



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan



Forced Conversions in Ghotki?

Field investigation report

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Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

Aiwan-e-Jamhoor

107 Tipu Block, New Garden Town

Lahore 54600

T: +92 42 3583 8341, 3586 4994, 3586 9969

F: +92 42 3588 3582

E: hrcp@hrcp-web.org

www.hrcp-web.org

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Forced Conversions in Ghotki?

Field Investigation Team

Ms Muna Baig, Director, HRCP

Mr Asad Iqbal Butt, HRCP Vice-Chair, Sindh

Mr Mahesh Kumar, Editor, daily *Sindh*, Hyderabad

Mr Khushal Khattak, HRCP, Islamabad

Mr Rahim Bux Jafri, veteran sociopolitical activist, Shikarpur

Dr Mohammad Khan Babbar, practising surgeon, Gambat Institute of Medical Sciences, and social activist, Khairpur

Dr Imdad Chandio, HRCP Provincial Coordinator, Sindh

Mr Allah Warayo Buzdar, senior journalist, Ghotki, and HRCP activist (local contact person and facilitator)

The fact-finding team visited Ghotki district on 2–3 May 2019. The purpose of the visit was to assess complaints concerning the reportedly forced conversion of Hindu girls, with reference to the case of Reena and Raveena of Daharki city in Ghotki district, and to gain an understanding of the increasing concerns and insecurity among the Hindu communities of the area.

The Reena and Raveena Case

On 20 March 2019, two sisters Reena Meghwar and Raveena Meghwar, disappeared from their home in Daharki, a city in the Ghotki district in Sindh. After having searched for them at local hospitals, the family and local members of the Meghwar community in the area went to the local police station to file an FIR. According to the locals, when it did not seem likely that an FIR might be lodged, the family and local community staged a protest the next day, after which an FIR was filed.

The same day that the FIR was lodged, a video of both sisters went viral on social media in which they claimed that they had converted to Islam and married two Muslim men from their locality. It emerged that the sisters had been taken to District Rahimyar Khan in Punjab where they had been married to Safdar Ali Khobar and Barkat Ali Malik, both of whom are already married and have children. The marriage took place on 22 March 2019 at the local office of the Sunni Tehreek, a religious organization. The sisters were converted before their marriage, allegedly at the Bharchundi Madrassah in District Ghotki.

The family of the girls claim that they are underage (not yet 18 years old), while

the sisters claim that they are over 18 years old. The sisters filed a petition in the Islamabad High Court to seek protection from their family on 25 March 2019. The court ordered the government to provide the sisters protection until the matter was resolved.

On 2 April, the court formed a commission to ascertain the facts of the case. The commission included the Federal Minister for Human Rights Dr Shireen Mazari, HRCP's chairperson Dr Mehdi Hasan, HRCP's honorary spokesperson Mr I. A. Rehman, chairperson of the National Commission on the Status of Women Ms Khawar Mumtaz, and scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani. Based on their medical report, the court ruled that both girls were of marriageable age and had not been forced to convert to Islam; they were allowed to return to their husbands. The family of the girls expressed concerns about the court's decision and was dismayed by these developments. On 14 May, the commission presented its report to the court. Subsequently, Mr I. A. Rehman and Ms Khawar Mumtaz presented additional comments to the court, which has reserved its judgment on a plea filed by the two sisters seeking protection against police harassment, following claims that they were forcibly converted.

Stakeholders' Hearing

Ghotki city, 2 May 2019

On 2 May 2019, the members of the HRCP team participated in a joint meeting of the citizens concerned at the Municipal Committee Ghotki meeting hall, to discuss the status and pressing problems of minorities as citizens of Pakistan, patterns of kidnappings, and conversion of Hindu/scheduled caste girls with consequent marriages with Muslim men.

Participants included religious minority community representatives, lawyers, teachers, and civil society members, the Hindu Panchayat Ghotki, Hindu Meghwar Panchayat, Daharki, Hindu Panchayat Daharki, Pakistan Meghwar Council, Ghotki Shahri Action Committee, Sindh Graduates Association, Roshni Taraqiyyati Tanzeem, Sindhi Adabi Sangat, and distinguished individuals.

The citizens in general, including the leaders/*mukhis* of the Hindu Panchayats of Ghotki, Daharki, and Meghwar community, welcomed the visit of HRCP to Ghotki district, which they believed might help protect the minorities against the highhandedness of certain powerful groups and individuals. However, there was some scepticism with regard to how the HRCP delegation or anyone could really help to improve their situation. The majority of the Hindu participants complained that they were being discriminated against in various ways by what they described as the 'powerful' or 'influentials'.

One of the mukhis, however, claimed that they had been living in peace and harmony in Ghotki town since inception and felt they were in harmony with the majority Muslim population. He claimed that Ghotki city had never had any cases of forced conversions and that if there had been any conversions, those had been by choice and were a different matter. The major cases had been observed in Daharki and Mirpur Mathelo. He admitted, however, that thousands of people had migrated from five tehsils of Ghotki district to India when the incidence of dacoity was quite high in the area. He also admitted the existence of forcible seizures of Hindu properties.

Another leader from a Hindu panchayat complained that no support was forthcoming to the community when a case of forced conversion occurred, whether for religious or political reasons. According to him, Hindu girls were being punished heavily for making mistakes as a result of increased mobile connectivity. He claimed that such girls were held in captivity for several days and a testimony was coerced out of them to confirm their conversion. Normally, it was contended by some participants, the girls were raped and tortured while in custody of the kidnappers. He expressed dismay over the courts' unsympathetic behaviour towards the community, including that of the Supreme Court.



“An ‘element of coercion’ prevails in conversion cases” – HRCP’s meeting with civil society representatives in Ghotki

A few participants said that, on the one hand, the Constitution of Pakistan guaranteed equality of citizens but on the other hand disqualified non-Muslim citizens from holding the highest positions in the state and government.

Minority representatives from towns other than Ghotki complained that the properties of Hindus were being occupied by powerful individuals and an

‘element of coercion’ prevailed in conversion cases. In this regard, some participants referred to the case of Rinkle Kumari who was allegedly kidnapped and married off to a Muslim man after being forcibly converted in 2012 and claimed that the converted girl, Rinkle, had at one stage expressed in the apex court her desire to go with her mother but was not permitted to do so. The participants alleged that she had been brainwashed.

The brother of Reena and Raveena, Mr Shaman Das Meghwar, was present at the meeting. He disclosed that, when his sisters were kidnapped, neither the police nor the government had responded to their protests, and even the SHO had not bothered to visit them. He said the District Police Chief/SSP came after three days, when a provincial minister directed him to do so. He complained that the NADRA office did not issue the birth registration form (B form) for his sisters even after ten days of hectic efforts by his family. The forms were finally issued upon the intervention of the village chairman.

He claimed that Hindus regularly faced such discrimination at the hands of the authorities. There was no support for the family even when they went to Islamabad. He claimed that their mother was given only five minutes to meet both the girls at the Supreme Court, and that his mother had reported that the girls were ‘continuously weeping’ and looked fearful.

To date, no one had allowed the family any further access to Reena and Raveena. He further questioned as to why and how Mian Mithoo had managed to reach the Islamabad High Court to participate in his sisters’ case. He also disclosed that cases of conversion were frequently being celebrated through jubilant processions in Daharki to further harass and depress the Hindu community. According to him, none of the Ghotki district girls embroiled in cases of forced conversion had returned.

Shaman Das Meghwar further highlighted the general discriminatory attitude of NADRA authorities towards the Hindu community: B forms were not issued very easily and then only if parents were present. Furthermore, they were asked to present two Muslim witnesses for the B form.

It was a general observation among minority community that Mian Mithoo, using his affiliation with the shrine of Bharchundi Sharif, was patronising cases of conversion of Hindu girls in the area. The influential support system in Daharki was the reason that cases of conversion in Ghotki district were rampant. The general view was that the widely respected spiritual shrines of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Sachal Sarmast, and Qalandar Lal Shahbaz were not involving themselves in the type of role which had become a characteristic of Bharchundi

Sharif Dargah. The instances of Hindu boys converting to Islam and then being allowed to return to their Hindu families were quoted as an example of the way in which the cases of boys and girls are dealt with differently.

Some participants differed in their opinion on the central controversial role attributed to Mian Mithoo in such cases. Such participants informed the team that local people did turn to Mian Mithoo for conversion and protection.

As to whether any evaluation or follow-up was subsequently conducted on the fate of the girls who choose to convert and wed without parental consent, the team was informed that the relevant Hindu communities had no idea about the fate of 99% of these girls. The panchayats and the Hindu community were reluctant to follow up for fear of intimidation. The Hindu community also did not speak out to preserve their dignity. Cases involving the Meghwar and Kohli communities tended to be reported as they were relatively better off financially, but virtually all the forced conversion cases of the Bhagri and Bheel communities went unreported.

Some participants decried the lack of independence given to Hindu girls involved in conversion cases to rectify matters once they realised they had made a mistake. Those girls were unfortunately made to endure the consequences of their mistake and even to confirm their choice to convert to Islam and declare their intent to continue with their new life in court. Therefore, once the girls left, they never returned to their community.

A demand was made for protests to be raised aggressively on this issue so that Hindu girls could return to their communities, as otherwise they would never be able to do so. While Reena and Raveena's case had gained global attention, at the local level the 'influentials' were refusing to acknowledge it. Only when the 'influentials' choose to intervene were 'forced' conversions preventable.

The team was made aware of the fact that most Hindu communities were traditionally narrow-minded and contributed to the discrimination meted out to the scheduled castes in accordance with their beliefs. The communities were normally unwilling to accept or accord respect to such girls given their controversial past. This played a role in the girls not being able to regain their original position or respect within their communities.

The team was informed that conversion by choice was acceptable, but forced conversions were not. A journalist pointed out that testimonies in forced conversion cases tended to be given directly at the High Courts. Another legal irregularity was that, while each case of forced conversion was different in

nature, all such cases were normally bundled together when being dealt with by the authorities.

It was contended that 90% of the cases were forced. Factors causing the problem included: escaping poverty, love, better social status, and forced conversion being treated by some as a business. The team was informed that many of the girls involved in these cases were already married. Another journalist pointed out that when girls converted it was celebrated, but when Hindu boys converted they were forced into destitution. A number of participants mentioned the involvement or acquiescence of the state in these cases.

The team enquired about the experience of Hindu residents with lawyers in cases of forced conversion and was informed that most good lawyers hesitated to take on such cases which were usually only pursued by politically oriented lawyers. However, this applied only to the minority that could afford legal services—the vast majority could not afford legal access to the apex court in Islamabad due to extreme poverty.

With regard to the Meghwar community appearing to be more affected by these incidents, it was explained that Meghwars tended not to educate their girls. Even their births were not registered and nor were they vaccinated for polio etc. when their age would be recorded on their medical cards. Several Hindu participants admitted that parents were to blame for Hindu girls' lack of education in these parts.



“Only when ‘influentials’ choose to intervene are ‘forced’ conversions preventable” – HRCP’s meeting with civil society representatives in Ghotki

An NGO worker stated that most of the responsibility for passing information to NADRA and relevant state authorities lay with the parents and the Mukhi of the relevant Hindu panchayat. If children experienced the appropriate environment at home, they could make reasonable decisions. However, the duty of the state in this regard should not be overlooked. The state should not refrain from protecting the rights of citizens simply because of the ignorance of those citizens. Systemically, the relevant NADRA officers were not regularly available and access to the offices was a problem. It was also contended that the Hindu community was deliberately being kept backward.

The main areas affected by this problem were the districts of Ghotki and Daharki. This was because these were business-oriented towns, with accessible trade routes and networks of madrassahs. There was also considerable political influence in these districts. Similarly, due to the opening of Thar Coal and Chinese investment, madrassahs were now proliferating in Tharparkar as well. These tended to target the non-Muslims and had political support due to the state's economic interest in the local areas. The businesses of non-Muslim traders were also targeted in these areas.

Leading on from this, other participants also confirmed the systemic discrimination faced by the Hindu community which led to several of their human rights being frequently violated without any recourse. One participant asked the team to reflect on why the Hindu population had decreased dramatically since Partition in 1947. The caste-based system in Hinduism was mentioned by some as also contributing to the problems within the Hindu communities.

Recommendations

Key recommendations made at the meeting were:

1. The issue could be adequately addressed if the state tackled the religion aspect and proposed a fixed process to be followed for conversion. Therefore, a separate law should be enacted which would empower a magistrate or deputy commissioner to observe and grant conversion to a religion. Controversial religious individuals or madrassahs should not be authorised to issue sanads (certificates) to converts to Islam.
2. NADRA should send its mobile units to far-flung rural areas to register the children of nomadic and indigenous people.
3. The Chief Minister of Sindh should grant an interview appointment to the Hindu community, including members of the scheduled castes, to be acquainted with the grievances and plight of religious minorities.

4. The citizens from minority communities expressed serious reservations over the role and contribution of the MNAs and MPAs belonging to religious minority groups, who tend to not look out for the rights of their communities in practice. Therefore, a participant demanded to have the right to cast two votes to elect minority representatives for both (i) general seats and (ii) special seats.
5. Strict implementation of 18 years as the minimum age across the country for both professing conversion to a religion and contracting marriages to address the unrest among minorities and their basic contention that their underage girls were being converted forcibly to Islam. In this regard, it was also recommended that the deputy commissioners should be given the power to assess cases of forced conversion based on medical evidence.
6. The five percent minority quota in jobs and educational institutions must be implemented. In education, reserved seats are not given to members through a meritocratic process and minorities are therefore not adequately served.
7. There should be secure shelter facilities to protect girls who, when they realise they have made a mistake, are able/willing to return to their communities.
8. More interfaith events should be held across the country to improve interfaith harmony. In the same vein, religious panchayats from across the country should also convene together.
9. An independent commission of minorities should be established to deal specifically with relevant issues affecting religious minorities across the country.

Meeting with Ghotki District Administration

Mirpur Mathelo, 3 May 2019

The HRCP delegation held a detailed meeting on 3 May 2019 with the district administration of Ghotki at its district headquarters in Mirpur Mathelo, in the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Ghotki.

The Additional Deputy Commissioner for Mirpur, Mr Rizwan Nazir, Mukhtiarkar/Tehsildar (Revenue Officer) Daharki Mr Ashraf Pitafi, Assistant Revenue Officer Mr Khalil Soomro, and a trainee gave the administration's version.

The case of the sisters Reena and Raveena was discussed and the administration claimed that the girls went of their own free will despite what their family was

claiming. They claimed that the Muslim men whom the girls married used to frequently visit the girls' house and their villages were only about 1–1.5 km apart. The administration explained that the family was claiming the case to be that of forced conversion because leaving their religion was not an acceptable act for them. The major factor behind this case was that of love rather than any affiliation with Islam. They also contended that some MNAs from the PPP were supporting Hindus in these cases but, by and large, the provincial government had not done much to address the issue and members of parliament were mostly not involved either way.



“No institution exists for following up on alleged cases of forced conversion” – HRCP’s meeting with the Ghotki district administration

Furthermore, the shrine of Bharchundi Sharif had nothing to do with this case. They claimed that the shrine protected whosoever went to it but it expressly did not initiate anything. The administration admitted that Mian Mithoo was indulging in self-promotion.

According to the administration, birth registration was delayed or avoided, especially of girls, in order to deny the girls their inheritance (and this was not limited to the Hindus). They also claimed that second marriages were common in Sindh.

Girls normally did not remain in touch with their families after converting and marrying, mainly because they had gone against community practice, according

to the administration. Officials stated that there appeared to be some problem with the issue of conversion cases whereby parents and the girls did not meet post-marriage, despite Islam not prohibiting parents from meeting with their children after marriage.

The administration did assert that the girls who wished to reunite with their families should reach out to the state and the state could possibly help with this. The administration officials were concerned about the image of Pakistan and Muslims, and wondered why Pakistani Hindus were highlighting such issues that maligned Pakistan globally.

In terms of the Hindus residing in the locality, the officials claimed that they were normally protected by Muslims who were partners in business.

When asked if there was any means for the administration to follow up on these cases of forced conversion, they stated that currently no institution existed for this purpose. Furthermore, when probed about the police's attitude towards complainants in forced conversion cases, the administration officials claimed that the police did its work efficiently.

Recommendations

Solutions suggested by the administration to address the issue of forced conversion included:

1. Legislation as the main way forward to curb forced conversions. Parliament should move legislation for courts to play a greater role in addressing this issue and setting up state machinery to combat this problem.
2. Courts should have/play a greater role in decreeing protection to victims and following up on cases of forced conversion that reach them.

Meeting with SSP Ghotki District

Mirpur Mathelo, 3 May 2019

In the team's meeting with the SSP of Ghotki, Mr Khurram Lanjar, following the discussion with the administration, the police's version was given. The team was informed that Mr Lanjar had been posted to the district about four months ago.

The SSP denied that there had been any delay in registration of an FIR for the alleged kidnapping of Reena and Raveena. He claimed that the FIR had been registered one day after the incident. He asserted that there seemed a willingness on the part of the girls to choose the Muslim boys. He claimed that police had,

in fact, apprehended the persons involved in the secret marriage of such couples in general. He agreed that an element of publicity and political point scoring was observed in patronisation of cases of conversion. As a result, it wouldn't be considered strange for a person from, for example, Choondko in Khairpur district to travel all the way to Daharki to change their religion. He explained he had discouraged the exhibition/celebration of the converted girls on their return to Daharki from Islamabad.



“The district administration should maintain an updated record of the status of Hindu girls involved in cases of forced conversion” – HRCP’s meeting with the SSP for Ghotki

He admitted that the social fabric was such that poor and scheduled-caste Hindus were considered lowly and tended to be ignored by the police, which he saw as unfortunate.

According to the SSP, the root cause of this problem was that Hindu girls were not given the possibility of choosing their marriage partners. Personal love played a larger role in the decision to convert than a love for Islam. He also stated that the shrine of Bharchundi Sharif probably believed it was doing a good deed by participating in these conversions and that the shrine was being unnecessarily dragged into this matter. He stated that people themselves went to the shrine of Bharchundi Sharif to obtain protection after converting to Islam. The fact that there were so many conversions appeared to suggest that there was more protection in that area for those who absconded to convert.

In the Rinkle case, one official claimed that she went willingly with her husband. (Note: this was contrary to the version that HRCP had received from other meetings).

Recommendations

Solutions suggested by the SSP of Ghotki included:

1. Religious conversion should be through a proper process and be formalised or registered in a court of law.
2. A minimum age for religious conversion should be set by the state.
3. The district administration should play a greater role in improving the situation and addressing the problem. It should maintain an updated record of the status of the Hindu girls involved in these cases.

Appendix 1: Media Coverage of the Alleged Forced Conversions of Reena and Raveena

HRCP press release, 22 March 2019

Bill against forced conversions must be passed

After two minor Hindu girls in Ghotki were allegedly abducted and converted forcibly to Islam, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has called on the Sindh Assembly to ‘take swift, serious measures to resurrect and pass the bill criminalising forced conversions.’

HRCP has said that ‘it is imperative this bill be passed and steps taken to implement it. At present, forced conversions are too easily – and too often – disguised as voluntary conversions, leaving minor girls especially vulnerable. The ugly reality of forced conversions is that they are not seen as a crime, much less as a problem that should concern ‘mainstream’ (Muslim) Pakistan. The two young girls reportedly abducted in Ghotki are a case in point: that their families were unable to lodge an FIR is shocking. This should be the first line of defence in all such cases.

‘The state has a responsibility to all its citizens to protect their freedom of religion or belief. This implies serious introspection into why the 2016 bill against forced conversions was not ratified by the governor at the time, Justice Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui. No reasons were given, nor is it clear whether he returned the bill officially or left it pending. Equally, the Sindh government should not have given in to pressure from a minority of religious parties who had objected to the bill. The present Sindh Assembly is morally bound to revisit the bill and ensure it is passed without capitulating to the religious far right or to any individuals or parties that object to its contents or underlying spirit.’

Source: <http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/bill-against-forced-conversions-must-be-passed/>

The Express Tribune, 25 March 2019

Police arrest 12 persons in Ghotki forced conversion

KARACHI: Ghotki police arrested on Monday 12 persons including the marriage officiator and witnesses of two minor Hindu girls who were allegedly forced to convert to Islam.

The incident came to light when a video of the girls’ father and brother surfaced online. The men said that the teenagers were abducted and forced into conversion and marriage. The girls, who are both 13, have been identified as

Reena and Raveena. They were allegedly kidnapped on March 20.

A new video, however, has now emerged in which a cleric is sitting next to the pair with two other men they were married to. The cleric said the girls were inspired by Islam and alleged that their family was lying about the incident. Reports also emerged that the teenagers had been moved to the Punjab city of Rahim Yar Khan from Ghotki, Sindh.

On March 24, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said the government had taken notice of the incident, asking authorities in both Sindh and Punjab to jointly investigate the matter. Similarly, it was announced that a five-point resolution seeking to end the kidnapping of Hindu girls and forced conversions was set to be tabled in the next session of the National Assembly.

According to a resolution draft circulated on social media, prominent Hindu lawmaker Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani was asked by Pakistan Hindu Council to play his due role for raising his voice in the parliament, media, civil society and all other forums available, in the wake of incident.

Meanwhile, the couples approached the Islamabad High Court, seeking protection as their lives were under threat. The application stated that propaganda was being spread in the media related to the matter.

Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1937008/1-police-arrest-12-persons-ghotki-forced-conversion-case/>

Dawn, 26 March 2019

Forced Conversions

THE alleged abduction of two young Hindu sisters, Reena and Raveena, from their home in Daharki last week is one of only a handful of the many claims of forced conversions in Sindh that actually gain public attention.

Too often, officials casually lean into the suggestion that such incidents are simply a matter of women deciding to convert and marry of their own free will, a ‘family dispute’ that should be resolved privately, ignoring the power dynamics that make this so suspect.

The fact is that the majority of new converts in Sindh are young women or minor girls from socioeconomically vulnerable Hindu families.

The nexus of power—politically influential families, clerics and seminaries—behind this phenomenon are also well known to all, while religious

minorities have repeatedly pointed to a lack of appropriate concern displayed by police and judicial officers.

In this case, too, despite the fact that an FIR was registered under the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act, 2013, the police seemingly attempted to minimise the allegations by pointing to a video of the two girls claiming they had chosen their fate voluntarily.

The truth about what has happened to Reena and Raveena can only emerge after a thorough and impartial probe, and it is hoped that the investigation will be swift now that the prime minister has taken notice of this case. But, beyond that, there is a need to address the systemic failures that enable such forms of religious persecution to flourish.

A move by the Sindh legislature to criminalise forced religious conversions and forced marriages was torpedoed in early 2017 when the then governor refused to ratify it.

The government was forced to capitulate to pressure exerted by the religious right that conflates safeguards against coercion with ‘obstacles’ in the path of those who wish to convert. Human rights groups have now called on the provincial government to resurrect the bill.

Indeed, such laws are needed across the country, for the guarantee of life and liberty of Pakistan’s religious minorities must be wholeheartedly embraced by all our citizens.

...

The state has a responsibility to preserve and protect the right to freedom of religion, guaranteed under Article 20 of our Constitution. But it is impossible to deny the fact that religious minorities are, in many ways, more vulnerable than safe in Pakistan.

Source: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1471932>

The News International, 26 March 2019

The unequal other

The sudden and unexplained disappearance of two teenage Hindu sisters, Reena and Raveena, on the eve of Holi, has brought some much-needed attention to the problem of forced conversions, forced underage marriage and our general treatment of religious minorities. Even as the parents of the girls were insisting that they had been kidnapped and taken to Rahim Yar Khan in Punjab, the Sindh

IGP had dismissed the case and claimed that the girls had gotten married and converted of their own free will. Such a blasé attitude in a country where it is estimated that at least 1,000 Christian and Hindu women are forcibly converted each year – 25 percent of these conversions take place in the Umerkot district of Sindh – shows how little attention is paid to the rights of our minority communities. Even leaving aside the fact that it is doubtful that those of minor age are capable of freely changing their religion – or contracting marriage – is there any doubt that the concerns of the parents would not have been swept away immediately had they not been poor and from a minority community? This is of course not the first case of its kind. Another Hindu girl, Shania from Mirpurkhas, also suffered a similar situation a few weeks ago.

Over the years, many have pointed to the complicity of local law-enforcement and lawmakers in such cases. The Sindh police had to be forced into even investigating this kidnapping. Let us not forget also that the Sindh Assembly had even unanimously passed a bill – the Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill 2015 – that would have placed an age limit of conversions, but later withdrew it under pressure from religious parties.

It took widespread national coverage of the kidnapping for Prime Minister Imran Khan to take notice of the problem and order Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar to investigate the matter – since the girls had been taken to Punjab. Hypocrisy has abounded on the issue since then. Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj sought details from the Indian envoy in Pakistan on the status of Reena and Raveena. This led to a back and forth between her and Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry. The truth is that neither Pakistan nor India has shown any inclination of making minority rights a priority. We are in no position to lecture anyone on the treatment of minorities – not when the initial reaction to the kidnapping and alleged forced conversion and marriage of two underage Hindu girls was to claim they had done so of their own free will. Until we take concrete action to curb this menace, we have no right to boast about how equal rights are granted to all. Instead, we need to look at ourselves and decide if this is the kind of discriminatory society we want to maintain going forward.

Source: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/448797-the-unequal-other>

Geo News, 28 March 2019

Timeline: The disappearance of Raveena and Reena

On March 20, while the Hindu community in the Daharki area of Sindh's Ghotki district was celebrating Holi, two sisters, Raveena Meghwar and Reena Meghwar, disappeared from their home.

Their father, a poor cobbler, and his two sons, spend the night searching for the girls. They moved from door-to-door asking if anyone had seen the two. They inquired at local hospitals and even at the police station in their area.

By morning, there were no traces of the girls. The worried old man, and other members of the community blocked the main thoroughfare connecting Sindh with Punjab, in protest.

Finally, the Station House Officer (SHO) Daharki convinced the community to let the traffic pass. The officer then filed a First Information Report (FIR) against six men, three of whom were unknown, for kidnapping the girls.

Videos go viral

The next day, a video emerged on the social media showing the two girls converting to Islam in Bharchundi Sharif in Daharki. A man named Mian Javed has been identified as the person at whose house the girls accepted Islam. He further named Raveena as Aasia and Reena as Shazia.

The journey to Punjab

On March 22, the girls reach Rahim Yar Khan in the province of Punjab. Here, it is alleged that they again renounced their faith in front of lawyers at a bar room in Khanpur. It is unclear who was accompanying these women or who brought them to Punjab.

The same day, the girls were married off to Safdar Khobar and Barkat Malik, at the residence of Jawad Hasan, the general secretary of Sunni Tehreek. A video of the ceremony and of a cleric purportedly solemnising the nikah also surfaced on the social media a day later.

Both the men, the girls were wedded to, are married. Khobar has three children, while Malik has one. They lived in the same neighbourhood as the teenage sisters.

What now?

The Islamabad High Court has ordered official protection for the two girls, due to concerns about their safety. Separately, on the prime minister's orders, authorities have launched a probe to determine if the girls were abducted and then forcibly converted.

In Punjab, eight men have been arrested and Jawad Hasan has been booked under Section 16 of the Punjab Maintenance of Public Order.

Can the men be prosecuted?

For abduction and forcing the girls to convert. No. There is no law in Sindh banning forced conversions. In 2017, the Sindh government rejected a bill tabled to outlaw the practice and punish forced conversions with jail time and life imprisonment.

However, Sindh does have the Child Marriage Restraint Act which sets the legal minimum age of marriage for boys and girls to 18 years. Both girls, according to their families are minors. Raveena, they say, is 12-years-old and Reena is 15. However, there are other reports that the girls maybe 18 and 20, though no documented proof has surfaced yet.

If the girls are underage, then even in Punjab, where they were allegedly married, the legal age to marry is 16 years.

Source: URL: <https://www.geo.tv/latest/232320>

The News on Sunday, 31 March 2019

Rinkle Kumari to Reena and Raveena

It was on March 20—the day of the Holi festival—that a video of the father and brother of two Hindu sisters, Reena and Raveena, surfaced online. The men claimed that the underage teenagers were abducted from the Ghotki district of Sindh and were forced to change their religion from Hinduism to Islam.

But things took a turn when the girls filed a court petition in Islamabad claiming that they were over 18 and had willingly converted to Islam, and married the men they wanted. They also sought protection from their family, claiming the family had harassed and threatened them. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) on Tuesday, placed both the girls in government custody and ordered a ‘fair and transparent inquiry’ into their circumstances, that is to be presented to the court in a week.

This case has yet again brought to the fore the issue that has been haunting non-Muslim communities, especially Hindus, for the last several years. Most such complaints and cases are being reported on a regular basis from Sindh, where most of the Hindu community lives.

“Abductions and forced conversions are some of the most serious problems Hindu women are facing these days,” says Birma Jesrani, a Hindu activist who led the ‘Stop Forced Conversions Action Committee’, a body of rights activists formed last week in Karachi, to show concerns over abductions. The body

organised a protest on March 24 against the recent case of alleged conversion of Reena and Raveena outside the Karachi Press Club in which a large number of activists, Hindu community members and parliamentarians from opposition parties participated. Speakers at the protest said that minorities, especially Hindu, often do not receive the protection required from state institutions and lack access to justice.

Community activists also claim that after kidnapping the girls, conversion and marriage were being used as legal cover to protect the abductors. “In such cases, girls were threatened into giving false statements in court,” Jesrani tells TNS.

Activists say that the recent case has not only made a dent in the cause of religious harmony but has also violated the Sindh government’s Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013 that bars the marriage of girls below the age of 18.

A section of activists was very critical of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) for shying away from a bill criminalising forced religious conversions, and subsequent forced marriages. In November 2016, the then Sindh Assembly had unanimously passed into law the Sindh Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill 2015 to make forced conversions punishable with a life sentence and forbade minors from changing their religion. However, the situation took an unpleasant turn when many religious parties, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), took to the streets against the proposed law and announced a movement against it, following which the governor at the time, Justice Saeduzzaman Siddiqui returned the bill to the assembly.

The pressure of religious parties was so severe that the PPP’s supremo Asif Ali Zardari telephoned the JI chief Siraj Ul Haq, assuring him that the Sindh government would take back the forced conversion bill.

Activists say that the recent case has not only made a dent in the cause of religious harmony but has also violated the Sindh government’s Child Marriage Restraint Act, 2013 that bars the marriage of girls below the age of 18.

Pakistan Muslim League-Functional MPA Nand Kumar Goklani, who had initially moved the bill against forced conversions, says he would raise the issue of abductions and forced conversions of the two girls in the Sindh Assembly. “It is now the community’s demand that Sindh government take up my bill and get it passed without any delay,” Goklani tells TNS.

After the passage of the bill in 2016, the PPP celebrated it but ever since the bill was taken back, the party has been now mum on the issue while the bill seems to

have been brushed under the carpet. A PPP MPA from the Hindu community familiar with the bill, says that Islamist parties had proposed to the Sindh government to remove the condition of age (18 years) for the conversion of religion. “The PPP is now not in the position to pass the bill again because it is mainly focused on NAB cases against the party’s central leaders; and could not annoy religious parties at this stage,” says the MPA, who requested anonymity. He says that the bill was unanimously passed in the previous assembly because there was no presence of religious parties, but in the current legislative body, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan and the JI have representation that will oppose the bill inside and outside the assembly with full force.

Amid the outrage of the recent case, Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, a Hindu parliamentarian from the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), moved two bills in the National Assembly on March 26, seeking enhancement of punishment for those involved in forced conversions, and for making child marriage a cognisable offence. Besides Vankwani, PTI legislators Lal Malhi and Shunila Ruth, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz lawmaker Darshan and PPP’s Ramesh Lal signed the resolution.

Pirs (spiritual leaders) of prominent shrines, such as Dargah Bharchundi Sharif and Sarhandi shrine, in rural Sindh, are hotbeds of such religious conversions where a number of Hindu girls and young women, mostly those belonging to Scheduled Castes—Bheel, Meghwar, Bhaagri and Kohli—have been converted to Islam. But, on the other hand, with an increase in the activities of various Islamic groups in rural Sindh, active efforts are being made to convert Scheduled Caste Hindu families by offering them material inducement such as ration, livestock and housing. “It is a purely voluntary process because it is un-Islamic to force someone to embrace Islam,” says an administrator of Dargah Bharchundi Sharif.

Source:<http://tns.thenews.com.pk/rinkle-kumari-reena-raveena/#.XP9itogzbIV>

Dawn, 11 April 2019

Ghotki sisters not forcibly converted, allowed to live with husbands: IHC

The Islamabad High Court (IHC) on Thursday declared that the two sisters from Ghotki were not forcibly converted from Hinduism to Islam, and permitted them to live with their spouses.

The sisters and their spouses had petitioned the IHC on March 25 against alleged harassment by police days after their father and brother, in videos circulating on social media last month, alleged that the two sisters were underage, had been

abducted, forced into changing their religion, and then married off to Muslim men. However, a separate video of the ‘minor’ girls had also made the rounds in which they said that they accepted Islam of their own free will.

IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah had constituted a five-member commission to probe whether the conversion of the Hindu sisters to Islam was forced or otherwise. During an earlier hearing, the court had also ordered that the two be shifted to a shelter home in Islamabad.

The commission comprising Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari, prominent Muslim scholar Mufti Taqi Usmani, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Chairperson Dr Mehdi Hasan, National Commission on the Status of Women Chairperson Khawar Mumtaz and veteran journalist and human rights activist I. A. Rehman had probed the matter and concluded that it was not a forced conversion.

The secretary interior, Azam Suleman, apprised the IHC about the findings of the commission, and told the court that as per the commission’s opinion, it was a facilitated conversion.

I. A. Rehman pointed out in court that “there is no law in Pakistan against forced conversions” and sought a court decree in this regard.

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf lawmaker Ramesh Kumar, when invited to the rostrum, wanted the IHC to issue directives to the government for the amendment of laws related to the protection of minorities.

Justice Minallah expressed displeasure, saying that he feels embarrassed when parliamentarians express helplessness to legislate. He remarked that the case of the Ghotki sisters was a simple one and would have been decided in a day or so, but a commission comprising eminent professionals and scholars had been constituted keeping in view the sensitivity of the case since “the court wanted to ensure this was not a forced conversion.”

Interior secretary Suleman also told the court that a medical board constituted to ascertain the age of the sister had concluded that they are adults aged 18 and 19 years.

Earlier, a medical report prepared by the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (Pims) had also stated that Asia (formerly Raveena) is 19-years-old and Nadia (formerly Reena) is 18-years-old.

The commission in its report pointed out that there is an unregulated facilitation centre for religious conversions and recommended that it be regulated.

Justice Minallah observed that the court's ruling today would not affect any proceeding litigation pending against the spouses of the sisters in any other court.

Regarding the issue of forced conversions, the court sought the commission's recommendations within four weeks and adjourned the case until May 14.

Source: URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1475372>

The Express Tribune, 14 May 2019

IHC reserves judgment in Ghotki sisters' protection plea

The Islamabad High Court (IHC) has reserved its judgment on a plea of two teenage sisters from Ghotki who converted to Islam and their Muslim spouses seeking protecting against police harassment following claims that they were forcibly converted.

During the hearing, IHC Chief Justice Athar Minallah remarked that minorities had the same stature as the rest of the citizens of Pakistan. He said this in response to Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf lawmaker Ramesh Kumar, who wanted the IHC to issue directives to the government for the amendment of laws related to the protection of minorities.

“The court cannot give directions to the parliament. We want to see the parliament get strong,” he remarked.

Earlier, the IHC had declared that the two sisters were not forcibly converted from Hinduism to Islam, and permitted them to live with their spouses. The IHC had also formed a five-member commission to probe the two sisters were underage and forcibly converted to be married, which ruled that it wasn't the case.

During the hearing, commission member and eminent rights activist I A Rehman stated that minorities weren't safe anywhere in Sindh and not just in any particular district. “We need to end the impression that minorities are unsafe in this country.” He said the commission wanted to visit the area but was unable to do so.

In the hearing, the two converted girls and their spouses were represented by the secretary of the IHC Bar Association Umair Baloch.

The sisters and their spouses had petitioned the IHC on March 25 against alleged harassment by police days after their father and brother, in videos circulating on social media last month. The videos alleged that the two sisters were underage, had been abducted, forced into changing their religion, and then married off to Muslim men.

However, a separate video of the ‘minor’ girls had also made the rounds in which they said that they accepted Islam of their own free will. The IHC constituted commission ruled that the two sisters were 18 and 19 years old at the time of the nikkah

Source: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1973040/1-ihc-reserves-judgment-ghotki-sisters-protection-plea/>

Appendix 2: Media Coverage of the Alleged Forced Conversion of Rinkle Kumari

BBC News (South Asia), 6 March 2012

Pakistan Hindu woman Rinkle Kumari ‘forced to marry’

A court in Pakistan has ordered police to find a Hindu woman who was allegedly abducted and forced to marry her Muslim husband.

In a petition before the Karachi High Court, the family of Rinkle Kumari say that her abduction was supported by a powerful politician. But her husband's friends say that she voluntarily left home in Sindh province and willingly converted to Islam.

Judges at the court said that Ms Kumari must be produced before them next week. Human rights activists say that other reported abductions of members of minority communities in Pakistan, which is overwhelmingly Muslim, have not been properly investigated by the authorities.

In the most recent case, Hindu community leaders say that an oath Ms Kumari made in front of a court in her home town that she had freely got married and converted to Islam was made under duress.

They say that many others like her have been forcibly taken away by powerful politicians - some allied to the governing Pakistan People’s Party (PPP).

The Hindu community has accused one of the party’s MPs, Mian Abdul Haq, of supporting the abduction and the forced conversion.

But in an interview with the BBC he strenuously denied the allegations. “I contacted her family when Rinkle came to me last month,” he said. “But they refused to respond – and then I was left with no choice but to convert her to Islam and get her married [according to] her will.”

Ms Kumari’s family say that she was kidnapped from her home on 24 February by Naveed Shah – who later married her.

They say that they have registered a police complaint against Mr Shah even though he appeared in court on 25 February with Ms Kumari, who made a statement before the magistrate that she had married him of her own free will.

The family and community leaders, however, say that the magistrate was under “a great deal of pressure” because hundreds of armed tribesmen loyal to

Mr Haq were in the court premises.

Mr Haq said that his supporters would abide by the court ruling and that Ms Kumari would appear in court on 12 March.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-17272943>

The Guardian, 25 March 2012

Pakistan supreme court to decide fate of Hindu woman in Muslim marriage row

The fate of a Pakistani Hindu woman who claims she was kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam and married against her will is to be decided this week, after weeks of campaigning by the country's Hindu minority.

The case of 19-year-old Rinkle Kumari has outraged Hindus from her small town in the south of the country, where community leaders accuse Muslims of preying on Hindu girls of marriageable age.

Some claim similar cases are helping to fuel a steady outflow of Pakistan's tiny Hindu community as families choose to move to Hindu-majority India instead. In a hearing beginning on Monday, the Supreme Court in Islamabad will try to get to the bottom of the hotly contested versions of events.

The town's Muslims, backed by a powerful local politician, say Kumari freely converted to Islam to marry her neighbour, Naveed Shah, on 24 February. But her father, a primary school teacher, is adamant she was abducted in the middle of the night from her house in Mirpur Marthelo, in Sindh province.

"These people see beautiful young Hindu girls and chase them," said her uncle Raj Kumar. "For 15 days Naveed Shah had been shouting at Rinkle, threatening to kill her only brother."

Her case has won support from members of parliament and attracted widespread attention in the Pakistani media. According to the Frontier Post newspaper, Rinkle was seized "for reasons based in sheer lust and debauchery". Throughout the whole saga Rinkle's voice has barely been heard, although both sides say she has made clear statements supporting their contradictory claims.

Her family says that when she first appeared at a magistrates court late last month the tearful woman made clear she had been forcibly converted and wanted to return to her parents. But the court failed to record her statement and

put her in police custody after hundreds of Muslim protesters surrounded the court. In a subsequent hearing – from which the family say they were banned – Kumari said she had freely converted.

In a sign of the enormous tensions created by the case, the Hindu minority only succeeded in forcing the authorities to open a case on the issue by staging protests, with shopkeepers striking and demonstrators blocking a highway. The intervention of the Pakistani president, Asif Ali Zardari, forced the police to act, say protesters.

Mian Mitto, the local member of parliament whom Kumari's family has accused of being intimately involved in the abduction and conversion, dismissed her initial court statement. "She may have been emotional, it is only natural to be upset after seeing her parents in court," he said.

Mitto's family control a nearby Sufi shrine which has a long history as a place where people come to convert to Islam. In his version of events Kumari had long been in love with Shah. Speaking at his house in Islamabad, he produced telephone and SMS logs that apparently showed the pair were in regular communication, although Raj Kumar insisted the family was too poor for Rinkle to have a phone.

Whether she was abducted or went on her own volition, she arrived at the shrine late at night. Within hours she had converted to Islam and married Shah, Mitto said.

Amarnath Motumal, from the Sindh chapter of Pakistan's human rights commission, said many cases of forced conversion were covered up, but he believed there were at least 20 such incidents each month. He said: "They take them into these extremist madrassas and don't let the parents meet their families, claiming the girl does not want to meet kaffirs [unbelievers] – her own parents."

Another recent case involves a female medical student who was allegedly kidnapped on the streets of Karachi. "These people want to stoke a war between the Hindus and Muslims so that we leave the country," said Amarlal, chairman of the Progressive Minorities Commission, who uses only one name. "Local mullahs and fundamentalist people think that if they leave they can take their properties."

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/25/pakistani-hindu-court-forced-conversion>

New York Times, 25 March 2012

In Pakistan, Hindus Say Woman's Conversion to Islam Was Coerced

GHOTKI, Pakistan — Banditry is an old scourge in this impoverished district of southern Pakistan, on the plains between the mighty river Indus and a sprawling desert, where roving gangs rob and kidnap with abandon. Lately, though, local passions have stirred with allegations of an unusual theft: that of a young woman's heart.

In the predawn darkness on Feb. 24, Rinkel Kumari, a 19-year-old student from a Hindu family, disappeared from her home in Mirpur Mathelo, a small village off a busy highway in Sindh Province. Hours later, she resurfaced 12 miles away, at the home of a prominent Muslim cleric who phoned her parents with news that distressed them: Their daughter wished to convert to Islam, he said.

Their protests were futile. By sunset, Ms. Kumari had become a Muslim, married a young Muslim man, and changed her name to Faryal Bibi.

Over the past month, this conversion has generated an acrid controversy that has reverberated far beyond its origins in small-town Pakistan, whipping up a news media frenzy that has traced ugly sectarian divisions and renewed a wider debate about the protection of vulnerable minorities in a country that has so often failed them.

At its heart, though, it is a head-on clash of narratives and motives.

Hindu leaders insist that Ms. Kumari was abducted at gunpoint and forced to abandon her religion. Local Muslim leaders say she wanted to marry her secret sweetheart: Naveed Shah, a young neighbor who said he had been conducting a secret courtship with her via mobile phone and the Internet for several months. Ms. Kumari, for her part, has said in a court filing and media interviews that she converted of her free will — but public figures have questioned whether she had been pressed or intimidated into saying that.

Sulachany Devi, left, and Nand Lal are pleading for the return of their daughter, Rinkel Kumari. Ms. Kumari's family says her marriage and conversion were at gunpoint.

The truth may emerge Monday, when the young woman is due to testify before the Supreme Court in Islamabad. For the past two weeks she has been sequestered in a women's shelter in Karachi on court orders. When she takes the stand on Monday, many Pakistanis hope she can resolve the central mystery: where do her religious, and romantic, intentions lie?

In one sense, the drama is an old story in South Asia, where the contours of society have been shaped by waves of conversions over the centuries. Since the founding of Pakistan, most conversions are to Islam, the state religion. But such conversions usually take place quietly, even in an organized fashion, and the unusual furor surrounding the latest case stems partly from the brash manner of her conversion at the hands of a divisive local politician, Mian Mitho.

After Ms. Kumari declared herself a Muslim in her town court on Feb. 27, Mr. Mitho triumphantly led the new convert from the courthouse, parading her before thousands of cheering supporters. Then he drove her in a caravan to an ancient Sufi religious shrine controlled by his family and famed as a site where Hindus have been converted.

There, Ms. Kumari was welcomed by Mr. Mitho's elderly brother, Mian Shaman—the same cleric who had converted her three days earlier—who led her into the towering shrine. When she emerged, now wearing a black veil, gunmen unleashed volleys of celebratory Kalashnikov fire into the air and shouted “God is calling you!”

Hindu leaders, enraged, viewed the images as a crass provocation. “If the couple was really in love, then why this fanfare of guns?” said Amarnath Motumal, a Hindu lawyer and human rights activist in Karachi. “It clearly shows they are trying to embarrass the Hindu community and are bent on taking our girls forcefully.”

Ms. Kumari's parents pursued the case through the courts, claiming that their daughter had been abducted by a Muslim supremacist, and that the police and judiciary were biased against them because they came from a minority background.

“Mian Mitho is a terrorist and a thug. He takes the girls, and keeps them in his home for sexual purposes,” said Ms. Kumari's father, Nand Lal, a government schoolteacher, noting that Mr. Mitho's armed guards had escorted his daughter to court appearances and news conferences. His wife, Sulachany Devi, issued an anguished appeal. “Rinkel was my blood, and she remains my blood. All I want is for her to return home,” she said.

Mr. Mitho, in an interview, denied the allegations against him. “I am merely protecting her human rights,” he said. And at the Sufi shrine in Ghotki district, his brother, the cleric who converted Ms. Kumari, was equally unapologetic.

“We are saving them from the fires of hell,” said Mian Shaman, a frail man in his 70s with a mottled complexion and a wavering voice. “We consider they are born again, and the sins of their previous life are washed away.”

Mr. Shaman estimated he had converted 200 people the previous year. He insisted none had been coerced. “Forced conversions are not permitted in Islam,” he said firmly.

Mr. Shaman led the way into the mosque, a spectacular building covered in intricately patterned indigo tiles and a carved wooden roof. Then he walked into the adjacent shrine, where murmuring pilgrims rocked back and forth in front of four tombs containing the bones of the cleric’s ancestors.

Women are not permitted inside, he said — they may only peek through a small barred window in the tomb wall — but he made an exception for Ms. Kumari. “She was a special lady,” he said.

The case has caused division within the ruling Pakistan People’s Party, of which Mr. Mitho is a member. Earlier this month, President Asif Ali Zardari privately intervened to have Ms. Kumari taken into protective custody. Later, the president’s sister, Dr. Azra Fazal Pechuho, delivered an impassioned speech to Parliament about the plight of the Hindu community.

“I have a lot of discomfort with this kind of behavior,” said a senior party member from Sindh Province, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the political delicacy of the matter. “The state is not giving the Hindus an equal environment. So they are turning to a narrative of forced conversion to fight back.”

Pir Muhammad Shah, the local police chief, agreed that Mr. Mitho’s actions had aggravated the situation. “It teased the whole Hindu community, and led them to believe the conversion had been done at gunpoint.”

Although Pakistan is blighted by sectarian bloodshed, rural Sindh Province is a relative beacon of religious tolerance. The majority of the country’s Hindus, estimated to number more than three million people, live here, and they have a history of tranquil co-existence with Muslims. The two communities share religious festivals, go into business together, and attend one another’s weddings and funerals.

Yet it remains a delicate social balance. In many Sindhi towns, wealthy Hindu traders have been targeted by kidnappers. Conversions, which are freighted with

notions of collective honor, can present a jarring social fault line. Officials with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan have spoken of up to 20 forced conversions a month—and Hindu families fleeing for India—but they admit that the research is thin.

As Ms. Kumari's anticipated court date nears, it has revived many old tensions. And while no one is expecting widespread violence in her case, in some of its particulars it bears a remarkable resemblance to an earlier conversion scandal — one in 1936, when a British magistrate returned a Hindu girl to her parents after she had been converted. The result was an 11-year uprising by Muslim Pashtun tribesmen that at one point involved 40,000 British troops.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/26/world/asia/pakistani-hindus-say-womans-conversion-to-islam-was-coerced.html>