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Article

"Love Jihad", "Forced" Conversion Narratives, and Interfaith Marriage in the Sikh Diaspora

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Abstract: This paper sets out to critically examine the "forced" conversion narrative circulating across the Sikh diaspora. The "forced" conversion narrative tells the story of Muslim men allegedly deceiving and tricking "vulnerable" Sikh females into Islam. The paper explores the parallels between the "forced" conversion narrative and the discourse on "love jihad" propagated by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as drawing out its particularities within the Sikh community. The paper is informed by new empirical data generated by a series of qualitative interviews with Sikhs in the UK, US, and Canada, and captures the complexities and nuances of my respondents in their interpretations of, and challenges to, the "forced" conversions narrative. The paper adopts a decolonial Sikh studies theoretical framework to critically unpack the logics of the discourse. In doing so, it reveals a wider politics at play, centred upon the regulation of Sikh female bodies, fears of the preservation of community, and wider anxieties around interfaith marriage. These aspects come together to display Sikh Islamophobia, whereby the figure of the "predatory" Muslim male is represented as an existential threat to Sikh being.

Keywords: Sikhs; "forced" conversions; "love jihad"; interfaith marriage; decolonial Sikh studies; Islamophobia

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1. Introduction

In November 2020, the state of Utter Pradesh implemented the "Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance" in an attempt to "crackdown" on "love jihad", which is the popular belief that specifically Muslim men are actively deceiving Hindu women and tricking them into marriage, before "forcefully" converting them to Islam.[1] The conditions of the order state the following:

> "The Ordinance requires individuals seeking to convert and religious convertors (who perform the conversion) to submit an advance declaration of the proposed religious conversion to the District Magistrate (DM). The declarations have to be given with a notice of: (i) 60 days by the individual, and (ii) one month by the convertor. Any violation of this procedure shall attract punishment of: (i) imprisonment between six months and three years, and a fine of at least Rs 10,000 (for individuals undergoing conversion), and (ii) imprisonment between one and five years, and a fine of at least Rs 25,000 (for convertors). A violation will also render the conversion illegal and void". (PRS Legislative Research 2020)

This decree represents yet another attempt by Narendra Modi and the BJP to oppress and subjugate Muslim minorities in India, and at the same time reinforces an already prevalent state Islamophobia. This law helps to legitimise anti-Muslim conspiracy theories that have been circulating in India for decades, with the underlying theme that Muslims are plotting to "wipe out" the majority population via "forced" conversions of non-Muslim women; more commonly referred to as "love jihad".[2] "Love jihad" is a Hindu nationalist discourse based on claims that Muslim men are seducing, duping, harassing, marrying, converting and trafficking young Hindu girls against their will (Tyagi and Sen 2020, p. 104). Tyagi and Sen argue that "love jihad" occupies a central role in the Hindutva discourse,

and became particularly prominent following the victory of the BJP in securing a majority in central government (ibid., p. 105). For Tyagi and Sen, the discourse of "love jihad" serves a number of different functions. Firstly, it regulates women's sexuality and mobility across urban India through the patriarchal language of fear and vulnerability (ibid., p. 19). Secondly it reinforces nationalist imagination around citizenship and belonging. That is, through its Islamophobic fixation on notions of "predatory" Muslim men, "love jihad" entrenches the idea of the Muslim "other", as representing a key "threat" to the nation (ibid., p. 20). "Love jihad" then is based upon the disciplining and management of Hindu women and Muslim men.

The moral panic around "love jihad" goes hand in hand with the desire to enforce anti-conversion laws across India, with several other states authorizing India's Freedom of Religion Acts or "anti-conversion" laws to curtail religious conversions. Currently, the laws are operational in the following states: Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Uttarakhand (Ahmad 2018, p. 1). Although the particularities of the state laws differ according to context, they share a resemblance in terms of their composition and intent. That is, they strive to restrict persons from converting, or attempting to convert, others through forceful, fraudulent or deceptive means (ibid). What makes these laws even more insidious is that they do not require any supporting evidence for allegations of wrongdoing (ibid). While these laws have partially existed in India since colonial times (mainly in the princely states ruled by Hindu Royal families) to protect Hindu identity from Christian missionaries (ibid., p. 2), they have since expanded in recent decades, taking a more hostile attitude towards Muslim men.[3] While this focus on Muslim minorities is hardly surprising given the rampant Islamophobia in the BJP,[4] it is nonetheless disturbing, as Muslims become key targets of state violence.[5] The anti-conversion laws therefore work to legitimise and reinforce Islamophobic discourses of "love jihad".

While "love jihad" is a phenomenon that has largely been focused on the divisions between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs have not been immune from subscribing to, and reinforcing, key tropes of the "love jihad" discourse;[6] however, less is known about the Sikh case. Current literature on the relationship between Sikhs and "love jihad" is limited. This paper thus contributes to the broadening of critical understandings of "love jihad" by examining how key tropes of the discourse can be seen circulating in the Sikh diaspora, as well as identifying the broader political purpose "love jihad" serves within the community.

In June 2021, there as a wave of Sikh protests across Jammu, Kathua, Udhampur, Reasi, Srinagar and Anantnag, following allegations that several Sikh women in Kashmir had been forcibly married and converted to Islam (Firstpost 2021, June 29). In particular, it was claimed that one Sikh woman in Srinagar had been abducted by a Muslim male, who was soon arrested following kidnapping charges being put forward by the woman's family (ibid). These claims were overturned both by police officials as well as the man's family, who stated that in fact an interfaith marriage had occurred, rather than a "forced" conversion (Fareed 2021, July 1). The Sikh woman in question, Manmeet Kaur, also denied the allegations made by her parents. Nonetheless, members of the Sikh community mobilised, calling for the enactment of the anti-conversion law in occupied Kashmir,[7] demanding that the woman be handed back to her family (Firstpost 2021, June 29).

The second case appearing at the heart of the scandal involved Danmeet Kaur, a Sikh woman who had been in a long-term relationship with her Muslim boyfriend. She converted to Islam before marrying her partner, which she reports was her decision and no one "forced" her into (Fareed 2021, July 1). After leaving her family, they soon went to the police, and once again the man was charged with kidnapping, and she was taken back to her family (ibid). She also made a statement refuting her parents' claims and called for police protection (ibid). Both of these interfaith marriages sparked Sikh protests, with Sikh political actors demanding an end to religious conversions and interfaith marriages, with reports that some protestors had held Sikh women at gunpoint (ibid). Unsurprisingly, these political outfits have been closely affiliated with the ruling BJP (ibid).[8]

While the story in India may seem far from home, my body of research has identified similar discourses around "predatory" Muslims circulating in the British Sikh diaspora (Sian 2011, pp. 115–30; 2013). What my work has described as the "forced" conversion narrative tells the tale of Muslim men allegedly targeting Sikh girls on university campuses across Britain (Sian 2011, pp. 117–19). It is claimed that Muslim men are disguising themselves as Sikhs as a way to lure in vulnerable girls from the Sikh community (ibid). Once a relationship (often sexual) is established, it is purported that the Muslim man reveals his true identity and forces the Sikh girl to convert by blackmailing her with indecent pictures, thus leaving the girl at risk of "shaming" her family (ibid). This is the basic structure to the narrative that my work has long interrogated (Sian 2011, 2013), and although different iterations of the story have appeared, including "warning" leaflets being disseminated to the Sikh community,[9] as well as "awareness" talks and film screenings on university campuses and at gurdwaras,[10] alongside television documentaries of Sikh victims telling their stories,[11] the discourse of Muslim men posing an explicit threat to the Sikh community is well established. However, while the idea of Muslim men threatening the future of Sikh communities by exerting control over Sikh women is well established, the reasons for the prevalence and circulation of the discourse are less established. While mainstream Sikh studies have reported and described the phenomenon, they have tended not to explain or analyse it in critical depth.[12] This is not a failing of individual scholars, but rather highlights the epistemological limits of conventional Sikh studies, both in its diasporic and non-diasporic forms. That is, the focus tends to be upon enumerating various instances of "forced" conversions and assigning them to a set of essentialist reasons, rather than exploring the construction of the phenomenon itself.

By utilising a decolonial Sikh studies framework, this paper will draw upon new empirical data as a way to critically examine how "love jihad"/"forced" conversion narratives have been transported into the Sikh diaspora, and the role that they play in illuminating broader fears around Sikh women "marrying out" of their religion. It will examine why the Muslim "predator" remains at the centre of this discourse, in order to unfold a larger story about Sikh Islamophobia, misogyny, and fantasies of endogamy.

2. Decolonial Sikh Studies: Conceptual and Methodological Concerns

The empirical data drawn upon to inform this paper are generated by a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted in 2014.[13] The fieldwork took place in the US (California) and Canada (Victoria and Vancouver), as well as the UK (Glasgow, Leicester, and Manchester). These sites were chosen as they have a large and vibrant Sikh diaspora. I conducted 15 interviews in each location, with a fairly equal split between Sikh men and women whose ages ranged from 18 to 50. The respondents were recruited through snowball sampling techniques and included students, activists, community leaders and young professionals who all identified as Sikh. The range of respondents enabled me to collect and capture a diversity of voices and different perspectives from within the community.

The empirical material discussed throughout this paper is positioned within a *decolonial Sikh studies* conceptual framework (Sian and Dhamoon 2020, p. 110). Decolonial Sikh studies is distinct from conventional Sikh studies and critical Sikh studies, in that it utilises both grassroots feminist praxis and the teachings of Sikhi (ibid).[14] In doing so, such an approach enables me to focus on the power relations that structure the "forced" conversion narrative, which, as we will go on to see, is underpinned by misogyny, patriarchy and toxic masculinity (ibid). That is, the discourse appears to be very much "owned" by (Sikh) men in both its narration and propagation, in an attempt to regulate Sikh female bodies in the diaspora and beyond. Decolonial Sikh studies therefore allow me to explore the discursive construction of the "forced" conversion narrative and its wider complexities, as well as the interconnections between power and politics.

Through its commitment to developing a critical epistemological approach, decolonial Sikh studies allows for an analysis of both the lived and embodied experiences of Sikh

women to emerge, that is, an analysis that is not limited to hegemonic scripts produced by Western discourse on the one hand, and sexist Sikh discourse on the other (ibid, p. 48). Such an approach is significant as it contributes to the documenting and dismantling of gendered (and colonial/raced) hierarchies that often violently subordinate Sikh women, both conceptually and structurally (ibid). Decolonial Sikh studies, in other words, disrupts the Western and Sikh male gaze that continues to construct and police Sikh female bodies (ibid).

As a racially marked and colonised community, Sikhs have often remained on the periphery of academic studies, representing what can be described as a "minority within a minority'" which refers to the existence of emergent groups that are a minor presence within already existing ethnic minorities (Ali 2002). For example, relations between Muslims and Hindus are given more prominence than those between Sikhs and Muslims;[15] furthermore, following 9/11 and the war on terror, there has been extensive research into Muslim populations, and as such the study of Sikhs has often been of marginal focus. This neglect of Sikhs is not uncommon within literature exploring South Asian diasporas, and as a consequence analytical accounts that attempt to examine Sikh and Muslim relations cluster around simplistic explanations centred upon ethnic/religious grievances; youth delinquency; and socioeconomic inequalities (Sian 2013, pp. 39–53). These accounts often remain locked within culturally deterministic frameworks with underlying assumptions that differences in religion/culture are sufficient to produce hostility (Ali et al. 2006). Not only are these approaches essentialist, but they are also Orientalist, as they assume that so called "communal tensions" between groups with a non-Western heritage are a "people without history" (Wolf 1982). These approaches prevent us from generating critical understandings of Sikh identity. Decolonial Sikh studies offers an alternative framework that is not bound to essentialism; that is, as an intellectual, ethical, and practical project, decolonial Sikh studies offers a political posturing of "insurrection and subversion" (Sian and Dhamoon 2020, p. 48).

A decolonial Sikh studies approach allows us to reconsider the "forced" conversions narrative through a critical lens. Perhaps one of the most curious aspects of the "forced" conversion narrative is that rarely have "everyday" Sikhs themselves had a space to discuss, challenge and debate the discourse; in other words, most accounts of the narrative have been orchestrated by largely right-wing, male Sikh organisations, "officials", or political actors.[16] The data demonstrate how the discourse has been internalised, interpreted, and rejected by my respondents, who appear for the most part both critical and aware of the larger politics at play in the narrative. While my previous research—which was solely based in Britain—demonstrated a much greater acceptance of the "forced" conversion narrative, with many respondents overtly and unashamedly subscribing to Islamophobia (Sian 2013, pp. 93–107), my new data appear to show greater nuance and complexity, which is in itself interesting, and most likely accounted for by the fact that my pool of respondents have extended beyond the British context. As Britain has become increasingly plagued with racially charged headlines around Muslim "grooming" gangs,[17] Islamophobic sentiment in the Sikh community has been heightened, whereby claims of "forced" conversions have been legitimised by predominantly right-wing organisations to stoke wider fears around Muslim men, and the Muslim community in general.[18] Decolonial Sikh studies is particularly important for interrogating the politics of this discourse, not because it is about "Sikhs" per se, but rather because it reveals how "love jihad" and "forced" conversion narratives continue to feed a wider articulation of Islamophobia in an Indic circuit.

3. Rumours of "Forced" Conversion Narratives and the Politics of Fear

The circulation and consumption of the "forced" conversion narrative is well established throughout the global Sikh diaspora, and it has both political and cultural dimensions as exemplified by numerous Islamophobic tropes in the entertainment industry. The discourse has been disseminated across the diaspora through a range of different mediums, including leaflets,[19] documentaries,[20] online videos/films,[21] social media networks,[22] and

organised talks in universities and at gurdwaras, both at the local and global level.[23] As Mankekar points out, such campaigns "are transnational in provenance and scale. Like all affect, digital affect is transitive; it gains potency through its very circulation" (Mankekar 2021, p. 700). It is interesting then to understand how a relatively minor story propagated by a few far-right Sikh organisations in Britain has taken hold of Sikh diasporic imaginaries. The function of the circulation of the "forced" conversion narrative appears to reinforce a particular sense of identity and forms of belonging (Ogunyemi 2015), allowing Sikhs to be connected through the telling and re-telling of the story. It perhaps does not matter so much the extent to which the story is accepted or rejected, as what remains significant is the fact that such a discourse continues to occupy an important place within Sikh diasporic spaces.

My respondents across all field sites were well aware of the "forced" conversion narrative. It appears that Sikhs in Britain have been a key impetus for driving the narrative across the Atlantic, with many of my respondents in the US and Canada recalling that their awareness of the story had largely come from Sikhs in the UK via inter-personal relations, informal networks, and digital media. As one respondent commented:

> "I've been hearing about that for 20 years. I haven't even really heard palatable evidence—I've heard mostly just rumours from Britain, like I haven't seen anything real—I mean how do you forcibly convert somebody?". (Male activist, USA, 36 years old)

Similarly, the next respondent also based in the USA stated the following:

> "Yeah, I've heard of this stuff, through my parents, my dad, my friends' parents you know who have had family in Britain and they'll show me on the Internet examples of these Muslims openly talking about converting Sikh women. I mean none of this stuff that I've seen has ever actually been proved, so I've heard of these things, but I don't know how true they are". (Male student, USA, 19 years old)

My interviewees appear sceptical of the "forced" conversion narratives, all implying that there appears to be no real evidence to support the claims. The idea that this phenomenon is largely based on rumours was also supported by my respondents in the UK, who were aware of the stories, but often stated that it was only through hearsay that they had come to know about the issue:

> "Yeah, I've heard of this story. I've often heard it in a general rumour sense, 'oh have you heard that this has happened to this person'. The most common thing that I hear is that Muslim males wear the Kara and pretend that they're Sikh as a way to entice Sikh girls.[24] So I've heard they will wear the Kara and go up to Sikh girls and pretend that they're Sikh, and when it unravels that they're Muslim, the relationship has got to a point where they're getting married and the girl is not forced, but I'd say expected to convert, because that's often the expectation in Muslim cultures. So, this is the most common thing I've heard, but no one close to me has ever experienced it". (Female student, UK, 18 years old)

The fictional nature of the "forced" conversion narrative was also reinforced by the following respondents, who questioned the authenticity of such accounts:

> "I think the whole forced conversions stuff sounds so insane and over the top. The authenticity of these things is always questionable. I feel like a lot of it is fear mongering; there's certainly a sense of Islamophobia throughout these cases". (Male student, UK, 20 years old)

Similarly:

> "I think these stories of forced conversions are made up. I would ask the Sikh claiming that this has happened, which Muslim did you see taking any girl away from your relation or your friend, that was seen by your own eyes and not just heard from someone else? Because it seems to me no one has seen this

> happening in front of their eyes. There is no proof for these stories". (Male young professional, Canada, 32 years old)

Some respondents, while weary of the story, also commented that the continued circulation of the narrative made them question if there was some element of truth to the issue:

> "I've never ever witnessed this forced conversions stuff myself when I was at university, nor do I know of anyone that it's happened to, but I've heard it, it's something you always hear about, and then because you hear it sometimes you start thinking well is it true, is it not, I don't know?". (Female young professional, UK, 30 years old)

Another went on to state:

> "I think my first reaction to this story was that it was ridiculous, but then it was very interesting that you had for a period of time articles coming out from everywhere, saying this was happening and all of a sudden the radio was talking about it, and then people were talking about it, and then you kind of almost wonder yourself, is this happening?". (Female activist, USA, 26 years old)

The following respondent appeared to believe that "forced" conversions were indeed happening:

> "I'm involved in local community groups, it seemed to start about 10–15 years ago and local Muslims started leafleting and, in the leaflet, it used to say we'll give you £1000 if you convert to Islam. There are people who will dress up as Sikhs by wearing the Kara in universities and promise mostly vulnerable Sikh females the world as a way to convert them, so it is happening". (Male student, UK, 42 years old)

As previously mentioned, it is not so much about whether or not the respondents believe if the story is "true" per se; rather, the purpose of this paper is to examine the function that such a rumour serves within the Sikh community and the wider politics of the discourse itself. Rumours are intertwined with "social sense-making" (Michelson and Mouly 2002); that is, they establish a sense of collective meaning for groups and communities. Although rumours are based on unconfirmed information, the message nonetheless generates widespread interest (ibid). As Michelson and Mouly argue, the key purpose of a rumour then, "requires the hearer to 'believe' the message even if they harbour some doubts as to its authenticity. These structural elements help maintain interest in and reliance upon the rumour" (ibid., p. 61).

In order to keep the appeal relevant, it becomes necessary for the rumour to spread. The "forced" conversion narrative has indeed enjoyed wide circulation, being spread to Sikh audiences across the diaspora. Not only has this been achieved through the global communications network (Mankekar 2021), which has enabled messages to be transported rapidly throughout the diaspora, but it has also been furnished by members of the Sikh community, or so-called "community leaders", spreading the story themselves by accessing spaces such as university campuses and more alarmingly places of worship to give "awareness" talks. For example, one respondent in the USA recalled:

> "In my community and at my Sikh camp, Sikhs from England came to give us some talks at the camp, and they'd talk about how people (Muslims) in England try to convert Sikh girls, and take their identity. They told us stories of people (Muslims) putting a date rape drug in the (Sikh) girls drink, or blackmailing her". (Female student, USA, 18 years old)

She goes on to say that:

> "I mean hearing those things from England made me scared and it made my mom scared too, and she was like stay away from Muslims because look what they do to Sikh girls in England. A lot of the older generations in America are

> aware of this story because the Sikhs that came from England reached out to the community about this". (ibid.)

This disturbing encounter was not an isolated experience, as another respondent based in Scotland spoke of a similar meeting:

> "There was a speaker that came from England to speak to us about grooming to people in the Gurdwara. I suppose that it's all first generations that are sitting there, thinking what can happen to their own daughters. I don't think people went out of their way to attend this, but they did it on a Sunday because that's when they have a captive audience probably". (Female activist, UK, 45 years old)

We can identify here a particular trend in which England appears to be at the centre in the flow and distribution of "forced" conversion narratives. This can be explained due to the very structure of the Sikh diaspora in England, which arises from a number of contingent factors. First is the longevity and depth of the establishment of the Sikh diasporic community in England; secondly, the Sikh diaspora in England is more concentrated relative to the US and Canada; finally, its anglophonic infrastructure dating from imperial times has meant that Sikhs in England have typically aligned themselves with the state, often representing (both historically and presently) a "model minority" (Sian 2013, pp. 84–91).[25] Such an image radically contrasts with portrayals of Muslims who, in comparison, have long been constructed as a "dangerous underclass" (ibid). Conscious efforts have therefore been made by Sikhs to separate themselves from the Muslim community, and in doing so they have been active shapers of Islamophobia (ibid). Combined, all these elements mark a very specific trajectory, which has meant that Sikh Islamophobia is far more prominent and organised in England, which serves as the hub for both the production and transmission of the "forced" conversions narrative.

The propagation of the "forced" conversions narrative feeds into what can be described as the politics of fear, which, as Altheide suggests, represents "social life as dangerous, fearful, and filled with actual or potential victims" (Altheide 2006, p. 423). As the next section will examine in more detail, the "forced" conversion narrative can be seen to invite strategies such as "protection, policing, and intervention" as a way to stop victimisation and provide assurance for the community (ibid.). As Altheide goes on to argue, the way in which fear is both constructed and actualised in everyday life is established by those in power who are able to dominate how particular issues are represented (ibid). Unsurprisingly then, the "forced" conversion narrative has been propagated by largely male, self-proclaimed, "representatives" of the Sikh community, from various organisations who claim to stand up for the needs and values of local and global Sikhs.

Similarly, in relation to "love jihad", it is hardly a coincidence that the narrative has been orchestrated and mobilised by the Hindu nationalist movement. The "love jihad" campaign is organised and run by Hindu nationalists across India and stands against what they allege is a Muslim conspiracy to convert Hindu girls into Islam (Kinnvall 2019). As Gupta argues, "love jihad" serves as an "emotive mythical campaign, a 'delicious' political fantasy, a lethal mobilization strategy and a vicious crusade—a jihad against love—for political gains in elections" (Gupta 2016, p. 292). Gupta goes onto suggest that disseminating rumours of "love jihad" through pamphlets, meetings, debates, and daily conversations has worked to sustain the narrative "as an active cultural, and therefore political, issue" (ibid., p. 294). "Forced" conversion narratives and "love jihad" then share structural resemblances in their content, organisation, and propagation. Both have been constructed and disseminated to create a culture of fear around the loss of "our" women to Muslim men. In both narratives, while evidence is scant, the rumours are still readily consumed and mobilised to unravel a wider story about the regulation of female bodies. Rather than the rumours representing a story about the Sikh (and Hindu) community itself, they instead tell us more about the concepts and values that matter to the very architects of the story, and the version of themselves that they wish to project and impose upon the wider community (Kalmre 2013). These concepts and values, as will now be explored, are

generated by patriarchal and Islamophobic anxieties concerning Sikh women's agency and the future of the community itself.

4. Sikh Patriarchy and Policing Sikh Female Bodies

The "forced" conversion narrative is a deeply gendered tale, stitched together by the logics of patriarchy, misogyny, and Islamophobia. As previously outlined, the narrative focuses exclusively upon the notion of vulnerable Sikh females being lured into Islam by "dangerous" Muslim men. In such a construction, Sikh females lack agency, and their bodies are surveilled and sexualized; as a result, they are positioned as subjects who can only be rescued by Sikh men, in a similar way that Hindu females can only be rescued by Hindu men in the love jihad narrative. The focus on the vulnerability and passivity of Sikh women also represents the stage upon which fears and anxieties about the Muslim "other" are projected (Sian 2013, pp. 77–79). That is, the construct of the Muslim "predator" works as a powerful symbol to both regulate Sikh women, and at the same time reproduce Sikh Islamophobia, which has a long history within the community, dating back to Mughal violence and the Partition of 1947 (ibid.). The "forced" conversion narrative plays out these past conflicts and insecurities upon the very bodies of Sikh females, who in turn become responsible for the preservation of Sikhi.

In her work on gender and nation, Mostov argues that women's bodies "become boundaries of the nation" (Mostov 1995, p. 515)—they come to signify the fecundity of the nation and their bodies represent the very vessels for its reproduction, and such a positioning locates them as the property of the nation (ibid). As she goes on to suggest, "women are biological reproducers of group members" (ibid, p. 518), and those who fail to fulfil this role are deemed traitors:

> "Women who fail to observe the borders, who transgress them through mixed marriages and other personal relationships or who engage in activities that otherwise push them to the margins of the community, are castigated". (ibid, p. 520)

In this sense, women's bodies become the key "battlefield" upon which identities are reinforced or contested (ibid, p. 524). Mostov's account is particularly compelling for understanding the patriarchal nature of "forced" conversions, as within this discourse we can see the way in which Sikh female bodies are the site upon which community fears around preservation, transgression, and purity are displayed. The construct of the "predatory" Muslim has been mobilised by both Sikhs and Hindus as they are seen to threaten the very existence of these communities. As Gupta points out, these entanglements have generated "an 'intimate politics', an embodied struggle, in which threatened patriarchal familial structures and Hindu communal agendas reformulated themselves through women" (Gupta 2016, p. 294). The safeguarding of Sikh and Hindu female virtue is deemed the responsibility of Sikh and Hindu men, as Gupta goes onto argue, "in the name of protecting 'our' women, which the women themselves have never asked for, they justify all forms of violence" (ibid., p. 297).

My interview respondents all pointed to the misogyny present within the "forced" conversion narrative, as one commented:

> "I found these stories disturbing on many levels: One it was very Islamophobic, and two, it was really masculine, it was like there was some sort of ownership of 'our' women in the community, it seemed to deny the women any sense of agency. Even if girls were converting the story makes them out to be these passive easily duped people". (Male student, Canada, 21 years old)

Similarly, the following respondent stated:

> "To me it has always sounded really Islamophobic, and that's something Sikhs have certainly not shied away from. From what I've seen, it's all one way, in the sense Sikhs are spreading so much propaganda about 'the Muslims taking away Sikh women'. I mean how gendered is that? Whoever is invested in creating

this divide that's definitely one way of inciting it—bringing in the female body". (Female activist, Canada, 48 years old)

The interviewees are clearly critical of the representation of Sikh women within these narratives, who are constructed as those who are easily duped and taken in by Muslim men with no agency of their own, and this was further reinforced by the following responses:

> "It's always about the Sikh girl converting, I've never heard in these stories about it being a Sikh guy being enticed by a Muslim woman. These grooming stories are always about Sikh girls or Hindu girls, who are made out to be the victim or the target for these guys". (Female student, UK, 19 years old)

As well as:

> "I don't think this story helps Sikhs at all because it just makes mothers think that they must lock their daughters up. It's very much a gendered story around a vulnerable Sikh girl, it's part of that same sort of story where it was white people fearing that black men were taking their women". (Female activist, UK, 45 years old)

As previously mentioned, in the context of Britain there are a number of right-wing Sikh organisations who have been responsible for peddling this misogynistic fantasy. Having previously examined the structure of these organizatios, there is an overwhelming presence of middle-aged Sikh men who have been at the forefront of organising an Islamophobic campaign around "grooming", hosting a series of "awareness-raising" talks around the "Dangers in Modern Society".[26] These Sikh men appear obsessed with stories of "forced" conversions. It is rather perplexing that they believe they are best placed to "educate" Sikh women about the "perils" of contemporary Britain. Underneath the mask of "safeguarding", however, lies the logic of toxic masculinity and vigilante efforts to police Sikh female bodies, specifically their sexual desires, agency, heteronormativity, and reproductive responsibility for Sikhs as Sikhs. The propagation of this narrative appears to display a disturbing form of pornographic aesthetics,[27] aimed at satisfying a voyeuristic gaze (Sian 2017, August 17). To deny Sikh women a voice is not only to pander to early anthropological studies on "passive" South Asian women, but also locates them as bodies that require intervention from Sikh males.

Interestingly, a large number of my respondents felt that the underlying issue was less about "forced" conversions, and more about the stigma and resentment in the Sikh community around love relationships between Sikhs and Muslims. Many spoke of being aware of relationships between Sikhs and Muslims without "force" or "coercion", for example:

> "I know of relationships between Sikhs and Muslims or Hindus and Muslims, but they just fell in love with each other—there wasn't any blackmail or anything like that. These forced conversion stories always seem to be focused on the girls, so I think they're definitely gendered and the focus on the idea of 'force' is perhaps more convenient than if the girl freely fell in love with a Muslim—because that would be impossible right?". (Female community worker, Canada, 43 years old)

Furthermore:

> "I've heard of this story, I heard it from my friend back then in 97. I think it's just crazy I just don't think there's any truth in it. I've seen Muslim women and Sikh guys falling in love and getting into relationships but never because of them being forcefully converted". (Male young professional, Canada, 32 years old)

The next respondent recalls a case wherein she claims that the relatives of the Sikh girl harassed her because she had entered into a relationship with a Muslim:

> "What I've heard also in these cases is that it's not that the girl was forced to convert, but she did so freely because she wanted to settle with her Muslim partner. And it seems to be the relatives of the Sikh girl who actually stalk the

> girl because she's gone off with a Muslim". (Female community worker, Canada, 50 years old)

This account seems to share a haunting familiarity with the cases discussed at the start of the paper, whereby the parents of the Sikh women demanded that their daughters return to the family, despite their wishes to remain with their Muslim partners. Indeed, as Gupta argues in relation to "love jihad", "it is impossible for Hindu groups to conceive that Hindu women can voluntarily elope or convert. Any possibility of women exercising their legitimate right to love, choice and conversion is marginalized" (Gupta 2016, p. 297). The next response further shines a light on the way in which the "forced" conversion narrative appears to conveniently deflect attention away from the patriarchy and gender inequality that blights the Sikh community:

> "I think the focus in these stories of the vulnerable woman being forcefully converted distracts attention away from how women are treated in our community, and that for me is the main issue, so things like the lack of support in their house, or in their family, or the treatment of them by Sikh men in general, also certainly the expectations of women is important to consider". (Male student, USA, 21 years old)

This section has identified the gendered nature of the "forced" conversion narrative. What we can perhaps learn from this discourse is that it appears to rest upon the idea that "brown women need to be saved" (Spivak 1988), thereby reproducing a particular colonial imaginary. That is, "forced" conversions feed into the colonial story of women without agency, of Muslims as dangerous, and of Sikh female bodies as threatened. Such a set of constructs appears to largely serve notions of Sikh masculinity, and particularly their fear that Sikh women are "marrying out". This will be elaborated upon in the following section.

5. "If I Got with a Muslim I'd Probably Be Thrown Out"—Interfaith Marriage and Islamophobia

The prohibition of "race mixing" has a long history in the West. Anti-miscegenation laws were enforced as early as the 1600s across the United States in an attempt to ban interracial sex and marriage and preserve white supremacy (Thompson 2009). In this context the upholding of the assumed "racial purity" of whites became institutionally indoctrinated, with hegemonic discourses projecting racial anxieties around "contamination" and the belief that "race mixing" would ultimately lead to the deterioration of whites. With the widespread view that whites were "superior", anti-miscegenation laws were enacted to both police sexual relations and racial boundaries, as well as reproduce existing systems of racial inequality (Menchaca 2008). Menchaca points out that those in power oppress those deemed racially and culturally incompatible by applying rules to maintain their subordination, and specifically prohibiting "their people" from interacting with the "other" (Menchaca 2008, p. 281). We can see how similar elements of this logic have underpinned much of the "love jihad" and "forced" conversion narratives we see circulating today. While the racial element has been substituted by religion, the same notions of purity, preservation, and fear of being outnumbered are present. The fear of losing "our women", combined with the fear of another religion becoming dominant, fuse together to uphold the fantasy of endogamy. As such, there is often a disbelief that Hindu or Sikh women would "freely" marry the Muslim "enemy"; that is, they "must have" been "forced". Gupta further articulates this point, arguing that:

> "In convoluted ways women are thus told that interreligious marriages are undesirable for the good of women themselves. It is also assumed that the mere act of marrying and staying with a Muslim ensures that the woman will lead a dreadful life and her unhappiness will be assured". (Gupta 2016, p. 297)

"Love jihad" and "forced" conversions then become a convenient discourse to warn women about the perils of "predatory" Muslims and regulate their bodies and relationships; indeed, as Gupta goes on to suggest, "Hindutva's cry for segregation expresses a geography

that maps power and hierarchy through bodies, by denying free movement to Hindu women" (ibid, p. 298). In relation to the Sikh community, there has been a catalogue of incidents whereby Sikhs have physically and often violently stopped interfaith and interracial marriages at gurdwaras,[28] particularly if the female is Sikh and the groom is Muslim (Sian and Dhamoon 2020, p. 49). My respondents were well aware of these issues in the Sikh community, and spoke of the Islamophobia and fears around interfaith marriage; for example:

> "It's not about forced conversion it's just falling in love, on both sides. You always hear this when it comes to Sikh and Muslim relationships, 'don't marry them because they're Muslim, right, because they're Muslim' and with that all the assumptions and ignorance about Muslims is planted. The misconceptions about Muslims in our community are so strong". (Female student, Canada, 21 years old)

Similarly, another respondent commented:

> "If a Sikh and a Muslim were to get into a love relationship and marry, I think in our community it's seen as a really bad thing, it shouldn't be, but it definitely is. There is definitely a stigma in the Sikh community if a Sikh was to marry a Muslim, and I think that's to do with the negative representations Sikhs have of Muslims, so if you're with a Muslim guy it's definitely a bad thing. If I got with a Muslim I'd probably be thrown out, which I think is bad, but I know my dad would hate it, he's classic ignorant". (Female student, UK, 19 years old)

The majority of my respondents shared similar stories, in which they recognized that a Sikh woman marrying a Muslim man was regarded as the ultimate betrayal:

> "It's still a major taboo in the Sikh community, say if I was to marry a Muslim that would be it—end of the world [laughs]. The mind-set of the older generations is programmed into thinking that every Muslim is a horrendous person, and there's all this stereotyping around 'this is what they're like' or 'this is what they'll do'. I think there's a thing about it being worse if a Sikh girl was to do this, just like everything is 'worse' when a girl does it". (Female young professional, UK, 29 years old)

Another stated:

> "The one thing my grandma always used to say to me was you cannot marry a Muslim!". (Female young professional, Canada, 23 years old)

These accounts were prevalent across my interview data, in all field sites, with respondents recalling similar stories in which their families had warned them not to marry a Muslim:

> "I've heard obviously many comments from my parents and my parents' friends, and I grew up with that rhetoric. So obviously it's kind of understood that Muslims are perhaps the most unacceptable group to marry into, or even if you're friendly with them, your friendship will be commented upon". (Female student, USA, 18 years old)

Many pointed out that there appeared to be a hierarchy within the Sikh community regarding interfaith marriage that placed Muslims firmly at the bottom:

> "I remember my mum telling me one day you can marry anyone you want as long as she's not a Muslim. There's this whole issue around Muslims, it's like there's such a hierarchy, I see that in terms of marriage a lot, and despite more and more interfaith marriages happening in our community—out of caste, or to Hindus, or whites—there is still an emphasis on not to marry Muslims". (Male student, USA, 19 years old)

Reflecting on this "order", another respondent said:

> "A lot of the times I've heard from family friends, 'you can't marry a Muslim, that's not right, you'll get screwed up by them', so a lot of the times there's like a list of who you can and can't marry so at the top it would be a Sikh girl, second an Indian, third a white girl, they're the top 3, and at the bottom it's Muslim". (Male activist, USA, 46 years old)

Furthermore, the following respondent stated that:

> "My sister is having a love marriage, and my dad isn't very happy about it because although he is Sikh, he is a different caste,[29] but my relatives say to him you should be thankful to god that she has chosen a Sikh guy and not a Muslim guy. So they didn't talk about the white guys, they just said Muslim". (Female student, Canada, 19 years old)

The data expose how deeply embedded the concerns of marrying a Muslim are within the Sikh community. In the same way that pervasive, racist fears surrounding Black men's sexuality were constructed, particularly as them posing a threat to White women if they were not properly regulated (Ferber 2007, p. 14), Muslim men occupy a positionality in the Sikh community that is seen to endanger the very existence of their being. Therefore, the colonial myths of black men as "hypersexual, animalistic, savage, and inherently violent" (ibid, p. 15) appear to have been expanded to include the bodies of Muslim men.[30] These myths, as has been identified, work to legitimise policies and interventions to deny Muslims rights, and at the same time discipline Sikh women. The idea of Sikh women as sexual beings appears to be heavily repressed in the Sikh community, and as such, a Sikh woman's choice to engage freely with a Muslim man is restricted through policing and regulation. From "awareness" seminars about "forced" conversions taking place at university campuses or in gurdwaras, to talk at the dinner table about ideal marriage suitors, we can see what Gupta describes as the "imposition of disciplinary regimes" being exercised upon women's bodies to control their behaviours and choices (Gupta 2016, p. 299). These mechanisms of social control thus work to domesticate women and ensure that they follow the prescribed path of traditional forms of sexuality, marriage, and "acceptable" relations outside of the community, as Gupta argues:

> "Campaigns such as "love jihad" attempt to underwrite an exclusivist grammar of "difference" in the intimate regimes of love and marriage. However, they also reveal deep seated fears and anxieties against female free will, against the subversive potential of love, against the threat to traditions". (ibid., p. 300)

"Love jihad" and "forced" conversions then illuminate how anxieties around community preservation have become deeply intertwined with the disciplining of the female body, intimacy, and desire.

6. Conclusions

This paper has critically examined the circulation and consumption of the "forced" conversion narrative in the Sikh diaspora. It reveals a complex set of politics around the deeper function of the narrative's logics, which appear to rest upon wider fears around the "place" of Sikh women, community preservation, and interfaith marriage. While the discourse on "love jihad" is well known in both popular and academic circles, less is known about the intricacies of the Sikh case. This paper has as such brought to light the overlaps and particularities of the phenomenon of "forced" conversions through its engagement with the empirical and the conceptual; the paper thus contributes to broadening academic debates around the phenomenon of "love jihad". By drawing upon qualitative data, the lived experiences of diasporic Sikhs are centred and analysed through the conceptual lens of decolonial Sikh studies. This has enabled a critical investigation to emerge that interrogates the wider relationship between politics, power, and patriarchy. The paper has also identified the various contestations among Sikhs in their interpretations and understandings of "forced" conversion narratives; this demonstrates the complexities around the consumption of this discourse across the diaspora.

The comparative diasporic element of this paper has enabled for an analysis of the construction of Sikh identity through the prism of "forced" conversion narratives. What appears then to be at the heart of the "forced" conversion narrative, circulating in both India and the wider Sikh diaspora, is a broader anxiety about interfaith marriage, particularly when the union involves a Sikh woman and a Muslim man. To elaborate, such an anxiety is deep rooted in ideas of Sikh "purity", preservation, and the future of Sikhi itself, and as such the construction of the Muslim man as the archetypal "other" feeds into deeper fears around the "contamination" of Sikh being. These anxieties are projected on to Sikh female bodies, who become markers for the preservation of Sikhi, and in doing so they are objectified through a Sikh male gaze, which assumes that they need "saving" and "protecting" from Muslim men. Such Islamophobic and patriarchal logics come together through a violent opposition to interfaith marriage.

As I was writing this paper, the news of the two Sikh girls in India allegedly being "forcefully" converted to Islam—mentioned at the start of this paper—hit the headlines (Fareed 2021). I once again found myself on the receiving end of a wave of abuse from mainly Sikh males on Twitter, demanding that I change my views on "forced" conversions and that the women who had married these men and converted had been coerced into doing so. In one tweet by a male Sikh, I was referred to as a "Sikhophobic white-adjacent academic", who has been "using feminism and Islamophobia to gaslight Sikh women". In another tweet, also by a Sikh male, it was claimed that I had been sexually abused, which was seen to have been, to quote, "a catalyst for my further denying the existence of Muslim grooming gangs and throw everything on abuse in our (Sikh) community." This is not the first time this has happened, and it probably will not be the last, but it remains telling that those of us examining the issue through a critical lens are subjected to harassment, as we are perhaps seen to interrupt and complicate a discourse that they desire to fix within the Sikh community.

In order for us to challenge the toxic discourses of misogyny, patriarchy, and Islamophobia, the task of decolonial Sikh studies becomes imperative, not only in the epistemological sense, but also in the political sense. A decolonial Sikh studies, in practice, calls for "the freedom for Sikhs to marry, partner with, and engage in sexual relations with whomever they want without fear of violence, forced marriage, or being outcasted" (Sian and Dhamoon 2020, p. 49). Furthermore, "interfaith and interracial relationships are markers of choice about the body and sexuality, and they can open the opportunity to educate communities on how struggles of justice are interconnected and related" (ibid). Decolonial Sikh studies also rejects Islamophobia in organisational, community, and academic discourse, and encourages solidarity with Muslims who share a rich and complex history with Sikhs (ibid, p. 53). Perhaps only once this framework is adopted can the "forced" conversion narrative be decentred from the Sikh imaginary, opening up the possibility of the future of Sikhi to be directed instead towards the dismantling of gendered, racial, and colonial oppressions that exist within the community and beyond.

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Notes

[1] For a detailed discussion of these laws please see: Nilsen and Nielsen "Love Jihad and the governance of gender and intimacy in Hindu nationalist statecraft" and Malji and Raza "The securitization of Love Jihad" in this Special Issue.

[2] For a discussion of the distinction between "Love Jihad" (the Hindu nationalist version) and "love jihad" (as a comparative analytical concept) please see, Frydenlund and Leidig 2021 in this Special issue.

[3] The anti-conversion laws are seen to stoke Islamophobia as they are largely focused on preventing "love jihad", which as we have seen is based upon the notion of "dangerous" and "predatory" Muslim men forcefully converting Hindu women into Islam. As reported by the BBC, in the short time since the anti-conversion law was passed, interfaith weddings between consenting adults had been stopped and many Muslim grooms had been arrested. See Geeta Pandy, ""Love jihad": What a reported miscarriage

says about India's anti-conversion law" (BBC, 17 December 2020) https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-55314832 (accessed on 30 July 2021).

4 For example, in December 2019, Modi's administration passed the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in which religion is the key indicator for granting citizenship. Under this act, Muslims have been stripped of their rights.

5 It is important to note that other minorities in India, including Christians, also continue to face persecution from the BJP. For example, across India, during religious gatherings, Christians have been violently attacked for allegedly forcefully converting people, see: Michael Safi, "Christmas violence and arrests shake Indian Christians" (The Guardian, 24 December 2017) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/24/christmas-violence-and-arrests-shake-indian-christians (accessed on 5 August 2021). The focus of this paper, however, is upon the notion of the Muslim "threat", as a way to show how anti-conversion laws reinforce the Islamophobia prevalent within the "love jihad" discourse, and how this further relates to Islamophobic "forced" conversion narratives within the Sikh community.

6 Sikh histography is entrenched with tropes around violence and the threat of conversion by the Muslim "other". In particular, the very emergence of Sikhism is articulated through a series of bloody battles between the Sikh Gurus and the Mughal Empire who threatened their existence. Much of the Sikh literature in the eighteenth century was thus characterised by images of "brave" and "heroic" Sikh martyrs suffering at the hands of "corrupt", "evil" and "dangerous" Muslims (Sian 2013, pp. 31–37). Another key moment in Sikh history further establishing anti-Muslim sentiment relates to the events that unfolded during the Partition of 1947. In the communal violence that accompanied the division of Punjab, hatred between Sikhs and Muslims was reignited as Muslims opted for inclusion in Pakistan and Sikhs opted for inclusion in India (ibid). Hegemonic accounts of Partition in Sikh discourse focus on themes of martyred Sikh women escaping Muslim men who were on a rampage to brutally convert them to Islam and rape them (ibid). These historical tropes have been reproduced in the contemporary "forced" conversion narratives.

7 Following Modi's annexation of Kashmir in 2019, and the BJP's project of the coercive assimilation of Kashmir's largely Muslim population, this case can be seen as the catalyst for a series of ongoing moral panics justifying state intervention in the defence of non-Muslim minorities.

8 It is important to note that the BJP and Hindutva more broadly tend to embrace Sikhs as part of the Hindu constellation as distinct from Muslims who are considered completely foreign from the traditions of Hinduism. However, while Sikhs are often regarded as "sons of soil" in BJP/Hindutva discourse, they also lack rights and agency as a religious minority.

9 For examples of such leaflets that have been posted on Sikh forums, see: https://www.sikhsangat.com/index.php?/topic/77929-call-to-muslims-to-seduce-sikh-girls-into-islam/ (accessed on 15 July 2021).

10 The film "Misused Trust" created by the right wing Sikh organisation Sikh Youth UK has been screened across University campuses in Britain: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tssP6Db_BAI (accessed on 15 July 2021).

11 See for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hXTM7ehvtk (accessed on 15 July 2021).

12 For an example of such accounts see: Singh, G. May 2010. The Adab-'Respect' Programme: a perspective on Sikh-Muslim relations in the United Kingdom and causes of tensions and mistrust between the two communities. London, Faith Matters.

13 All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the The BSA Statement of Ethical Practice, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Manchester (2013).

14 Sikhi is a concept adopted by Sikhs to describe their journey of learning as a lived experience; for further details see: Mandair AP.S. (2017) Sikhi. In: Mandair AP.S. (eds) Sikhism. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions. Springer, Dordrecht.

15 It has to be remembered of course that Sikhism is a relatively minor religion in the number of adherents compared to Islam. There are by most estimates over 1.6 billion Muslims on the planet, compared to approximately 26 million Sikhs.

16 Examples of such organisations include: Sikh Youth UK, and Sikh Awareness Society.

17 For further information on this critique see: Cockbain E, Tufail W. Failing victims, fuelling hate: challenging the harms of the 'Muslim grooming gangs' narrative. Race & Class. 2020;61(3):3–32.

18 For example, the English Defence League, which is a far-right organisation, and the now defunct think-tank "Quilliam Foundation", which has faced criticism for its Islamophobia and faulty evidence base. See also Leidig, "From Love Jihad to grooming gangs: Tracing flows of the hypersexual Muslim male through female far-right influencers" in this Special Issue.

19 E.g., http://sikheducation.blogspot.c.om/2010/07/love-jihad-or-reproductive-jihad-call.html (accessed on 19 July 2021).

20 E.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hXTM7ehvtk (accessed on 19 July 2021).

21 E.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELYREMMa5Y8 (accessed on 19 July 2021).

22 E.g., Twitter and Facebook.

23 E.g., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xT_uLsDWs4 (accessed on 19 July 2021).

24 The Kara is a steel bracelet worn by Sikhs, representing an external marker of their faith.

25 "Model minority" is a reductive term that has been attached to migrant communities that are seen to have assimilated and excelled in the host community. For further details of its specificity for Sikhs see: Jasbir Puar, "'The Turban Is Not A Hat': Queer Diaspora And Practices Of Profiling", Sikh Formations 4, no. 1 (2008): 47–91.

[26] See: https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/patriarchy-islamophobia-misogyny-challenging-politics-sikh-youth-uk/ (accessed on 19 July 2021).

[27] This can be seen in the way in which such accounts focus on the graphic sexual details of alleged incidents.

[28] E.g., https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/03/i-never-thought-id-be-terrorised-by-my-fellow-sikhs-at-a-wedding (accessed on 20 July 2021).

[29] For a detailed critique of constructs of caste, see Ali et al. (2006).

[30] Of course, it is important to recognise that there are many black Muslims on the planet, and these racial logics do not map onto Muslim and black experiences and societies easily.

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