Hindu Conversion
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INSIGHT

Hindu Conversion

It's a hot button that everyone is pushing. While Indians are demanding that Christians convert ethically, sincere seekers from other faiths are.

Conversion is a red hot topic in India this month, what with the Pope's visit in November and the US Baptists' insulting October prayers for the conversion of "900 million people lost in the hopeless darkness of Hinduism" [page 37]. Those who know history know that the concept of changing one's faith is nothing new for Hinduism. Long before Islam or Christianity had even begun, Jainism and Buddhism contended with the Sanatana Dharma for the allegiance of India's masses. Great Hindu saints, such as Adi Shankara, Appar and Sundarar, gained fame in large part through their opposition to these nascent religions--an opposition so successful as to practically abolish both in the land of their birth. The other edge of conversion's sword figured when South Indian kings colonized Cambodia, Bali and other parts of Southeast Asia, for in those days, the way of things was the way of kings: the religion of the ruler was the religion of the subjects.

While Hindus are worried about Christian efforts to "save the Pagans," millions in the West are quietly adopting Hinduism in a remarkable and little-discussed silent conversion, a conversion no less powerful and far more extensive than in the

past. Sincere seekers in Europe, Africa and the Americas are starting to call themselves Hindu and seek formal entrance into the faith. They are the result of 150 years of Hindu philosophy surging out from India in several waves: first as scriptural translations, then itinerant holy men such as Swami Vivekananda and most recently as part of the diaspora of Hindus out of India, Sri Lanka and Nepal, and the resulting establishment of temples and ashrams in nearly every country of the world. The central Hindu concepts of karma, dharma and reincarnation are now understood by tens of millions not born in the faith but exposed to it through music, film and television, and even commercial advertising.

There remains a significant contingent of orthodox Hindus today who firmly preach that Hinduism does not accept converts. They believe that one must be born a Hindu. Outsiders, no matter how learned or devoted, must wait until another lifetime to enter the faith. Leave alone that this opinion goes against historical fact, many modern Hindu scholars readily acknowledge that Hinduism does indeed accept converts. In 1899, Swami Vivekananda proclaimed, "Why, born aliens have been converted in the past by crowds, and the process is still going on. This statement not only applies to aboriginal tribes, to outlying nations, and to almost all our conquerors before the Mohammedan conquest, but also to all those castes who find a special origin in the Puranas. I hold that they have been aliens thus adopted." Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, former president of India, confirms the swami's views in a brief passage from his well-known book, The Hindu View of Life: "In a sense, Hinduism may be regarded as the first example in the world of a missionary religion. Only its missionary spirit is different from that associated with the proselytizing creeds. It did not regard it as its mission to

convert humanity to any one opinion. Worshippers of different Gods and followers of different rites were taken into the Hindu fold. The ancient practice of vratyastoma, described fully in the Tandya Brahmana, shows that not only individuals but whole tribes were absorbed into Hinduism. Many modern sects accept outsiders. Dvala's Smriti lays down rules for the simple purification of people forcibly converted to other faiths, or of womenfolk defiled and confined for years, and even of people who, for worldly advantage, embrace other faiths."

To the born Hindu of today, the question of entering Hinduism may appear unnecessary, for by one common definition Hinduism is a way of life, a culture, both religious and secular. The Hindu is not accustomed to thinking of his religion as a clearly defined system, distinct and different from other systems, for it fills his every experience. It encompasses all of life. This pure, simple view has to do, in part, with Hinduism's all-embracing quality, to accept so many variations of belief and practice into itself. But this view ignores the true distinctions between this way of life and the ways of the world's other great religions. There is no denying that Hinduism is also a distinct world religion, and to hold otherwise in today's world is a stance fraught with risk.

If Hinduism is not a religion, then it is not entitled to the same rights and protections given to religion by the nations of the world. As just one example, in colonial Trinidad, Hinduism was not recognized as a religion, Hindu marriages were therefore considered illegal, Hindu children illegitimate and unqualified to inherit property. A great deal of Hindu ancestral property was forfeited to the colonial Christian government. The claim that Hinduism is "not a religion" weakens its position socially

and legally with respect to other religions in the world community.

Among Hinduism's four major denominations--Vaishnavism, Saivism, Shaktism and Smartism--only the Smarta lineage, represented by the various Shankaracharyas in India such as of Sringeri and Puri, does not accept converts. Smarta priests serving in American temples have consistently refused to perform the Namakarana Samskara, the name-giving ceremony [see next page] for non-Hindus by which they could enter the religion. But the spiritual leaders and priests of the remaining sects--representing perhaps 90 percent of Hindus--actively engage in conversion rites.

The hundreds of Hindu swamis, pundits and lay persons who regularly travel outside India are a relatively passive band, offering a reasoned presentation of beliefs that listeners are only expected to consider and accept or reject. There is no proselytizing, no tearing down of other faiths. Hindu philosophy lacks the missionary compulsion to bring the whole world into its fold in a kind of spiritual colonialism and cultural invasion. That kind of conversion, which has gone on in India for centuries now, has seriously disrupted communities, turned son against father, wife against husband, friend against friend. Coupled with the enticement of material gain and destruction of ancient traditions, it has destroyed lives. The Hindu form of preaching does none of this.

A direct result of hundreds of swamis and yogis coming to the West, and of tens of thousands of Westerners journeying to India, is the desire by some non-Hindus to become Hindu. The

question then is, "How?" This is an issue that Hinduism Today publisher Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami faced five decades ago. Instructed by the great saint of Sri Lanka, Satguru Siva Yogaswami, to "build a bridge between East and West," he began his mission in America in 1957 and soon tackled the thorny issue of just how to enter the Hindu fold. As with many Americans, Subramuniyaswami had no prior religion. Hinduism was therefore his first. This early experience, in his twenties, set the pattern for his ministry in the years to come. He calls the pattern "Ethical Conversion," a six-step method that results in a sincere and lasting commitment to the Hindu faith [see facing page]. The Sivacharya priests of India explained to him that it would take three generations to fully establish Hinduism in a new country. The most innovative step in ethical conversion--and what truly makes it ethical--is severing from any former faiths. The devotee is asked to go back to his prior religious leader, priest, rabbi, etc., and explain his change of belief in a face-to-face meeting. The leader may attempt to talk the devotee out of his intention, or honor the depth of his new commitment and understanding.

Why such a formal process? In 1966, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad issued this definition: "'Hindu' means a person believing in, following or respecting the eternal values of life, ethical and spiritual, which have sprung up in Bharatkhand [India] and includes any person calling himself a Hindu." While self-declaration remains the basic way to enter the Hindu faith, the VHP's 1998 Dharma Samsad meeting in America called for the development of "a process for accepting willing non-Hindus into the Hindu fold, which is an important concern among Hindus living in America." Those concerns include intermarriage, the need for a non-Hindu spouse to adopt the

religion of his or her mate and raise their children in a purely Hindu home. Another is the standing policy of most Indian swamis in the West to not formally convert their devotees to Hinduism. They give a Hindu first name, and create what may be called an "Ardha-Hindu"--"Half-Hindu"--who finds himself separated by newfound belief and practice from his old faith, but not fully embraced by his new one. The situation gets especially precarious when it comes to raising children. Are they Hindus, or what? The practical outcome in the last 20 years is that they are raised with no faith.

By setting a standard of ethical conversion, Hindus can also help alter the otherwise predatory nature of religious conversion. If, to apply the idea to another faith, every Hindu who wanted to become a Christian went successfully through an ethical conversion, there would be no claims by Hindus that he had been bribed, coerced, enticed or otherwise forced into the change. Of course, there would also be a lot fewer conversions! Finally, this is a time when religions are looking for ways to get along better. Unfortunately, the disruptive conversion tactics of missionary religions are rarely on the agenda at global meetings. By advocating ethical conversion, Hindus can overcome the single greatest obstacle to interfaith harmony.

Six Steps to Ethical Conversion

1. Joining a Hindu community

First and most importantly, the devotee mixes socially and earns acceptance into an established Hindu community. The devotee worships regularly at the community's satsangas or temples, makes yearly pilgrimages, performs daily puja and sadhanas within the home and seriously strives to live up to

the culture.

2. Point-counterpoint

The devotee undertakes certain assigned studies according to the Hindu denomination he seeks to enter. Simultaneously, he makes a formal analysis of his former religions, denominations, sampradayas or philosophical systems. He then writes a point-counterpoint comparing Hinduism with each such school of thought, carefully noting the similarities and differences. Part two of this assignment is to complete a written analysis of all former pledges or vows (such as those taken at confirmation), indicating when and why each point mentioned in those vows was abandoned. This point-counterpoint is presented to a Hindu elder for review and comment.

3. Severing from former mentors

Formal severance is required if the devotee was officially a member of a particular religious denomination, such as the Catholic Church. If he did not formally belong to any religious denomination or institution, he goes on to step four. To complete formal severance, he returns to the former institution and attends services or lectures for a few weeks. Then, accompanied by a relative or friend as a witness, he meets personally with the minister, priest, rabbi, imam or mentor. The devotee explains that he will be joining the Hindu religion and wishes to sever ties with this church or institution. The object is to give the minister the face-to-face opportunity to talk the devotee out of his change of faith. If the devotee successfully conveys his sincerity to the minister, he requests an official letter of severance, stating that he is no longer a member of the former institution. The minister or priest may

not give a letter, may give a release verbally or may refuse to give any form of release. Even in the latter situation, having declared his apostasy, the inner severance is accomplished. In the case of the Catholic Church, anyone who adopts another religion is automatically an apostate and not allowed to receive communion, confession, penance or other rites of the Church.

4. Adopting a Hindu name

The devotee then proceeds to have a legal change of name. The new name is placed on his passport, driver's license and all important financial or legal instruments, including credit cards, library cards and bank accounts. Even before formal entrance to Hinduism, the devotee is encouraged to begin using his Hindu name--first and last--at all times.

5. The Namakarana Samskara

The name-giving sacrament, namakarana samskara, can be held at any Hindu temple. Before the ceremony, the devotee informs family, relatives and close friends of his or her name change and intended entrance into Hinduism. At the sacred name-giving rite, the Hindu name is formally received, vows are taken and a certificate is signed, documenting the former name and the new name, place of ceremony and signature of the priest and at least three witnesses. At left is a sample namakarana certificate for this purpose.

6. Announcing the name-giving

After the severance and name-giving, the devotee publishes a three-day announcement in a local newspaper stating that the name-change has been completed and that he

or she has entered the Hindu religion through the namakarana samskara. The devotee should keep a copy of these announcements and all other documents related to the conversion (such as letters from attorneys and elders) as part of a dossier verifying the name-giving, as these may be needed in the future, such as when seeking acceptance into a conservative Hindu organization or seeking permanent residency or citizenship in a foreign country. Similarly, many temples in India and other countries will ask to see the passport or other appropriate proof of Hindu identity before admitting devotees of non-Indian origin for more than casual worship.

Welcome Home

The vratyastoma ceremony ("vow pronouncement"), dating back to the Tandya Brahmana of the Rig Veda, is performed for Hindus returning to India from abroad and for those who have embraced other faiths. One finds a wide range of converts in India, from communities such as the Syrian Malabar Christians who adopted Christianity shortly after that religion's founding, to the Muslim converts of a thousand years ago, to Indians converted in the last few generations. Especially in the case of many recent converts, the conversion is often superficial, and the return to Hinduism is a simple matter of ceremonial recognition. In other cases, complete reeducation is required.

There are many organizations in India active in reconversion, some motivated by fears of non-Hindu dominance in regions once all Hindu. The Masurasrama in Mumbai specializes in reconversions through a Suddhi Sraddha ceremony, bringing dozens of converts back into the Sanatana Dharma each

month. Masurashrama founder, Dharma Bhaskar Masurkar Maharaj, set a strong precedent in 1928 when he organized the purification rite for 1,150 devotees in Goa who had previously converted to Christianity. About the same time, Swami Agamanandaji of the Ramakrishna Mission in Kerala reconverted hundreds to Hinduism, as did Narayana Guru [see page 52]. More recently, two South Indian ashrams--Madurai Aadheenam and Kundrakuddi Aadheenam--have brought thousands of Indians back into Hinduism in mass conversion rites. Since the early 1960s, the Vishva Hindu Parishad has reportedly reconverted a half-million individuals through Suddhi ceremonies all over India. The VHP activities are extremely distressing to the Christian missionaries who, according to an analysis published in Hinduism Today, February, 1989, spent about US$6,000 to win over each convert.

It is vital that reconversion campaigns are followed up with continuing education, social improvement, community temple building and priest training to create fully self-sustaining groups.

For more on Hindu conversion, see chapter 24 of"Loving Ganesha", available from Himalayan Academy Publications, 107 Kaholalele Road, Kapaa, Hawaii 96746-9304 USA. or visit "How to become a Hindu" at www.himalayanacademy.com/basics/conversion/