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Vishwa Hindu Parishad Calls Their Work a Triumph - Critics Expose the Covert Costs

Christians would laud their missionary zeal, Muslims bow to their unshakable faith and Lawrence of Arabia would admire their austere desert lifestyle. The work of this VHP volunteer band is the stuff of movies - twilight scenes of whole families in rural Rajasthan villages burning former beliefs in makeshift ceremonial conversion fires that welcome the newcomers into a new theological world.

As reported in the Illustrated Weekly of India, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has for 10 years aggressively plied and propagated Hinduism - Hindutva (the rallying word) - in Rajasthan. Crisscrossing the state's wilderness tracts in inspired recruit of Hindu candidates, they now report 48,000 converts - 46,000 from Islam and 2,000 from Christianity.

This area of Rajasthan is unusual. Unlike other sections in India - where one's religious dye is unequivocally Hindu, Christian or Muslim - history, with its waves of Muslim conquest and conversion, has left the Mehrat and Rawat communities with a potpourri Muslim/Hindu lifestyle. Though Muslim in most religious customs, they also celebrate Hindu festivals like Holi and Diwali with great fervor. This quaint religious amalgam has ingeniously produced peaceful and homogeneous hamlets, free of communal conflict for hundreds of years.

Persuasive Movies, Candid Motives

The VHP approach is simple, according to the news story. Saffron-colored VHP

jeeps arrive in a village. Camp is pitched, electricity rigged up and local residents invited to a three-hour movie on legendary Hindu king Prithviraj Chauhan. They are told that they are the strayed members of his lineage and invited to a "homecoming" - a conversion ceremony. Months of persuasive talk follow. But no coercion, VHP's Rajasthan coordinator Uma Shankar states emphatically.

Typically, a modest mandir (religious center) is soon constructed for about US $1,000. It is doubles as strategic headquarters and temple. Other welcomed social services follow - hospitals, health care, hostels for the teenagers and baalbadis for children where Hindu culture is taught enthusiastically. The VHP estimates it costs them about $400 per month per village to sustain this outreach work. Then, when a family decides to embrace Hinduism, they sign a document declaring they will renounce all non-Hindu traditions. A namakarana samskara (name-giving) ceremony is given, which may include over 100 converts at a time. Before a sacred yagna fire, they recite the vow, "I swear in the name of God that I will renounce the wrong traditions that have crept into my family and accept Hindu customs and traditions."

In most cases, life proceeds much as before. But with the donning of the tilak, the subtle issues of life invariably face adjustment. For ex-Christians, death is no longer a final judgment day, a doorway to an eternal heaven or hell. An understanding of Karma introduces the perspective that each life is a classroom, and rebirth occurs until all experiences are resolved and permanent access to inner worlds gained. For ex-Muslims ingrained with an egalitarian social sense, caste concerns take on a new significance.

VHP conversion successes have not come without the pains and personal suffering that operations of this highly delicate nature sadly guarantee. In the beginning, the new Hindu converts were ostracized from the generally Muslim community. When 89-year-old Kuber Singh of the Pali village Niyabari converted, Muslims banned him from crossing their fields or drinking from the local well. Then on Holi, he and his nephew were severely beaten. His nephew died. The VHP responded by sending in a small army of volunteers, a powerful show of strength, openly threatening the Muslim villagers that any further maltreatment of converts would be met force with force. Lawyers were recruited, the situation documented, culprits tried and a signal sent out to leave the converts in peace. It worked. An aging VHP volunteer and part-time priest told Illustrated Weekly, "Earlier anyone who entered the mandir was threatened that his limbs would be broken. Today the maulvis [Muslim fundamentalists] have run away."

Unquestionably, the most tragic experience is when a family is half-converted. Like an operation stopped midway - and the patient cut open and exposed - large happy extended families are sometimes schismed into factions as new dogmas rip familial bonds. "Now we don't visit each other at festival time," says new convert Badami Devi referring to her Muslim parents. My husband says it's a sin to celebrate Id [Muslim festival].

VHP volunteers are of course saddened by all instances of personal suffering, but not dampened in their resolve to restore as many as they can to India's indigenous faith. They eagerly envision the country one day becoming a Hindu rashtra, a Hindu state like Nepal, that identifies itself as Hindu in national character and ethos but protects without compromise full freedom of religion and individual expression of worship. Their conversion efforts are to fulfill that goal.

Muslim leaders are interestingly more wary and watchful than antagonistic of the VHP's mission. Many dismiss their conversions as only skin-deep. As 36-year-old Ahmed Bukhari deputy head of Delhi's Jama Masjid says, "If you find one person in a lakh who has converted from Islam, it will be surprising. Because Islam is a religion which makes a person consider himself to be better. If you consider the taleem of Islam, I do not think anybody could be converted."

Some argue that the VHP conversion work will never be a peacemaking venture in a country where religion today is simply too tender and flammable a substance, mercilessly ignited too often and too easily by political power brokers. But the harshest critic of the VHP's conversion work is expectedly the Indian press which prides itself on its secular, anti-religious bent. Typical of their negative view of Hindu conversion efforts is the subhead of the Illustrated Weekly article itself: 'The VHP has driven a wedge deep between the Muslim and the new converts to Hinduism and encounters people who are too poor and ignorant to realize they are being used in the communal game." The VHP, inured to the press's chronically negative assessment, has enthusiastically increased its operations and diligently canvassed the families of 80 new villages in preparation for the next wave of teaching/preaching volunteers.

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