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The 'threat' of 'conversions': cultural violence in the 2008 anti-Christian violence in India

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in India, a system of anti-Christian violence has emerged. This article explores the movement's justifications of physical and structural violence against India's Christians, casting them as a form of cultural violence. It argues that Hindutva's broad conception and portrayal of India's Christians as a demographic, cultural and political 'threat' allows justifications for violence to be deployed adroitly and flexibly across varying state contexts, and the national level. The portrayal as an internal and external threat enables the movement to escalate tropes about the Christian 'threat', as and when required to justify direct and structural violence. Thus, making the system of anti-Christian violence in India more potent. By examining newspaper archives, civil society and government reports, and documents and speeches of Hindutva-aligned organisations, this article revisits the 2008 anti-Christian violence, primarily in Orissa and Karnataka, India's worst episode of anti-Christian violence.

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Introduction

With the political and social dominance of the Hindu nationalist movement (also known as the Hindutva movement) in contemporary India, a system of anti-Christian violence has emerged. This system consists of the dynamic interaction of direct, structural and cultural violence and is designed to address the Christian 'threat' (Nielsen et al., 2024; Selvaraj, 2024a; Selvaraj & Nielsen, 2025). Open Doors International now classifies India as the 11th worst place in the world to be a Christian, just behind states like Yemen, Sudan, Afghanistan and North Korea (Open Doors, 2024). The Evangelical

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Fellowship of India (EFI), a civil society organisation, reported that in the first 8 months of 2023, there were 525 attacks against Christians representing a four-fold increase in attacks over the past decade (since 2014). These include beatings, disruptions of services and prayer meetings and desecration of churches. Most were carried out by Hindu nationalist-aligned organisations. This EFI data excludes the significant anti-Christian violence in the north-eastern state of Manipur in which more than 218 were killed and 50,000 were displaced (Pal 2024). A significant aspect of this system is anti-conversion legislation, a form of structural violence. These laws, passed in 12 Indian states, place unnecessary hurdles in the way of an individual's constitutionally guaranteed free choice and practice of religion (Selvaraj, 2024a). While anti-conversion legislation dates back to the 1960s, these laws have become more intrusive over the past decade. Scholarship shows that these laws, passed mostly in BJP-led states, encourage extra-judicial enforcement by Hindu nationalist groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, which often leads to physical violence (Saiya & Manchanda, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2024; Selvaraj, 2024a; Kaiser et al., 2025). These laws also formalise an incentive for Dalit Christians, who make up a majority of India's Christian population, to 'convert' back to Hinduism, as they will then be eligible for affirmative action which Dalit Christians currently do not receive (Selvaraj, 2024b). This article argues that much like Hindu-Muslim contentions (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004; Berenschot, 2009; Basu, 2015; Pai & Kumar, 2018), anti-Christian violence is instrumental in nature.

While recent scholarship has shed light on direct and structural violence against India's Christians (Bauman, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2024; Selvaraj, 2024a, 2024b; Kaiser et al., 2025; Nielsen, 2025; Sasikumar, 2025), the role of cultural violence in this system has not been fully unpacked. Galtung (1990) introduced cultural violence as the third super type (after direct and structural violence) in his violence typology. He defined it as 'any aspect of a culture that can be used to *legitimize* violence in [either or both] its direct or structural form' (p. 291, emphasis added). It occurs with one group 'inflating, even exalting, the value of Self; deflating, even debasing, the value of Other'. The stage is then set for direct and structural violence which is subsequently blamed on the victim (p. 298) and justifies the actions of the aggressors as necessary and vital. The potency of cultural violence, therefore, is that it normalises the other forms (through public speeches, biased media representation and hate speech in print and social media) making them 'look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong' (p. 291) thereby, gaining implicit public consent. Importantly, Standish (2015) adds that the deployment of cultural violence can be selective, happening 'not all the time, but when required' (p. 15) adding credence to its instrumental use.

This article argues that the Hindu nationalist movement's deployment of the broadly conceived trope of the Christian 'threat' of 'conversions' was

used to justify the 2008 anti-Christian violence in the country. The natural extension of portraying Christians as a 'threat' is that there needs to be a defence against it, and as such any violence would be justified. In the cases of violence in Orissa and Karnataka, it shows how the 'threat' of 'conversions' was used to lay groundwork for future violence and subsequently, to justify it ahead of the 2009 general elections. Notably, this article explores how this cultural violence operates at and between the state and national levels in India using Tambiah's (1996) reciprocal concepts of *parochialization*, the 'reproduction of a national issue in diverse local places, where it explodes like a cluster bomb in multiple context-bound ways' (p. 257) and *transvaluation*, the 'linked process of assimilating particulars to a larger, collective, more enduring, and therefore less context-bound, cause or interest' (p. 81). More than considering the reciprocal flow of cultural violence, these concepts show how varying aspects of the broadly conceived Christian 'threat' can be contextualised at local levels, yet made to feel universal when compounded and elevated to the national level. By revisiting the 2008 violence, India's worst episode of anti-Christian violence, this article shows how the relatively well-organised Hindu nationalist movement was able to contextualise national themes to local contexts (in Orissa and Karnataka) and work local concerns into a national discourse about Christians. Basu (2015) reaffirms this notion by arguing that mass violence is rarely 'local' but is often perpetuated while being justified by national themes (p. 15). As such, given their well-developed social and political infrastructure, the Hindu nationalist movement benefitted from being able to trigger violence and compound it, relatively easily when enacting violence would be beneficial electorally.

This article draws on a wide range of data for its analysis of the 2008 anti-Christian violence, at the national-level, and in Orissa and Karnataka including government and religious and secular civil society fact-finding reports, and newspaper archives. Additionally, archives of organisations affiliated to the Hindutva movement (available online) have been examined. This research was carried out in two stages. The first in 2018, during fieldwork in Karnataka and the second, in preparation for this article in 2024.

First, this article will elaborate on the Hindu nationalist framing of India's Christians as a 'threat'. Next, it looks at the emergence of anti-Christian violence in India from the 1990s onwards and particularly explores the 2008 anti-Christian violence (centred in Orissa and Karnataka). The analysis will primarily focus on the 'justifications' provided by Hindu nationalist organisations for this spell of violence. The conclusion will briefly discuss the implications of these findings for today's India.

Hindutva and the construction of the Christian 'threat'

Hindutva is a cultural nationalist ideology which conceives of India as a land of 'Hindus', privileging them over other minority groups, especially, Muslims

and Christians. It seeks to preserve dominant caste male supremacy in the country. Since its strong articulation in the early 1920s, the ideology has portrayed Muslims and Christians to be 'dangerous others' who pose a multifaceted 'threat' to the 'Hindu' nation (Nielsen et al., 2024). V.D. Savarkar, an influential ideologue, feared that the 'Hindu' nation would be wiped out by these threats and therefore, stressed the need for unity among *all* 'Hindus' (across caste, class and linguistic cleavages) as the remedy (Chaturvedi, 2022, emphasis added). Savarkar feared that Christianity and Islam would wipe out 'Hindus', who 'remained effete and divided into many castes and sects' (Jaffrelot, 2007, pp. 15–16). By emphasising these threats, the ideology 'normalizes the politics of fear and hatred by representing it as a defensive reaction' to Muslims and Christians (Anand, 2011, p. 1).

The expansion of Christian missionary work, sanctioned by the British Raj, and the establishment of missionary schools from the early 1800s was marked the beginning of tensions across the country. Notably, compared to historic Christian groups like the Syrian Christians in Kerala, this wave of missionary work primarily focused on Dalits and Adivasis. As Frykenberg (2008) noted, in some cases, whole villages converted to Christianity, and new converts were encouraged to destroy idols and other symbols of Hinduism. Dalits achieved an element of upward mobility through access to missionary education (pp. 294–297). Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu revivalist movement, rebuked these early missionary movements writing the missionary

> … wanted to accomplish his object by ensnaring others into his net like a fisherman … a missionary who ensnares a large number of converts into the net of Christianity gets a good salary and makes a name for himself. (Saraswati, 1875, p. 619)

The publication of the decadal census from the 1870s onwards brought to the fore anxieties of the 'dying Hindu race' – a belief that Hindus would be displaced from 'their' homeland by growing Muslim and Christian populations. At this stage, Dalits and Adivasis were identified as being especially 'vulnerable' to Christian 'conversion'. In his tract, *Saviour of a dying race*, Swami Shraddhanand, a disciple of the Arya Samaj, particularly emphasised the 'inhuman treatment' of Dalits and Adivasis by the 'orthodox Brahmins' (Shraddhanand, 1926, p. 84). He feared that their continued mistreatment would lead to large-scale conversion to Christianity and Islam, jeopardising the 'Hindu' majority in India. Geopolitics of the 1920s was dotted by the pan-Islamic mobilisation of the Khilafat movement following the First World War, the discontent from separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus, introduced by the British Raj, and the growing prominence of the US in global politics. These ideas about Christians were collated by V.D. Savarkar, esteemed by many as the ideological founder of the Hindutva

movement. In his tract, Essentials of Hindutva, published in 1923, Christians were portrayed as 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' to his idea of the nation. Later M.S. Golwalkar, an influential ideologue and the longest serving head of the RSS, in his book, *We or our nationhood defined*, wrote that Christians were 'traitors and enemies to the National cause' and therefore, 'deserving of no special protection, far less any privilege or rights' (Golwalkar, 1947, pp. 100–104).

The Hindutva movement has since presented a well-developed articulation of the Christian 'threat' which can be represented by the term 'conversions' deployed in multi-faceted ways (Selvaraj, 2024a). First, Hindutva portrays India's Christians as 'agents' of western 'Christian' countries (particularly, the US and the UK) who are intent on destroying the fabric of the 'Hindu' nation as part of their global expansion. Christian mission work is viewed as being nefarious because it targets 'vulnerable' and, therefore, 'gullible' Hindus like Dalits and Adivasis, who are essential to bolster the 'Hindu' majority in the country. The wide national network of Christian social services is misconstrued as being forms of 'force', 'fraud' and 'allurement' to convert Hindus to Christianity (Selvaraj, 2024a). As such, the epithet 'rice-bag' Christians is often hurled at new converts to suggest that they converted in exchange for the 'gift' of a bag of rice. Finally, missionary affirmation of monotheism is criticised as being culturally insensitive towards polytheistic Hinduism. Pentecostals and evangelical churches sympathetic to Pentecostalism are particularly accused of this insensitivity in their missionary work (Bauman, 2015). Aspects of this understanding have been deployed historically to justify both direct and structural violence against Christians and therefore, should be considered a form of cultural violence.

Importantly, the perceived 'threat' has less to do with the incompatibility of Hinduism and Christianity, rather it represents the anxieties over a 'well-planned conspiracy to overwhelm Hindus' in their homeland (Anand, 2011, p. 22). This broad conception of Christians emphasises a demographic, political, social and cultural 'threat' to the 'Hindu' nation. Notably, by linking India's Christians to external 'Christian' countries, the threat is perceived to be internal and external. As Anand (2011) suggests this, therefore, makes Christians 'lethal enemies', more than the foreign actors they are accused of working for (p. 42).

The emergence of a system of anti-Christian violence in India

Direct anti-Christian violence in India is a relatively recent phenomenon when compared to Hindu-Muslim contentions. It emerged and began proliferating in the late 1990s when the Hindu nationalist movement 'turned its attention' towards India's Christians (Bhatt, 2001, p. 198) displacing Muslims as the 'primary target' (Sarkar, 1999). A range of plausible accounts suggest why

Christians took precedence as the 'threatening other' in the eyes of Hindu nationalists at this time. Notably, all resonate with aspects of the Hindu nationalist concerns over India's Christians, described above. The first relates to Christian's interaction and relationship with minoritised communities especially Adivasis and Dalits. As most of this violence occurred in tribal-dominated areas such as Orissa and Gujarat, scholars highlight the direct confrontation between Hindu nationalist organisations and Christian missionaries working in these areas. Hindu nationalist organisation seek to 'mainstream' Adivasis to make them 'Hindu' so counteracting the influence of Christian missionaries in Adivasi areas and helping build popular and electoral support for the Hindutva agenda at the state and national level (Shah, 1999; Froerer, 2006; Thachil, 2016).

Others attribute the onset of violence to the growing 'assertiveness' of Dalit Christians in their demands for inclusion into the government's affirmative action policy. Under the Scheduled Castes Order, 1950, reservations were offered only to Hindu Dalits, recognising the centrality and specificity of the caste system to Hinduism. However, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits gained access to these provisions in 1956 and 1990. Christian and Muslim Dalits are still not eligible to receive benefits under these provisions. Proponents of Hindutva feared that if Dalit Christians were admitted into the affirmative action policy, then the floodgates would be opened, leading to a mass exodus of Dalits towards Christianity. This potential loss would, therefore, jeopardise the 'Hindu' majority in the country (Zavos, 2001, p. 73). Importantly, for the first time, mainline Roman Catholic and Protestant churches supported these efforts (Wyatt, 1998; Sarkar, 1999; Zavos, 2001). Sarkar (1999) highlights that Christian activists working together with diverse groups including secular, liberal and left formations (p. 1698) served as a source of ideological resistance against the nascent BJP-led national government.

Others argue that globalisation directly fuelled Hindu nationalist anxieties and Christians became the 'symbolic extension of Globalization' (Lobo, 2002, p. 150). Globalisation was said to have disrupted the social, economic and cultural fabric of the country bringing in merit-based employment in corporates, the spread of western culture through media and an influx of western goods that threatened local producers. Simultaneously, the ascension of Sonia Gandhi (an Italian-born Catholic) to the presidency of the Indian National Congress (INC), enabled Hindu nationalist organisations to harness the anger felt towards foreign powers and directed them towards Indian Christians who were viewed as proxies for these foreign powers (Bhatt, 2001, pp. 198–199).

Finally, Aaron (2002) argues that the diminishing electoral returns of demonising Muslims following the violence in Ayodhya and the resulting riots around the country in the early 1990s necessitated that the movement turned its attention to another 'other' to mobilise against prior to the national

elections (p. 44). As Sarkar (1999) argues, the ruling BJP government would be hard-pressed to defend its mandate of bringing law and order to the country if violence against Muslims continued, particularly because many of the BJPs coalition partners relied on the support of Muslim voters (p. 1698).

Apex: the 2008 anti-Christian violence

A decade later, India witnessed 287 incidents of Hindu–Christian violence across 20 states where 82 were injured and 44 died (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2008). The preceding years saw similar political, economic and social dynamics as the late 1990s. India's general elections were coming up in 2009, with polls predicting a close fight between the ruling INC-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The NDA had been dealt a shock defeat at the hands of the UPA in 2004. There was still a high level of national awareness of anti-Muslim violence which occurred in the BJP-led state of Gujarat in 2002. Geopolitics in the early 2000s, had brought global Islam and global Christianity closer to India's 'homeland' as the 'War on [Islamic] Terror' raged globally (following 9/11) and at home (following the Mumbai attacks). Furthermore, the INC-led government, in 2005, signed the high-profile Civil Nuclear Agreement with the US.

The release of the 2001 census in 2005, showed a marginal decline (1 per cent) in the 'Hindu' population in the country. Hindu nationalists apportioned some of the blame for this onto Christians. The Akhil Bharatiya Prathinidi Sabha (ABPS), the highest decision making body of the RSS, in a resolution stated, 'the elements which believe in religious conversions are behind this … There is an urgent need for a shift in the Hindu mindset over this issue, and all Hindus be awakened to work towards this' (2005a). Particularly concerning for the movement at this time were renewed claims for Dalit Christians to be included into the government's affirmative action policies following the publication of the Sachar Committee report in 2006. This report, established by the ruling Indian National Congress, sought to explore and make recommendations for the socio-economic development of India's minorities. The report found 'the caste system to be an all-pervading social phenomenon of India shared by almost all Indian communities irrespective of religious persuasions' (Prime Minister's High-level Committee, 2006, p. 143). This conclusion challenged Hindu nationalist claims that Dalits economically and socially benefitted from conversion to Christianity, and supported the argument that Dalit Christians should also be included in the government's affirmative action policy. Noting their concern about this, another resolution, passed by the ABPS, reiterated that it would be a 'great injustice' if affirmative action were extended to Dalit Christians as the benefits for scheduled castes would then be 'grabbed away by the

converts'. The ABPS feared that it would further instigate 'a steep rise in religious conversions among SCs since it will remove a major obstacle for the foreign funded Christian missionaries who are engaged in religious conversions by hook or crook' (ABPS, 2005b).

The epicentre of the 2008 violence was Kandhamal and surrounding districts in Orissa with Karnataka also experiencing significant violence which came to be known as the 'Church Attacks'. The districts in Orissa and Karnataka represented vastly different contexts. In both cases, we see observe *parochialization* as Hindutva's broad conception of 'conversions' at the national level was contextualised in each case to justify the violence. Reciprocally, this analysis also demonstrates the process of *transvaluation* to consolidate these instances into a universal Christian 'threat' of 'conversions' at the national level ahead of the general elections. As shown here, this process was facilitated by the movement's well-developed social and political infrastructure.

Parochialization of cultural violence in central Orissa

Anti-Christian violence was not new in Orissa in 2008. The state was the first in independent India to pass an anti-conversion law in 1967, following the publication of the Report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Commission by the neighbouring Madhya Pradesh government. The commission recommended a law to control the 'rampant' evangelisation in the area. The hostile situation against Christians in the state was accentuated in 1999 when the Australian missionary doctor, Graham Staines, along with his two sons were burned alive as they slept in their jeep. This crime was believed to be the work of Dara Singh, a member of the Bajrang Dal (*The Hindu*, 2019), who in an interview from jail justified his actions saying 'Missionaries have been targeting our religion. They have been converting Hindus by deceit and inducements. Our religion is under siege. As a true Hindu, it was my responsibility to oppose them' (Banerjee, 2000).

The epicentre of the 2008 violence was the Kandhamal district, one of Orissa's poorest and least developed districts. Kandhamal's population largely comprised of Scheduled Tribes (53.58 per cent) and Scheduled Castes (15.76 per cent) (Census of India 2011, p. 15). Notably, it had a high Hindu population (79 per cent) and a significant Christian population (20 per cent) but a negligible Muslim population (0.29 per cent). Importantly, the BJP was in a fractious coalition government with the Biju Janata Dal at the state level at this time.

There had been a concerted effort in the preceding years to make Orissa the next 'Hindutva Laboratory', fashioned after Gujarat which experienced significant anti-Muslim violence in 2002 (Chatterji, 2010, p. 10). A central actor in this violence was Swami Lakshmanananda Saraswati, an anti-conversion advocate, linked to the VHP. Saraswati had been working in Kandhamal

since 1969 on Adivasi 'development' to counter the work of Christian missionaries in the region. This included running an extensive network of schools and hospitals, preaching the Vedas and organising mass rallies against 'conversion' and Christian missionary work (Bhattacharya, 2008). The VHP's understanding of Christians in Kandhamal is perfectly summed up in the texts on pamphlets they distributed which claimed 'Christians in the area have long been trying to convert the tribal population … The tribals in the region over the last few years have been despising conversion due to the attacks on their cultural moorings by the Christian community' (Biswas, 2008).

Importantly, the work of the Swami and the VHP, prompted an influx of energetic evangelical groups (and funding) making the region a site of competing religiosity (Kanungo, 2008, p. 13). It is important to note that this influx was not necessarily well-received by all Christians in the region. For example, Fr. Francis, a Catholic priest who worked in Kandhamal said, 'we need jobs so that our communities can develop too. Without jobs where is the money for [our children's] education? We do not need more evangelising. Poor Christians get nothing but attacked for this' (Ramesh, 2008). This statement reflects the schism which existed between mainline service-oriented churches like the Catholic church and more evangelical groups around the question of aggressive missionary tactics (Bauman, 2015).

Tensions were strong in Kandhamal between the mostly tribal Kondhs and the mostly Dalit Christian Panas, two marginalised groups with a shared history and language, Kui. While the Panas were considered to be 'socially inferior' by the Kondhs, through educational attainment facilitated by Christian missionaries, Panas had raised their social and economic position. The Kondhs, however, harboured an understanding that Panas were using this status to exploit the Kondhs and their land (Bauman, 2013, p. 646). These ill-feelings grew through recent demands by Panas to change their status from Scheduled Castes to Scheduled Tribes due to their shared lineage which would facilitate acceptance into the government's affirmative action policies. This was particularly relevant in the underdeveloped hilly regions of Orissa where the government was the primary employer. The Kondhs had vociferously fought this effort believing that their piece of the already small reservation pie would diminish, if Panas gained access to these policies (National Commission for Minorities, 2008a, p. 2). Bauman (2020) explains that geographical and hierarchical proximity placed Panas and Kondhs in significant social, economic and political competition with each other causing both groups (spurred on by Hindu nationalists) to participate in the violence which was to follow.

The prelude to the 2008 anti-Christian violence came on Christmas day in 2007 and tensions continued to escalate into January 2008. The catalyst was the erection of a *pandal*, a temporary structure erected during festivals, to celebrate Christmas, in the village centre in Brahamanigaon. Christians had

already attained permission to erect this; however, the conflict arose because this was the same location where the annual *Durga Pooja* festivities took place. Furthermore, the Kui Samaj, a tribal organisation had called for a *bandh* (lockdown) in the area to protest against Pana demands for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes. A group of 200 protesters demanded the removal of the *pandal* and the shutting of shops in the surrounding markets. The refusal of Christian shopkeepers to do so led to altercations between the Kondhs and the Panas (National Commission for Minorities, 2008a, p. 5). It is estimated that this spell led to the destruction of 700 houses belonging to Christians, 90 churches and 100 Christian institutions and the unofficial death toll was 11 (People's Union for Human Rights, et al., 2008, p. 25).

After this initial violence tensions remained dormant until 23 August 2008 when the Swami along with four of his disciples was murdered in his Ashram in Kandhamal, during the Krishna Janmabhoomi, Lord Krishna's birth anniversary celebrations. Despite Maoists operating in the district taking credit for the murder (Pattnaik, 2008), the VHP, capitalising on its decades long anti-Christian rhetoric sought to portray Christians as the murderous assailants. The Swami's body was led in procession through districts in Orissa by members of the VHP including its president, Praveen Togadia. At this point, widespread violence erupted which killed 59 people and left 50,000 homeless, mostly Christian (Setalvad, 2017).

Justifications for this violence articulated by Hindu nationalist groups resonated with historic anxieties about India's Christians, but primarily focused on the work of missionaries among Adivasi and Dalit communities in the region. The blame was placed on Christians who were 'stealing land from poor tribals for churches' and 'getting foreign money to fund mass conversions' (Ramesh, 2008). In particular, the violence was portrayed as a natural and spontaneous response from the Kondh community, absolving the VHP of any blame. For example, the national co-convenor of the Bajrang Dal, an affiliate of the VHP suggested that '[p]eople rise in rebellion when there is unfairness and injustice. No one has to encourage them' (Soondas, 2008). The Akhil Bharatiya Karykari Mandal (ABKM), the All India Executive Committee of the RSS blamed the violence on the 'missionary infused socio-economic rivalry between the Kandh tribals and the converted Panas' saying that 'the Kandh identity and culture have come under severe threat' by 'overzealous missionaries' (2008).

Through this brief analysis, it is evident how historic anxieties about Christians were applied to suit the Kandhamal context, particularly around tensions following demands for Dalit Christians to be included in the state's affirmative action policies, which was a concurrent national level issue. Further, the justifications for the Kandhamal violence reveal how Hindu nationalist organisations, across the state and national level, drawing from a similar ideological playbook, presented a relatively uniform defence for the violence.

Parochialization of cultural violence in Coastal Karnataka

The context of the impacted coastal districts of Karnataka were radically different from those in Orissa, yet they have also been referred to as a 'Hindutva Laboratory' (Bhardwaj, 2017). These districts score highly on Human Development Indicators such as education, income and health care (Government of Karnataka, 2006, p. 15), houses many nationally respected secondary and tertiary educational institutes and is known as the 'cradle of Indian Banking'. Dalit and Adivasi communities form only a small portion of the district's population (around 10 per cent together) (Census India, 2011, n.d.). According the 2011 census, Hindu were 67.18 per cent of the population of the district, Muslims another 24.02 per cent and Christians 8.20 per cent (Census India, 2011, n.d.). It is noteworthy, that the influential and affluent Catholics formed an estimated 80–90 per cent of the Christian community, but there was also a small and growing population of evangelical Christians.

As opposed to Kandhamal, where Christians were in direct competition with Hindu nationalist organisations, here, tensions between Hindus and Muslims dominated the headlines. A system of communal competition had evolved in the district over the preceding decades which unfolded on two levels. The first was between Hindu nationalist groups and Islamic fundamentalist groups, like the Popular Front of India, and the second between Hindu nationalist groups such as the Bajrang Dal, and autonomous Hindutva-inspired groups like the Shri Ram Sena. In competing for public attention, these organisations constantly battled for supremacy through their communal activities including moral policing, hate speech, and violence inspired by emotive issues including cow vigilantism and love jihad (People's Union for Civil Liberty Karnataka, 2009).

As in Orissa, the VHP had been active in their *Ghar Wapsi* (reconversion) and 'mainstreaming' efforts in the preceding years, proudly claiming the reconversion of over 50,000 people from Christianity to Hinduism. G.R. Suresh, who oversaw the VHP's campaign revealingly emphasised that '[w]e are not bothered about Christians who have been converted centuries ago [the Catholics] … . Our primary targets are those who have been converted by inducement, or under duress, in recent decades [Dalits and Adivasis]' (Desai, 2008).

These efforts coincided with a rise in physical violence from 2006 onwards (People's Union for Civil Liberties Karnataka, 2009). Importantly, this coincided with the advent of the BJP government in coalition with the Janata Dal (Secular) from February 2006. In mid-2008, the BJP formed the government on its own, marking the first time the party was in power in a south Indian state. In 2007, human rights activists noted 48 incidents of anti-Christian violence in 19 districts (with most incidents taking place in the coastal districts) in 2007. This included attacks on pastors of small

churches following allegations of 'conversions' and executed by organisations like the VHP, the Bajrang Dal, and the Sri Ram Sena (People's Union for Human Rights, et al., 2008, p. 53)

In what came to be known as the 'Church Attacks', 21 places were attacked in Karnataka's coastal belt between 23rd August and 19th September (National Commission for Minorities, 2008b, p. 6). Notably, 18 attacks were carried out simultaneously on Sunday, the 14th of September which gives the impression that they were coordinated (All India Christian Council, 2008, p. 3). Similarly, Harcharan Singh, a member of the National Committee of Minorities investigation team, suggested that 'the attacks were well-organized' and Hindu nationalist organisations 'carried out the attacks in connivance with the state government there' (*The Times of India*, 2008b). The 'Church Attacks' shocked the Christians community in the region. A few days earlier, commenting on the ongoing violence in Kandhamal, the Catholic Archbishop Moras said he did not anticipate similar violence in Karnataka, as the 'people are peace-loving' and there had been no track record of anti-Christian violence in the area (*The Times of India*, 2008c).

Significant efforts were made in coastal Karnataka to establish links to the ongoing violence in Kandhamal, perhaps to magnify and escalate the 'Christian' threat here. Civil society groups in the state noted large saffron banners hailing Swami Saraswati popping up in Mangalore, the district's capital, following his murder (People's Union for Human Rights, et al., 2008, p. 53). The report commissioned by the Government of Karnataka tried to manufacture the spontaneity of the violence saying an 'impression is given that the Christians are responsible for killing some Hindu persons in Orissa and therefore they were justified in resorting to the violence against Christians' (Somasekhara, 2010, p. 4). However, here the violence appears to have been initiated and executed by Hindu nationalist groups. The same day, Bajrang Dal activists in Mangalore entered a walled one and a half acre of government land in Pachanady under the possession of St Lawrence Church, and vandalised the buildings and installed saffron flags on the property. Bajrang Dal leaders suggested that this was a sign of protest and solidarity with the Swami's killing. On August 29th, Christian schools in Karnataka, and around the country, remained closed as a sign of solidarity for the Kandhamal violence. This closure was called by the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India, the apex Protestant and Catholic bodies in the country. The Bajrang Dal raised a complaint about this with the state government. The Minster for Primary and Secondary Education responded by seeking written explanations as to why these minority institutions had acted without prior permission from the government (BBC, 2008).

Despite the investigation team from the National Minorities Commission not finding any evidence of 'conversions' (*The Times of India*, 2008), the spectre of Christian 'conversions' was used to justify this violence. However,

in this case, the emphasis was on the style of, or tactics, used in evangelism employed in the region, rather than the emphasis on 'conversion' of Dalits and Adivasis. The interim report of the controversial Somasekhara Committee, appointed by the BJP-led government, suggested that 'Christians are indulging in mischievous activities by commercializing inducements, etc. directly with their literature maligning the Hindu Religion, ancient systems, Hindu sacred beliefs, practices and sentiments' (Somasekhara, 2010, p. 5). The report further argued that 'Christian tenets and holy Bible and their wrong interpretations of Hindu religious people … this is mainly responsible for maligning Hindus by Christians religious people' (p. 5).

Hindu nationalist justifications made particular efforts to exploit the schism between mainline churches and more evangelical churches, along modalities of evangelism. The main target became the evangelical New Life Church and its alleged publication of *Sathyadarshini* (The Mirror of Truth) which supposedly denigrated Hindu deities. G.R. Suresh claimed New Life was not a church but an organisation seeking to proselytise (Desai, 2008). Similarly, RSS spokesperson Srikanth Joshi said, '[t]he aggressive proselytizing activities and blasphemous propaganda by evangelical organizations have hurt some people in parts of the state' (*The Times of India*, 2008d).

These sentiments were amplified by high-ranking members of the BJP-led state government. For example, Chief Minister Yediyurappa said, 'I came to know that the New Life Church is converting people. I requested Catholic Bishop to help us but he's helpless like us' (*Zee News*, 2008). National level BJP spokesperson Ravi Shankar Prasad objected to 'one Christian group distributing "abusive pamphlets" about Hindu gods in Karnataka' (*The Telegraph*, 2008). Notably, the final report of the Somasekhara Commission, too, emphasised that there were 'clear indications of conversions … by few organisations and self-styled or self-appointed Pastors' who were funded by 'foreign countries'. The report went on to say that this 'had damaged the reputation and holy image of the genuine and true Christians in sacred Indian Christianity and their known service and valuable contribution to the nation' (Somasekhara, 2011).

Significantly, Karnataka's BJP-led government further perpetuated the Christian 'threat' by initiating an anti-conversion law, modelled after the Orissa legislation. On February 20th, the following year, Suresh Kumar, Minister of State for Law, Justice and Human Rights, Parliamentary Affairs and Urban Development confirmed that the BJP was working on an anti-conversion bill because 'poor and uneducated Hindus are becoming victims for the false propaganda against Hinduism and our government is planning to enact a law' (Ekadshi, 2009). The Karnataka Law Commission (which was established by the BJP in 2008) concluded that legislation was needed to tackle the 'real, substantial and serious' threat of conversions (Government of Karnataka, Ministry of Law, 2013, p. 15).

Transvaluation of cultural violence to the National Level

Through the process of *transvaluation*, the justifications of violence from these two varied local contexts were compounded at the national level to elevate the Christian 'threat' ahead of the 2009 elections. A signal of this was the inclusion of 'religious conversions' for the first time in the BJP's 2009 election manifesto. The party called for a 'sustained and sincere inter-faith dialogue between leaders of the Hindu and Christian communities on all aspects of life, including the issue of religious conversions' (Bharatiya Janata Party, 2009, p. 40).

However, despite this innocuous-sounding appeal, other organisations aligned with the Hindutva movement had not softened their stance and continued to perpetuate the idea of a Christian 'threat'. In a resolution, the ABKM reasserted that 'conversion militates against the core ethos of our nationhood as understood through the true meaning of Secularism … Conversion implies superiority of certain religions over others. It is nothing but 'Religious Imperialism' (2008). The same resolution chastised the international condemnation of the violence in Orissa and Karnataka and denounced it 'as undesirable interference in the internal affairs of our country' (2008). Referring to the Kandhamal violence, the ABPS, in a resolution, reiterated that 'preferential treatment to a section of our society on the basis of religion is against our Constitution' demanding that 'all reservations, concessions and privileges based exclusively on religion must be abolished' (2009).

A significant aspect of these efforts was an attempt to exploit differences between Christian denominations. On October 9th, 2008, following a two-hour long meeting, L.K. Advani, the BJP leader of the opposition, made a joint statement with the archbishops of Delhi and Orissa condemning the Orissa violence, particularly the rape of a Catholic nun. However, the leaders collectively denounced 'forcible conversions' and calling for them to be stopped immediately (*The Economic Times*, 2008). This followed a statement by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India clarifying the Church's position on conversion saying that it 'respects other religions and holds what is true and holy in them as a precious heritage of humanity. Her teaching in this matter is clear' (Vithayathil, 2008). Similarly, the National Council of Churches in India, the apex organisation of Protestant churches said that the 'Church is against conversion. It is unethical and unchristian. We never believe nor recommend forceful conversions. It is plainly used to accuse Christians who are part of 'growing development' in this nation' (Samuel, 2009). Capitalising on these statements, the ABKM welcomed 'the initiative taken by some eminent leaders of *Bharatiya* Churches to condemn the conversion activities of certain fundamentalist evangelical groups' (2008, emphasis added).

Through this analysis, we can see the reciprocal and symbiotic nature of the justifications for the 2008 violence at the state and the national level,

centred around the Christian 'threat', through *transvaluation* and *parochialization*. While the 'threat' was deployed as the justification for the violence, we see how it was contextualised to suit two radically different local contexts, demonstrating the Hindutva movement's adroitness and flexibility. As such, this less-explored feature of the system of anti-Christian violence in the country is made more visible and nuances our understanding of the concept of cultural violence.

Conclusion

This article explored the Hindu nationalist movement's justifications for the 2008 anti-Christian violence, casting these as a form of cultural violence. As Galtung (1990) suggested, 'any aspect of a culture that can be used to *legitimize* violence in [either or both] its direct or structural form' (p. 291, emphasis added) should be considered to be cultural violence. It normalises other forms of violence making them 'look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong' (p. 291) to the public. This article traces the historical evolution of the movement's portrayal of India's Christians as a threat in multi-faceted ways, but consolidated in one word, 'conversions'. Particularly, the article showed how the relatively broad framing of the 'threat' was contextualised and appropriated in two vastly different contexts (Orissa and Karnataka) through the process of parochialization, and subsequently, collated into a more universal framing through transvaluation. From this case, we can see the adroitness of the Hindu nationalist movement as they adapted the Christian 'threat' to address the varying socio-political-economic contexts of the heterogenous Christian community across India. Further, the movement also exploited the existing schism between mainline Christian groups and evangelical and Pentecostal Christian groups in their justifications for the violence. By presenting India's Christians as a 'threat', the movement positioned itself as natural defenders against it, thus justifying their actions.

As the Christian 'threat' is perceived to be simultaneously internal and external, this case reveals the myriad of ways that Hindu nationalist anxieties could be activated and violence escalated, if needed. Standish (2015) points out, the instrumental use of cultural violence, saying it can be perpetuated 'not all the time, but when required' (p. 15). Notably, the article argues that the deployment of the Christian 'threat' nationally and in certain states was part of the effort to rally political support for the BJP ahead of the 2009 election. As such, this article sheds light on how the RSS and its affiliates 'do' politics at and between the state and national level.

Since 2008, the Hindu nationalist movement has grown significantly with scholars now describing India as an 'ethnic democracy' (Jaffrelot, 2021) or an 'ethnocracy' (Roy, 2024). These descriptors suggest how deeply Hindutva ideology has permeated into India's cultural, social and political lives.

Hindutva's anxieties about Christians have become embedded into India's political and legal system, forming a complex and dynamic system of anti-Christian violence consisting of varied forms of direct, cultural and structural violence (Selvaraj, 2024a; Selvaraj & Nielsen, 2025). This article produces a deeper understanding of this system by drawing attention to cultural violence, a 'hidden' and underexplored aspect of anti-Christian violence in India. Cultural violence can be a potent way of encouraging inaction and suppressing dissent; and thus, acts of direct and structural violence against India's Christians are projected as being essential to countering the Christian 'threat'.

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