160,000 Convert Out of Hinduism in Malaysia
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25-Years Loss Result of Evangelization and Poor Hindu Education

According to estimates compiled by a respected Hindu organization, about 130,000 Malaysian Hindus have converted to Christianity and another 30,000 to Islam. While it is not possible to relate it to any time period, it is probable that it refers to the period from 1965-90. Considering that the Hindu population in the country is about 1.1 million, the figure of 160,000 converts is 6,400/year or half a percent a year.

The same reliable sources say that of the 130,000 Hindu converts to Christianity, about 97,000 joined the Methodist Church and 33,000 joined various protestant churches such as the Anglicans, Seventh Day Adventists, Lutherans, Assembly of God, Pentecosts and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Converts to the Catholic Church are few, estimated to be about 100 converts each year, mostly through marriage to a Catholic.

By far the largest motivating factor for conversions to the Tamil Methodist Church is the strong missionary work. Christian propagation methods and its effects are well known to most Hindus: free Sunday classes for children, house to house visitations, healing sessions by visiting preachers, social service in neglected areas like the squatter and slum areas, exploitation of the emotional and gullible Hindus during their weak moments and partly the social acceptability of becoming a Christian. The rural Hindus find this appealing as they are unable to socialize with their urban, educated and caste-conscious Hindu brethren. Most conversions to the Methodist Church are due to the missionary work of that church. Rarely is it due to marriage to a Methodist.

Conversions to the Catholic Church are primarily due to marriage to a Catholic.

The Catholics insist that any person who marries one of their flock must become a Catholic. The moment a marriage seems imminent, the pastor begins work with visits and invitations to the church masses and youth programs. While sometimes they tolerate a Hindu wedding to be followed by a church wedding, the children of that marriage are exclusively brought up as Catholics.

As for Islam, it is national law that a nonMuslim must convert first to Islam before marrying a Muslim. Most conversions to Islam are motivated by a Hindu's marriage to a Muslim girl. Apart from Islamic influence in schools and universities, and the peer pressure there and in workplaces, there is almost no missionary effort by the Muslims in the country to convert Hindus.

Mr. A. Subramaniam, president of the Malaysia Hindu Sangam, says that, "the greatest threat to the Hindus comes from the Tamil Methodists who train their members in the Tamil language and are therefore able to take advantage of it with freely available literature."

The Sangam plans to hold a national seminar around March 1992 to drive home to the Hindu public "the extent and true dimensions of this conversion problem." Mr. Subramaniam says that while Hindus are somewhat aware, they are not aware of the extent as well as the serious repercussions of it.

But there has been a trickle of these Hindu converts to Christianity back to the Hindu fold. The sangam holds orientation interviews counselling these would-be reconverts. While there is a formal ceremony for entrance to Hinduism called the Vratyastoma Samskara, the Sangam suggests a simple ceremony for these reconverts. It consists of a bath,' followed by the application of vibhuti or tilak on the forehead and the repetition of the "Om Namasivaya" three times.

Code of Ethics on Conversion Proposed

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism was formed some years back to bring about a working together of the several minority religions in the country on common issues. Without the presence

of any Islamic groups in the council, it is basically an association of non-Muslim religions; relatively successful in voicing to the government its opposition to the Islamization policies of the ruling government.

Now members of the council are grappling with new/old issues. As before, representatives of the Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh religions have brought to the council their objections to the propagation methods of the many Christian sects in the country, proposing the idea of adopting a declaration on conversion and a code of ethics. But that idea got nowhere.

Mr. Subramanian, President of the Hindu Sangam, spoke to the members of the council stressing that religious freedom as well as the right to practice and preach as enshrined in the constitution was accepted by all. He explained that Hindus are not against conversion per se but that the community opposed organized conversion campaigns by the Christian churches which are based on undue influence. He said that several Christian churches have devious plans on conversion, that they have converted using deception and fraud.

The Hindu Sangam maintains a file on the hundreds of complaints received over the years, he said. He explained that Hindus have no objections to individuals changing their faith if they choose to do so by their own free will. Elaborating on unethical conversion, he said that "First they destroy one's belief in one's own faith, then they fill the vacuum with their new faith."

Mr. Subramaniam suggested that instead of converting others to one's religion, all the religious groups should confine their efforts to convert the respective members of their own religion into better followers: Christians into better Christians, Sikhs into better Sikhs, etc. "In a multi-religious country like Malaysia, inter-religious harmony is the cornerstone of national unity and it's of utmost importance to therefore adopt a declaration on the code of ethics."

Christian replies have been consistent: that they apologize for the unethical conversions but claim that not all Christian churches are guilty of unethical conversions; that conversion is by God and not by man; that they have a duty to "share the faith," and that no low or document could prevent them from propagation.

The adoption of the declaration has been shelved pending further deliberations throwing into question new alternatives to satisfy the Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. A proposal to restructure the council into two tiers, one representing the Christian sects and another the other religions has been bandied around. Another is to propose to the government to pass new legislation banning conversion, following the example of the Singapore. A third is for the non-Christian religious groups to simply leave the council. Except for the Christians, the other religious groups do not have many problems with the Muslims, and voicing such problems was the council's original purpose.

Tolerance & Equality of Religions

Most Hindus tolerate other religions, understanding that there is only one God and all paths are His. But many go further and think that all religions are therefore the same, all the Gods the same, that religious loyalties are not important, even an impediment, that ecumenism is the answer and finally that conversion is acceptable. This has led to a liberalization of spiritual and religious values, watering down of sectarian loyalties, disregard for rituals, mixing of Hindu worship with that of other faiths.

A large part of the fallacy that all religions are the same and therefore acceptable stems from the oft quoted and oft misrepresented term em matham, sam matham. "Several Hindu sects teach [that all paths lead to the same goal] and need to be corrected" says Malaysia Hindu Sangam president, A. Subramaniam. He explained to HINDUISM TODAY that Adi Sankara coined this term to attest the validity of the six sects of Hinduism according to his classification. Another understanding is that Sankara states his religion to be all of the six sects.

He said that Hinduism classifies religions into three groups: agach samayam which includes the six sects of Hinduism, agap pura samayam which includes religions born in India but denying the Vedas such as Buddhism. Jainism and Sikhism, and the third category is the pura samayam or alien religions, which includes Christianity and Islam. In elaborating on these classifications, he said that, "our spiritual leaders struggled against the agap pura samayams, so what more of the alien religions?" In the southern bhakti movement, especially the Nayanars' stand against the Buddhists and Jains is clear. The Tamil scriptures. Tirumurai, record for all time the verses spoken against these religions. One also remembers clearly the Tamil saint Manickavasagar's sarcastic debate against the equally abusive

Buddhists in Chidambaram.

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