly without provocation. Yet, the international community has not raised even 10% of the noise that they have done in case of | 20 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 20 India where only a handful have been killed. The churches are also in the same game plan, and have made frequent announcements down playing the killings in Indonesia. The western countries should also look at within their own borders as to what is happening. In the United States, more than 100 churches, belonging to the Black community, have been burnt by the White supremacist. The racial picture in the United Kingdom is not something that the country is proud of. The German government’s treatment of the Turkish guest workers has been adversely commented upon even by those within the country. Less said of the treatment of the Aborigines in Australia the better. 28. Is it only in India that Christians are being attacked? Christians have been on the receiving end in many countries. Indonesia is one such example. In Sudan, there is a major problem for the Christians living in the south. In Nigeria, the Christians of the Southeast are under continuous pressure. The Coptic Christians in Egypt are frequently attacked. (In many other countries, it is the Christians who are the aggressors.) Christians are also under attack in China, where the Communist government has set up its own Christian hierarchy different from the one by the mother churches in the west. Some of the Christian magazines have reported that the Chinese government has used prostitutes to blackmail the Christian priests. Christian organisations are not allowed to practice, let alone do their so-called social

service in almost all the Islamic countries. In Russia, a bill has been passed that prohibits the different Christian sects, except the Russian Orthodox, from functioning in the country. In Israel, a bill banning conversions was dropped only when 50 Christian organisations gave an undertaking that they would not undertake such an activity. 29. Why should violence be resorted to even as a provocation? Are there no legal remedies? If violence is resorted to immediately after a provocation, without trying other remedies, then condemning such type of violence is justified. However, when the provocation persists, and the provocateur does not listen to reason, then the violence has to be seen in a different light. This is particularly the case in rural and tribal areas, where the legal system moves at a | 21
 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 21 lesser pace than in an urban area. So while any society would like violence not to exist, condemning the violence alone does not solve the underlying problem. When violence takes place upon a provocation, the scale of both has to be seen. The provocation has been substantial, and continuing for a long time. Except for the murder of the Australian priest, there has been no loss of Christian lives in the recent incidences. Damage to property is also small. And about the murder of the priest, all the details are yet to come out. Many reporters have mentioned about party politics also being a factor in it. 30. Have there been attempts to have bills to regulate conversions? What is the view of the Christians towards such bills? At the time of the debate in the Constituent Assembly, all the gamut of issues relating to conversions were discussed. Given the record of vandalism in the name of Christianity in India, and the strong objections of Mahatma Gandhi towards conversions, many members wanted to put restrictions on conversions. There was also a strong sentiments to even leave the provision of propagation out of the section of fundamental rights. However, after discussions, and due to various compromises, no specific provision was made with respect to prevent conversions due to force, inducements or fraud. It was assumed that such tactics would not be possible in an independent India. Also, due to various definitional niceties adopted, the word propagate was kept as part of the fundamental rights. The record of Christianity in an independent India does not conform to the expectations that many thinking persons had of them. The Niyogi Committee documented the improper activities of the missionaries, and made scathing remarks about them. In this state, followed by Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh, bills were introduced to prevent conversions due to force, inducements and fraud. The Supreme Court in 1977 upheld the validity of these bills. In 1978, there was a private members bill in Lok Sabha to enact a national legislation on the same lines as the three states. The Christian churches, aided by the laity organisations and the English media, mounted a sustained campaign against the bill. The introduction of the bill did not become possible, and with the changes in the political dispensation, the bill lapsed. The fact that the churches object to the regulation of conversions is a clear sign that they | 22
 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 22 wish to continue their practice of conversions by inducements and fraud, and apply force in subtle ways. 31. Please give a summary of the recommendations of The Niyogi Committee Report On Christian Missionary Activities, 1956. This committee was set up in 1954, because of serious concerns being expressed by various people about the activities of the Christian missionaries in the tribal areas of what is now Madhya Pradesh. It went about its task in terms of meeting people, as well as doing field work. It also perused the printed material of the Christian missionaries, to understand the way they set about doing their task. Though one of the members of the committee was a Christian himself, the Christians have criticised the report as biased. However, most others have commended the report. The whole process of the work of the committee was during a time when there was a Congress government both at the centre and the state. It is pertinent to note that the methods of fraud and inducements that the committee came across, continue even today. It would appear that the methods of the missionaries have not really changed. The following is a summary of the recommendations which have been made: Those missionaries whose primary object is proselytisation should be asked to withdraw. The large influx of foreign missionaries is undesirable and should be checked. The use of medical or other professional services as a means of making conversions should be prohibited by law. Any attempt by force or fraud, threats of illicit means, grants of financial or other aid, by moral and material assistance, by exploiting any person's necessity, spiritual (mental) weakness or thoughtlessness, should be banned. Any attempt or

effort, whether successful or not, directly or indirectly to penetrate into the religious conscience of persons whether of age or underage, of another faith, for the purpose of consciously altering their religious conscience or faith, so as to agree with the ideas or convictions of the proselytising party should be absolutely prohibited. | 23 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 23 Government should issue an appeal to the Christian missionary organisations, and the Christian community, to lay down in clear terms the policy they will follow in respect of propagating their religion, the methods to be followed in conversions, the type of propaganda which will be promoted and the attempts which will be made to confine their evangelistic activities within the limits of Indian Constitution. An amendment of the Constitution of India may be sought, firstly to clarify that the right of propagation has been given only to the citizens of India, and secondly that it does not include conversion brought about by force, fraud or other illicit means. Suitable control on conversion activities brought about through illegal means should be imposed. If necessary, legislation measures should be enacted. Circulation of literature meant for religious propaganda without the approval of the State Government should be prohibited. No foreigner should be allowed to function in a Scheduled or a Specified area either independently or as a member of a religious institution unless he has given a declaration in writing that he will not take part in proselytisation. 32. Some of the reported incidents of attacks on Christians have turned out to be without any basis. Why has this happened? We will deal with three incidents here. In the case of the rape of the four nuns in Jhabua, the Sangh Parivar was held as being guilty of the crime without any foundation. Subsequently, out of the 24 people arrested, the local police said that 12 are Christians. No one who had accused the Sangh came forward to apologise to the organisation. Moreover, this incident is still listed as an attack on Christians. After the dastardly killing of the Australian missionary, in the same state of Orissa, there was a report of a nun being raped after accepting a lift from a taxi that had men disguised as women. Right from the beginning, the story had full of holes. However, the English media lapped it up, and highlighted it as another incident of attack on Christianity and implied that it was the Sangh that was behind the attacks. The Christian churches organised a rally in the | 24 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 24 state, protesting the rape. Within a few days, a medical report stated that there was no rape and that the other injuries sustained by the nun were of an earlier date. The holes in the story became more apparent because the sequence of events in the incident was obviously false. After all, this came out, the papers that wrote editorials, holding the Sangh indirectly responsible, did not find it necessary to have follow-up editorials admitting their mistake, and deliberate perversions. Neither did the church apologise for trying to fabricate an event. On Feb 2, 1998, the Associated Press, an American news service, put out a report that an American missionary, Dr. John Sylvester, had been forced by ‘Hindu fundamentalists’ to close down his school and clinic in Allahabad and take sanctuary in a Baptist Seminary. It turns out that Dr. Sylvester is an Indian citizen, not a priest, does not run a school, and never met the AP correspondent. One does not know what action AP has taken to punish their correspondent for sending an obviously false report. These incidents reinforce the impression of a conspiracy, both national and international. It also reinforces the feeling that the Christian churches are involved in it. The ‘rape’ incident in Orissa, reflects poorly on the morality of the church, which has no feeling of remorse in getting a lady member of the organisation to humiliate herself in the public. 33. Are only Hindutvavadis concerned about conversions? Here the definition of Hindutvavadi in the narrow sense, to identify those who are the supporters of the Sangh Parivar. Many Christian writers have found that the whole Hindu samaj is concerned about conversions. One saw an ‘anger’ against conversions amongst her Hindu husband and their Hindu friends, who she says are ‘educated, perceptive adults’. She also says, “They just don’t see Christians as Indians; they see us as an alien ‘other’, minions of a white, Christian world that is synonymous with spiritual and racial chauvinism.” Another writer said that his Hindu friends asked him, “Why doesn’t the Church confine itself to socially constructive functions like running hospitals and schools? Why do you have to preach your religion and make converts?” While saying this, he said, that there is a reproach | 25 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 25 in the voices of his Hindu friends. It is time that the churches hear these voices, and realise that what the Hindutvavadis are saying is nothing different from what the Hindu samaj is

saying. 34. The tribals are said to be animists and not Hindus. Is the reconversion program not an attempt to create a homogenised (in the wrong sense of the word) Hindu society? Animists are those who believe that natural phenomena occur due to spirits and that all animate and inanimate objects have such spirits. They attribute conscious life to nature, and that organic objects have a soul. Of course, in each area, different tribal groups have additional beliefs that are not defined as being animistic. Although these practices may appear to be primitive, for the animists they are true and valid. The controversy of whether the tribals are not Hindus has been going on for ages. The attributes stated above are also part of the beliefs of many who are recognised as being Hindus. For example, Tulsi puja and Nagpanchami are important Hindu festivals. Tribals participate in the Hindu festivals, wherever they are celebrated nearby. The genesis of the controversy is that the missionaries wanted to divide the Hindu society, and claim that certain sections do not fall within the fold of Hinduism. During the time of the British, efforts were made to identify who are animists for the purposes of the census. And each time, the census officers said in strong terms that it is not possible to differentiate between an animist and a Hindu. The fact that the controversy continues is an indication that the old policy of dividing the Hindus still continues. The Hindu tradition is so vast, that all the indigenous faiths fall within the scope. Each tradition, either regional or started by persons, borrow from other traditions. At the same time, they are all rooted in the essential ethos of the Hindu tradition of tolerance. For example, the Bhils and the Rajputs interact at the social and cultural levels. However, what is clear is that animism has no convergence with Christianity. So, if a tribal is made a Christian, then a conversion definitely takes place. What the Hindu organisations are doing is to ask the tribals to come back to their traditional faith – whether one calls it a Hindu | 26 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 26 faith or an animist. There is no attempt to either impose upon them something different from what their ancestors practised or to homogenise the Hindus into one unique way of belief. 35. What about the Hindu temples that are coming up in the Christian countries? There is a qualitative difference between the Hindu temples coming up in Christian countries, and the Christian churches coming up in India. The Hindu temples come up only when there is a significant Hindu presence in an area. They are set up with the initiative of the local people and funded by them as well. The objective, therefore, is to fulfill the spiritual needs of the Hindus residing in the area and not built with an objective to convert. The Christian churches are first set up by the missionaries in areas where there are no Christians, and where they go to offer their so-called social service. They are funded from outside, if not the country, at least outside the area of operation. The objective is to convert people to Christianity. 36. While many Hindus complain about the conversion activities of the Christians, they have no hesitation in sending their children to their schools. Most of the Christian schools have been set up during colonial times. And they have been set up mostly by funds provided by the colonial masters out of the taxes levied on the Hindus. Thus, the infrastructure was created. In the post-independence period, the schools were initially funded by the state, until it was decided that the English medium schools will not receive such grants. The colleges continue to receive almost full aid. Since the funds are provided out of taxes, contributed mostly by the Hindus, it is a gross misnomer to call such institutes as missionary schools. At the same time, if the infrastructure is created, should it be allowed to decay? And as the education facilities are becoming available outside of metropolitan areas, one sees Hindus coming forward to set them up. Even in metropolitan areas, more and more Hindus are setting up institutes of learning. In the urban areas, the conversion activities of the churches are severely restricted due to public pressure. The conversion activities take place in the | 27 Copyright © 2020 Vhp. | All rights reserved. . . | 27 rural and tribal areas, and amongst the poor members of the society. This is done in the guise of social service. 37. Is it true that the number of people going to church in the Christian countries is declining? The fall in church attendance has been going on for more than 40 years, at least. It is said that the attendance to church in Austria is less than 20%, and that about 40,000 additional numbers are leaving the church every year. By the year 2030, there will be no one attending churches in Austria. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, less than 10% of the Anglicans, the main Christian sect in the country, attend church services. In addition to the reduced attendance to the church, the number of priests has declined drastically. One priest has to look after more than one

church. Many churches are locked up except at the time of the weekly mass. Due to fewer people wanting to be priests, the number of seminaries, the training institutes for the priests, has also come down drastically. Courtesy – Hindu Vivek Kendra, www.hvk.org

