

Briefing Note

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latest victim of organised forced
conversions in Sindh**

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March 2021

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Available from:

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IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England
Charity Registration Number 306371
Charitable Company Number 877338

13-year-old Hindu girl Kavita is the latest victim of organised forced conversions in Sindh

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We sit in the cosiness of our homes and write about the plight of two young parents and the trauma a 13-year-old child is undergoing. The child's only crime is to be born a Hindu in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Not just a Hindu but a poor Hindu and if that was not enough, this child was also committed to be being born a girl. A poor Hindu girl cannot live without being 'punished' in Pakistan.

This story is about Kavita Oad, a 13-year-old Hindu girl, a resident of Tangwani, a small and impoverished city in District Kashmore, Sindh, around 367 miles away from Karachi. Kavita has become the latest victim of the network of Mian Mithu, an infamous political and influential religious figure who abducts and then converts young Hindu girls to Islam.

On 8th March 2021, Kavita's poor parents filed a complaint about her kidnapping. According to Kavita's father, Takhat Oad, on 8th March, around five men, some carrying pistols, entered his house in Tangwani and '[dragged his daughter](#)' to a vehicle before running away. Her father had shared the names of the kidnappers and stated that one of the kidnappers, while dragging Kavita away, said to him that he will marry Kavita to his son, Mushtaq. The next day, as can be seen in this [video](#), Kavita is sitting on the floor, surrounded by hundreds of men who are singing a *maulood* (praise for God or the Prophet in the Sindhi language). In the video on the throne sits Mian Abdul Khaliq, the caretaker of *Khanqah-i-Aalia Qadria Bharchundi Sharif* shrine in Daharki, Sindh, a relative of Mian Abdul Haq (aka Mian Mithu), honouring himself with another prey.

On 10th March, Kavita appeared in the Ghotki court, roughly 160 kilometres from Tangwani, to record her statement. The court was surrounded by a religiously-motivated mob who were chanting slogans related to the giving or taking of lives for the 'honour' of Islam. While the charged followers of Mian Mithu were outside, Kavita confirmed to the judge that she is 18 years old and that her marriage to Mushtaq is therefore legal, while stating that she needs refuge from her parents as she has married against their will.

However, her parents contest that the age of Kavita is being misrepresented, that she is 13 years old. This school [certificate](#), seen by the authors, confirms that she was born on 12/12/2008, which validates Kavita's parents' claim. The reason why her age is being misquoted, a tactic Mian Mithu often employs, is to avoid the [Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act 2013](#) which criminalises underage (i.e. under 18) marriages. According to Section 4 of the law, anyone who conducts or performs the marriage of a child under 18 will be jailed for two years or fined, or both.

Knowing the consequences of forcibly marrying an under 18-year-old, the abductors of Kavita started pressurising her parents to withdraw their case. When her parents refused, violent

methods were used in an attempt to silence them. On 15th March, some ‘unknown’ people set their house [on fire](#). On the condition of anonymity, a local Hindu activist informed us that Kavita’s family were beaten, her younger brother injured and their valuables were stolen, despite the family already belonging to a financially marginalised class. The Hindu activist also shared that the perpetrators are freely roaming around, even though everyone knows that they were the ones that set the house on fire.

Aroon Prasad, Advocate [of the] High Court Sindh, who had travelled from Karachi to follow her case, informed us that he was initially scared to leave his car outside the court as Kavita was escorted by hundreds of men who seemed hostile. According to him, the court agreed to verify Kavita’s age and sent her to a ‘safe shelter’, called *Darul-ul-Aman*, for seven days until her age and medical reports were investigated. However, although Prasad also asked the court to add the clause of sexual assault and rape, as Kavita is a minor, the court did not consider this request.

Forced conversions in Pakistan are a complex issue. They are run in an organised way where the perpetrators, such as Mithu, maintain their influence over the police, judiciary, politicians and military generals. A trusted source also informed us that, since the local police are also being pressurised not to pursue the case, one of the police officers requested to shift jurisdiction of the case from Ghotki, which is a stronghold of Mian Mithu.

Since January 2021, at least [four Hindu girls](#) have been abducted and forcibly converted. According to one [report](#), between 2013 and 2019, around 162 Hindu and Christian girls have been converted in Pakistan. One might wonder why the perpetrators are still roaming free despite the obvious pattern of young Hindu girls being purposely abducted and then converted? We will briefly discuss some of the legal conundrums carefully negotiated by the perpetrators as well as considering the question of why Hindu girls are converting to one specific Islamic school.

One of the significant issues which courts do not consider is the role of manipulation in the conversion of Hindu girls. Hindus belong to a financially marginalised class; the majority of the [Dalits or Scheduled Caste](#) in Pakistan are Hindus who have been historically exploited through bonded labour and the absence of economic opportunities. The abductors running this organised process of forced conversion take advantage of these Hindu girls’ class background. They groom them, making fake promises such as financial benefits or that they will be able to keep their religion after their marriage.

This phenomenon was further explored in CREID’s recent publication on the situation of minority women in Pakistan, which documents how the [intersection of religious identity and poverty](#) increases the threat and possibility of persecution that women of religious minority backgrounds face. In particular, one author elucidates the modus operandi of abductors, for example, how they abduct Hindu girls and frame forced conversions as ‘consensual marriage’ through intimidation and threats to the girl and her family.

The courts are unable to challenge the framing of forced conversions as ‘consensual marriage’ despite knowing the role of coercion and the threats used by the perpetrators. Subsequently, it all

boils down to the testimony of an abducted girl who is [threatened](#) and surrounded by a hostile mob. The most these courts do is to send these girls to ‘safe shelters’ (*Darul-Aman*), which are not safe at all. Even in the case of Kavita, Mithu’s men were seen [meeting](#) her where she is supposed to be free from all pressure and intimidation. How can free testimony be given if the girl is constantly being threatened or under surveillance?

This brings us to our last point of discussion: why do Hindu girls convert to a specific school of Islamic thought? A senior Hindu lawyer reminded us during our discussion that if Hindus are close to any group, it would be Shias. In the Indo-Pak region, some Hindus [share](#) Shias’ commemoration of Muharram and perform some practices such as *matam* (mourning) and [ta’ziyeh](#) (expression of grief). In Sindh, in particular, both these religious groups observe each other’s occasions, for example Hindus observe Muharram and Shias’ [commemorate](#) Holi and Diwali in Mirpurkhas. So, if one accepts Mithu’s reasoning that Hindu girls are converting at their own will, then why, as the senior lawyer questioned, don’t they convert to Shia Islam, with whom they feel closer and share some religious practices?

Let us quote another incident to posit that, with few exceptions, these conversions do not usually happen with the consent of Hindu girls. It is a particular group that believe in [grooming Hindu and Christian girls](#) for various reasons such as religious/spiritual ‘reward’, rape and sex trafficking. Last year, in September 2020, CREID [campaigned](#) for the recovery of a 16-year-old Christian girl named Saneha Kinza Iqbal who was abducted on her way to church by a man in Faisalabad, Punjab. When investigated further, the man was found to belong to a persecuted Muslim minority sect. But interestingly, he took Saneha to a madrassah which was not of his sect. In fact, the madrassah belonged to the group that believes in the ethnic cleansing of the abductor’s sect. Despite these differences, Saneha’s abductor knew the specific group and place where he could get support. In Sindh, Mian Mithu is an institution that provides logistics and political support to those who wish to groom or convert Hindu and Christian girls.

One also needs to look at the overall hostile environment against minorities in Pakistan where some powerful individuals and groups have a set goal to enforce their version of religion or sect. For more than a decade now, Sindh has seen an influx of state-backed extremist groups which seem to be on a mission of [converting people](#) in the guise of ‘helping them’. Jamat-ud-Dawa’s controversial welfare wing, Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), had been working openly on relief aid in Hindu dominated areas of Sindh until 2019 when they started [disappearing due to the FATF-related crackdown](#).

To prevent forced conversions, there are three measures urgently required.

- 1. The first and the most basic is to at least accept and acknowledge that forced conversions are happening in Pakistan and that the perpetrators are conducting them with impunity.**

The Pakistan Foreign Office (FO) spokesperson [denied](#) the oft-cited unverified estimate that [1,000 Christian and Hindu girls](#) are converted every year and that ‘[swift actions](#)’ have been taken

against the involved persons. He further added that there is no evidence to the claim that there is institutional involvement in the forced conversions. However, one thing the FO failed to explain is why people like Mian Mithu and his cousins, whose names appear in most of the cases in Sindh as a [central figure](#) behind many forced conversions, are not behind bars?

2. Secondly, all provinces must pass legislation against forced conversion.

The lawmakers of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the party which claims to be liberal and supportive of minorities, [turned down](#) the Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill in 2019. In Punjab, where the age limit of marrying a girl is [16](#), there are reports that girls abducted in Sindh were married in [Punjab](#). Therefore, all provinces (including federal territories) must act unanimously to stop the crisis that Hindu and Christian girls are facing.

3. Lastly, the so-called safe shelters must actually be safe. They must be spaces free from fear and the involvement of the accused in forced conversion and marriage cases.

One Hindu activist added that the safe shelters are also not minority friendly and the Mian Mithu network can also approach girls inside them. Therefore, these safe shelters should not be in the same district as clearly, almost every institution is under the influence of this powerful network.

The story of Kavita does not end here. Her turmoil has just begun, like hundreds of others who have lost their childhood and hope to forced marriage and conversion. How many more will have to survive the same fate?

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