

Radical Hindus Push Christian ‘Purification,’ Converting Churches to Temples

Hindu radicals in India are intensifying their religious purification practices, amping up cleansing, reconversion and converting Christian churches in the state of Uttar Pradesh to turn it into a Christian-free zone. The brutal religious cleansing attacks that have engulfed the Christian community have left many Christians feeling like they are facing a life and death struggle in the world’s largest democracy.

Radically right-wing Hindu organizations such as Dharma Jagran Vibhag, Shuddhikaran (Cleansing) Movement and Religious Awakening have increased their reconversion campaign to turn India into a Hindu nation by carrying out numerous attacks on Christian communities. Mr. Rajeshwar Singh, a leader within the Religious Awakening, said in a newspaper interview that, “On Dec. 23, the martyrdom day of Swami Shraddhanand (the leader of the 19th century re-conversion movement), we will convert Muslims to Hinduism in at least 50 locations in west UP,” Singh claimed. “On Dec. 25, the day when Christians convert people to their religion, this year, we will do the reverse—by converting them back to Hinduism. In two to three years, the rural hinterland will be free of Christians.”

Asroi’s Christians and Church Converted to Hinduism

As a part of this reconversion campaign, a church in Asroi village, located in U.P., was forcefully converted into temple and three Christian families were also forcefully converted back to Hinduism by members of a radical Hindu group. Asroi is located about 22 miles from the district capital of Aligarh in western UP, which is where one of the most intense reconversion campaigns is being carried out by Hindu radicals

in recent months.

The reconversion “ceremony” took place inside the church where Hindu radicals placed portraits of Hindu gods and build an altar complete with a sacred fire to symbolically declare the church and its followers were unclean and needed purification. All of the Christians in Asroi were forced by the radicals to attend this ceremony and were told they needed to return to Hinduism or face dire consequences. Following this ceremony, the radicals claimed they had turned the church into a Hindu temple.

Mr. Rajender, a 65-year-old former member of the church told ICC in an interview that, “I converted back to the Hindu faith on my own wish.” However, this statement and the others that followed seemed to be scripted and well-rehearsed. When pushed, Mr. Rajender went on to say that, “a Bajrangdal leader from the area came to the village several times persuading me to come back to Hinduism.” He continued, “We were educated of the benefits of going back to Hinduism and disadvantage of continuing as Christians. We weighed both and we thought it is safer going back to the Hindu faith.”

Mr. Rajveer, another former Christian of the church, said, “As Christians, we were denied and discriminated against, unlike our Hindu counterpart.” He continued by saying, “We want to be treated on par with everybody, when it comes to government schemes and subsidies from which we were denied because of following Jesus.”

This pattern of reconversion is being followed by many Hindu radicals all over U.P. In the case of former Christians in Asroi, the Hindu radicals first warned them that they will lose government benefits designed to help poor people due to their religious identity. Next, they frighten these Christians with social expulsion from mainstream society if they remain as Christians. In order to ensure they didn’t violate India’s anti-forced conversion laws, the radicals likely told these

reconverted Christians what to say in case their conversions were ever questioned.

The Christians Who Said No to Reconversion

Khem Chandra, a leader within Dharma Jagran Vibhag in Aligarh, told the Times of India, "This is called ghar wapasi (referring to Christians, who reconverted in Asroi village), not conversion." Chandra added that, "in the years that followed their adoption of Christianity, he met heads of the eight Valmiki families (untouchables under Hindu caste system) numerous times to convince them to reconsider their decision."

In another incident similar to what happened in Asroi, a local pastor in Senata Safipur did not allow a reconversion ceremony in his church. Pastor Jeypal is now facing constant threats from local Hindu radicals groups because he resisted.

On the Jan. 29, 2009, Pastor Jeypal and his church faced a life and death situation, as he described it, when more than 300 Hindu radicals surrounded his church, the Glorious Church of Christ in India, in an attempt to force the Christians to leave the area. They demanded the pastor and his church members leave the Christian faith and convert to Hinduism or else face the consequences. The mob wanted to conduct a reconversion ceremony, similar to what happened in the Asroi, by constructing an altar and a fire in the church to declare that the village is pure and it's now a Christian free village.

Pastor Jeypal, along with his church members, stood strong and, with the help of the police, did not allow the mob into church for the reconversion ceremony. Pastor Jeypal said that, "I am reminded of a verse where Paul in the New Testament says, 'to live, is Christ and to die, is gain.' God gave me strength to stand in such manner, bravely facing more than 300 people on one side and very few Christians the other side."

The police had to threaten shooting orders against the mob if

they tried to enter into the church by force. When the Hindu radicals realized that they would not be able to carry out what they had planned, they left. However, the church member turnout decreased significantly after that incident.

Whatever the phrases or terms are being used to describe these acts of communal reconversion or purification in the name of nationalism, they certainly go against Article 25 of India's Constitution which guarantees religious freedom for all India's citizens.

In a recent interview with the *Times of India*, Rajeshwar Singh, a regional leader of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (.) claimed that . has taken possession of as many as 60 churches across the state (U.P.), where no Christians worship now, "as they have all be reconverted to Hinduism." This widespread issues continues to be a grave concern for the Christian minority across India. Many fear that someday they may be forced to deny their Christian faith when these radical groups show up in their village. Without action by the Indian government, this situation is likely to continue to spread, potentially forcing millions of Christians to choose between their security and their faith.