

Massive 'Reconversion' Event in India Aimed at Christians

☒ Hundreds of tribal Christians and adherents of aboriginal religion from villages in Maharashtra state were reportedly "reconverted" to Hinduism Monday in the Mumbai suburb of Thane at a ceremony led by a Hindu nationalist cleric.

Swami Narendra Maharaj's goal was to "reconvert" 6,000 Christians in the so-called purification ceremony, reported *The Hindustan Times*, which put the number of "reconversions" at around 800. Hindu nationalists believe all Indians are born Hindu and therefore regard acceptance of Hinduism by those practicing other religions as "reconversion."

Maharaj, a Hindu cleric known for opposing proclamation of Christ, has allegedly led anti-Christian attacks in tribal regions. On March 15, 2008, his men reportedly attacked two Catholic nuns, Sister Marceline and Sister Philomena, from the non-profit Jeevan Jyoti Kendra (Light of Life Center) in Sahanughati, near Mumbai.

The attack took place in a camp to educate tribal women on HIV/AIDS, which also provided information on government welfare programs, according to Indo-Asian News Service. The assault in Sahanughati, Alibaug district was followed by a mass "reconversion" ceremony in the area on April 27, 2008, said Ram Puniyani, a well-known civil rights activist in Mumbai.

Rightwing Hindu groups are mostly active in tribal areas. Hindu nationalists attack Christians in tribal areas because they provide social and development services, regarded as competition by rightwing Hindus seeking to woo tribal voters, said Anwar Rajan, secretary of the People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL) in Maharashtra's Pune city.

Kandhamal district in the eastern state of Orissa, where a massive spate of anti-Christian attacks took place in August-September 2008, is also a tribal-majority area. At least 100 Christians were killed, 4,600 houses and churches were burned, and over 50,000 people were rendered homeless in the violence.

Sociologists maintain that India's tribal peoples are not Hindus but practice their own ethnic faiths. Hindu nationalists run Ekal Vidyalayas (one-teacher schools) in tribal regions to "Hinduize" local villagers and repel conversions to other faiths. These schools are operating in over 27,000 villages of India.

Dubious Claims

An anonymous spokesman of Maharaj said the plan for Monday's event was to "reconvert" 6,000 Christians to achieve the larger goal of "bringing back" 100,000 Christians, according to the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

The rightwing spokesman in Maharashtra, a western state where Hindu nationalism originated decades ago, claimed that Maharaj and his followers had overseen the conversion of more than 94,000 Christians "back to their original faith" and plan to complete the target of 100,000 in the next two years.

Maharaj, whose followers call him Jagat Guru (Guru of the World), told PTI that those who "reconverted" were not coerced.

"We are not having a religious conversion here – it's a process of purification," Maharaj was quoted as saying. "We taught them the precepts of the Hindu religion, and they decided to convert to Hinduism on their own after repentance. They were not forced."

Many reports of "reconversions," however, have been found to

be false.

In 2007, Hindi-language daily Punjab Kesari reported that four Christian families in Nahan town, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, had “reconverted” to Hinduism. But a fact-finding team of the All India Christian Council revealed that none of the members of those families had ever converted to Christianity.

The Hindustan Times reported yesterday’s ceremony included rituals involving cow’s milk, seeking forgiveness from ancestors, installation of idols of the Hindu gods Ganesh and Vishnu, and an offering ritual performed by priests from Ayodhya, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Ayodhya is believed to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama.

Home of Hindu Nationalism

The basic philosophy of Hindu nationalism was expounded by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, popularly known as Veer Savarkar, in 1923 through the publishing of a pamphlet, “Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?” Savarkar, who is from Maharashtra, argued that only those who have their ancestors from India as well as consider India as their holy land should have full citizenship rights.

A follower of Savarkar, Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, also from Maharashtra, further developed the Hindu nationalist philosophy through a book, “A Bunch of Thoughts,” in 1966. He claimed superiority of Hinduism over other religions and cultures of the world.

“In this land, Hindus have been the owners, Parsis and Jews the guests, and Muslims and Christians the dacoits [bandits],” he said.

The emergence of Hindu nationalist ideology from Maharashtra came in reaction to the politics of social justice by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and Mahatma (Jyotirao) Phule, said Irfan

Engineer, director of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies in Mumbai and an expert on religious conflicts. Phule led a mass movement of emancipation of lower castes, mainly Shudras and Ati-Shudras or Dalits, in the 1870s. Ambedkar, known as the architect of the Indian Constitution, began movements against "untouchability" in the 1920s.

Also born in Maharashtra was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, or RSS), India's most influential Hindu nationalist conglomerate. It was founded in 1925 in Nagpur by Dr. K.B. Hedgewar.

Hindu society has traditionally had four castes or social classes, namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. While Shudras belong to the lowest caste, Dalits were formerly known as "untouchables" because the priestly Brahmin class considered them to be outside the confines of the caste system.

During British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent between 1858 and 1947, sections of the Brahmins felt the British were sympathetic towards the Dalit reformist movement, said Engineer of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies. Mahars, Maharashtra's largest Dalit people group, have been very organized and powerful since then.

The PUCL's Rajan said that the Brahmins have long portrayed minorities as enemies of Hinduism.

"Since the Dalit reformist movement is essentially against the Brahmin hegemony, the Brahmins had to react and get organized," Rajan said. "As a part of their strategy to weaken the reformist movement, Brahmins projected minorities as the 'real' enemies of all Hindus, including Dalits and other lower castes, diverting attention away from the atrocities they meted out on them."

Most of the founding leaders of Hindu nationalism, including Savarkar, Hedgewar and Golwalkar, were Brahmins. Since

communal troubles benefited Hindu nationalists politically, the use of divisive issues became routine for them, Rajan added.

After two successive defeats of the Bharatiya Janata Party, political wing of the RSS, in general elections in 2004 and 2009, differences between the moderate and extremist sections within the Hindu nationalist movement – which blame each other for the party's downfall – have deepened to unprecedented levels.

In frustration, the extremists have accelerated their activities, especially in Maharashtra, the ideological capital, said Dr. Suresh Khairnar, a well-known civil activist from Nagpur.