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IN MY OPINION

Reconversion Made Right

How Lord Ganesha opened the doors of Hinduism

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Conversion to hinduism started in India as a social movement to bring ex-Hindus back into their native faith. During the British rule many Hindus were converted to Christianity. This was often done quickly and simply by having the converts drink the water from local wells or rivers blessed by Christian ministers ceremoniously tossing in scraps of bread. Many Hindus became outcasts overnight through that process, and Christian missionaries got a lot stronger. These Hindus were converting mainly because of poverty. Another attraction was Christianity's better community support system. Hinduism did have a support system, of course, but it was only at the family level.

Many of the converted ex-Hindus who wanted to come back were simply shut out by the system. The system said: "You are free to leave but you cannot come back."

Because these ex-Hindus were lost to Hinduism forever, the Christian church felt very justified in identifying Hindus as being uncaring.

Enter Lokmanya Tilak. In 1893, Tilak had taken the private celebration of Ganesha Chaturthi and turned it into a public community festival lasting for eleven days consisting of speeches, plays, musicals, songs and dances and more. His purpose was two fold: religious and political. He noticed that Christians not only got together for congregational church services on Sunday, but also celebrated holidays like Christmas and Easter as a group. This united the entire Christian community. Hindus had no festivals that did quite the same thing. As public as Diwali and Holi were, they were still not community festivals. This new form of Ganesha Chaturthi was designed to unify the Hindu community.

On the political side, the eleven-day festival gave voice to people's secular aspirations through the presentation of poems, plays and speeches that the British government just could not monitor due to the sheer number of celebrations occurring everywhere. Tilak and other Indian leaders made fiery speeches that could have gotten them arrested any other time. As we now well know, Ganesha Chaturthi succeeded beyond Tilak's greatest expectations and to this day is a chance for political and social expression in every small city and

town. I grew up in a building with one hundred two-room apartments, and as many families. Everyone wanted to participate in this wonderful festival. They were so crowded that some of us watched the programs from our upper floor apartments leaning out of balconies.

During this time some ex-Hindus approached Tilak with their problem of not being able to get back into Hinduism. Even relatives would not accept their banished brothers and sisters back, and nobody would marry their children. Tilak started speaking out against the injustice of this one-way street. He convinced many that we had a ridiculously self-destructive system that was only hurting our own people. Then he declared that mass conversions of ex-Hindus would be a regular feature of Ganesha Chaturthi everywhere, every year.

To give conversions the sanction they lacked, Tilak himself attended as many of these ceremonies as possible during the eleven days of celebration. He also encouraged other leaders and influential Hindu priests to do the same. This gave conversions the recognition they lacked before. Ex-Hindus soon came to be accepted back into the fold. Once they were accepted, conversion no longer needed to be part of Ganesha Chaturthi and conversion faded away from the usual festival routine. It became a non-issue.

All Hindus owe a debt to Lokmanya Tilak for taking the lead in the late nineteenth century in righting a wrong perpetrated not by Hinduism but by Hindu society. Conversion to Hinduism has now been socially accepted for a hundred years.

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