Article

Sound Biting Conspiracy: From India with “Love Jihad”

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Abstract: Since 2013, India has seen a remarkable growth of a conspiracy theory known as “love jihad”, which holds that Muslim men conspire to lure Hindu women for marriage to alter India’s religious demography as part of a political takeover strategy. While earlier scholarship on “love jihad” emphasizes the Hindu nationalist propagation of this conspiracy theory, this article pays equal attention to its appeal among conservative Hindus. Making its point of departure in the generative effects of speech, it argues that the “love jihad” neologism performs two logical operations simultaneously. Firstly, it fuses the long-standing Hindu anxiety about daughters marrying against their parents’ will, with the equally long-standing anxiety about unfavorable religious demographic trends. Secondly, it attributes a sinister political takeover intent to every Muslim man who casts his eyes on a young Hindu woman. To bring out these points, this article pays equal empirical attention to marriage and kinship practices as to the genealogy of, and forerunners to, the “love jihad” neologism, and develops the concept of “sound biting” to bring out its meaning-making effect.

Keywords: love jihad; sound biting; Pramod Muthalik; meaning making; Koenraad Elst; Hindu nationalism; Hindu Janajagruti Samiti; conspiracy theories; *A Suitable Boy*; arranged marriage

Citation: Frøystad, Kathinka. 2021. Sound Biting Conspiracy: From India with “Love Jihad”. *Religions* 12: 1064. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121064>

Academic Editors: Iselin Frydenlund and Eviane Leidig

Received: 20 September 2021

Accepted: 24 November 2021

Published: 1 December 2021

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1. Introduction

When Lata, the main character in Vikram Seth’s novel *A Suitable Boy* (Seth 1993), fell in love with her Muslim college mate Kabir, she realized the futility of requesting her widowed mother’s permission to marry him so well that she did not even consider asking. Their only option would have been to elope together, which Kabir refused. In the final chapters, Lata ended up marrying a suitable shoe factory owner from her own Hindu caste instead. Set in the 1950s, Seth’s novel—which was adapted into a six-part BBC series by Mira Nair in 2020 and subsequently made available on Netflix—is a vivid dramatization of the marriage pattern that still predominates in most parts of India despite having weakened: Hindus should ideally marry within their own caste, with a suitable partner chosen, or at least accepted, by their parents. Though Lata was more fortunate than most of her contemporaries in being granted some choice, her choice was hardly free: when her mother came to know about her relation to Kabir, she promptly sent her away to end their liaison. Yet, for all the Hindu aversion against interfaith relationships, few would have thought of accusing a Muslim suitor of attempting love jihad prior to the election campaign of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2013–14.

As Seth’s novel suggests, Hindu families have considered Muslims unsuitable as marriage partners long before the love jihad neologism was invented. To understand the Indian roots of the love jihad conspiracy theory, we thus need to go beyond tracing its origin and spread, though this task is certainly crucial. It is equally important to spell out the deep cultural resonance of the love jihad neologism among conservative Hindus, which is usually left implicit by South Asianists who write for a South Asianist readership, and reflect theoretically on the ideological “work” performed by neologisms such as love jihad. In terms of analysis, this article thus complements the organization- and rhetoric-centric perspectives that have so far dominated in the scholarship of love jihad (see e.g., Anand

2011; Strohl 2019; Tyagi and Sen 2020) with analytical optics that bring out how it helps families resist changing marriage patterns as well as the generative effect of language.

My argument is roughly as follows. Though the love jihad neologism itself only dates to around 2005, it amalgamated, condensed and popularized two long-standing anxieties: (1) the fear that young Hindu women's growing insistence on their right to free choice of marriage partner will bring shame to their families, and (2) the Hindu nationalist anxiety about minoritization and Muslim domination of India. Its effect is to popularize the phantasmagoric narrative that Muslim men, such as Kabir, are not merely unsuitable marriage partners for young Hindu women such as Lata, but also representatives of a sinister "Muslim Other" who conspire to lure Hindu girls into marriage, conversion and child-breeding. Their ulterior aim, this neologism further insinuates, is to alter India's religious demography in preparation for a new Muslim takeover along the lines of the much-dreaded Mughal Empire. The "love jihad" conspiracy theory has evident similarities with the Great Replacement Theory propagated in far-right networks in the West (cf. Frydenlund and Leidig forthcoming), but their relation is complex. By tracing the ideological forerunners of the love jihad rhetoric in India, this article suggests that the similarity is neither attributable to a coincidental polygenesis, nor to a "mother" conspiracy theory that has inspired "offshoots" elsewhere, but to a long-term, rhizomatic transnational exchange that bears the imprint of landmark events, including Partition in 1947, the 11 September attacks in New York in 2001, and real or perceived threats against Hindus on Indian soil. Thus, the attribution of sinister takeover intentions to lovesick Muslim men did not begin with the love jihad neologism but was "sound-bited" by it, a concept here launched to bring out the productive effect of neologisms of this kind.

The empirical part of the article opens by summarizing what former scholarship and news reports reveal about the invention and early repetition of the "love jihad" neologism, which later transmuted into accelerated policing of women, increased vigilantism against inter-faith couples and law-making (see Nielsen and Nilsen 2021). The next two sections draw on historical and anthropological scholarship, including my own, to elucidate the cultural resonance of the love jihad idiom and the ways in which marriage patterns have changed in recent decades. In so doing, particular attention is devoted to the perceived unsuitability of Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, the state on which Vikram Seth's "Purva Pradesh" was modelled, and one of the states in which the love jihad narrative has affected law making. The final empirical section returns to the love jihad neologism, this time by tracing the genealogy of the conspiracy theory that prompted its invention. Before delving into Indian specifics, however, let me outline the triple analytical prism through which I approach the origin and generative effects of the love jihad concept.

2. Compound Neologisms as Sound-Bite Order-Words

Ever since Austin developed his theory of speech acts in the 1950s, it has been evident that words can be performative as well as descriptive (or "constative", which was Austin's preferred term). Following Austin, the coining of the "love jihad" term would be a "perlocutionary" act: in contrast to direct orders, warnings, or declarations (which he termed "illocutionary"), such acts are performative by virtue of their "convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading" effects (Austin [1962] 1976, p. 109, emphasis added). As Searle later paraphrased it: "By arguing I may persuade or convince someone; by warning him I may scare or alarm him, by making a request I may get him to do something, by informing him I may convince him (enlighten, edify, inspire him, get him to realize)" (Searle [1969] 1995, p. 25, italics omitted). He might as well have continued: by coining new expressions, I persuade, and by persuading many, I popularize.

Most neologisms share this perlocutionary performativity despite being more inventive than outright creative (Maxwell 2006). As we will see in the final section, the love jihad expression did not arise from thin air but had antecedents in an explicit Hindu nationalist anxiety that young Muslim men deliberately scout for Hindu girls to enamor, convert, and impregnate as a long-term strategy to alter India's religious demography in

favor of Muslims. For someone who shared this anxiety, coining the “love jihad” expression may not even have been deliberate. According to Redfern, new words are so frequently created by compounding words that it is almost done “without noticing, like nose-picking” (Redfern 2010, p. 270). Like metaphors, compound neologisms transfer meaning from one context to another, only in less inventive ways. When such expressions are popularized, it is because they are catchy, fill a lexical gap, and enhance the speakers’ chances to get their messages across.

Since philosophers of language who follow the tradition of Austin and Searle tend to rely on invented examples from micro-social contexts typically consisting of only a speaker and a listener, I turn to media studies, social movement theory, and political philosophy to bring out some of the broader societal dimensions of catchy neologisms such as “love jihad”. In so doing I find three perspectives particularly useful, the first of which pertains to sound bites. For media scholars, a sound bite is an abbreviated communicative capsule of the kind that predate digital memes, an “atomized symbolic message” (Scheuer 2001, p. 82) that compresses complex meaning into a slogan-like sentence or catchy expression. Sound-bite communication is a side effect of the increasingly competitive mediascape (cf. Appadurai 1990) that began with the expanding television universe in the US in the 1980s, which gave politicians and journalists ever-shorter time to get their message across without losing their viewers’ attention. From 1968 to 1988 the average duration of uninterrupted political speech shrank from 43 to nine seconds on US television screens (Scheuer 2001, p. 81) whereafter it plateaued (Farnsworth and Lichter in Rinke 2016, p. 625), but may have sunk even further in the age of social media and meme communication. As media users across the world drown in information, the hard currency is their attention, which enhances the need for condensed, emotive rhetoric (cf. Lanham 2006). In this process, complex arguments, deliberations, and justifications migrate to specialized media outlets for intellectuals. In the rest of the mediascape, connotations increasingly overshadow denotations, which according to Thrift (cf. Thrift 2004) turns political communication into a matter of affect engineering. Politicians, activists, and journalists of all hues are acutely aware of this development, which makes them prone to what I term “sound biting”: the art of inventing and repeating slogans, neologisms and other compressed messages that hold potential to break through and move their listeners by resonating with what Bloch (1990, p. 193) terms “chunked” knowledge that may only be partly verbalizable. In this respect, sound bites are comparable to memes despite having been around longer and working in auditory rather than visual ways. My use of sound bite as a verb rather than as a noun is meant to bring closer attention to their production and repetition than what media studies commonly do, and to the fact that the love jihad neologism helped *popularize* the Muslim takeover conspiracy rather than inventing it out of thin air.

The second perspective I find useful is the branch of social movement theory that emphasizes the importance of meaning making. Though the Hindu nationalist ideology that gave rise to the “love jihad” concept is more of a political ideology than a social movement, many of its activities, campaigns, and strategies can fruitfully be studied through such a lens. This approach is excellently spelled out by Kurzman, who asks: “What would happen if we not only recognize meaning making as an important facet of social movement mobilizations, but privilege it as the central feature of such phenomena?” (Kurzman 2008, p. 5). For Kurzman, social movements would accomplish little unless they succeeded in challenging established patterns of thought and re-framed political realities by recontextualizing them. In his view, meaning-making is thus not merely one of many tools within a social movement repertoire, but *constitutive* of them (Kurzman 2008, p. 10). Adding a Foucauldian lens, Casas-Cortés et al. suggest that social movements strive to challenge the dominant “truth effects” that influence “what we see, experience and think; what it is possible to say and do, as well as what is outside the realm of comprehensibility” (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008, p. 47). In a precursor to this line of thinking, Jaoul (2006) shows how social movements’ epistemological efforts may involve emotions that help invoke outrage and arouse passionate cries for justice, a perspective recently elaborated further by

Blom and Lama-Rewal (2020). Beyond this point, however, scholars part ways. While many strive to craft analyses that are politically neutral, some sympathize so strongly with the movement or political ideology they study that they elevate emic concepts and framings to analytical concepts and perspectives (Casas–Cortés et al. being a case in point), while those who study meaning making they consider divisive are more prone to incorporate the vocabulary of their critics. In applying this perspective to the love jihad campaign, this article will strive towards a neutral terminology, believing with D’Andrade (1995) that strong moral investments make us overlook important nuances. As we will see primarily in the next and final section, the meaning making perspective helps accentuate how Hindu nationalist ideologues, activists, and politicians actively deployed the love jihad neologism to raise “awareness” about the dangers purportedly represented by the Muslim minority.

The third and final perspective that will influence the analysis holds affinity with the critical branch of social movement scholarship, but approaches political meaning-making from a more panoramic philosophical perspective. Following Deleuze and Guattari, the “love jihad” expression would exemplify an “order-word” (*mot d’ordre*), the French original of which captures a crucial double meaning: besides referring to commands such as slogans and passwords, it also denotes phrases that create order (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, p. 573, n.1). The potency of order-words derives from the extensive connotations concealed by their brevity. For Deleuze and Guattari, this implies a “redundancy of speech” that may be exemplified by the news media, which, besides informing us about noteworthy events and developments, also “tell us what we ‘must’ think, retain, expect, etc.” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, p. 79). When order-words are constantly repeated, they thus tend to affirm what goes without saying. Scaled up, order-words that are closely related may produce discursive “refrains” or combine in assemblages of enunciation that produce “a regime of signs or a semiotic machine” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, p. 83). What this perspective adds, is the potential of neologisms to re-frame and naturalize meanings in ways that escape attention, to de- and re-territorialize by virtue of their brevity, as well as to blur agency. From “Judeo–Bolshevism” in Nazi Germany to “stealth jihad” or “stealth Islamization” in Western far-right networks, “islamo–gauchisme” in France and “love jihad” and “urban naxals” in India,¹ once heard, such words are virtually impossible to unthink. Consequently, even their critics, who work tirelessly to refute the implicit assumptions that undergird them, may unwittingly contribute to their entrenchment—possibly even the article you now read. By being repeated and reported, disputed and analyzed, catchy neologisms, such as “love jihad”, stick, move, and multiply, thereby re-ordering and naturalizing thought patterns that generate effects ranging from divisive thinking and discrimination to new voting patterns, conspiracy thinking, vigilantism, violence and law making, as exemplified in other contributions to this special issue.

3. The Birth and Early Repetition of the “Love Jihad” Expression

At first thought, the irony that a Hindu nationalist activist would combine an English and an Arabic word to gain leverage for the idea that Hindus must protect themselves from repeated non-Hindu takeover is almost deafening. After all, Hindu nationalists strive hard to restore India’s imagined Hindu Golden Age by reducing the influences from the Mughal and colonial periods, whether in terms of religion, architecture, or language. To this end, they consistently promote Sanskrit on school curricula, Hindi rather than English as a lingua franca as well as a purified version of Hindi without its Persian, Arabic, Urdu, and English loanwords (Rai 2001). Given this background, it was surprising that their war cry over interreligious marriages took shape as an English–Arabic compound.

This language combination is nevertheless understandable since both words signify issues that Hindu nationalists seek to delimit. For all the Bollywood movies about romantic love, conservative Hindus still consider parent-arranged marriages more appropriate than so-called “love marriages”, which is the common everyday referent for self-choice marriages in South Asia.² Indeed, the English love marriage idiom is so well established that it is even used by the most ardent language purifiers. To substitute “marriage” with

“jihad” was thus a small step in terms of linguistics. As for “jihad” (struggle), the sense they invoked had little to do with the “great” or inner jihad of self-refinement, which most Muslims consider paramount. Nor even did it allude to the “lesser” jihad of striving to win others over by means of persuasion. For Hindu nationalists, “jihad” was reduced to its most narrow sense of religious conquest. As the final section will suggest, the jihad concept was rare in Hindu nationalist rhetoric until it entered their semiotic machine after Al Qaida’s terror attacks in New York in 2001. The emergent transnational diffusion of the “love jihad” concept from India to other countries (cf. [Leidig 2019](#); Leidig this issue) thus relies upon an import of a narrow interpretation of the “jihad” concept *into* India (as of course “love” long before that), which indicates how seemingly unidirectional transnational flows can be underpinned by prior transnational exchanges that virtually go “all the way down”, like in the famous story about the turtles.

When Pramod Muthalik coined the “love jihad” neologism around 2005, he was already well known in Southern India as a Hindu nationalist hardliner. Based in the state of Karnataka, he had been affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), the Bajrang Dal as well as the BJP until a tiff over BJP’s reluctance to support his workers in their criminal cases made him conclude that the original Hindu nationalist “family” of organizations, the Sangh Parivar, had become “soft” ([Joshi et al. 2009](#)). It was in this period he happened to coin the “love jihad” expression, which he recalls as follows in an interview with the news magazine *Frontline* fifteen years later:

It was sometime in 2005 when a 65-year-old Muslim man kidnapped a poor 19-year-old Hindu girl in Savanur in Haveri district. When she went missing for three months, I investigated the case and met the parents. At that time, I had learnt that the word ‘jehad’ was used by Muslims to mean ‘holy war’ [*Dharma Yuddha* in Kannada]. There were many cases like this, and realising that it was a ‘huge conspiracy’ [Muthalik used the words *shadyantra* (conspiracy) and *kutantra* (cunning strategy) in Kannada to describe this] realised that this was a form of jehad and I called it ‘love jehad’.

([Sayeed 2020](#), bracket explanations added by Sayeed)

The love jihad neologism did not catch on right away. Muthalik continued that everybody made fun of him at the time, which made him spend considerable energy trying to “awaken” his fellow Hindus to the danger of Hindu–Muslim marriages. In so doing, he wrote a book and produced CDs for distribution as well. Yet, when Muthalik was suddenly catapulted to fame in 2009, little mention was made of his love jihad campaign. The focus then was on one of his other campaigns. In January that year, his new organization Sri Ram Sene (sometimes transcribed as Sena) organized an attack against female pub-goers in the coastal city of Mangalore. “Girls going to pubs is not acceptable”, he is quoted to have said ([Kapur 2012](#), p. 2), adding that his organization would also protest against everyone who celebrated Valentine’s Day, which had been controversial ever since it was appropriated in India in the early 1990s due to its advocacy of free, romantic love (cf. [Brosius 2012](#)).

In the years that followed, Muthalik’s efforts to “awaken” Hindus to the supposed dangers of inter-faith relationships gained increasing support from other hardline organizations that shared his political ideology. Foremost among them was the Goa-based Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (Hindu People’s Awakening Society, hereafter HJS), which had been founded in 2002 to promote the transformation of India to a Hindu state and help protect the religious sensibilities of Hindus globally. From around 2009, HJS spearheaded the love jihad campaign in Karnataka. In a press release dated 15 October that year, it claimed young Muslim men to be “sexual wolves who were on the prowl for Hindu women”; that roughly 30,000 Hindu women had so far been converted across the state and that it now had established a self-defense women’s wing ([Sayeed 2009](#)). Along with sister organizations mainly in South India, the HJS also began to approach Hindu parents whose daughters had recently married Muslims to try to persuade, if not pressurize, them to charge their sons-in-law for forced conversion, though none of these cases held up in court.

At the same time, HJS initiated preventive campaigns targeted at Hindu families with marriageable daughters. To this end, it produced a pamphlet titled *Love Jihad* that came to be widely distributed. Authored by Sri Ramesh Hanumant Shinde and Sri Mohan Ajjju Gauda, the cover depicts a modestly dressed young Hindu woman wearing *salwār-kurtā* (baggy trousers with a long shirt on top),³ who rides pillion on a motorcycle driven by a handsome, short-bearded man wearing jeans and a green piquet shirt, the combination of which suggests a Muslim but not particularly religious orientation. Behind them is the temple; the road ahead cannot be seen. Their intentions are suggested by their thought bubbles: hers is shaped like a pink heart while his reads “love jihad” (written with the Devanagari script) in the Marathi version and “conversion” in the English one. The content of the pamphlet is helpfully summarized on HJS’ own web page. While young women are advised to apply vermillion powder (*kumkum*) to their foreheads, keep distance from “jihadi friends or neighbours” and learn self-defense techniques, the remaining advice is addressed at their parents. The suggestions include keeping a close eye on their daughters’ movement and mobile phone contacts, alert Hindu organizations if they spot “young Jihadi faces” hanging out near their schools, not buying them unnecessary luxury items, inculcating them with proper Hindu values and warning them against “the day-to-day sufferings of a jihadi woman”. The suggestions end with an overview of the legal sections they can book unwanted Muslim boyfriends or sons-in-law for violating, which in addition to forced conversion include rape, cheating, kidnapping, blackmail, or even bigamy, though polygamy still remained legal for Muslim men according to Indian law ([Hindu Janajagruti Samiti n.d.](#); see also [Strohl 2019](#)). At least since 2009, then, the HJS has played a seminal role in promoting the conspiracy theory of love jihad, though it would still take another four years until it became widely known throughout the country.

In Uttar Pradesh, like in the South, the love jihad neologism spread through Hindu nationalist organizations. The sociologist Aastha Tyagi, who conducted fieldwork on the women’s wing of the RSS, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, in Meerut in 2013, quotes one of her interlocutors to have stated that she first encountered the love jihad idiom at a Samiti camp in Saharanpur in 2009 or 2010 ([Tyagi and Sen 2020](#), p. 111). Nevertheless, this idiom remained largely unknown beyond Hindu nationalist activists until the BJP began to prepare for the general election that would take place in May 2014. In 2013, BJP workers spearheaded by Amit Shah (who later became BJP president and, in 2019, minister of home affairs) traversed the countryside to warn against “love jihad” to garner support for their party ([Mahaprashasta 2020](#)). In this way, the “love jihad” narrative developed into an interpretive frame that contributed to transform a tussle in rural Muzaffarnagar over a Muslim man’s sexual harassment of a Hindu Jat girl in August 2013, into an orchestrated interreligious riot that left more than 60 people dead and 50,000 Muslims displaced ([Pandey and Pathak 2013](#)). Following this tragic event, the news media gradually stepped up its coverage of the love jihad campaigns of the Hindu Right, which meant that the campaigns in Karnataka and now Maharashtra and elsewhere became known to a wider public. Nevertheless, an informal enquête conducted by the news site *Scroll* in August 2014 revealed that many Hindu villagers in Western Uttar Pradesh still had no idea what “love jihad” meant (“maybe if you said it in Hindi I could understand”, one farmer said), let alone accept the conspiracy theory it attempted to sound bite ([Venkataramakrishnan 2014b](#)). Yet, the frequency with which the love jihad idiom was repeated from then onwards, whether to drive home, report or repel the anxiety that Muslims deploy romance as part of a quest for political domination, has now made such claims to ignorance exceedingly rare.

The speed with which the love jihad sound bite developed into a refrain in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari is suggested by the rudimentary frequency analysis shown in Table 1. A search for “love jihad” (in quotation marks) on Google News reveals the following annual increase of hits since this service was launched in 2006.

Table 1. Annual frequency of “love jihad” on news sites searchable on Google News.

Year	Google News
2006	0
2007	12
2008	4
2009	42
2010	112
2011	150
2012	212
2013	435
2014	778
2015	1060
2016	1450
2017	1670
2018	3800
2019	7350
2020	7620
2021 (until 10 September)	14,300

What the figures in Table 1 suggest is that the love jihad idiom entered the digitalized mediascape in 2007, two years after Muthalik’s linguistic invention, crossed the 100-mark in 2010, rose markedly during BJP’s election campaign in 2013–2014, and had virtually become omnipresent by 2021. Granted, frequency analyses based on Google News have obvious limitations. In this case, an increase of hits would also reflect the growing presence of Indian news media on the internet, as well as a rising international news coverage of the Indian love jihad campaigns. While a more fine-tuned frequency analysis must await a more rigorous study, a Google News analysis nevertheless suggests a rough pattern.

Once the federal BJP governments began to discuss how to amend the state laws to prevent alleged love jihad around 2020, it became virtually impossible to read, watch, or discuss the news without encountering this concept. Judging from the toxic social media messages, I began to receive in this period from my former interlocutors in Uttar Pradesh about allegedly lecherous and power-hungry Muslim men, the steady repetition of the love jihad sound bite was having the desired effect. Even those of my acquaintances who used to approach Sufi-Muslim dargahs and Muslim ritual specialists for divine intervention to thorny problems, now circulated love jihad warnings.⁴ Yet, this would hardly have worked unless many Hindu families already had strong reservations about Muslim sons-in-law. To begin spelling out these misgivings for readers without in-depth knowledge about this part of the world, the next section turns to the centrality of caste endogamy to Hindu kinship.

4. Marriages Made in Heaven, Hell, and In-Between

Feminist critique of the law jihad neologism and vigilantism against inter-faith marriage commonly makes the point that they undermine central liberties such as the right to free choice of marriage partner, which is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. While this point is indisputable, only a small fraction of the Hindu population has so far been positioned to avail itself of this right. Just like Vikram Seth’s Lata, the rest still grow up in surroundings in which their families, extended kin and community elders have firm opinions about what kind of marriage partner that would be suitable, tolerable, or utterly inappropriate for them, opinions that until recently were grounded in family compatibility rather than in individual compatibility. Though individual compatibility has gained impor-

tance, the ideal is still a caste-endogamous marriage arranged—or at least accepted—by the parents. Consider the 2021 PEW report on religion in India: Of the close to 30,000 people surveyed across the country in 2019–20, roughly two thirds of the Hindus (all ages) considered it “very important” to stop people from marrying outside their caste (PEW Research Center 2021, p. 29). An equal proportion found it crucial to prevent inter-faith marriage with Muslims (PEW Research Center 2021, p. 9).⁵ Though such inhibitions are weaker amongst the young, they are by no means absent: a 2016 survey of the 15–34 age group found 35 per cent to disapprove of inter-caste marriage (Lokniti 2017, p. 69) whereas the disapproval of inter-religious marriage varied from 28 to 57 per cent, depending on whether the respondent’s own marriage had been arranged or not (Lokniti 2017, p. 70).⁶ Marrying without parental consent moreover comes at a considerable cost: no parents are prepared to give dowry or other financial help to daughters who marry against their will, which makes it more difficult for the couple to get by (cf. Marwaha 2021).

When justifying the preference for caste endogamy to Western observers, many Hindus open by contrasting arranged marriages to the Euro–American ideal of self-choice marriages based on romantic love. As Parkin (2021) reminds us, however, this contrast should not be exaggerated. European royals and aristocrats have a long history of endogamy, and marriage across stark differences of class, culture, and racialized features can still be frowned upon though explicit objections are now nearing extinction. Yet well into the early 1980s, women’s magazines carried feature stories about young, white mothers worrying sick about whether their parents would be able to love their newborn grandchild if it had inherited its father’s dark complexion. Though such stories invariably ended well, and were undoubtedly meant to be educational and progressive, they nevertheless communicated that marriage across visible ethnic differences was somehow less socially acceptable than what anyone found it appropriate to say explicitly. Such complications notwithstanding, the free choice ideal was clearly on the verge of naturalization, which made it an obvious pedagogical point of departure for Hindus who tried to get their preference for arranged marriage across.

Consider the case of “Bina”, a newly wed Brahman woman whom I came to know in the early 1990s as part of my first anthropological fieldwork in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. In 1992, she married into a Brahman joint family with whom I had already stayed for six months, and as she settled in as its first daughter-in-law (*bāhū*) of her generation, we had ample time to talk, our commonalities of gender, age, and education level providing a good starting point. True love (*pyār*), she explained, can only grow *after* the wedding, by sharing food, sexual pleasure, children, family responsibilities, and so on. It does not precede it.⁷ In her opinion, pre-marital love was more unruly and unreliable since it typically was grounded in physical attraction rather than in cohabitation and mutuality.⁸ Marriages in which love *precedes* the wedding would thus be to do it the opposite/wrong (*ulṭā*) way, she argued, pointing to the spiraling divorce rates in the West.⁹ Consequently, Bina claimed to have been more than happy to leave the choice to her parents and appeared satisfied with their choice.

In the decades that followed, I repeatedly encountered similar arguments from defenders of arranged marriage, whether they were brides, grooms, or kin looking for suitable partners for their offspring. Many added the benefit of cultural similarities, arguing that caste endogamy made it more likely that the two families would follow roughly the same religious observances and dietary restrictions, which was particularly crucial to upper-caste and vegetarian Hindus. Particularly strong reservations were expressed against the prospect of marrying daughters “down” and sons “up” in the caste hierarchy, which I return to shortly.¹⁰ Though far from all arranged marriages became as harmonious that of Bina and her husband,¹¹ proponents of arranged marriage were unison in their belief that parent-arranged, caste-endogamous marriages were the best long-term solution for as many of those involved as possible.

In the decades that followed, arranged marriages began to accommodate more individual choice but without doing away with the preference for caste endogamy. While

not even sociology students in Delhi, most of whom would have hailed from a liberal middle-class family background, could hope for their “adolescent crushes and affairs” to lead to marriage in the 1990s (Uberoi 1994, p. 2), young people gradually got more say after the turn of the millennium. Though a Indian Human Development Survey reveals that the percentage of women who had the primary role in choosing their husbands remained as low as six per cent even in 2011 (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, p. 443), no less than 65 per cent claimed to have had *some* choice in partner selection (Banerji and Deshpande 2021, p. 202). What this reflects, is a shift towards joint decision-making rather than to self-choice marriages of the kind that dominate in the West. This trend is confirmed by Kaur and Dhanda, whose study of matrimonial websites such as [Shaadi.com](#) (2014) shows them to have expanded the selection of eligible partners compared to what conventional matchmaking could provide, thus giving more weight to personal traits. Interestingly, the authors also found caste to remain “a crucial variable in finding a match” (Kaur and Dhanda 2014, p. 279) given the way matrimonial websites encouraged its users to specify their pedigree and the subsequent proliferation of caste-specific matrimonial websites.

Despite the trend towards joint decision making, young adults increasingly develop romantic relations to someone they meet in the classroom, workplace, or elsewhere and later approach their parents to “arrange” their marriage or accept a low-key civil wedding. How do parents react to prospective partners whom they find unsuitable? At the gentlest end of the spectrum, we find verbal persuasion, a task for which parents frequently seek assistance from elder relatives or others whom they have reason to believe that their youngsters might listen to. Those requested to assist (including myself on occasion), are asked to do their best to impress on them (*acchī tarah se samjhanā*) that a marriage is just as much between two families and kin groups as between individuals, and that the personal connections required to get by in their kind of society, necessitates social acceptance. At the middle of the spectrum, we find threats, slaps, self-harm,¹² confiscation of mobile phones (which affords contact with “inappropriate” strangers, as indicated in HJS’ love jihad brochure), and withdrawal of other individual freedoms, such as hanging out with friends in the evening. These sanctions are almost uniquely directed against daughters. So too are the most severe sanctions of excommunication and murder, whether of the daughter, her paramour, or both. Such murders—which are now labelled honor killings, but which Indian newspapers in the 1990s tended to report as unfortunate events on par with traffic accidents—have long been most prevalent if upper-caste daughters develop relations to young men of Dalit or other low-caste background. A study of the 100 Indian honor killings described in sufficient detail in English-language news media between 2003 and 2017 to be analyzed, revealed that almost 83 per cent arose from situations in which upper-caste girls were romantically involved with a man of low-caste, Dalit, or even same-caste background without her parents’ consent (D’Lima et al. 2020, p. 29). Most of the remaining cases concerned extramarital relationships or daughters who had become “too modern”. The authors made no mention of honor killings rooted in interfaith relations between Hindu women and Muslim men. Yet, one case is detailed by Mody (2008, pp. 5–6), interfaith couples have long received threats, and a few recent killings (see e.g., [Al Jazeera 2021](#); [TNN 2021](#); [Wire Staff 2021](#)) give reason to worry that that such cases are now on the rise.¹³

To understand why daughters traditionally can marry up but now down, and are subject to more severe sanctions than sons, some additional details about Hindu kinship are required. Besides being caste-endogamous, Hindu kinship is predominately patrilineal, which means that children traditionally derive their family membership from their father’s lineage.¹⁴ When young women, such as Bina and Lata, marry, they are “transferred”, so to speak, from their natal lineage to that of their husband, where they slowly advance from subservient daughters-in-law to authoritative family matriarchs. Though the structuralist alliance optic invoked here (outlined in Lévi-Strauss [1949] 1969; and aptly summarized by Uberoi 1994) has been rightly criticized for disregarding agency, resistance and change,¹⁵ it is helpful for explaining the gender inequality at work. According to this optic, many societies are comprised of “wife givers” and “wife takers” of kin groups, clans, or lineages

that “exchange women” either bilaterally or in larger exchange circuits, which in Hindu India conventionally occurs between lineage segments (*gotras*) within each caste. As formerly described by [Rivers \(1921\)](#), Indian wife exchange is unique in requiring wife givers to have lower rank than wife takers, a phenomenon he referred to as “hypergamy”. Following this principle, women could well marry “up” within their caste (or in rare cases across caste boundaries), but not down. Despite the growing incorporation of individual choice, the hypergamy principle appears equally resilient as the preference for caste endogamy, which helps explain why young women who insist on marrying someone from a less prestigious family background than her own, are more severely sanctioned than young men who make similar moves.

In light of the sanctions that Hindu parents implement to prevent their daughters from marrying “unsuitable” partners, it is obvious that “love jihad” accusations represent a repertoire expansion. A family whose daughter is adamant to marry a Muslim man against their will now has an additional option than excommunication, unfulfilled threats, and reluctant acceptance. It can now raise alarm about love jihad instead, which not only enables them to restore their endangered honor in fuller public view than ever but also to salvage the reputation of their daughter among conservative caste fellows and acquaintances. By recasting her from a wayward and overly independent young woman to a hapless, naïve victim of an outsider’s sinister plans, they evidently hope to optimize the chances of finding her a more palatable husband once the dust settles. All the same, it would be misguided to interpret love jihad controversies as a lesser evil. As shown by numerous news reports, Hindu nationalist activists have frequently forced love jihad controversies upon families who had come to terms with their daughter’s partner choice, or who were about to do so, in which case the vigilantes *generate* family tragedies. By castigating the parents as dimwits who willingly give their daughters to “Muslim jihadis”, they simultaneously construe them as complicit in the much-feared demise of Hinduism.

Having summarized the so-called “positive” marriage rules that govern whom Hindu women ideally *should* marry, I now turn to the “negative” marriage rules that govern whom they should definitely *not* marry. In so doing I emphasize the perceived unsuitability of Muslims, which is seminal in explaining why the love jihad sound bite caught on.

5. Prior Apprehensions against Muslim Marriage Partners

The ongoing Hindu nationalist transformation of India makes it difficult to imagine a time in which Hindu kings and noblemen married their daughters to Muslim emperors to build political alliances. However, this was not unusual in the early days of the Mughal Empire. Consider emperor Akbar (1542–1605), who is famous for having expanded the Mughal empire established by his Turkic grandfather, Babar, in 1526: two of his at least eleven wives were daughters of Hindu kings ([Chandra 1993](#), p. 17), and his harem of “more than five thousand women” (cf. Abu Fazl in [Balabanlilar 2010](#), p. 134) included at least one known illegitimate daughter of a Hindu nobleman ([Chandra 1993](#), p. 17). His son and successor Jahangir (1569–1627) followed suit, with the result that Jahangir’s son Shah Jahan—internationally best known for having raised the Taj Mahal in memory of his favorite wife Mumtaz—had a mother and paternal grandmother who both were raised as Hindu Rajput royals. Some authors interpret such intermarriages as having “Indianized” the Mughal empire (see e.g., [Sharma 2018](#)). However, according to the logic of patrilineality, the male line outweighs the female line to such an extent that the entire Mughal empire becomes perpetually foreign, a foreignness reinforced by their Muslim identity and the requirement that in-marrying non-Muslim women convert to Islam. Though such marriage alliances evidently were an acceptable trade-off for certain Hindu royals in medieval India, most contemporary Hindus dread the idea of having a daughter who suddenly risks having to keep away from all future life cycle rituals (*saṃskāras*) and festive celebrations with her natal family because the religion of their in-laws might consider them heretic (*śirk*).

The main Hindu misgiving about inter-faith marriage with Muslims pertains to conversion, and though their conversion anxieties were exaggerated, they had hardly

arisen from thin air. Like Hindus, South Asian Muslims predominately marry within their own sect and community (*quam*) but, unlike Hindus, with relatively close kin (cf. [Vatuk 2014](#)). As a rule, Muslims discourage interreligious marriage just as much as Hindus do. In his anthropological study of alleged forced conversion in Sindh, Pakistan, Schaflechner explains that interfaith marriages are neither widely acceptable nor approved by certain readings of the Quran, but that marriages between Muslim men and non-Muslim women are permissible if the women first convert to Islam ([Schaflechner 2017](#), p. 276). In such cases, the groom's family and their coreligionists typically construe the women's conversion as motivated by a prior attraction to Islam rather than to their husbands to prevent violating the "cultural notions of honour" ([Schaflechner 2017](#), pp. 281, 297). Ring epitomizes this kind of thinking in her vivid anthropological monograph from a Karachi apartment building (pseudonymized as "Shipyard") in which she conducted fieldwork in the 1990s:

For Shipyard residents, the loss of status involved in "giving" one's girls outside of the community or *biradari* (clan) was self-evident. At one extreme, to marry one's daughter to a non-Muslim was unthinkable, a loss to the faith, a grave transgression, whereas for a son to marry a non-Muslim strengthened the faith and was broadly recognized as *sawah ka kam* (an act with divine rewards). ([Ring 2006](#), p. 72)

Except for the open satisfaction over marriage-related conversion, the pattern described by Ring applied to Indian Muslims as well. A central difference between India and Pakistan must nevertheless be noted: In India, reconversion to Hinduism is legal and easily doable by means of a *śuddhī* (purification/conversion) ritual, which the Hindu reform organization Arya Samaj invented in the 1920s to prevent "leakage" from Hinduism. Even if conservative Indian Muslims were to denounce reconversion as apostasy, no legal repercussions would follow. In Pakistan, however, apostasy comes into conflict with the draconic blasphemy laws that came into being under General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s ([Schaflechner 2017](#), p. 275; [Rollier 2019](#), p. 57), which means that, once converted for marriage, there is usually no way back.

As my fieldwork among Bina's family and their acquaintances progressed, I learned about several such cases from an upper-caste Hindu perspective. While none had resulted in violence or lasting excommunication, they were still agonizing to the parents. One example concerned a young woman named Neha, whose family hailed from the same Khatri caste as Vikram Seth's Lata, a non-Brahman upper caste originating in Punjab. According to Neha's younger sister, Neha had eloped with a Muslim classmate and adhered to his parents' request to convert to Islam in order to be accepted as their daughter-in-law. To mark the conversion and her entrance into their family, her name was changed to Heena. Though Neha/Heena's parents initially severed all contact with her, they missed her too much to stay firm. However, their relation remained complicated. Not only did Neha/Heena now keep away from family celebrations in which she would otherwise have participated, her parents were still alienated by her new name and hesitated to eat the food she served them even though it was fully vegetarian.¹⁶ When such cases found their way into local gossip, they generated pity rather than ridicule or anger, something the love jihad vigilantes later did their utmost to change.

Granted, not all Muslim families required Hindu daughters-in-law to convert. Close-up studies of contemporary inter-faith marriages hint at a weakening of the conversion requirement, and some conversions may well have been nominal anyway. A study of interfaith couples mainly in Delhi from 2016 documents some of the accommodations now made by interfaith couples. Based on interviews, repeated home visits, and participant observation in a support network for mixed couples, [Sharma \(2017\)](#) found that some were simply non-believers, others attended their spouses' religious festivals in ways that did not involve direct ritual participation, whereas yet others sought common ground in one of the new religious movements that incorporated influences from several religious traditions. Granted, such accommodations were most prevalent among urban professionals, could be difficult to implement unless the couple lived by themselves, and could well

only have deferred difficult choices until the couple had children. Such complications notwithstanding, the point I want to make is that accommodations and compromises of this kind were utterly irrelevant to love jihad activists. What mattered for them was which religious community the said persons were administratively recorded as identifying with, which reflects a view of religious identities as discrete, quantifiable “world religion” categories that overshadowed all the accommodations, residual fuzziness, and inclusivist practices that still can be documented by scholars of South Asia’s religious complexity.

Another long-standing Hindu misgiving about marriages between Hindu women and Muslim men thus pertained to an anxiety about minoritization. As a number of scholars point out (e.g., [Frykenberg 1987](#); [Appadurai 1993](#); [Bhagat 2013](#)), the decennial census implemented by the colonial government since 1881 reified pan-religious identities and generated concerns about majority/minority relations. Ever since the 1920s, any indication that the Muslim or Christian minority grew faster than the Hindu majority, whether nationally or within each province or state, has been treated with concern. Every societal development believed to reduce the proportion of Hindus has periodically given rise to moral panic, including Christian and Islamic proselytization, disproportionate fertility rates, illegal immigration of Muslims from the neighboring countries, and, of course, interfaith marriages between Hindu women and Muslim men. According to the increasingly apocalyptic Hindu nationalist optic, Hindus and Hinduism are in danger of extinction unless protected by a government willing to implement demographic engineering to ensure a comfortable Hindu majority nationally as well as in the federal states (see [Nielsen and Nilsen 2021](#)). In the age of digital communication, these anxieties are amplified by dystopian exaggerations about how soon the dreaded Muslim takeover of India will occur, the atrocities that will happen, and maps that show India and Nepal as the only orange (Hindu-majority) countries amidst a sea of green (Muslim-majority), white (Christian-majority), and blue (water). Those who share these anxieties consider it crucial to halt and reverse these trends. To prevent matrimonial alliances between Hindu women and Muslim men is thus also a way of protecting the Hindu nation and Hinduism itself.¹⁷ While this kind of thinking extends back to the 1920s,¹⁸ it is now weaponized by the love jihad sound bite.

A third reason why many conservative Hindus dread the thought of getting a Muslim son-in-law pertains to their memorialization of Partition. Since this may be less obvious to scholars working on “love jihad” equivalents in other parts of the world than to South Asianists, a brief reminder of this momentous event is in order. The minute British India gained independence from its colonial overlords in 1947, the country was split. The Independence movement had given rise to divergent visions about the future Independent India, and given the extensive use of Hindu symbols to mobilize the masses, the Muslim League eventually demanded a separate state for Muslims ([Jalal 1985](#), p. 4), though possibly intended as a negotiation card. In the end, however, the Muslim-majority provinces in the West and East were carved out to form Pakistan along with half of Punjab and Bengal,¹⁹ causing a territorial dismemberment that still is mourned by Indians far beyond those with Hindu nationalist sympathies. Equally upsetting were the interreligious carnage and displacements that followed. The partition had been poorly planned, and in the uncertainty that ensued, between 200,000 and 2 million people were killed and around 15 million displaced ([Talbot and Singh 2009](#), pp. 2–3). Though historians emphasize the mutuality of this carnage and the refugee crisis that developed, Indian commemorations of this event primarily recall the Muslim atrocities against Hindus and Sikhs, which perhaps is inevitable given the many Hindu and Sikh refugees who left everything behind to resettle in India. For Hindu nationalists, this bias is reinforced in such a way that Muslims—including those who remained in India—are frequently constructed as fifth columnists, potential secessionists, and violent marauders.²⁰ Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* illustrates well how the then recent horrors of Partition formed an unspoken context that augmented Lata’s mother’s horror at learning about the Muslim background of her daughter’s admirer. Given the constant Hindu nationalist recreation of the Indo-Pakistan boundary within

India itself, Partition helps turning Hindu families against prospective Muslim sons-in-law even today.

A fourth source of apprehensions against intermarriage with Muslims is the abduction narrative, which portrays Muslim men as prone to capturing innocent Hindu women for marriage and child breeding, particularly during violent conquest. The tendency to ascribe abductions uniquely to Muslims may well seem puzzling since the most mythologized abduction of all is the evil king Ravana's abduction of Sita in the Ramayana epic. Yet, in the Hindu nationalist conceptualization of India's past, which relies heavily on nineteenth-century Orientalist constructions of pre-colonial rulers as barbarian (cf. [Thapar 2007](#); [Truschke 2020](#)), Muslim rulers spanning from the Delhi Sultans of the thirteenth century to the late Mughal emperors of the eighteenth century, are commonly stereotyped as brutal rapists and abductors, a stereotype increasingly nurtured by Bollywood films as well (cf. [Khatun 2018](#)).²¹ Though India's pre-colonial history is not without instances of gross sexual violence,²² there is no historical basis for generalizations of this kind, and many scholars interpret the abduction narrative as rooted in a collective anxiety about male loss of honor. The Partition experiences of 1947 fed into this narrative. On both sides of the new border, not least in Punjab, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim men abducted women from other religious communities, whether to marry their secret sweethearts, replace their lost families, or do their bit to increase the demographic strength of their own communities ([Dandekar 2021](#), p. 2). According to Veena Das, the Indian parliament estimated in 1949 that 33,000 Hindu or Sikh women had been abducted by Muslims, while the Pakistani government claimed that 50,000 Muslim women had been abducted by Hindu and Sikh men ([Das 2006](#), p. 429). While feminist scholars emphasize the repeated intimidation of state-organized repatriation, the re-inscription of "polluted" women into the Indian nation, and the shame that made it difficult for repatriated victims to talk about their experiences (see e.g., [Menon and Bhasin 1993](#); [Das 1995, 2006](#); [Butalia 2000](#); [Dandekar 2021](#)), the relevance of abduction narratives to the love jihad conspiracy is more banal: on the Indian side of the border, it was the ordeal of Hindu and Sikh women that was emphasized, thus placing Pakistani Muslim men in the role as abductors and rapists. In Hindu nationalist rhetoric, this image is frequently extended to Indian Muslims as well, thus construing all Muslim men as threats to innocent Hindu women.

Finally, the Hindu apprehension against prospective Muslim sons-in-law was fueled by a long sequence of real-time events in which people of Muslim background committed atrocities, whether within or beyond India. Unlike Western Islamophobia, which many scholars claim to have been set in motion by Al Qaeda's terror attacks in New York in 2001, comparable anti-Muslim sentiments in India date much further back. Consider the remark made in the autumn of 1992 by the head of the household in which I met Bina, whose preference for arranged marriage I discussed earlier. "Why is it", he said, "that whenever there is a terror attack anywhere in the world, it is always Muslims behind it?"²³ Despite the obvious fallacy of this claim,²⁴ it is noteworthy for its early association of Muslims with terror. Though his statement had clearly been shaped by the then ongoing Hindu nationalist campaign for "reclaiming" the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram in Ayodhya (which led to the destruction of the Babar mosque some months later), it was also a reaction against the growing political unrest in certain Muslim-majority regions at the time. The Middle East had seen a Palestinian Intifada since 1987, and closer to home, an insurgency in Kashmir began in 1989 during which at least 100,000 Kashmiri Hindus (known as Pandits) were forced to flee, which nurtured an anxiety that Hinduism is endangered more than what scholars of Hindu nationalism tend to acknowledge. In this period, the Soviet troops also withdrew from Afghanistan, resulting in a chaotic civil war between Mujahideen leaders. The 1990s were hardly more comforting. The violent insurgencies in Kashmir and Palestine continued, and the Taliban regime that emerged in Afghanistan in 1994–95 confirmed the worst Hindu anxiety about what a Muslim takeover could look like before Al Qaida and the Islamic State emerged on the scene. Terror attacks committed by Muslims on Indian soil made matters even worse. These include the Bombay Stock Exchange bombings (1993), the

killing of five foreign hostages in Kashmir (1995), as well as series of attacks in the 2000s, targeting the Indian Parliament (2001), the Akshardham temple complex (2002), the Hindu pilgrim town Varanasi (2006), and key tourist destinations in Mumbai (2008). In short, India has long been fertile ground for Hindu nationalist generalizations of Muslims as potential terrorists, which enhanced the unsuitability of Muslims as marriage partners for Hindu women even further and produced an exceptional resonance for takeover conspiracies.

This list of factors that made Hindus hostile to interfaith marriages could well have been extended given the excessive negative stereotypes that circulated about the Muslim minority. For the purposes of this article, however, it is overdue to return to the genealogy of the love jihad conspiracy theory, this time by tracing its development *before* it was sound-bited as “love jihad” in 2005.

6. Attributing Takeover Conspiracy

Several commentators have made the point that the “love jihad” conspiracy theory has roots in the tumultuous 1920s, a period of intense religious polarization particularly in the north-Indian provinces of Punjab and United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). While there are evident continuities between then and now, it is also important to be attentive to differences, without which it is impossible to trace the discursive steps through which the first metamorphosed into the second. This section outlines this gradual metamorphosis, and in so doing, it first turns to Gupta’s much-quoted studies of how the anxiety about interfaith marriages was expressed in Hindu nationalist pamphlets in the 1920s.

As documented by Gupta (2002b, p. 244), anxieties about “losing” Hindu women to Muslim men loomed large in this period. These anxieties, she explains, were not merely an effect of census enumeration. They were also inspired by the description of India’s pre-colonial Muslim rulers in nineteenth-century history textbooks: besides emphasizing their polygamy and harems, much was made of their romances, sexual treatises, adultery, and, in the case of Akbar (1542–1605), festive use of female clothing.²⁵ As the 1920s progressed, the Arya Samaj and orthodox Hindu organizations expanded this imagery to average Muslim men, who were increasingly vilified as treacherous rapists and abductors of Hindu women. The concern with numerical strength could be quite explicit. One of Gupta’s examples is a poem titled *Chand Musalmanon ki harkaten* (Deeds of some Muslims), which had been composed by one Raghuvar Dayalu from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, in 1928:

Dear Aryans, why are you sleeping calmly?

Muslims will never be your companions.

Since we have launched shuddhi and sangathan, they have been jealous of us.

They are making new schemes to increase their population and make people Muslims. They roam with carts in cities and villages and take away women, who are put under the veil and made Muslim.

(Gupta 2002a, p. 210, see also 250)²⁶

Though the poem was later banned given the threat it apparently represented to the social order, similar propaganda reverberated across Northern India, where it ignited controversies, attacks and “rescue operations” that, as noted by several commentators (e.g., Venkataramakrishnan 2014a), have an uncanny resemblance with contemporary love jihad campaigns.

Yet there is also a crucial difference. In the 1920s, the discursive focus was still primarily on abductions rather than on romantic love relationships. Granted, the possibilities of female romantic attraction and sexual desire were acknowledged in cases involving young upper-caste widows and Dalit women (see Gupta 2006, 2014 for details). Yet in most other cases, the shame of having a daughter who had willingly eloped with a Muslim, made it more tempting to frame her disappearance as an abduction, which in turn meant that no questions of allurements applied. A telling example discussed by Gupta is the elopement of

Bimla Devi in 1938. Her father was a noted lawyer in Kanpur, and when Bimla Devi eloped with the son of a prominent Muslim merchant, converted to Islam, and married him, the young man was charged for abduction, which was (and remains) a punishable crime. With help from a lawyer colleague with close ties to the Arya Samaj, the father regained custody of his daughter, made her reconvert to Hinduism in an Arya Samaj temple, and married her off to a more suitable Hindu man. As Gupta dryly remarks, Bimla Devi herself was never allowed to appear in court. In this period, the honor-related denial of female agency consequently protected the “Muslim Other” from suspicions of deploying romantic love and allurements as part of their purported strategy to gain numerical strength.

The expansion to love, which implies female agency, does not seem to have occurred until around the turn of the millennium. Though it is impossible to trace the exact genealogy that incorporated this idea without sifting through all the anti-Muslim remarks that have ever been uttered and written, some turning points are nevertheless discernible by scrutinizing some of the books that appeared in this period. One of the first authors to incorporate the notion of romantic love was Koenraad Elst, a Belgian independent academic, Flemish nationalist, and anti-Muslim propagandist who has authored numerous books in support of Hindu nationalism since the late 1990s. Given his several years’ stay at Banaras Hindu University and subsequent PhD in Asian Studies from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven later published as *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind* (Elst 2001), Elst is widely recognized in Hindu nationalist circles as a rare fellow academic traveler of Western origin.²⁷ As noted by Nanda (2011), Elst has long mediated between Western and Indian anti-Muslim rhetoric by providing historical (often revisionist) material from India to far-right networks in the West while bolstering Hindu nationalist rhetoric in India with arguments from Western far-right networks.

As early as in 1998, Elst published a book titled *The Demographic Siege* (1998). Published by the Hindu nationalist publisher *The Voice of India*, this book aimed to bolster the anxieties that already circulated within India about the marginally higher population growth of Muslims compared to Hindus. In the appendix, Elst added a message about the alleged slippery slope of romantic relationships across boundaries of faith. Titled “Using kafir [non-Muslim] women in the service of Muslim demography”, it warns about the growth of regular courtship across boundaries of faith:

One of the most painful aspects of Muslim demographic warfare is the open attempt by Muslims to grab non-Muslim girls to use them for their own demographic ambitions, meanwhile also inflicting a good dose of humiliation on the accused kafirs. In Bangladesh and in Muslim-majority areas inside India, this often takes the form of simply kidnapping girls, or of threatening them to marry them out to Muslims. In the open market-place of the West and of westernized circles in India, it takes the form of normal courtship, with the limitation that in case of a Muslim girl befriending a non-Muslim, family pressure is used on her, or physical threat on him or both, to stop the affair; since the same is much less likely to happen in the reverse case, the net result is a considerable traffic of non-Muslim girls into Muslim households. (Elst 1998).²⁸

The continuation confirms Elst’s global concern: “The population surplus is transferred from countries where Muslim hegemony is unchallenged to countries or regions where fresh numbers may tip the scales in favour of the Muslim community. This way, Islam tries to usurp both the women and the land of the infidels as its own breeding-ground.” (Elst 1998). His advice to Indian readers is thus to cultivate pride in the Hindu traditions and warn their daughters about the dangers of Islam. What Elst added to the table was thus a budding acknowledgement of female agency. Despite infantilizing young Hindu women as “daughters”, he recognized their potential to develop romantic relationships with unacceptable men as well as to fight such attractions with the help from firm parental guidance. In this way, he contributed to expand the conspiracy theory about alleged Muslim use of inter-faith marriage to Islamize India from abduction to seduction, and as

urban professionals began to exercise more individual choices in their partner selections, such arguments were gradually incorporated into the Hindu nationalist common sense.

The next rhetorical step, which appears to have occurred a few years later, was to construe the alleged romancing strategy as a “jihad”. This concept is hard to come by in early Hindu nationalist writing. Though [Kramer \(2003\)](#) may be right in claiming Indian and Pakistani journalists to have used it about Kashmiri separatism before it gained global fame after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York in 2001, it was rarely used about real or imagined Muslim terrorism prior to 2003. Apparently, not even the tragic train fire that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims in Godhra, Gujarat, in February 2002 (which motivated widespread violence against the Muslim minority some days later), appears to have been referred to as a jihadi attack even though the blame was immediately cast on local Muslims: according to Ghassem–Fachandi’s insightful analysis of the terminology used in the local newspapers that covered these events as they unfolded, it were rather “terrorism” and “sacrifice” (*qurbānī*) that were invoked (see [Ghassem-Fachandi 2012](#), chp. 2).

In 2003, however, the same year as Robert B. Spencer launched the Jihad Watch blog in the US, the jihad concept entered Hindu nationalist rhetoric with a bang. In a book titled *Islam: A Concept of Political World Invasion by Muslims*,²⁹ Supreme Court advocate [Bhasin \[2003\]](#) ([Bhasin \[2003\] 2004](#)) attempted to warn fellow Hindus about the danger Muslims purportedly represent to India and the rest of the world. In so doing, he made systematic use of the jihad concept though his spellings (jehad, Allaha, and zimmi rather than jihad, Allah and dhimmi) suggest additional sources of inspiration than the emergent jihadism discourse in the West.³⁰ Bhasin’s book was prefaced by Praveen Togadia, International General Secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), which suggests an official sanction from at least one of the main organizations within the Sangh Parivar network. In the book, which discusses Muslim conquest and the biography of the Prophet, Bhasin makes at least 23 mentions of jihad, though only with reference to violent attacks. Even so, Bhasin was unusually explicit about the many strategies Muslims allegedly employed to gain control over India:

The Muslims within India after 1947 have recommended a plan of action for all Muslims in India to use the following 10 methods for immediate implementation:

1. Convert Hindus by every mean to embrace islam.
2. By polygamy. God himself divinely allows you this.
3. By thwarting any family planning programme.
4. Infiltrate into India from all directions to grow fast as servants of Allaha.
5. Form muslim majority geo-political areas within India.
6. Force mass expulsion of Hindus when they come close to being a religious minority.
7. Jihad is the duty of every Muslim. Be Allahas own soldiers to fight & kill those who oppose his diction as said in Quran.
8. Let no non believer dare settle where you have come into close majority.
9. Abduct women of Hindus to breed out of them your children. Hindu abducted woman are delivered to you as MALE GANIMAT [booty].
10. Attack the foundation of Hindu culture in India, their temples and their books. They will then automatically follow Allaha’s ordainment and convert to ISLAM. Know thus, that India is under attack of ISLAM.

([Bhasin \[2003\] 2004](#), p. 154; cf. [Anand 2011](#), pp. 22–23; [R. V. Bhasin vs 2 Marine Drive Police Station 2010](#); punctuation and spelling as in Bhasin’s original text; explanation in square brackets added).

Though Bhasin’s book was banned and most hard copies forfeited in 2007, many chapters can be accessed online, and the most controversial claims and passages (including that quoted above) have paradoxically become more easily available than ever before by virtue of being quoted in the digital version of the Bombay High Court verdict that

upheld the ban in 2010. However, we should note that Bhasin still construed inter-faith relationships as abductions.

K. V. Paliwal's book *Challenges before the Hindus*, which appeared in the same year as Bhasin's book, is also worth mentioning. Though it does not represent an independent step towards the love jihad conspiracy theory as such, it offers another interesting window into the international influences that entered Hindu nationalist thought in this period. His claim that India's Hindus are endangered was bolstered by quoting Bat Ye'Or (which he spells Batye'or) and Daniel Pipes,³¹ and his reference to Pipes' 1983 book *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power*, which was republished in an affordable Indian version by The Voice of India in 2001, seeks to establish that jihad has many forms beyond violence, including "[w]riting, preaching, developing militancy in the community, self-defence, insurrection, invasions and aid to neighbours or guerilla action" (Pipes in Paliwal 2003, p. 23). Though Paliwal stopped short at using Pipes' concept expansion to classify *all* the alleged Islamization strategies he aimed to warn against as modalities of jihad, his list is nevertheless noteworthy due to its inclusion of allurements:

Some main plans and policies being adopted by the Muslims of the Islamization of India.

1. To oppose Family Planning Program of the Indian Government, and to have more children by having upto four wives, at a time as per the Islamic law and increase Muslim population explosively.
2. To allure, attract and abduct young Hindu girls for marriage to the Muslims.
3. To convert the Hindus, particularly, the SCs, STs, OBCs, and other economically weaker sections of the Hindu society by all possible means.
4. To establish an extensive chain of mosques, Islamic makhtabs and madarsaas [sic] as centres of teaching and training Muslim fundamentalism, separatism and Jihad.
5. To excite Muslim youths, particularly the illiterates and poors for terrorist, secessionist and Jehadic activities in the name of Allah, in Muslim majority areas of Kashmir, Assam, U. P. [Uttar Pradesh], Bihar, Kerala and other parts of India.

(Paliwal 2003, p. 25)

As this excerpt shows, the forerunners of the love jihad conspiracy theory were clearly influenced by comparable discourses in the west, and though neither Bhasin nor Paliwal went as far as construing inter-faith marriages as a mode of jihad, Paliwal repeats the shift of attention from abduction to allurements presumably initiated by Elst.

While we have now seen some of the ideas that circulated prior to Muthalik's invention of the "love jihad" concept in 2005, it is still not known exactly how, when, and where interfaith courtship was first construed as a modality of jihad in its own right. An interesting lead is nevertheless found in Anand's research on the deliberate Hindu nationalist production of anxiety about the alleged Muslim threat to Hindus and Hinduism in 2004–2005 (Anand 2011), which exemplifies the meaning-making approach outlined in the theoretical section. During fieldwork, Anand had numerous conversations with activists from various Hindu nationalist organizations and collected many of the pamphlets they circulated in their campaigns. In the VHP office in Ahmedabad, he obtained an anonymously authored training manual published by Rashtra Chetna Prakashan and Charitable Trust, which VHP activists used to "expose Islam to the non-Muslim masses" (A Board of Experts quoted in Anand 2011, pp. 100, 161–62). Here, it is clearly stated that, "you have to build up a threat-perception in the minds of the people regarding 'jihad'. That is to be done by citing examples of Islamic excesses from recent as well as historical incidents" (Anand 2011, p. 171). In my interpretation, this was not merely an explicit call to continue the ideological creativity and enhance anxieties that served the Hindu nationalist agenda, but also to expand the semantic field of "jihad".

So, when the words “love jihad” suddenly fell from Pramod Muthalik’s lips in 2005, he did not generate a new idea as much as he summarized and “sound-bited” a conspiracy theory that had already fermented for some years. Though the neologism itself was of Indian origin, the genealogy of thought that underpinned it, reflects a transnational exchange motivated by a series of local and global events, and a gradual fine-tuning by a large collective of Hindu nationalist authors, ideologues, publishing houses, activists, strategists, social media content producers, and, since 2020, lawmakers.

7. Concluding Remarks

Had Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* been set in contemporary India rather than in the early 1950s, the self-determination acquired by women from elite Hindu families since then might well have emboldened Lata to defy her mother and marry Kabir regardless of his Muslim background. If so, she would still have risked cold treatment from her family and a loss of financial support, and as this article has shown, she would also have risked pressure from Hindu nationalist organizations to divorce her husband, reconvert to Hinduism if converted, and charge her husband for forced conversion or other violations of law. In fact, even Netflix, which showed Mira Nair’s adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*, was targeted: in November 2020, a regional leader of the youth wing of the BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha, charged two Indian Netflix representatives for screening a series containing scenes that “encourage love jihad” and hurt religious sentiments (Dwary 2020). A scene in which Lata and Kabir kissed inside a Hindu temple was emphasized as particularly provocative. Though it remains to be seen whether the lawsuit will hold up in court, its mere existence shows the extent to which the love jihad narrative has been weaponized.

To enhance the understanding of this development, this article traced the genealogy of the love jihad conspiracy theory in two steps. The first summarized what scholars and journalists have unearthed so far about the invention of the love jihad concept in 2005, its early dissemination from around 2009, and its countrywide spread from 2013 onwards, whereas the second reviewed the forerunners of this conspiracy theory since the early 1920s, focusing particularly on the crystallization of the attribution of a sinister intentionality since the late 1990s, and the expansion of the jihad concept, to denote this purported intentionality in or shortly prior to 2005. To trace this development, it is however insufficient to focus squarely on the activities and rhetoric of Hindu nationalist activists and organizations. To appreciate how the love jihad conspiracy theory could gain such a resonance, this article also delved into the apprehensions that many Hindu families have long had against prospective Muslim sons-in-law. As argued in the foregoing pages, these apprehensions are rooted in what kinship scholars term “positive” as well as “negative” marriage rules; that is, the norms that govern what kind of persons someone from a given Hindu community *should* marry as well as what kind of persons they should definitely *not* marry, Muslims being a clear example of the latter.

In terms of theory, this article relied on perspectives that emphasize the generative effects of words, speech, and new linguistic inventions. Foremost among these were the scholarship of sound bites, meaning making, and the thumping repetition of “order words”. The twist added here was to turn the sound bite concept into a verb to emphasize how the deliberate compression of a complex conspiracy theory could “chunk” a long chain of taken-for-granted thought into a simple compound neologism that requires neither explanation nor justification, thus making it come across as factual. The potency of sound-bited conspiracy theories lies in their silences, in the tacit connotations that makes it all too easy to accept them without thinking. Herein lies their potentiality to multiply and prompt political change, and it is crucial to understand how they can come to have such a powerful and oftentimes dangerous generative potential.

Funding: This research draws on anthropological research conducted in the 1990s and in the 2013–2019 period funded by the Research Council of Norway.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author is indebted to the guest editors, Roar Høstaker, and the two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments to earlier drafts, and takes the full blame for all remaining shortcomings.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The Judeo-Bolshevism term of the 1930s compressed the conspiracy theory that Jews engineered all communist movements from the Russian Revolution and onwards; the “stealth jihad” concept launched by the Jihad Watch founder [Spencer \(2008\)](#), which soon metamorphosed into European equivalents such as the Norwegian Progress Party’s term “snikislamiserings”, sound-bited the purportedly slippery slope of giving special treatment to members of the Muslim minority; the “islamo-gauchisme” concept that entered French political discourses in 2020 and soon metamorphosed into “Islam-leftism” in English, communicates the alleged existence of an alliance between Islamists and leftists; whereas the “urban naxal” neologism that originated in India in 2017, compresses the idea that leftist intellectuals who work for the rights of marginalized tribal communities support the violent Maoist movement that remains active in some of the most impoverished tribal regions.
- ² More on this below.
- ³ Unless otherwise indicated, the italicized words in brackets are in Hindi, the main language spoken in Uttar Pradesh.
- ⁴ Most of their forwarded messages—memes, dystopian narratives and videos—were professionally made and, like the Twitter messaging discussed by [Chaturvedi \(2016\)](#), [Udupa \(2015, 2018, 2019\)](#), appeared to have been produced by the BJP’s IT cell or its many volunteers, which in 2020 was expanded with the so-called “Hindu ecosystem” initiated by Kapil Mishra ([Thakur and Meghnad 2021](#)).
- ⁵ The disregard for inter-faith marriage was strongly reciprocated by Muslims: Roughly four fifths of the Muslims surveyed held it “very important” to prevent inter-faith marriage with Hindus, particularly in the case of daughters ([PEW Research Center 2021](#), p. 9).
- ⁶ These figures include responses from all of India’s religious communities and are thus not directly comparable to the PEW figures. Since the Lokniti surveys take great care to optimize representativity in their sample selection however, the Hindu proportion is expectedly around 80 per cent.
- ⁷ See [Mody \(2008, p. 7\)](#) for similar observations. The everyday Hindi/Urdu spoken in this region has many synonyms for love that range from *pyār* and *prem* to *muhabbat* and *ishq*, which are sometimes used interchangeably, but which can also reflect different degrees, contexts, and stages of love. Though *pyār* has the widest semantic fields of these four, the sense in which Bina used it has much in common with Howell’s notion of “kinning” ([Howell 2003](#)), which describes how kin relations can develop over time rather than being an automatic product of birth and blood relations.
- ⁸ Her argument reflects the cultural prohibition against cross-gender friendship that still prevailed at the time: Unless a budding friendship across the gender divide was terminated or converted to classificatory siblinghood by means of a *rākhi* ritual during the annual Raksha Bandhan festival, they would be suspected of having an illicit affair, which would damage the reputation of the girl and her family.
- ⁹ Scholars, who have commented on India’s low divorce rate, have rather drawn attention to how women who depend economically on their husbands find it difficult to break out of dysfunctional marriages.
- ¹⁰ Reservations against marrying sons “up” were grounded in an anxiety that future family gatherings would be punctured by awkward moments comparable to those [Anderson \(2012\)](#) labels “nigger moments”, which denotes situations in which civility suddenly breaks down and racial fault lines are exposed. According to Anderson, this typically occurs when the offender unexpectedly encounters representatives of an “othered” community, who in turn is off guard, and can have long-lasting impact ([Anderson 2012](#), p. 253).
- ¹¹ When the present article was drafted almost 30 years later, the couple had two self-sufficient adult children, stayed together in thick and thin, and always spoken highly of one another. To my knowledge, their most serious disagreement to date concerned the feasibility of leaving the joint family to establish a nuclear setup, which they eventually did one decade into their conjugal life.
- ¹² My field notes include the case of a Brahman mother who banged her head into the wall until she bled to protest her daughter’s unflinching decision to marry a classmate from the Baniya community, a non-Brahman upper caste traditionally specializing as traders that has given rise to notabilities such as Mahatma Gandhi.
- ¹³ In the monograph I published following my stay with Bina’s family, I noted that urban upper-caste Hindus were more inclined to reluctantly accept a prospective Muslim son-in-law than a Dalit one provided that the families’ class backgrounds were compatible ([Frøystad 2005](#), pp. 169–74), though I was unable to claim generalizability for this claim at the time.

- India's famous matrilineal exceptions—the Nayars and Nambudiri of Kerala as well as some tribal communities in the Northeast—are reportedly also moving towards patrilineality.
- Feminist writers are usually quick to resort to arguments about “patriarchy” and efforts to “control women’s sexuality”, which in my opinion are better suited to denounce the existing marriage patterns than to spell out the principles that reproduce them.
- This case is briefly mentioned in Frøystad (2005, p. 169), but with a different emphasis. The hesitation of vegetarian upper-caste Hindus to eat food cooked in Muslim-owned kitchens was widespread in Uttar Pradesh at the time. Their hesitation was partly rooted in a negative stereotyping of Muslims as too “dirty” to do their dishes sufficiently well, to remove all traces of non-vegetarian cooking between each meal, and partly in a worry that the hosts descended from low-caste Hindu converts, in which case their food would be ritually polluting irrespective of their domestic hygiene.
- The minoritization anxiety afforded by colonial census enumerations is yet token of the global influences that precede the invention, repetition, and current diffusion of the love jihad concept and its equivalents. Similar experiences across the world call for a deeper problematization of the unintended effects of quantification and other technologies of statecraft along the lines of Scott (1998), Kertzer and Arel (2002), and Riles (2006).
- More about this in the next section.
- East Pakistan later broke away to form Bangladesh in 1971, as the union with West Pakistan was both geographically, linguistically, and culturally untenable.
- Though such claims come into conflict with the Indian Penal Code, they have long been part of everyday conversation, and are increasingly expressed with impunity on social media and in political speeches.
- A prime example is Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s film *Padmaavat* (2018), based on a poem about the legendary queen Padmini in thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Chittor in today’s Rajasthan.
- Interesting historical evidence is found in the writings of Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of Sikhism, who expressed appallment against the sexual violence perpetrated by his Lodi and Mughal contemporaries (Singh 2019).
- Source: author’s field notes.
- For instance, it ignored the attacks committed by the Basque separatist movement in Spain, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its splinter groups in Northern Ireland, the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany, and the Shining Path in Peru, as well as what anthropologists of violence term “state terror” (cf. Sluka 2000).
- This fascination is also carried forth in more recent Hindu nationalist writing. A case in point is K. S. Lal’s *Muslim Slave System in Medieval India* (Lal 1994), a full-text version of which has long been online, and which the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik could thus easily quote in the infamous “manifesto” he circulated before moving on to kill 77 people in 2011.
- Gupta’s transcription of the Hindi original reads as follows: “*Ai aryon kyon so rahe ho pai pasare, Muslim yeh nahin hoyege humrah tumhare Shuddhi va sangathan kiya tabhi se dil jala . . . Tadaad badhane ke liye chal chalai, Muslim banane ke liye scheme banayi . . . Ekkon ko gali gaon mein lekar ghumate hain, parde ko dal muslim aurat bethate hain*” (Gupta 2002a, p. 210). The *shuddhī* scheme was a conversion ritual invented by the Arya Samaj to bring Muslims and Christians “back” to the Hindu fold, whereas *saṅgathan* refers to the organization and consolidation of divergent Hindu traditions to help withstand the pressure primarily from the Christianity of the colonizers.
- Other “fellow travelers” of Western descent include David Frawley, Stephen Knapp, Renée Lynn, and François Gautier.
- The book is un-paginated.
- The book was translated to Hindi by Anil Misra and titled *Islām rājñaitik vishva par muslim ākramaṇ kī avdhāraṇ*.
- Western references were however also evident, one of the most interesting of which was a reference to a “clash between the civilizations” that seems inspired by Samuel Huntington’s much-debated clash of civilizations thesis (Huntington 1993, 1996), and which Bhasin claims was predicted by the fifteenth-century seer Nostradamus (whom he terms Norstadam). If so, this exemplifies how academic texts can share some of the generative, perlocutionary characteristics as novel figures of speech.
- Bat Ye’Or, whose real name is Gisèle Littman, was the originator of the Eurabia theory which claimed that European politicians collaborated with Muslim-majority countries in North Africa and the Middle East in preparation for a Muslim takeover of Europe (Bangstad 2019). Daniel Pipes is a policy-oriented American historian and prolific writer who founded the conservative think tank Middle East Forum in 1990.

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