Tough Talking 'Raja' Turns Tribals Back to Hindus While Christians Take to their Heels
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When we ventured a guess as to the religion of central India's indigenous tribals, we innocently assumed it was some form of village Hinduism. So we were startled to learn that in some of the remote villages in Madhya Pradesh, such as Maheshpur, ninety-percent of the residents declare themselves Christian. In the districts of Surguja and Raigarh it is estimated that thirty-percent of the tribals are now Christian. According to Dilip Singh Judev, vice president of the Bharatiya Janata Party of Madhya Pradesh and a Rajya Sabha member of Parliament, "Christian missionaries are converting 125,000 people to Christianity in India every year."

Judev is alarmed by these statistics. He claims this is the outcome of years of Christian missionary activity and the millions of dollars brought into India annually to support their efforts. "These missionaries are such powers that even the central government trembles. But with limited resources, the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram is tackling this big power," he declared. The missionaries' income depends on the reports they send back to America and Europe enumerating the

number of "souls they have saved" through conversion. The larger the numbers, the greater the financial support.

Judev has embarked on his own campaign to reconvert to Hinduism those tribals who were Hindus before the missionaries "convinced" them to change religion. He holds mass "homecoming" ceremonies where such tribals are ritually reunited with their Hindu roots and ancestry [see sidebar, right].

Some have termed his efforts a "war" against Christianity. Ironically, no one but Judev has termed the Christian efforts a "war" against Hinduism. Judev remains undaunted, stating, "I have never said that I have launched a war against Christianity or missionaries of Christianity. But those who observe my work are free to use this expression. I am certainly having a clash with the missionaries. And this clash is inevitable. The only way that this can be avoided is if Mother Teresa declares that they will not undertake the conversion of Hindus and that they only do service."

Judev's basic complaint is that the missionaries are in the "business" of conversion. He explains, "We are not against the service the missionaries are doing. We are against the business they are doing in the name of service. In their hospitals they are providing free service to Christians but charge fees from Hindus. The Hindus who are unable to pay the fees are advised to change their religion. Now thisis business." In a February, 1996, edition of Outlook,a district official of Surguja concurred that, "Access to education and aid in cash and kind was easier if one became a Christian."

Both Judev and Outlookreport that the conversions to Christianity have virtually ceased. Outlookattributes this, quite ironically, to "the socio-economic development in the region." Judev has a different perspective. "Ranchi is the nucleus of activity. It is known as the 'Vatican of the East.' This is the area where, due to our influence and work, we have brought a halt to conversions. Our workers tell the Hindus in these areas that these missionaries are very cunning. We advise them to 'accept the services the missionaries offer, but do not give up your religion and culture due to the favors you receive.' We have also spread 'terror' due to our style of functioning, organization and the hard work of our volunteers. The conversions have stopped and the wheel is now moving in the reverse direction. Under operation 'homecoming,' people are coming back to the fold of Hinduism. We have remade 50,000 Hindus."

Fighting Friar with Fire

What is the "terror" that Judev boasts of spreading? It is merely the effect of his outrageous demeanor. He is determined to act, and not to fail. "We do not want spectators and directors," he advises. "We want active workers." But what really gives his rivals cause to pause are his audacious declarations. In a 1992 issue of India Today,Judev put forth his manifesto to the missionaries. It reads, "1) The Christians used to sacrifice a calf on Christmas. We declare that anyone who eats the cow will be in turn eaten up by us; 2) We told the missionaries that for every choti(Hindu sacred thread) clipped, we shall clip two throats and 3) I believe in tit for tat. We have prepared a hit list of missionaries." Recently he affirmed his outlandish utterances by stating, "I have to say certain things to terrorize

these people. If you cut one chotioff a Hindu, we will cut off your heads and offer them to Hanuman."

If he is bluffing, it is a very convincing bluff. Shri Dilip Singh Judev is the former 'Raja' (King) of Jashpur, a tribal belt in the north-eastern part of Raigarh district in Madhya Pradesh. Over six feet tall, Judev is a well built, handsome person who dresses like a military general. In addition, he is the hereditary "royal guardian" of the Korwa tribals of Surguja district. He calls Korwa warriors to attend his homecomings as protectors and as a convincing show of force [see sidebar]. To date, however, no untoward incidents have been reported at any homecoming.

While arguments and accusations assail both sides, including claims of mere political motivation, there exists a deeper dilemma. The tribals themselves sometimes feel caught in the middle. The Christian's "assistance" sometimes crosses into questionable "forced civilization," while the most traditional tribals follow an indigenous faith not quite concurrent with modern Hinduism. Massive deforestation of tribal lands has upset their livelihood, and adjusting them to modern society entails a supreme transformation. In the battle for the soul of India's tribals, we must constantly evaluate the true benefits of our assistance.

Sidebar: Operation "Homecoming"

In the words of Dilip Singh Judev

"We have decided to celebrate 1996-97 as the Year of the

Hindu. Our target is to make one lakh(100,000) Hindus. But these are going to be people whose ancestors were Hindus. We are not going to make Hindus of people who have come from Britain or the US. We are only going to invite those who changed their way of worshipping God due to one reason or another. To this movement we have given the name 'Operation Homecoming.' The response to our movement is tremendous. Just last week we have received five thousand applications from people requesting to return to Hinduism.

"We only reconvert those people in whose veins there was once the blood of Hindus. The charge that we are reconverting people who have never been Hindu is baseless. We are making Hindus, Hindu--something very harmless--and there is no reason for the missionaries to get upset about it.

"When we bring people back to Hinduism, we wash their feet and we give them clothes. We offer food to all who come.You see, we have our own style of functioning. We cannot give what Christian missionaries give. But we will certainly give what one brother can afford to give to another brother.

"Now, if we are planning to reconvert five thousand, then we take around six thousand people with us. If I were to go alone for the homecoming, and on the previous night the missionaries assigned five people to thrash me by offering them twenty thousand rupees each, what will happen? Who would not do this for this amount?

"So, from the mountains we invite the warrior class tribals, the

Korwas, who always carry bows and arrows with them--all the arrows are dipped in poison. If ten thousand armed Korwas walk with us, how would our opponents feel? It does scare them. I lost eight of my colleagues in this movement, and there was an attempt on my life. I am on their hit list. But it is no bother. We know how to do tit for tat. I have a dedicated band of workers. We are ready to face death. Please understand, these missionaries are very influential and we cannot match them."