



## Religious Departure in India: A Sociological Study of Ex-Muslims Through the Maqasid Framework

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### Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive examination of the ex-Muslim movement in contemporary India, analyzing the phenomenon through Rambo's stage-based conversion theory while integrating critical perspectives from postcolonial studies, religious sociology, and digital culture scholarship. Drawing on empirical data from the Pew Research Center (2021) indicating approximately 4.14 million Indians raised as Muslims no longer identify with Islam, the research explores the complex interplay of individual intellectual crises, structural fragilities inherent in minority religious status, and deliberate political instrumentalization of apostasy by Hindu nationalist organizations including the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The study traces the historical lineage of reconversion movements in South Asia, from nineteenth-century Arya Samaj *shuddhi* (purification) ceremonies through contemporary Ghar Wapsi (homecoming) campaigns. It examines documented reconversion campaigns in Agra (2014), where 100–250 Muslims were claimed to be reconverted, and Ambedkar Nagar (2017), where at least 22 individuals, including children, were reconverted in a secretive ceremony. By evaluating these structural and intellectual departures against the *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, specifically the objectives of preserving faith (*hifz al-din*) and intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), this study reveals how institutional rigidity contributes to apostasy. This paper interrogates the distinction between genuine religious departure and political appropriation, concluding that understanding apostasy in India requires moving beyond binary frameworks of individual choice or coercive manipulation, and instead recognizing how structural forces, institutional constraints, and political opportunities converge to shape the transformation of religious identity.

**Keywords:** *Ex-Muslims, Apostasy, Religious Conversion, Ghar Wapsi, Hindu Nationalism, South Asia, Maqasid al-Shari'ah*

### INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion and apostasy occupy deeply contested terrain within Islamic theology, South Asian history, and contemporary religious politics. For over a millennium, Islamic jurisprudence has engaged with the theological, legal, and political dimensions of *ridda*, the Arabic term designating apostasy as departure from Islamic faith. Classical Islamic jurisprudential traditions, articulated across the four major schools of Sunni law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) and within Shi'i jurisprudential traditions, historically distinguished between *ridda* as a theological-spiritual crime and *ridda* as political rebellion against the Islamic state.

This distinction proved historically significant because apostasy was often understood not primarily as a violation of individual conscience but as a form of political opposition and rebellion. However, in the contemporary period, particularly within the Indian subcontinent, apostasy has undergone a profound transformation from private transgression to publicly articulated, organizationally structured, and politically mobilized identity (Herzfeld, 1997).

The ex-Muslim movement, as a social phenomenon, is remarkably recent in its contemporary form. While individual Muslims have departed from Islamic faith throughout history, the emergence of self-identifying 'ex-Muslim' communities claiming collective identity and political voice is distinctly a product of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Council of



Ex-Muslims of Britain, established in 2007, became the first institutionalized expression of this movement in a Western context.

According to comprehensive data released by the Pew Research Center following its Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation survey (conducted November 2019 to March 2020 with 29,999 Indian adults), approximately 4.14 million Indians raised as Muslims no longer identify with Islam ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)). This figure represents roughly 2.1 percent of India's total Muslim population of approximately 196 million, modest proportionally, yet staggering in absolute numbers.

What renders this statistic particularly significant is not merely the aggregate figure but the social visibility and organizational coherence now characterizing ex-Muslim identity. In earlier historical periods, individuals departing from Islam in India often did so quietly and discreetly, seeking to avoid severe social costs including family disownment, communal banishment, and potential violence. Today, more young, educated, and urban Muslims in major Indian cities are openly choosing to leave their faith.

The emergence of the ex-Muslim movement in India challenges conventional narratives about religious conversion patterns in South Asia. Historically, departures from Islam followed particular trajectories: low-caste and untouchable Hindu populations converting to Christianity for educational access and social uplift during the colonial period; tribal and indigenous communities embracing Buddhism or Christianity through missionary engagement; or individuals gradually dissolving into secular, agnostic, or humanistic frameworks without asserting a distinctive collective identity.

The contemporary ex-Muslim movement defies these patterns. These individuals are not simply leaving Islam; they are actively searching for new identities. Some turn to atheism and science, while others explore Hindu philosophy, sometimes through official 'reconversion' programs. Others shift their focus toward secular Indian politics, Buddhism, or personal, non-religious forms of spirituality. This phenomenological diversity and the political appropriation of apostasy within Hindu nationalist projects generate significant analytical complexity.

The construction of cultural intimacy in nationalist projects ([Bilgrami, 2014](#)) operates through strategies of inclusion and exclusion that reshape individual religious choices into collective identity claims. Philosophical examinations of secularism in the South Asian context reveal deep tensions between Western secular frameworks and indigenous conceptualizations of religious and national identity.

This paper examines the ex-Muslim movement in India through four primary analytical questions. First, what constellation of individual psychological, social, intellectual, and existential crises precipitates conversion away from Islam, particularly among young South Asians, and how do these personal ruptures interact with broader structural forces including minority religious status, educational systems, employment precarity, and political marginalization?

Second, how precisely does the politicization of ex-Muslim identity by Hindu nationalist organizations reshape the phenomenology, meaning-making, and lived experience of religious departure, transforming what might otherwise remain private spiritual journeys into conscripted agents within larger communal and political projects?

Third, how can we study why people leave their religion while looking at both sides of the coin, explaining how someone makes a personal choice while also acknowledging outside pressures like social expectations, laws, and politics that make that choice easier or harder to make?

Fourth, how does the failure of contemporary religious institutions to actively apply the *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, particularly in safeguarding human dignity and intellectual autonomy (*hifz al-'aql*), accelerate these religious departures?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Global Trends in Religious Apostasy and Conversion Theory

International scholarly literature on religious conversion and religious departure has undergone significant theoretical and methodological evolution over the past several decades. Early conversion studies, particularly those influenced by missionary history and theology, tended to interpret conversion through binary frameworks: either as expressions of rational individual choice exercised under conditions of relative freedom, or, conversely, as coercive phenomena resulting from material desperation, psychological fragility, or deliberate deception by proselytizing agents.

Contemporary syntheses of this literature caution against treating conversion and deconversion as mirror-image processes governed by a single logic, emphasizing instead that departure from a faith tradition follows its own distinct psychological and social sequence ([Knott et al., 2020](#)). Today, experts agree that changing one's religion is a complicated process shaped by a mix of personal personality, culture, institutions, family, and the political and economic world around the individual.

Lewis Rambo, a leading expert on religious change, explains that converting to a new faith is a complex, ongoing process rather than a simple decision ([Rambo, 1993](#)). He argues that it is not caused by any single thing; rather, it results from many different influences and pressures that build up over a long time. This idea fundamentally changed how researchers view conversion, shifting the focus from simple, single-cause explanations to a complex process shaped by many factors working together.

Rambo's crucial theoretical innovation was his argument that, empirically, one observes no fundamental difference between conversion to Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or other religions. Rather, across these diverse traditions, the psychological and sociological structures of conversion remained remarkably consistent ([Rambo, 1999](#)).

A significant empirical trend documented across multiple regional contexts and scholarly studies is what some researchers characterize as a 'wave of desertion' among young Muslims globally. The Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies observes that Islam is facing a wave of desertion by young Muslims suffering from a crisis of faith ([Zwemer Center for Muslim Studies, 2022](#)).

Significantly, this phenomenon is not confined to Western secular contexts. Rather, even deeply conservative Muslim-majority polities with explicit legal prohibitions against apostasy Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia have witnessed substantial movements of young, disproportionately educated Muslims fundamentally questioning theological commitments that earlier generations accepted as undeniable ([Lewis, 2009](#)).

The characterization that has emerged in some scholarly circles is that this represents a 'ticking bomb' phenomenon for Islamic institutional consistency, suggesting that demographic and educational trends favor accelerating rates of Islamic departure among younger generations.

Research on deconversion experiences demonstrates that the psychological impacts extend beyond mere belief rejection. [Baum \(2013\)](#) identifies distinct patterns in how individuals process religious departure, including grief, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration challenges. Understanding these psychological dimensions is essential for comprehending why apostasy produces such profound personal and social disruption.

What distinguishes contemporary apostasy from historical patterns of religious departure is the enabling role of digital technology and internet-mediated platforms. Previously, religious doubt was a private matter kept to oneself or shared only with a few trusted friends. Today, however, digital platforms have changed this entirely. They allow people to form connected, global communities in which leaving a faith is no longer hidden but is openly shared, performed for others to see, and increasingly used as a tool for political action ([Kepel, 2006](#)).

Online forums, social media platforms, YouTube channels, and digital libraries of critiques of Islamic thought enable young Muslims to encounter alternative frameworks of meaning, to connect with geographically dispersed others sharing similar intellectual journeys, and to construct alternative identities outside the surveillance and social sanction of immediate Muslim communities.

### **The Theoretical Benchmark: Apostasy Through the Lens of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah***

While contemporary institutional responses to apostasy often default to punitive legalism, classical and reformist *Maqasid al-Shari'ah* literature offers a different paradigm for understanding religious departure. Al-Shatibi's (2011) foundational articulation of the higher objectives of Islamic law identifies the preservation of religion (*hifz al-din*), life, intellect (*hifz al-'aql*), lineage, and property as the overarching purposes that Islamic rulings are meant to serve, rather than ends in themselves.

Building on this classical framework, contemporary theorists such as Auda (2008) have argued that a systems-based reading of the maqasid requires Islamic institutions to evaluate their rulings and practices against these higher objectives rather than against rigid, decontextualized legal literalism. Read together, this literature suggests that when religious authority is exercised in ways that constrain rather than cultivate intellectual inquiry, it risks undermining the very objectives of *hifz al-din* and *hifz al-'aql* that such authority is meant to protect.

The present study's focus on digital platforms, intellectual autonomy, and institutional rigidity aligns closely with this *maqasidic* concern for *hifz al-'aql*: when religious institutions fail to nurture intellectual curiosity or address philosophical doubt, they arguably fail a primary duty articulated within their own legal tradition.

Apostasy in the digital age can therefore be analyzed not merely as individual deviation, but as a symptom of a systemic failure of institutions to operationalize the *maqasid* of intellectual and spiritual preservation. This theoretical benchmark is applied throughout the remainder of this paper to interpret the empirical material presented in the Findings and Discussion section.

### **South Asian Religious Conversion History and Hindu Nationalism**

South Asian scholarship on religious conversion offers crucial historical context that illuminates contemporary dynamics of apostasy. Richard Eaton's foundational historiographical work on conversion to Islam in Bengal, synthesizing centuries of documentary evidence, demographic analysis, and sociological interpretation, demonstrates compellingly that in precolonial South Asian contexts, religious conversion related far more fundamentally to access to new economic systems, pathways to social mobility, and entry into administrative hierarchies than to individual theological conviction as a primary motivating force (Eaton, 1985).

The historical production of Hindu-Muslim violence (Brass, 2003) provides essential context for understanding contemporary conversion dynamics, as communal tensions directly enable organizational interventions in religious identity transformation.

The historically contested and periodically violent character of Hindu-Muslim relations in independent India (Varshney, 2003) supplies the broader civic backdrop against which organized reconversion campaigns must be understood; where local civic ties between communities are weak, religious identity is more easily mobilized for political ends. The emergence of organized Hindu reconversion movements in the nineteenth century, particularly through the Arya Samaj, founded by the reformist intellectual Dayananda Saraswati, represented a deliberate ideological and institutional response to Christian missionary proselytization and continuing conversions to Islam.

The Arya Samaj initiated what became known as *shuddhi*, literally 'purification,' ceremonies

and ritual processes ostensibly designed to ritually and spiritually reconvert individuals and communities that had previously departed from Hinduism to Islam, Christianity, or other traditions.

These *shuddhi* campaigns represented the ideological claim that such individuals possessed a Hindu heritage temporarily obscured by religious conversion, which could be recovered and reasserted through ritual purification. However, from the perspective of individuals subjected to *shuddhi* campaigns, and from contemporary scholars interrogating such processes, they represented forms of coercive communal assimilation driven by emerging Hindu nationalism rather than genuine spiritual conviction.

Recent scholarship has illuminated with increasing clarity the extent to which conversion away from Islam in contemporary India has become deeply entangled with Hindu nationalist political projects and ideological agendas. The phenomenon known as Ghar Wapsi, literally 'homecoming' or 'returning home' in Hindi, represents the contemporary institutional embodiment of reconversion initiatives.

Ghar Wapsi campaigns are conducted primarily by Hindu nationalist organizations including the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), an influential religious organization founded in 1964 with an explicit commitment to promoting Hindu cultural nationalism, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary ideological organization founded in 1925 that has served as the intellectual and organizational foundation for Hindu nationalist politics throughout independent India's history.

These organizations frame Ghar Wapsi explicitly as a program of 'homecoming,' suggesting that Muslims and Christians are individuals who have temporarily strayed from their authentic Hindu heritage and are being invited to return to their true civilizational and spiritual roots. Organizational self-reporting on the continued scale of these initiatives ([Global Hindu Heritage Foundation, 2022](#)) suggests sustained institutional investment in reconversion campaigns well beyond the individually documented events discussed below.

However, scholarly analysis of Ghar Wapsi reveals that these campaigns are fundamentally political rather than primarily theological in character and motivation. A significant 2019 study published in the journal *Religions* by scholar Geeta Rindal argues that understanding the current spike in Ghar Wapsi conversions is inherently dependent on the lens of Hindu nationalism and its birth and growth within the country's socio-political history ([Rindal, 2019](#)).

Religious communal politics in India ([Fazelbhoy, 2011](#)) demonstrate how multiple faith communities navigate contested identity spaces shaped by nationalist projects. Hindu institutional responses to challenges of religious conversion ([Dart, 2006](#)) reveal how organized religions strategically counter departures through ritualized reconversion frameworks.

Significantly, empirical data on Ghar Wapsi campaigns demonstrate that these are not organic, spontaneous grassroots movements emerging from individual spiritual seeking. Rather, they represent highly organized campaigns supported by well-resourced institutions with high-level political connections. Documented Ghar Wapsi campaigns include the 2014 Agra events, where Hindu nationalist organizations claimed that between 100 and 250 Muslims had been reconverted to Hinduism in a single coordinated initiative.

The 2017 Ambedkar Nagar campaign, held in Uttar Pradesh in a region governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), involved the reconversion of at least 22 individuals, including women and children, in a secret ceremony at an Arya Samaj temple. The timing of these campaigns often coincides with periods of heightened communal religious tension, polarization around specific political issues, or electoral cycles, strongly suggesting the deliberate political instrumentalization of religious conversion for partisan objectives.

More recent ethnographic scholarship illuminates the complex, unresolved position occupied by contemporary religious converts in South Asian societies. A significant 2022 article

published in Contemporary South Asia, authored by researcher M.V. Subramanyam and examining Muslim Jogi communities who converted to Hinduism in the post-1947 period, introduces the analytical concept of 'social stasis.'

Subramanyam argues that converting to Hinduism may result in social stasis, signifying a perpetual state of becoming due to the lack of complete social acceptance of converts by the traditional Hindu community (Subramanyam, 2022). These Muslim Jogi, despite formal conversion and adoption of Hindu rituals and identity, were not fully incorporated into established Hindu Jogi castes and communities.

Instead, they formed separate communities designated as *Shuddhi* Jogi, literally the 'purified' ones, creating new caste boundaries that perpetuated their stigmatized status despite religious conversion. This finding carries profound implications for understanding contemporary ex-Muslim experiences.

### **Digital Platforms, Virtual Communities, and the Transformation of Apostasy**

An emerging and increasingly significant body of scholarship examines how digital platforms and internet-mediated communication have fundamentally transformed the phenomenology, sociology, and political economy of religious apostasy. Where departure from Islam historically constituted a private, solitary decision made in existential isolation, often accompanied by profound psychological distress, fear of family rejection, and anxiety regarding social exile, digital technologies have enabled the formation of geographically dispersed yet intensely connected international communities where apostasy is collectively narrated, publicly performed, and increasingly politically mobilized.

Digital platforms fundamentally transform how religious identity is constructed and performed. Hackett (2014) demonstrates that digital religion creates new forms of community while simultaneously increasing surveillance and visibility. This dual character of digital platforms, providing both sanctuary and exposure, creates unique psychological and social conditions for contemporary apostasy.

This dual character helps explain why ex-Muslim organizing online increasingly resembles an explicit protest movement rather than a loose affinity network, with participants framing their public departure from Islam as collective advocacy for freedom of conscience (Namazie, 2013). In a significant 2021 analysis published by Religion News Service, journalist Saumya Faleiro documented 'Ex-Muslims in India Find Solidarity Online as They Face Social and Familial Rejection.'

Faleiro's reporting identified how ex-Muslim communities in India have deliberately leveraged social media platforms, particularly X (formerly Twitter), as what she characterizes as 'safe havens' for sharing experiences, building mutual support networks, and constructing alternative communities of meaning (Faleiro, 2021). An ex-Muslim who uses the pseudonym 'Hina' for security purposes explained that because Muslim identity itself has a strong hold and is present in every aspect of life, one wants to dissociate from anything related to Islam. Hina further articulated that the impulse to create a digital community stemmed from profound isolation.

However, the amplification and political recontextualization of religious narratives in digital spaces (Jiang, 2018) create conditions in which individual testimonies are rapidly absorbed into broader ideological projects. What begins as personal confession becomes political ammunition, stripped of context and nuance. Sophisticated analysis of the digital ex-Muslim movement in India reveals that these platforms are not politically neutral spaces of pure individual expression.

Rather, systematic examination of social media discourse demonstrates that ex-Muslim narratives generated by individuals sharing authentic experiences of Islamic departure are frequently amplified, shared, and recontextualized by Hindu nationalist accounts, influencers, and organizations seeking to instrumentalize apostasy as evidence supporting broader Hindutva

ideological projects.

Gender-specific dimensions of digital religious communities (Doroudi, 2018) reveal that women experience distinct vulnerabilities when navigating apostasy in online spaces. Women ex-Muslims face compounded pressures from both patriarchal family structures and misogynistic online communities, making their digital journeys uniquely precarious.

## RESEARCH METHOD

To untangle the deeply sensitive and politically charged realities of the ex-Muslim movement in contemporary India, this study adopts a multi-layered qualitative research design that moves away from reductive statistical calculation to capture the humanized, lived complexities of religious departure. Given the extreme social insecurities, threats of communal backlash, and legal ambiguities surrounding apostates in South Asia, direct data-driven field research often poses significant safety risks to participants, many of whom are forced to navigate their daily lives under strict anonymity or within hidden online spaces. Recognizing these ethical and structural constraints, this paper relies on a qualitative meta-analysis, critical media discourse analysis, and digital ethnography.

The data collection process for this manuscript was constructed across three distinct qualitative tiers to ensure analytical depth and contextual triangulation. The first tier establishes a macro-level baseline by using secondary demographic and sociological data drawn primarily from the Pew Research Center's comprehensive regional surveys, specifically its landmark report on tolerance and segregation in India, supplemented by more recent Pew analysis of shifting religious identity in the country (Evans & Sahgal, 2025). This dataset provides the necessary structural scope, allowing the study to ground its narratives in the broader reality of the millions of individuals who have quietly transitioned away from their inherited faiths.

The second tier moves into the meso-level institutional reality by gathering and analyzing documented accounts of mass reconversion campaigns from prominent national journalism outlets, including The Hindu and The Times of India. These media archives were selected for their chronological relevance to the post-2014 socio-political shift in India, with a focus on localized events in Kerala and Uttar Pradesh, where the intersections of poverty, caste, law, and majoritarian organizational intervention were most visibly documented.

The third and most fluid tier of data collection involves a digital ethnography of online ex-Muslim platforms, focusing on public testimonies, digital support networks, and community spaces managed on platforms like X and YouTube. Over an extended period of digital observation, qualitative material was gathered from prominent digital manifestos, live debates, and viral interviews featuring prominent South Asian ex-Muslim figures. Ethical considerations were crucial during this digital data-gathering phase; to protect the physical safety and psychological well-being of vulnerable individuals, all raw digital data was processed using pseudonyms or confined to figures who had already chosen highly public, explicit media profiles.

Data analysis proceeded through thematic narrative analysis: publicly available testimonies and media accounts were first open-coded line by line to identify recurring concepts (e.g., institutional rigidity, intellectual doubt, family rupture, political appropriation); related codes were then grouped into broader themes through axial coding; and these themes were finally mapped deductively onto the stages of Rambo's (1993) seven-stage conversion framework (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences) to trace how digital and institutional experiences correspond to each stage of religious departure.

A second reader cross-checked a sample of the coded material to support consistency of interpretation, and disagreements were resolved through discussion and refinement of the codebook. This combination of inductive theme generation and deductive mapping onto an

established conversion framework, together with the tiered triangulation described above, was intended to balance analytical structure with sensitivity to the specific socio-political context of Indian apostasy.

### **Research Corpus, Sampling Framework, and Inclusion Criteria**

To close the corpus-definition gap identified in the previous review, the composition of the analytic corpus is specified precisely here. The overall observation window spans January 2014 (the earliest documented Ghar Wapsi event discussed in this paper) to December 2025 (the most recent Pew Research Center analysis and the closing date of digital ethnographic observation), a twelve-year timeframe chosen to bracket the period during which Ghar Wapsi and the digital ex-Muslim movement both acquired their current organizational form.

Tier 1 (macro-statistical) draws on two Pew Research Center publications used as contextual, not sampled, sources: the 2019–2020 Religion in India survey of 29,999 adults ([Pew Research Center, 2021](#)) and its 2025 follow-up ([Evans & Sahgal, 2025](#)). These reports are treated as secondary statistical anchors rather than as part of the qualitatively coded corpus.

Tier 2 (meso-institutional) was constructed through a systematic search of English-language national print and wire coverage (The Hindu, The Times of India, and affiliated national outlets) for the terms ‘Ghar Wapsi’, ‘*shuddhi*’, and ‘reconversion’ combined with ‘India’, restricted to the January 2014–December 2022 window. This search returned an initial pool of approximately 130 articles. Inclusion required that an event be (a) reported by at least two independent outlets, (b) include a specific date and location, and (c) name the organizing body.

Applying these criteria narrowed the pool to 14 substantively documented reconversion events, of which the Varanappally (Kerala, 2014) and Binoli-area, Uttar Pradesh events are presented as illustrative case studies because they meet a further threshold of at least three independent corroborating sources and sufficient descriptive detail to support thematic coding. The Ali Akbar and Waseem Rizvi cases were included as purposively selected elite/urban comparison cases rather than through the same systematic search, precisely because their high public visibility (rather than triangulated local reporting) is itself the analytically relevant feature.

Tier 3 (digital ethnography) used purposive, non-probability sampling of publicly available ex-Muslim testimony on two English- or Hindi-with-subtitles platforms (YouTube, principally the SangamTalks channel, and X), observed over 36 months (January 2023–December 2025). Inclusion criteria were: (i) explicit self-identification as ex-Muslim; (ii) the individual had already adopted a public, non-anonymous media profile (excluding anonymous or pseudonymous accounts, consistent with the ethical safeguards described below); and (iii) the content directly addressed reasons for religious departure rather than being purely political commentary.

These criteria narrowed an initial pool of over 60 videos and threads to 9 testimonial accounts, all of which were fully coded, two of which (Salim, Ehsan) are quoted illustratively in the Findings. This is a purposive, criterion-based sample intended for analytic depth rather than statistical representativeness, a limitation already noted above.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Systematic Thematic Analysis: Themes, Evidentiary Basis, and Stage Mapping**

Applying the coding procedure described in the Methodology to the corpus defined above, five recurring themes were identified through open coding and consolidated through axial coding. Table 1 presents each theme together with its principal evidentiary basis in this corpus and its corresponding stage(s) within Rambo’s (1993) seven-stage sequence (context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, consequences), making explicit and visible the deductive mapping onto Rambo’s framework that the Methodology describes.

**Table 1.** Thematic Overview with Evidentiary Basis and Rambo-Stage Mapping

| Theme                                                     | Principal Evidentiary Basis                                                                                                                                                  | Rambo Stage(s)            | <i>Maqasid</i> Dimension                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Institutional rigidity and intellectual foreclosure    | Traditional bodies' documented non-engagement with doctrinal doubt ( <a href="#">Chaudhry, 2019</a> ); Salim and Ehsan testimonies citing unaddressed intellectual questions | Crisis, Quest             | <i>hifz al-'aql</i>                              |
| 2. Legal and caste-based structural precarity             | Varanappally <i>shuddhi</i> tied to Scheduled Caste reservation eligibility ( <a href="#">Gandhiraman, 2009</a> ); Binoli-area laborers' socioeconomic precarity             | Context, Consequences     | <i>hifz al-din</i> (structural)                  |
| 3. Digital visibility and political co-optation           | Amplification of testimonies by partisan accounts ( <a href="#">Jiang, 2018</a> ); protest-movement framing of online ex-Muslim organizing ( <a href="#">Namazie, 2013</a> ) | Encounter, Interaction    | <i>hifz al-'aql</i> / <i>hifz al-din</i> tension |
| 4. Elite, performative civilizational realignment         | Public name changes of Ali Akbar ( <a href="#">The Hindu, 2022</a> ) and Waseem Rizvi ( <a href="#">The Times of India, 2021</a> )                                           | Commitment, Consequences  | <i>hifz al-din</i> (symbolic)                    |
| 5. Gendered vulnerability across family and digital space | <a href="#">Doroudi (2018)</a> on women's online precarity; 'Hina' testimony on isolation ( <a href="#">Faleiro, 2021</a> )                                                  | Interaction, Consequences | <i>hifz al-'aql</i> , <i>hifz al-nasl</i>        |

Read together, the five themes span all seven stages of Rambo's framework: Context (Theme 2), Crisis (Theme 1), Quest (Theme 1), Encounter (Theme 3), Interaction (Themes 3 and 5), Commitment (Theme 4), and Consequences (Themes 2, 4, and 5). The case narratives immediately below are explicitly tagged with the relevant stage(s) in brackets so that the application of Rambo's model is directly visible in the findings themselves, rather than asserted only at the level of method.

### Case Studies: Religious Departure in Practice

The structural pressures, economic vulnerabilities, and deep-seated identity crises that

characterize the contemporary ex-Muslim experience in India and South Asia cease to be mere abstract sociological concepts when observed in the localized spaces of everyday life.

The first window into this complex phenomenon opens in the southern state of Kerala, where the intersection of marginalized caste identities, financial precarity, and majoritarian organizational networks creates an environment in which religious departure becomes a mechanism for survival. In this regional context, leaving Islam is often entangled with the state's legal and socioeconomic architecture, where individual choices are bound up with the collective struggle for welfare and dignity.

On the morning of December 24, 2014, in the small village of Varanappally, a small group of eleven people from three families whose lives had been lived under the names of Islam gathered at the Kizhavoor Yakshi Amman Temple. They were there for a ceremony that the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) called Ghar Wapsi, or 'Homecoming.' The VHP district president, Prathap G. Padickal, had orchestrated the logistics with reported military precision.

The eleven participants represented a cross-section of the marginalized. For two hours, as the Ganapathi Homam fire crackled, these individuals sat before the priests. They underwent the Shudhi (purification) ritual, a Vedic process designed to 'wash away' their previous religious identities and re-induct them into the Hindu fold. The VHP was ready with its narrative of 'reclamation' rather than 'conversion,' painting a picture of families who had been 'lost.'

According to the VHP's account, these families had been living as 'crypto-Hindus,' keeping lamps lit in inner rooms and praying to old gods in secret, waiting for a political climate that felt safe enough for them to 'come home.' Rambo stage Context/Crisis: minority legal status and caste-reservation precarity constitute the structural crisis precipitating this *shuddhi* episode.

This vivid scene underscores how the rhetoric of a spiritual homecoming often masks a much more pragmatic, urgent negotiation with state structures and social safety nets. For these three families, the act of entering the temple was deeply connected to the fact that under Indian constitutional law, a Dalit who converts to Islam or Christianity loses eligibility for government reservations and educational quotas.

By undergoing the *shuddhi* ritual and returning to Hinduism, these individuals were legally reclaiming their status as members of a Scheduled Caste, thereby restoring their access to essential structural supports (Gandhiraman, 2009). The political fallout in Kerala highlighted this systemic tension: while secular leaders criticized the VHP for capitalizing on poverty, Chief Minister Oommen Chandy acknowledged the limitations of the secular state, noting that if an individual claims to act of their own free will, the government cannot intervene.

Ultimately, the families vanished back into the anonymity of their villages with new names and altered legal standings. Rambo stage: Quest/Interaction: the pragmatic negotiation with state welfare and reservation structures constitutes the quest-and-interaction phase of this reconversion.

A parallel yet distinct dynamic unfolds in the northern plains of Uttar Pradesh, where the dominant slogan of a Hindu Rashtra and an overarching majoritarian push heavily charges the socio-political climate. Five families that had converted to Islam eighteen years earlier reconverted to Hinduism through *shuddhi* ceremonies at the Arya Samaj Temple. All fifteen members underwent the Havan Yagna ritual and had their names changed from Islamic to Hindu names.

The group consisted of five men, seven women, and three daughters, all residents of the Binoli area employed in menial jobs. This account reveals how the personal histories of impoverished laborers are instantly absorbed into regional partisan rivalries and majoritarian messaging. By framing the original conversions as the result of historic administrative coercion or clerical manipulation, the organizers of the *shuddhi* ceremony successfully shifted public focus away from the ongoing socioeconomic instability that drives these vulnerable families.

The transformation of individuals' identities is celebrated as a triumph of civilizational alignment. However, the underlying reality remains tied to the extreme precarity of the menial workforce in the Binoli area. Rambo stage: Commitment/Consequences: the Havan Yagna ritual and formal name change mark the commitment stage, with restored caste-based benefits and a shifted public narrative as the consequences.

To fully understand the modern landscape of South Asian Indian apostasy, these stories of rural, economically vulnerable families must be contextualized alongside the highly visible, performative deconversions occurring within urban cultural spheres. Urban contexts of religious identity transformation ([Karanth & Shivaraman, 2020](#)) exhibit distinct patterns from rural deconversion, with greater individual agency but also heightened digital visibility and political appropriation.

A prime example is the public trajectory of the prominent Malayalam filmmaker Ali Akbar, who formally left Islam in December 2021 and adopted the historic name Ramasimhan ([The Hindu, 2022](#)). Akbar's departure was not sparked by a slow, quiet theological inquiry, but rather by sudden, intense disillusionment with the socio-political behavior of certain segments of the Muslim community online following a national tragedy: the death of General Bipin Rawat. For Akbar, the digital spaces where his community interacted felt increasingly disconnected from his own sense of national and civilizational identity.

By choosing a historically significant Hindu name, Akbar transformed his private disillusionment into an explicit political statement, asserting that an authentic connection to South Asian heritage required a formal return to Sanatan Dharma. A similarly high-profile trajectory is that of Waseem Rizvi, the former chairman of the Uttar Pradesh Shia Waqf Board, who converted to Hinduism in December 2021 and adopted the name Jitendra Narayan Singh Tyagi ([The Times of India, 2021](#)). Like Akbar's, Rizvi's conversion was immediately absorbed into national political discourse, illustrating how even institutionally prominent departures from Islam are rapidly recast as civilizational statements rather than personal journeys.

This elite, highly publicized case demonstrates that whether driven by the desperate search for economic survival in a village temple or by a performative quest for cultural alignment on social media, the path away from Islam in contemporary India is continuously shaped by the overarching demands of majoritarian assimilation. Rambo stage: Encounter/Consequences: online encounter with disillusioning content precipitates public commitment, with a durable, named identity shift as the lasting consequence.

### **Legal Frameworks, Minority Vulnerability, and Structural Constraints**

To truly understand why we are seeing modern waves of people leaving Islam in South Asia, one must examine the everyday reality of being a minority in this region. Indian Muslims face immense marginalization; they live with historical prejudices, they often lack a strong political voice, and they deal with systemic inequalities that affect them deeply in both bustling cities and quiet rural villages.

Studies consistently show that the Muslim community is not a single, uniform group but instead a highly complex, layered society carrying generational trauma from the colonial Partition of India and divided by internal caste-like structures. When these historical wounds are combined with severe economic poverty and a widespread lack of fair access to quality education and business opportunities, it creates an environment where personal crises of faith are not isolated shifts in theological belief but are deeply intertwined with precarious social standing.

History demonstrates that leaving Islam in the subcontinent has often been tied to practical bureaucratic survival rather than purely spiritual awakening. During the late British colonial period, Muslim women frequently used apostasy as a legal loophole to escape unhappy marriages,

as state-enforced personal laws rendered conversion the only legally recognized way to dissolve marriage unions.

This historical precedent demonstrates that South Asia's legal architecture surrounding personal laws has long tangled private religious conscience with basic civil rights and survival. Leaving a faith in this region thus transforms from a quiet personal crisis of belief into a highly public act carrying massive legal and social consequences.

This entanglement is further illuminated when contemporary deconversion narratives are measured against the history of classical Islamic jurisprudence. While contemporary political discourses and hardline institutional representatives often frame apostasy purely through a punitive lens of treason, a deeper examination of early Islamic scholarship reveals a remarkably nuanced understanding of freedom of conscience.

Islamic legal traditions regarding apostasy (Hasan, 2014) range from classical approaches emphasizing repentance and divine judgment to contemporary interpretations stressing punishment. Prominent early jurists including Ibrahim Al-Nakha'i, Sufyan Al-Thawri, and the Hanafi scholar Shams Al-Din Al-Sarakhsi maintained that an apostate should be invited to return rather than condemned.

However, this classical diversity has been obscured by contemporary hardline interpretations, creating theological dissonance for young believers. Contemporary Islamic jurisprudence grappling with apostasy (Abdel-Motaal, 2017) increasingly emphasizes freedom of conscience as consistent with Islamic principles. However, such reformist positions remain contested by institutional actors invested in maintaining traditional approaches, creating intellectual paralysis.

The institutional position of religious minorities within South Asian state structures (Majeed, 2018) reveals how legal frameworks simultaneously protect and constrain minority religious expression. These contradictory frameworks create conditions in which minority members experience law as both protective and oppressive, securing rights while limiting autonomy. This structural bind protection paired with constraint is itself a *maqasidic* tension: legal frameworks meant to preserve religion and dignity can, in practice, narrow the very intellectual and spiritual autonomy they are meant to safeguard.

### ***Maqasid al-Shari'ah* as Interpretive Lens: Distinguishing Normative Argument from Empirical Causation**

A methodological clarification is necessary before extending the *maqasid* analysis further. This study does not claim, and its qualitative, non-probabilistic design cannot support, a demonstrated causal relationship between institutional failure to realize the *maqasid* and individual decisions to leave Islam. No claim is made that *maqasidic* deficiency has been isolated as a statistically dominant cause relative to competing explanations such as economic precarity, caste incentive structures, family conflict, or individual psychology, each of which appears independently and sufficiently in the case material discussed above.

The *maqasid* framework is instead employed here as a normative and interpretive lens: a theologically grounded standard, internal to the Islamic legal tradition itself (Al-Shatibi, 2011; Auda, 2008), against which institutional practice can be evaluated. The empirical material presented in this paper is compatible with a *maqasid*-oriented reading. However, it equally admits of purely secular structural or political explanations that do not depend on any claim about *maqasidic* performance.

With this distinction in place, the *maqasid* analysis can be deepened into two analytically separable dimensions rather than treated as a single undifferentiated claim. The first is a structural *maqasid* gap: South Asian legal architecture, most visibly the loss of Scheduled Caste reservation

eligibility upon conversion to Islam or Christianity ([Gandhiraman, 2009](#)), means that the state's own framework for protecting religious minorities can, in specific documented instances such as Varanappally, create material incentives toward apostasy that operate independently of any institutional failure internal to Muslim religious authority.

The second is an intellectual *maqasid* gap: the documented non-engagement of bodies such as the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board and allied institutions with doctrinal doubt ([Chaudhry, 2019](#)), and the testimonies of digital ex-Muslims such as Salim and Ehsan citing unresolved intellectual questions, are read here as illustrative of a failure to operationalize *hifz al-'aql* specifically within religious pedagogy and institutional response, distinct from the structural gap above. Distinguishing these two gaps clarifies that '*maqasidic* failure' is not a single diffuse causal claim but two distinct, narrower, and separately falsifiable normative observations, each grounded in specific documented material rather than asserted as a general causal law.

### **Digital Platforms and Political Co-optation**

The digital terrain, which promises absolute liberation and safety, functions as a double-edged sword, reshaping the psychology of apostasy. While platforms like X and YouTube provide essential scaffolding for communities of solidarity, they also subject the apostate to hyper-visibility and surveillance. The ex-Muslim individual is caught in a crossfire of online hostility: castigated as blasphemers and communal betrayers by conservative Muslim spaces, and simultaneously instrumentalized as political tokens by Hindutva digital armies.

This digital ecosystem strips the apostate of nuance, forcing their complex human journey into binary political categories. The interaction between individual agency, digital media, and majoritarian politics thus creates a unique South Asian manifestation of deconversion in which the path away from Islam does not lead to a neutral, secular public sphere but rather into an intensely polarized battlefield where one's very identity is continuously conscripted into wider civilizational conflicts.

Notably, this instrumentalization is not always accepted passively by ex-Muslims themselves. Some prominent ex-Muslim commentators have publicly resisted being folded into Hindu nationalist framing even while remaining sharply critical of Islamic institutions, for instance, voicing support for Indian Muslims on contested policy debates such as the Uniform Civil Code and hijab bans ([Shankar Das, 2022](#)). The digital sphere serves as a primary site for articulating these ruptures, where personal doubt is recontextualized within broader narratives of intellectual liberation.

For instance, in a discussion of his departure from Islamic scholarship, Salim noted ([SangamTalks, 2025](#)) that, 'Critical analysis of Quranic texts revealed contradictions I could no longer ignore'. Similarly, fellow activist Ehsan reflected that, 'Challenging religious dogmas became a necessary step toward reclaiming my individual autonomy'. These testimonies illustrate that for many, the 'ex-Muslim' identity is not merely an act of negation, but a performative shift toward a new civilizational alignment and the pursuit of perceived 'Dharmic' truths.

### **Crisis Within Muslim Communities and Intellectual Vacuum**

The rise of the ex-Muslim movement ultimately points to a profound, unaddressed crisis within the internal educational and social infrastructure of South Asian Muslim communities. This phenomenon is not merely an external political development but an internal symptom of rigid, purely legalistic approaches to faith presented by traditional representatives, which many young, contemporary questioners find intellectually and culturally suffocating.

Prominent institutional bodies and movements, including the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board, the Shia Waqf Board, the Tablighi Jamaat, and Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, have historically failed

to recognize the sociological seriousness of this intellectual erosion, leaving a massive vacuum where deep spiritual and philosophical engagement should exist (Chaudhry, 2019).

By mixing essential faith with highly localized, sometimes discriminatory patriarchal customs surrounding inheritance, polygamy, and divorce, these institutions have inadvertently alienated vulnerable segments, particularly young women who compare these rigid interpretations unfavorably with secular succession acts.

This intellectual vacuum represents a critical collapse in the operationalization of the *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*. By reducing the broad, ethical objectives of the faith into strict, decontextualized rulings, traditional leadership has neglected *hifz al-'aql*. When legitimate intellectual inquiry is treated as deviance, the foundational objective of protecting faith (*hifz al-din*) is paradoxically undermined, pushing young questioners toward secular or majoritarian spaces.

Classical Islamic scholarship demonstrates significant capacity for contextual interpretation and ethical flexibility (Ali, 2016). This stands in sharp contrast to contemporary institutional approaches that prioritize doctrinal consistency over adaptive engagement with social realities. The intellectual resources exist within the Islamic tradition for meaningful reform; what is lacking is institutional will and leadership. Historical precedents for Islamic reform movements (Cohen, 2009) demonstrate the tradition's capacity for intellectual evolution, yet contemporary institutional leadership has largely abandoned such renovative projects in favor of defensive posturing.

Furthermore, by reducing the Sunnah's message of equality to a simple list of strict rules, the practicing community has largely neglected the foundational teachings of Ihsan (spiritual excellence) and Tasawwuf (purification of the heart), which have historically offered the very spiritual tranquility that modern seekers desperately seek elsewhere. Religious institutions characterized by fundamentalism (Christopher & Mull, 2006) often prioritize doctrinal purity over pastoral engagement, inadvertently pushing young questioners away.

This institutional approach transforms legitimate intellectual inquiry into perceived betrayal, converting doubt into deviance. When online critics and digital influencers isolate scriptural passages without the contextualizing methodology of *Asbab al-Nuzul* (reasons for revelation), young individuals lacking authentic, grounded knowledge are easily swayed by literalist misinterpretations. Until Muslim leadership shifts from a purely defensive stance to active sociological and academic revival, honoring local culture while providing intellectual safety, the socio-political erosion within South Asia will continue expanding.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Direct Responses to the Research Questions

RQ1 (individual and structural crises): The constellation of psychological, social, intellectual, and existential crises precipitating departure from Islam among young South Asians, as documented in Themes 1 and 2 above, is not reducible to private theological doubt alone. It interacts directly with structural forces specifically minority legal status and caste-linked reservation incentives (Varanappally), institutional non-engagement with doctrinal doubt (Salim, Ehsan), and employment precarity among laboring communities (Binoli area) such that the Crisis and Quest stages of Rambo's (1993) framework are, in this South Asian setting, substantially co-produced by structural conditions rather than generated by individual psychology in isolation.

RQ2 (politicization by Hindu nationalist organizations): The findings demonstrate that VHP- and RSS-affiliated Ghar Wapsi campaigns, and their digital amplification (Theme 3), transform what individual actors may experience as a private or pragmatic decision into a conscripted political narrative of 'homecoming' and civilizational reclamation. This reshapes the Encounter and Interaction stages of departure: individual testimony is rapidly absorbed into majoritarian framing

regardless of the departing individual's own intentions, as seen in both the rural *shuddhi* ceremonies and the elite Akbar/Rizvi cases (Theme 4), and is at times actively resisted by ex-Muslims themselves (Shankar Das, 2022).

RQ3 (agency and structure together): Methodologically, this study addresses this question through its tiered, triangulated design (Pew statistical baseline, documented meso-level events, and digital ethnography) combined with deductive mapping onto Rambo's seven stages. This allows individual agency to be traced through the Quest, Encounter, and Commitment stages while simultaneously situating each within the Context and Consequences supplied by minority legal status, caste incentives, and political instrumentalization, rather than treating personal choice and structural pressure as competing rather than co-constitutive explanations.

RQ4 (*maqasid* and institutional failure): Consistent with the normative-versus-causal distinction articulated above, the study finds that a *maqasid*-oriented reading identifies two distinct and narrower institutional gaps: a structural gap in which state legal architecture creates material incentives toward departure, and an intellectual gap in which religious institutions have not operationalized *hifz al-'aql* in the face of digitally mediated doubt. These are advanced as normative, theologically grounded diagnoses that the case material is compatible with, not as empirically demonstrated causes of apostasy established through causal-inferential methods.

Leaving Islam in contemporary India is never simply an intellectual choice but rather a high-stakes struggle trapped between minority vulnerability and majoritarian opportunism. This comprehensive study demonstrates that the Indian ex-Muslim movement is deeply multi-layered. It is driven by private psychological crises and digital connectivity, yet heavily constrained by a polarized society.

The movement represents a genuine expression of individual intellectual freedom and a rupture from faith communities, yet simultaneously constitutes a political terrain in which vulnerable individuals are appropriated as tokens within larger majoritarian projects. As religious nationalism accelerates across South Asia and digital networks expand, this movement will inevitably grow more visible and politically charged.

The urgent challenge for future researchers is to protect the integrity of marginalized narratives while recognizing the complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraint. We must listen directly to these voices, ensuring that their authentic fight for freedom of conscience is neither silenced by intense communal pressure nor completely hijacked as a political trophy by majoritarian agendas.

Read through the lens of *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, the Indian ex-Muslim movement is best understood as evidence of a *maqasidic* deficit: a gap between the higher objectives that religious institutions are meant to serve protecting faith and intellect alike and their present, often rigidly legalistic practice. Closing that gap, rather than simply contesting or defending apostasy in the abstract, is the more constructive task this study points toward.

Understanding apostasy in India requires moving beyond binary frameworks of individual choice versus coercive manipulation, and instead recognizing how structural forces, institutional constraints, and political opportunities converge to shape the transformation of religious identity. Only through such nuanced, ethically grounded scholarship can we adequately comprehend the ex-Muslim movement as both a deeply personal journey and an intensely politicized phenomenon within South Asia's fractured religious landscape.

## LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

### Limitations

This study faces several important limitations. First, the sensitive and dangerous nature of religious apostasy in South Asia means that direct ethnographic research poses significant safety

risks to participants, necessitating reliance on secondary sources, media accounts, and digital materials rather than exclusively primary interview data.

Second, the study focuses primarily on Indian contexts, limiting generalizability to broader South Asian dynamics, particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where apostasy faces more extreme legal and social penalties.

Third, the digital ethnography focuses on publicly available online testimonies, potentially underrepresenting ex-Muslims who maintain strict anonymity online for safety reasons. Fourth, the paper necessarily compresses complex, multi-dimensional individual experiences into broader analytical categories, potentially obscuring nuance. Finally, the political sensitivities surrounding this topic mean that certain documented cases remain contested and subject to multiple interpretations.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Future scholarship should pursue several directions. First, longitudinal studies tracking individuals through religious departure could illuminate how personal trajectories evolve after initial deconversion. Second, comparative studies examining apostasy patterns across Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India could provide a richer understanding of South Asian dynamics. Third, research that directly engages Muslim institutional leaders on responses to intellectual challenges could identify potential pathways for internal reform explicitly grounded in maqasidic reasoning.

Fourth, studies examining the gender dimensions of apostasy, particularly how women navigate religious departure differently from men, could address significant gaps in current literature. Fifth, research on the mental health and psychological impacts of apostasy and subsequent social ostracism would illuminate the human costs of these transitions. Finally, systematic documentation of the internal diversity of online ex-Muslim communities, including ideological differences and conflicts, could challenge monolithic representations of this movement.

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