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Digital Echoes and Legal Shackles: How Online Misinformation Fuels Anti-Conversion Laws in India and Challenges Global Religious Freedom

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ABSTRACT

*This research paper explores the significant influence of digital misinformation and online radicalisation on the perception of forced religious conversions, particularly in India, and its impact on the enactment of stringent anti-conversion laws. The paper examines the interplay between online platforms and public perception in disseminating misinformation, which is further amplified by AI-based tools. This digital environment can manipulate perceptions, fuel social tensions, and create a gap between perceived threats and actual data, ultimately affecting public sentiment and legislative action not only in India but also globally. The research also delves into the historical context of anti-conversion laws in India, tracing their roots from the colonial era through the drafting of the Constitution to the present day, where twelve states have enacted such laws. The paper contrasts the constitutional right to propagate religion with state anxieties about religious identity and control over religious conversion, referencing key Supreme Court cases like *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh*. Furthermore, it analyses how disinformation spreads through social media using multimodal formats and anti-establishment signals, exploiting user-driven distribution to undermine verified information. Ultimately, the paper aims to bridge the divide between perceived threats and empirical evidence by analysing India's anti-conversion laws in relation to international norms, including Article 18 of the UDHR and the ICCPR, which increasingly contradict these national laws.*

Keywords: Digital misinformation, anti conversion laws, AI Tools, UDHR and ICCPR.

I. INTRODUCTION

The interplay between online misinformation and its legal ramifications is a burgeoning area of interest, particularly in the context of anti-conversion laws and perceptions surrounding forced religious conversions. India, as a secular nation, has included the right to preach and spread

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religious beliefs in its Constitution. Despite this commitment, twelve of India's 28 states have anti-conversion laws as of February 2023: Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh. These laws aim to prevent individuals and groups from converting or attempting to convert, either directly or otherwise, persons through 'forcible' or 'fraudulent' means, including 'allurement' or 'inducement' and thereby impose severe penalties for doing so³. However, enforcement of these laws varies across different states where courts have ordered some states to pause enforcement of their anti-conversion laws while others are actively charging individuals. Meanwhile some states yet to pass anti-conversion laws continue to consider introducing them.

In parallel, the digital age has witnessed a growing convergence between online platforms and public perception. The increasing confluence of public and private incentives, the unthoughtful use of online platforms, such as social networks, search engines, news aggregators, messaging apps or video sharing apps, are positioning themselves as central places for gaining various information, including news and information exchange. The unchecked spread of misinformation on these platforms—often propelled by AI-based tools—has **disrupted the control of disinformation networks**. Thus, platforms are taking on the role that the media have played for a long time and contribute to the diminished control of disinformation networks and agents⁴. As a consequence, the information environment gradually becomes highly unbalanced, extremely incompatible with public ethics. This ecosystem can manipulate perceptions and fuel social tensions, playing a disruptive role in civil society⁵. In the context of anti-conversion laws, such misinformation creates a **discrepancy between perceived threats and actual data**, which ultimately influences both public sentiment and legislative action. This phenomenon impacts not only India but also plays a role in shaping legislative reactions in different countries as part of a larger global trend. Globally, laws like Article 18 of the UDHR⁶ and the ICCPR⁷ ensure the right to freely choose and switch religions. India's anti-conversion laws impose severe restrictions that contradict international standards by criminalizing voluntary religious

³ Saiya, N., & Manchanda, S. (2020). Anti-conversion laws and violent Christian persecution in the states of India: a quantitative analysis. *Ethnicities*, 20(3), 587-607. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819885396>

⁴ GRBEŠA ZENZEROVIĆ, Marijana, NENADIC, Iva, Strengthening resilience to disinformation : the state of affairs and guidelines for action, 2022, Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/75571>

⁵ Hill, L. (2024). "Chapter 20: The challenge to liberal democracies of political disinformation". In *Research Handbook on Liberalism*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁶ United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

⁷ United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

conversions, mandating prior state approval, and using vague terms like ‘force,’ ‘fraud,’ and ‘inducement,’ leading to arbitrary arrests and violations of privacy, free expression, and religious freedom.⁸

This paper seeks to close the divide between perceived threats and empirical evidence by analyzing India's anti-conversion laws in relation to international norms and comparing them to similar legislative issues worldwide. It is important to comprehend how digital misinformation affects legal frameworks in order to ensure that laws are in line with both national and international religious freedom and human rights standards.

To understand the implications of anti-conversion laws in India, it is essential to examine their historical context and the legal framework that governs them.

(A) Objectives:

- To analyse the historical context and legal framework of anti-conversion laws in India, including key legislative acts and judicial precedents.
- To investigate the role of digital platforms and the proliferation of online misinformation in shaping public perception regarding forced religious conversions.
- To assess the discrepancy between the perceived prevalence of forced conversions fuelled by digital misinformation and actual empirical evidence.
- To examine how digital misinformation influences the enactment and enforcement of anti-conversion laws in India.
- To compare India's anti-conversion laws with international human rights standards and norms related to freedom of religion and belief, such as Article 18 of the UDHR and the ICCPR.
- To identify the mechanisms through which disinformation regarding conversions is amplified on digital platforms, including the use of multimodal formats, anti-establishment signals, and citizen-driven distribution.
- To contribute to a better understanding of how digital misinformation impacts legal frameworks globally in the context of religious freedom.

⁸ See, e.g., Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021; Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2021; Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2019; Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022; Odisha Freedom of Religion Act, 1967. See also Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217A, U.N. Doc. A/810, Art. 18 (1948); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Dec. 19, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, Art. 18.

- To provide insights that can help ensure that laws related to religious conversion are in line with both national and international religious freedom and human rights standards.

Hypothesis: The proliferation of digital misinformation and online radicalization significantly contributes to the perception of forced religious conversions, creating a gap between the perceived prevalence and actual empirical evidence. This influences the enactment of stringent anti-conversion laws that often lack adequate factual basis and compliance with international human rights standards.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS IN INDIA

"The legal regulation of religious conversion in India reveals the state's deep-seated anxieties about religious identity and its control over the boundaries of belief."

Rowena Robinson⁹.

Religious conversions, particularly those alleged to involve coercion, have remained a matter of worry for Indian state governments since pre independence. The Constitution guarantees all individuals the right to freely profess, practice and propagate their religion as per art. 25 of the Indian constitution. However, this right has sparked significant debates regarding its scope, especially when it comes to the propagation of religion and conversions. The Supreme Court upheld early state laws banning "forced conversions" as reasonable restrictions on Article 25 of the Constitution¹⁰ due to public order concerns in the case of *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh*¹¹.

The roots of anti-conversion sentiments in India can be linked to the colonial era, when the actions of Christian missionaries were frequently met with scepticism. The indigenous population feared that the British colonial administration's backing of missionary activities would weaken traditional social structures and religious identities through conversions. In reaction, numerous princely states passed legislation to limit conversions, mainly focusing on missionaries. The Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968, and the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967¹², were some of the initial laws enacted after Independence to govern conversions, showing concerns about the impact of Christianity and Islam on Hindu society. Both of these laws aimed to prohibit religious conversions that were achieved through coercion,

⁹ Legal Regulation of Religious Conversion in India," published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 27 (July 7-13, 2001), pages 2527-2532.

¹⁰ Constitution of India, 1950, Art. 25

¹¹ *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of M.P.*, (1977) 1 SCC 677

¹² Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act 1968; Orissa Freedom of Religion Act 1967

deception, or enticement¹³.

Intense discussions on the right to spread religion characterized the drafting of the Indian Constitution in 1950. Some members of the Constituent Assembly believed that allowing the right to propagate religion would mainly help Abrahamic religions and might result in Hindus converting¹⁴. This concern stemmed from the communal violence during the partition of India in 1947, which increased concerns about religious conflicts. In the end, the Assembly chose to incorporate the right to spread religion into Article 25, ensuring freedom of religion, yet this choice did not ease concerns about conversions.

After Independence, the increase of Hindu nationalism and changes in political dynamics resulted in the introduction of anti-conversion laws in different states. Further, privacy became an inherent aspect of Article 25 of the Constitution, particularly in regards to the freedom of belief and the ability to practice any religion, or none at all. This, was articulated in the way that the "right to freedom of religion under Article 25 has implicit within it the ability to choose a faith and the freedom to express or not express those choices to the world"¹⁵. Advocates contested the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act¹⁶ and the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act¹⁷ in court, claiming that these laws infringed upon the constitutional right to evangelize. The Supreme Court confirmed that states have the legal authority to pass such laws for the purpose of maintaining public order, effectively validating the limitations on conversions.

In the landmark case of *Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh (1977)*¹⁸, it revolved around the questioning of the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act. The state was deemed by the Supreme Court to have the power to control conversions for the sake of maintaining public order. The Court ruled that while individuals have the right to spread their religious beliefs, they do not have the right to convert others, thereby confirming the legality of laws against forced conversion. The supreme court in this case explored that "... what the Article 25 grants is not the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets. It has to be remembered that Article 25(1) guarantees 'freedom of conscience' to every citizen, and not merely to the followers of one particular religion, and that, in turn, postulates that there is no fundamental

¹³ The Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968, § 3, No. 27, Acts of Madhya Pradesh State Legislature, 1968; The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967, § 3, No. 2, Acts of Orissa State Legislature, 1968.

¹⁴ James Andrew Huff, *Religious Freedom in India and Analysis of the Constitutionality of Anti-Conversion Laws*, 10 RUTGERS J. L. & RELIGION 1,4 (2009).

¹⁵ Justice (Retd.) K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India, (2017) 10 SCC 1, ¶ 188 (per Chandrachud, J.).

¹⁶ Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968

¹⁷ Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967

¹⁸ *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of M.P.*, (1977) 1 SCC 677

right to convert another person as one's own religion because if a person purposely under-takes the conversion of another person to his religion, as distinguished from his effort to transmit or spread the tenets of his religion, that would impinge on the 'freedom of conscience' guaranteed to all the citizens of the county alike."¹⁹

In contrast, the **Evangelical Fellowship of India v. State of Maharashtra (2012)**²⁰ case challenged the constitutionality of Maharashtra's anti-conversion law. The High Court declared the law as unconstitutional because it infringed upon the basic freedom of religion. The court stated that:

“A person's belief or religion is something very personal to him. The State has no right to ask a person to disclose what is his personal belief. The only justification given is that public order requires that notice be given. We are of the considered view that in case of a person changing his religion and notice being issued to the so called pre judicially affected parties, chances of the converttee [sic] being subjected to physical and psychological torture cannot be ruled out.

The

remedy proposed by the State may prove to be more harmful than the problem. (...) In case such a notice is issued, then the unwarranted disclosure of the voluntary change of belief by an adult may lead to communal clashes and may even endanger the life or limb of the converttee.²¹”

The Court also held that the state's invocation of public order had to be justified in order to fit within the exception to Article 25 of the Constitution. Nevertheless, the law continued to be enforced, underscoring the persisting conflict between religious freedom and government control.

III. THE ROLE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN AMPLIFYING MISINFORMATION ON CONVERSIONS

Disinformation is typically defined as “the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain²²”, political disinformation has been characterized as a significant threat to democracy. The contemporary issue of religious conversion has become a significant concern, amplified by the proliferation of false narratives disseminated through social media and mobile messaging applications. Disturbing reports of

¹⁹ Rev. Stainislaus v. State of M.P., (1977) 1 SCC 677, ¶ 20.

²⁰ **Evangelical Fellowship of India v. State of Maharashtra** 2012 SCC Online HP 5554

²¹ Evangelical Fellowship of India v. State of H.P., 2012 SCC OnLine HP 5554, ¶40-41.

²² Disinformation and ‘fake news’: Government Response to the Committee’s Fifth Report of Session 2017–19, 23 October 2018, HC 1630 Government response to Interim Report, p 2.

involuntary conversion to misleading religious interpretations have surfaced, with these narratives spreading unchecked on various digital platforms. Despite existing legislation criminalizing fraudulent religious conversion and other forms of coercion, the public remains vulnerable to the dissemination of false religious interpretations. Exploiting these loopholes, some organizations have cynically employed religion as a marketing tool.²³ The growing explosive religious fatalistic views presented on social media and widespread misinformation, disinformation, and fake news can result in detrimental outcomes in adopting protective behavior²⁴.

Additionally, social media features allow disinformation to seem credible, especially when these narratives are presented in multimodal formats (i.e., integrating text and visuals)²⁵. This approach leverages the emotional impact of visuals, enhancing the engagement and effectiveness of disinformation, since images can trigger more intense reactions and appear more real than just text. In conversion narratives, visuals showcasing intense or controversial religious moments are frequently shared without explanation, intensifying societal anxieties and influencing viewpoints in manners that do not align with actual facts. Also, algorithms prioritizing engagement amplify sensational content, facilitating the spread of falsehoods²⁶.

Misinformation regarding conversions frequently utilizes anti-establishment signals, portraying the government or mainstream media as hiding "truths" related to religious issues. This method attracts audiences skeptical of traditional institutions and aligns closely with populist feelings, portraying "the people" in opposition to supposedly corrupt elites. This anti-elitist perspective has shown success in captivating audiences attracted to alternative stories and can impact legislative measures, especially in divided or deeply religious communities²⁷.

Additionally, these stories gain momentum through citizen-driven distribution, in which individuals or bots pretending to be regular citizens share what appear to be personal experiences of transformation. These strategies give disinformation an appearance of authenticity and relatability, causing users to perceive these messages as trustworthy narratives

²³ Henry, Andrew. (2021). Religious Literacy in Social Media: A Need for Strategic Amplification. *Religion & Education*. 48. 1-13. 10.1080/15507394.2021.1876507.

²⁴ Jin Q, Raza SH, Yousaf M, Munawar R, Shah AA, Hassan S, Shaikh RS, Ogadimma EC. Ingraining Polio Vaccine Acceptance through Public Service Advertisements in the Digital Era: The Moderating Role of Misinformation, Disinformation, Fake News, and Religious Fatalism. *Vaccines*. 2022; 10(10):1733.

²⁵ Hameleers, M., Powell, T. E., Van Der Meer, T. G. L. A., & Bos, L. (2020). A Picture Paints a Thousand Lies? The Effects and Mechanisms of Multimodal Disinformation and Rebuttals Disseminated via Social Media. *Political Communication*, 37(2), 281-301.

²⁶ Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2018). Fake News and the Economy of Emotions: Problems, Causes, Solutions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 154-175.

²⁷ Waisbord, S. (2018). The Elective Affinity Between Post-Truth Communication and Populist Politics. *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 17-34.

instead of altered propaganda. This peer-to-peer framework avoids conventional journalistic gatekeeping, enabling disinformation to quickly and directly affect public opinion. The connection between digital and traditional media broadens the impact and accessibility of these stories. Prominent media outlets like OpIndia and NewsX in India occasionally highlight and enhance narratives from social media, thereby lending additional credibility to these accounts. This cross-platform dissemination results in users facing comparable stories across different formats—tweets, videos, news articles—establishing a feedback loop that solidifies the misinformation's credibility and pulls users into ideological groups.

A crucial element is the transnational character of digital platforms, which allows for the worldwide dissemination of ideological narratives concerning religious conversions. For instance, Hindutva narratives portray conversion as a danger to cultural identity and leverage digital platforms to foster unity among Indian diaspora groups²⁸. The contemporary 'Love Jihad' narrative propagated by Hindu right-wing factions, which inaccurately asserts a systematic endeavor to convert Hindu women to Islam via romantic deceit, reflects comparable campaigns from the 1920s in North India, which accused abductions as a method for coerced conversions. This continuity highlights how misinformation can strengthen intergenerational anxieties and shape community views, ultimately affecting social behavior and policy decisions regarding conversion. This communication corresponds with international extremist beliefs, including elements of white supremacy, to establish a global network of influence. Incidents such as the Leicester violence in 2022 highlight how far-reaching these narratives are, as misinformation transcends borders, inciting genuine conflicts and strife among communities distant from the source of the ideology.

The effect of digital misinformation extends beyond online environments; it carries tangible consequences, such as shaping public opinion, policies, and actions. Deceptive narratives concerning conversions can foster a warped sense of danger, leading governments and communities to act on inaccurate information instead of trustworthy data. Anti-conversion laws, specifically, can be influenced by public sentiment that is largely swayed by online misinformation rather than solid proof. This cycle underscores the necessity of creating policies grounded in factual foundations to prevent reactionary actions that could jeopardize civil liberties.

Ultimately, digital platforms offer a cost-effective and potent way for disinformation efforts to weaken credible information and diminish public trust. The combination of social media's active

²⁸ Rajagopal, A. (2001). *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*. Cambridge University Press.

characteristics, anti-establishment messages, and community-driven sharing fosters a strong setting where misinformation regarding religious conversions can flourish, impacting views and possibly shaping policies at local, national, and global scales. Comprehending these mechanisms is crucial for tackling the issues created by digital misinformation and safeguarding social unity in a globalized society.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS WORLDWIDE

Anti-conversion laws embody a complicated and contentious element of worldwide legal systems, as various nations implement regulations that claim to safeguard against forced conversions but frequently impose broad limitations on personal beliefs. These laws differ significantly in their extent and application, but they often stray from international human rights norms, especially those outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)²⁹. Both frameworks emphasize a person's basic right to select, alter, and freely engage in religion, highlighting freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as essential rights. Nevertheless, the global reality of anti-conversion laws shows a trend of limitations that hinder not only voluntary conversions but also penalize peaceful expressions of religious dialogue, leading to significant ethical and legal issues.

As of 2023, twelve states in India have implemented anti-conversion laws, containing clauses that generally forbid conversions claimed to be acquired through "force, fraud, allurement, or inducement." Regions like Uttar Pradesh³⁰ and Karnataka³¹ have enforced notably strict regulations, requiring government notification prior to any religious conversion—particularly in instances of interfaith marriages. This regulatory strategy highlights a notable change in the burden of proof, placing the onus on individuals charged with coercive conversions to demonstrate their innocence, which directly opposes the international principle of presumed innocence. Moreover, India's anti-conversion regulations impose stricter penalties for conversions that involve minors, women, and marginalized communities under the pretext of protection, although these clauses are condemned for being excessively vague and prone to exploitation. By intensifying the scrutiny of religious minorities and encouraging vigilantism, these laws create a climate of fear that limits people's ability to select and practice their faith without the threat of persecution. Moreover, the addition of measures aimed at interfaith

²⁹ Coleman, P. (2017). *Freedom of Religion or Belief: An International Law Commentary* Heiner Bielefeldt, Nazila Ghanea and Michael Wiener Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016,

³⁰ Uttar Pradesh's Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021

³¹ The Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Act, 2022

marriages, influenced by the controversial idea of "Love Jihad," illustrates how socio-political stories of distrust and cultural safeguarding can infiltrate legal systems, heightening the control over personal convictions³².

The disparities between these national anti-conversion laws and international human rights norms highlight a considerable deviation from universally acknowledged principles of religious liberty. Article 18 of the UDHR and ICCPR ensures that individuals can change their beliefs freely, without fear or pressure, while also safeguarding their right to participate in peaceful religious advocacy and non-coercive persuasion. Nonetheless, by outlawing non-coercive conversions and imposing strict regulations on personal religious decisions, many nations, such as India, limit these rights, creating a situation where individuals are discouraged from asserting their independence in spiritual matters. This discord with global standards highlights a significant concern: the safeguarding of religious freedom as a fundamental human right is undermined when legal frameworks enforce narrow interpretations that prioritize cultural preservation over personal freedom.

A major factor propelling these limiting anti-conversion laws is the impact of misinformation and socio-political narratives that depict religious conversions as threats to cultural or national identities. In India, for example, the concept of "Love Jihad" creates an atmosphere of skepticism and doubt, depicting interfaith unions as organized attempts to convert people through deceitful means. This exaggerated threat story drives legislative limitations on interfaith marriages, increasing public backing for laws that regulate personal decisions in the name of protecting cultural integrity. Likewise, countries with prevailing religious identities, like Myanmar and certain regions in the Middle East, defend anti-conversion laws as safeguards for the majority faith, frequently disregarding the rights of minorities. The interaction between false information and legal systems generates a self-sustaining loop where unfounded anxieties are incorporated into legislation, providing governments extensive power over individual religious choices and exacerbating bias against minority faiths.

Consequently, the comparative examination of anti-conversion legislation highlights the intricate interplay of socio-political factors, religious identity, and legal systems that influence these regulations in different nations. India's anti-conversion laws, similar to those in Myanmar, Pakistan, and certain regions of the Middle East, illustrate a persistent conflict between safeguarding cultural or religious majorities and complying with globally accepted norms of religious freedom[m]. This examination shows that although safeguards against coercion are

³² GUPTA, C. (2009). Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(51), 13–15.

essential to avert forced conversions, widespread and harsh implementations of anti-conversion laws frequently infringe on voluntary religious decisions, threatening individual liberties significantly. The dissemination of false information exacerbates these difficulties by heightening perceived dangers to cultural integrity, thereby entrenching biases in legislative systems. Moving ahead, it is essential to commit to harmonizing national legislation with international human rights standards. This alignment will guarantee that legal safeguards against coercion honor the universal right to religious autonomy, promoting a more equitable approach that protects both individual and collective rights in a more interconnected world.
