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## The Discourse of Religious Conversions

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*To have a rational conversation about religious conversions in India, we have to carefully disentangle reason from rhetoric, cleanse key words of their emotive charge, subject arguments to logical scrutiny, and restore perspective. This essay attempts to prepare the groundwork for such an exercise.*

When a matter becomes an emotional issue, inevitably the discourse around it gets warped. Preposterous assumptions are embraced as self-evident axioms and illogical arguments are entertained. Connotations hijack the meaning of words, making them instruments of abuse and accusation, and implausible narratives are accepted as witnessed histories. This is what is happening with the issue of religious conversions.

When this happens, rational, meaningful discussion becomes impossible. At such times, it is very important to bring back the discourse to its rational moorings. We need to carefully disentangle reason from rhetoric, cleanse key words of their emotive charge, subject arguments to logical scrutiny, and restore perspective. I think such an exercise is urgently needed in the case of religious conversion. In this piece, I am going to try to at least lay the groundwork for such an exercise so that a space is created for rational conversation about religious conversions.

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In the prevailing climate of opinion, it appears to have been accepted as somehow self-evident that religious conversions are terrible things that should be actively discouraged, if not totally prevented, and that the government should ensure that they do not occur by imposing all sorts of conditions on those who convert and criminalising the involvement of others in the conversion. Maybe this is unexceptionable.

|| That a person can practice any religion of his choice is beyond dispute. It is the corollary of a person's right to hold beliefs that appeal to him on any matter, no matter how bizarre they may be.

But, given that it has grave ramifications for individual liberties amongst other things, it is important that we ask a few central questions about it. What exactly is religious conversion? What are its psychological and practical dimensions? What are its social and political implications? What are the principles that are violated by religious conversion? What are the principles that need to be safeguarded in this context?

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Let us begin by asking whether a person has the right to convert to another religion of his or her own will. That a person can practice any religion of his choice is beyond dispute. It is the corollary of a person's right to hold beliefs that appeal to him on any matter, no matter how bizarre they may be.

A person's beliefs are constitutive of his personhood. We may find those beliefs irrational or even dangerous. It may seem rash to concede the latter. But as long as the person does not implement his dangerous beliefs, that is to say, as long as actions flowing from his beliefs do not adversely affect the lives of others, no matter how abhorrent we might find them, we have no right to demand that he give up those beliefs.

We can of course try to convince him through reasoning and persuasion to abjure those beliefs. But that is another matter and I will come to it presently. The point here is that right to belief is a basic right. That being the case, it makes no sense to object to a person's change of belief. The right to give up a belief or embrace a new belief is an integral part of the right to belief. Therefore, it is absurd to insist that a person should hold on to an initial set of beliefs and never change them. At the level of belief, this right extends to religion as well.

The central point [...] is that neither state nor society can demand that he should seek permission to change his religious beliefs or even inform them that he has done so.

The question then is: if we grant that the right to change beliefs of one's own will is inalienable, can we object to a person changing his beliefs under another person's influence? The answer has to be in the negative because the right to belief (including change of belief) is not compromised by whether the person changes his beliefs and personal practices as a result of his own reflection or after being convinced by someone else, or even lured by some inducement.

I will elaborate on this point in a while, but the central point here is that neither state nor society can demand that he should seek permission to change his religious beliefs or even inform them that he has done so, except when it involves a change in his social identity and status with implications for state or society – such as privileges, special rights, or benefits. To reiterate what I said earlier, this is not affected by the causes and circumstances of the change of belief, provided, as always and without exception, that the person exercised his agency.

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The next point is about someone converting another person to a religion, whatever that may mean. What are the moral and legal issues that arise here, particularly about the means employed?

There are four possible means that can be used for religious conversion: force, deception, inducement, and persuasion. Let us start with the use of force.

The interesting fact, for some reason not often noticed, is that at the level of beliefs, it is impossible to force someone to change their convictions. This is just a specific instance of a more general fact that there are certain things that are simply not amenable to force. Believing is one of them. Some other such things are enjoying, loving, and trusting.

In all such cases, I may plead, cajole, present persuasive arguments and so on, but I may not be able to force the other person into it. I may force you to eat something but I cannot possibly force you to enjoy it. To take another example with a larger relevance, I may be attractive, witty, and charming and I may try to make you see how lovable I am, but I cannot force you to love me.

In the case of beliefs too, the use of force is futile. I can force you to express agreement with me but I cannot force you to actually agree with me or accept my beliefs. If, as I have argued, it is impossible to force a change of belief, it makes little sense to discuss its permissibility. The inescapable conclusion is that the idea of “converting another person's faith” by force is the result of a failure to understand a basic psychological fact. It belongs to the realm of the impossible and there is no greater waste of time than discussing the undesirability of the impossible.

It may be objected that even if all this is true in the case of beliefs, it is different in the context of practices. It may be argued that while I cannot force you to believe in something, I can force you to act in a certain way. This argument is not without some merit.

The necessary condition for ensuring that someone continues to engage in the practices forced on them is dominance. I will have to be in a dominant position to force someone to continue doing what I want them to do.

However, there is an important point that we must remember here. We are not talking about one isolated act but continuous, long-term practices. As a matter of fact, an entire way of life. I can force you to perform one act or maybe even a series of acts over a period of time. But I cannot force you to persist with the new practices and forever adopt the new way of life. It is true that in certain conditions even this is possible. This brings us to the next important point on religious conversions.

The necessary condition for ensuring that someone continues to engage in the practices forced on them is dominance. I will have to be in a dominant position to force someone to continue doing what I want them to do. Let me give the unsavoury example of forced prostitution to make this point. A woman may be deceived, induced, or forced by someone on one occasion to engage in sex for money. But to make her keep doing it whether she likes it or not, that someone has to be in a dominant position and have control of her life.

In the case of religious practices, that necessary condition is hegemony. When there is a dominant group which enjoys power over a large population, it makes practical sense for people to adopt and persist in the way of life of the dominant group. It is not a case of

simple force or coercion but a complex mixture of threat, inducement, and assimilation. At least since the time of the emperor Ashoka, we know that the populace finds it expedient to follow the religion of the king. It may not always be specifically religious conversion but may form part of a broader cultural conformity.

In the absence of such dominance or hegemony, even if people are forced to embrace a religion, there would be nothing to stop them from reverting to their old religion once the enforcer withdraws from the scene. But as long as the dominant group is present, it can enforce perpetuation of the imposed practices. We see this phenomenon in its undisguised form in the case of caste practices.

The dominant agents, however, need not be kings or powerful groups from outside. They can be dominant members of one's own community or one's own family. We all know that a member of a family or community, especially a vulnerable member like a child or a woman, can be forced to engage in religious practices against their will on pain of grave repercussions.

It is a universal principle that the use of force is wrong. It is wrong to force someone to engage in any act, be it prayer or sexual intercourse.

To sum up this point, to “convert” someone to a religion through a ceremony or ritual means nothing if the convert is going to revert to his old religion the next day. The aim would be to keep them converted. When we speak of religious conversions, it is the latter we should focus on. Therefore, when there are allegations of forced religious conversion, we must ask whether the converter is in a position of inescapable dominance. Any claim that a vulnerable, minority group has been forcibly converting others to their religion should be greeted with initial scepticism.

Let me conclude this part by making a general point. It is a universal principle that the use of force is wrong. It is wrong to force someone to engage in any act, be it prayer or sexual intercourse. If a husband or a family forces a woman or a child to change their way of life or their identity, it is a form of domestic violence. The correct way to deal with it is to extend the existing laws on domestic violence. If we make adequate provisions for legal recourse in all cases of forced practices, either in the domestic sphere or the public domain, it will cover forced religious conversions as well.

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The second possible way of religious conversion is deception. Whatever we said about the wrongness of force applies to deception as well. It is axiomatic in any society that deception, cheating, making false promises, and so on is wrong. They are equally wrong everywhere. There is nothing especially egregious about the use of deception in the context of religious conversions, and the punishment appropriate in other cases of deception should apply to the use of deception for religious conversion as well.

Be it force or deception, the wrongness lies in the means, not the ends. No matter how noble the ends, force and deception are bad means, and to be condoned, they need extraordinarily strong justification.

Having said that, let us ask what amounts to deception in the case of religious conversion. If I assure a person that he will go to heaven if he practices my religion, I am doing what every religion does. Every religion makes eschatological promises that cannot be proved and which are prima facie mostly dubious. The fact of the matter is that the notion of conversion through deception is too vague and insubstantial to be of any use.

The third means is inducement. It may be tempting to club inducement with force and deception, but that would be incorrect. Unlike force, where willingness is absent, and deception, where knowledge is absent, inducement implies informed willingness in the person accepting the inducement.

Suppose I accept an inducement to do something. What is wrong with it as long as what I have been offered inducement to do is not immoral or illegal?

The problem with the idea of religious conversion through inducement is that beliefs are not amenable to inducements any more than to force. Just as I cannot force you to believe something, I cannot make you believe it by offering you an inducement. The psychology of belief does not work that way.

In relation to religious practice, inducement is, of course, possible. I can offer you an inducement to act (or refrain from acting) in a certain way. However, the relevant question here is not about possibility, but permissibility. Take the matter of accepting inducement.

Suppose I accept an inducement to do something. What is wrong with it as long as what I have been offered inducement to do is not immoral or illegal?

Conversely, suppose I am offering an inducement to someone to do something. In what way is it wrong as long as that person has full knowledge of what I am asking him to do, and he is made aware of the nature of the inducement and its purpose, and what he is asked to do is not illegal or immoral? It is ultimately a matter of that person's personal freedom whether to accept the inducement and perform the act or not.

This is not to say that inducement as a means to something is totally unproblematic. That someone needs to be offered an inducement creates some unease about the act, and more so about the motives of the person offering the inducement. But the domain of religion has no special relevance in this matter because the truth is that, like most animals, we respond to rewards and punishments.

We live in a world saturated with inducements and disincentives. Governments announce schemes and projects, and political parties make alluring promises before an election. These are all forms of inducement. Businesses offer all sorts of incentives to potential customers which are nothing but inducements; and so on. All institutions from family to society use inducements. For that matter, even in the domain of religion, votive offerings to gods are inducements to the gods for preferential treatment.

The only proper conclusion, therefore, is that inducement in itself as a means is not unethical. Any ethical condition applies only to the ends towards which the inducement is offered or accepted. It is disingenuous to single out inducement in the context of religious conversion as especially wicked and treat it on a different footing.

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That leaves us with persuasion. It is certainly possible to change beliefs as well as practices through persuasion. But it is difficult to see how persuasion can be deemed wrong. As a matter of fact, persuasion is the most civilised form of influencing each other. Civilised life is grounded in persuasion—to be civilised is to abjure force in favour of persuasion.

|| Persuasion is an appeal to the rationality of the other person, and the purpose of education is to make children learn to believe something on the basis of their sense of truth and plausibility, not of dogma or authority.

Force and persuasion are mutually exclusive and together exhaustive. To reject one is to embrace the other. The social contract is a move from force to persuasion. Democracy, from elections to governance, is based on persuasion. So is diplomacy in international relations, the only alternative to which, as everybody knows, is war. Leaving aside all these, education, which is the most important thing in any society, is, in the final analysis, persuasion. A teacher tries to change her students' beliefs through persuasion, which involves reasoning as opposed to appeal to dogma.

Persuasion is an appeal to the rationality of the other person, and the purpose of education is to make young people learn to believe something on the basis of their sense of truth and plausibility, not of dogma or authority. (It may be objected that I am not distinguishing adequately between education and indoctrination. But that is not true. The difference between education and indoctrination lies not in the nature of the “doctrine” but in the mode of its dissemination. If it is through appeal to reason and evidence, it is education, and if it is through appeal to dogma, it is indoctrination.)

If we agree – “persuaded” by the arguments given above – that persuasion is the most desirable mode of changing each other's beliefs and attitudes, it is not clear why it should be regarded as sinister when it comes to religion.

If we look closely, we realise that the real source of unease with persuasion in certain cases is the motive of the persuader. The tacit question is—why does this person want to persuade me that some religion or way of life is better than the one I am following now? If a trader tries to persuade me that his wares are better than those of his rival, I do not consider it sinister because I can see his motive. But in the case of religion, we find it difficult to believe that someone is truly concerned about the afterlife of a total stranger.

It is not that we cannot see the possible motives. In some religions it is considered a duty to help others see the truth of their religion. In some cases, there could be other motives as well, such as the desire to increase their numbers (which I shall discuss in a while).

|| We must still look for the motive for religious conversion because the zeal with which it has been practised cannot be explained purely in terms of the benign desire to enlighten other people.

However, the desire to make others share one's own beliefs is not necessarily wicked – it is perfectly natural. We discuss, argue, debate, and even quarrel in an effort to convince others of the correctness of our views or the falsity of their beliefs. The tendency to try to change the views of those whose opinions and beliefs we find erroneous is universal. It is second nature. The feeling that it is the duty of those in possession of knowledge to enlighten those who are ignorant or confused is integral to social life.

*Asatoma sadgamaya* (guide us from ignorance to knowledge) is not just a prayer to the divine but also an exhortation to each other. When in all other matters we regard persuasion as not only legitimate but commendable for changing the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of others, any attempt at the exclusion of religion from the broad arena of persuasion is a case of prejudice. Having said that, we must still look for the motive for religious conversion because the zeal with which it has been practised cannot be explained purely in terms of the benign desire to enlighten other people.

The strongest motive for religious conversion comes from the desire for numbers. There is not only safety but strength, power, and dominance in numbers. Demographic magnitude is a significant form of power and all communities wish to increase their numerical strength. This also answers the other question as to what it is about religious conversions that provokes such irrational hostility.

Religious conversions induce a paranoid anxiety about the reduction of numerical strength. We fear that conversions will decrease the numbers of our own religious community, which will inevitably lead to a reduction in power, which, in turn, will result in a loss of social, political, and economic significance.

Although a possible vestige of earlier times, this anxiety of numbers is irrational in large communities that often constitute the majority. Such anxiety would be understandable in the case of small, dwindling religious communities. To understand this irrationality, we must note that the concern about numbers is nothing but the operation of the survival instinct at the level of communities. As we all know, there are few things stronger than survival instinct.

In the case of the conversion of women, the matter is compounded by an ingrained patriarchal attitude, which perceives a woman as property ... combined with the outrage of her joining the ranks of the enemy.

When threatened with extinction or even attenuation, even when the threat is totally imaginary, individuals and communities react with disproportionate virulence. However, there is yet another, equally strong factor in our reaction to religious conversions that can explain the sheer virulence of it. That factor is “identity”.

The logic of identity requires an “other” placed in a negative relation with oneself. One way of ensuring the solidarity of group identity is by magnifying the negativity of the other, by projecting the other as an existential threat. Essentially the other is perceived as the enemy and the decimation of that other is seen as necessary for the survival and progress of oneself.

In the case of the conversion of women (generally through marriage), the matter is compounded by an ingrained patriarchal attitude, which perceives a woman as property, as metaphoric territory, combined with the outrage of her joining the ranks of the enemy.

The rationale for this piece is that we do not have a congenial climate of thought for rational debate on religious conversions. To justify my position, let me give one example. Some members of the higher judiciary have made remarks to the effect that religious conversions by force or deception often result in recruitment to terrorist organisations, and that they should be treated as a threat to national security and dealt with accordingly. They have urged the government to enact stringent legislations that would criminalise religious conversions.

To begin with, this claim betrays total ignorance of the dynamics of the entire phenomenon of terrorism. You cannot turn someone into a terrorist through force or deception for the simple reason – though counterintuitive at first sight – that a terrorist is a volunteer.

There is no such thing as forced terrorism. You cannot be forced to engage in terrorist acts, and if you are, then you are not a terrorist, you are not even an accomplice but a victim. Suppose a person is threatened by a terrorist group that if he does not place a bomb in a public place they will kill him and his family, and he does as told. You can call him a horribly selfish beast, an abominable coward and so on, but you cannot call him a terrorist.

Second, a little reflection would show that it cannot be easy to make someone join a terrorist organisation through deception either. What kind of deception could anyone use to turn someone into a terrorist? In almost all cases, recruitment to terrorist or other such

organisations occurs through indoctrination, which is a form of persuasion. Young people are often impressionable and susceptible to the rhetoric of heroic idealism and martyrdom in a supposedly noble cause. This vulnerability of the young is used by such ideologies for indoctrination and recruitment.

The other, more dangerous component in the claim that conversions lead to terrorism, not stated in so many words but implied in a fairly transparent way, is the position that that conversion to a particular religion somehow inclines the convert to become a terrorist. This is a claim with enormous mischief potential because it implies that the majority, if not all, members of a religious community are innately prone to terrorism.

Whatever our position may be, it is important that we have clarity on the basic contours of the phenomenon of religious conversions, and then discuss its implications in a sober, responsible way.

This is the stuff communal conflagrations are made of. There is something seriously wrong with our public sphere if someone can claim with impunity that conversion to a religion, the majority of whose practitioners are peaceful, law-abiding citizens, turns the convert into a terrorist. There are extremist elements in all religions, in all communities. This does not justify making sweeping claims about entire religious populations, numbering in the billions, who live normal, civil, decent lives without any propensity towards unprovoked violence.

My point is only this—we may be in favour of or against religious conversions; some of us may think that religious conversions do not matter in any significant way. Whatever our position may be, it is important that we have clarity on the basic contours of the phenomenon of religious conversions, and then discuss its implications in a sober, responsible way. More importantly, we must not allow our irrational perspectives on religious conversions to give a chance to the state to take away some more individual liberties.

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