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CONVERSION

Tribals Return To Fold

Puri Pontiff reconverts dozens of villagers, but suggestion for separate temples draws fire

Become Christians," the evangelist promised, "and your malaria fever will be miraculously cured!" The uneducated tribals believed him and converted, but after many years of waiting, malaria still afflicted their villagers, and they concluded that their conversion was ill-advised. So on June 2, 2000, 33 men, 28 women and 11 children returned to the Hindu fold in a ceremony presided over by the Shankaracharya of Puri, Swami Nischalananda Saraswati, in the village of Manoharpur, Orissa State, India. It was in this very village that Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were burnt alive in January, 1999, by a Hindu mob.

The tribals belonged to 22 families, and included 12 of the 18 Christian families of Manoharpur itself. They had filed affidavits with the local administration seeking permission to become Hindus, in accordance with the Orissa Freedom of Religions Act which makes such approval necessary in advance. Given that it probably took decades to convert those 18 families, this one ceremony represents a huge loss for the missionaries. Three brahmin priests from the famed Jagannath Puri temple also attended. Heads of the men and boys were shaved, and all

were given new clothes. Then the Shankaracharya gave blessed food from the temple to each personally. Thousands from nearby villages observed the ceremony, which passed off peacefully--due in part to the presence of hundreds of police.

However, matters have not ended for the reconverts, as the Mukti Mandap Pandit Sabha, who govern the Jagannath Puri temple, soon announced that they would not allow these reconverts to enter the temple, because they were not "on a par with persons born as Hindus." This order appears to extend to all Hindu temples, for the Shankaracharya then proposed, apparently in an attempt to alleviate the situation, that new "Swastika temples" be built for these reconverts. This in turn brought a storm of protest from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, itself very active in reconverting Christians. A press release from the VHP of America stated, "denying equal status to our homecoming brothers and sisters is most reprehensible and goes against the tenets and spirit of Hindu dharma." They demanded the Shankaracharya explain his position. Both Swami Vivekananda and the great Hindu scholar and statesman, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, have in the past affirmed that reconverted people should resume full rights as Hindus.

The problem of conversion is a serious one, for Hinduism is the only major religion suffering a net lose of adherents by conversion, as the chart below from the World Christian Encyclopedia 2000 shows.