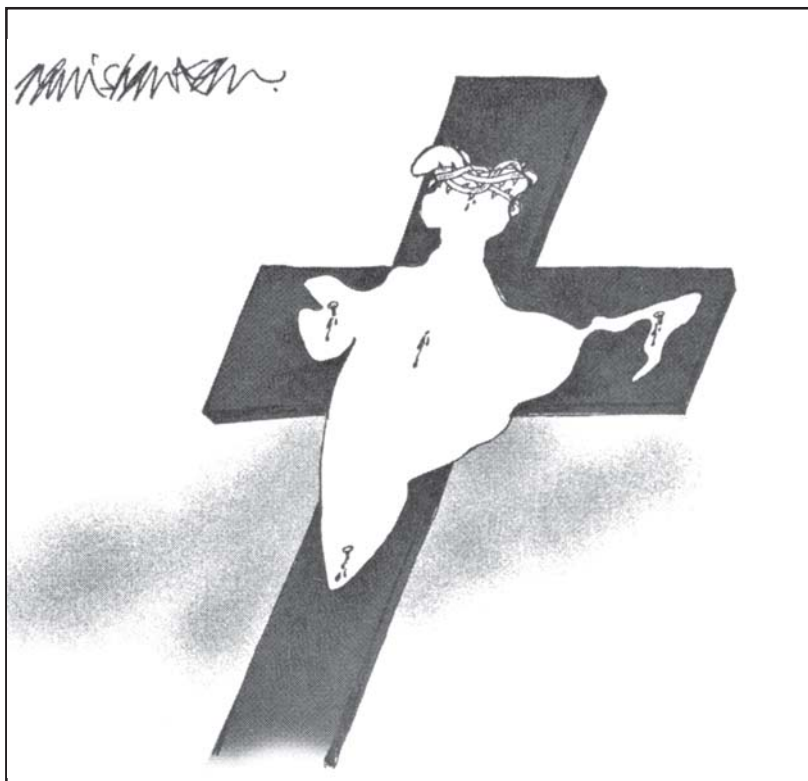


We were pleasantly surprised when a few years ago a young teenager from the oil presser caste belonging to the neighbouring hamlet told us that we should henceforth call him Michael, for he had converted to Christianity. We were equally surprised when, a few years later, he reverted back to his original name, Krishna Prasad. We asked him the reasons for his conversion to Christianity. He said that the life of Jesus Christ had a great appeal to him and that the missionaries were doing good work for the suffering and the poor. All this had a deep influence on him. And why did he revert to his original name? He had now joined the army and all his original official records showed his name as Krishna Prasad. However, he would still go to the local church wherever he was posted. A year or two later at his sister's Hindu wedding, he participated actively in all the rituals. He explained that one need not convert in order to help the poor and needy. He was one of the rare idealistic young men I came across in our neighbourhood. I hope his idealism and his urge to help the suffering have not worn out in the face of the harsh realities of life.

Aruna, a Harijan (Mala) by caste, works with us in the house cooking, cleaning, etc. She never puts a *bindi* on her forehead—something which a south Indian married Hindu woman with a living husband would not normally neglect. Except widows, all south Indian women wear a *botu*—as a bare forehead is considered 'not right'. Even widows apply sacred ash, or whatever is their relevant sectarian mark, on their foreheads. When I asked her about it, she said she had been a

In and Out of Christianity Conversions in Our Village

○ Uma Shankari



Christian for a while and that is when she started the practice of not putting any mark on her forehead. Before Aruna came to us she had been working in another household at Tirupati, the famous Hindu pilgrim centre. In her neighbourhood there was a Christian nun, a respectable elderly lady, who everybody called 'amma'. Her employer and his family used to visit this nun to listen to her talk about Christianity, and Aruna too had tagged along. Though barely literate, she was quick to learn by

heart a few passages from the Bible. One day she recited these passages before a church gathering. Aruna was awarded a prize of Rs 1,000. She spent Rs 500 of it on a feast she gave at the church for her fellow Christians and the rest on miscellaneous things. Her honeymoon with Christianity, however, lasted barely six months. She had to discontinue when her husband and in-laws brought a lot of pressure on her to leave her new faith because as a Christian she was not able to participate in the

Courtesy: INDIA TODAY

family rituals in the manner expected. The last straw in her decision to reconvert to Hinduism was her father's funeral. She wanted to participate fully as a daughter in his last rites, which were very different from Christian rites.

I asked her what it was like being a Christian. She said she was taught that one has to be very strict about morality, prayers, etc. You are not to tell lies, steal, commit adultery, you are to say your prayers every day and go to the church every Sunday. She was told if you keep Jesus Christ in your heart and pray to him all the time, your life will take a definite turn for the better. She said many people had, in fact, experienced it: diseases got cured, the unemployed became employed, businesses saw a turn around, etc. When she decided to discontinue Christianity, she went and told the nun about her problems with her husband and in-laws. The nun was very understanding and told her that it was alright to reconvert, that if her relatives were against it she need not persist.

What struck me in both these cases is the ease with which they went in and out of Christianity. Not that they ever took conversion lightly. In fact, they were quite serious about it. For Aruna it was perhaps the only period when she felt what she considered 'clean', for she had been somewhat casual in her relationships with men. As for Krishna Prasad, he

felt that Christians as a community were more humane and responsive to the poor and suffering people than Hindus. And when they reverted to Hinduism they were equally serious. Aruna recently put her son through the Sabarimalai rituals and felt very holy about it. A large number of people from our area go on a pilgrimage to Sabarimala in Kerala during a specific period in the year. It is preceded by a period of observing a strict ritual code of conduct. One is required to wear black clothes, bathe in cold water daily, pray collectively along with other Sabarimalai pilgrims, abstain from smoking, wine and sex, stop speaking ill of others, and so on.

For many Hindus, it may not be a difficult thing to go in and out of Christianity. Already they live with a multitudinous pantheon supported by rich, colorful myths. A deity can be a hero in one aspect and a villain in

another, depending upon the sect and the *sampradaya* which has created the myth. Different deities co-exist peacefully or with hostility depending upon the equations between different *sampradayas*. While some deities have a generalised sphere of influence encompassing everything in the universe, some of them have a very limited sphere of influence and they are worshipped for a very specific purpose, for example, *Saneesvara*, or by specific communities, for example, *Grama devata* or *kulu daivam*. In such a situation it is not difficult for Jesus Christ to find entry into the family altar. In fact, when I asked Jyoti, another reconvert, why she still kept a picture of Jesus Christ in her family altar, she said, "This *devudu* (deity) also brings good to us." Conversion in the upper castes and middle and upper classes would, however, be a very different matter. People in these

groups are likely to see conversion as a very strong statement as it is tantamount to an active rejection of the faith in which the person was born. This would result in public protest. But even they may not object to keeping a picture of Christ in the spirit of *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*.

Even first generation converts may feel deeply rooted in their new faith. For instance, an old lady from our neighbouring hamlet died recently. She had asked to be buried as a Christian, though she had been a Christian only for the last few years of her life. Her Hindu



ANOOP KAMATH

relatives respected her last wishes, called in the Christian priests and gave her a Christian burial. But they also followed it up with Hindu rituals! Or take Mr Aashirvadam, a master weaver. He was a farmer from a Hindu agricultural caste. He started apprenticing with a Christian weaver when he was young. He subsequently married the daughter of his benefactor and converted. He is now a grand old man in his 70s, heads a large family of Christian sons and grandchildren. He is deeply religious, prays several hours a day, knows almost the whole of the Bible by heart. It is a constant reference point in his life—the way the *Gita* or *Tulsi Ramayan* is for some Hindus.

All these cases make me wonder if one needs much force or inducement to convert. Many people including Harijans from our village undertake the pilgrimage to Sabarimala or Tirupati Balaji temple in the belief that their lives will take a turn for the better. Some take a vow to ward off a specific crisis in their lives. They save the whole year for their pilgrimage from their very meagre savings and observe the strict code of conduct of their vow entirely on their own. It gives them a sense of dignity, piety and virtuosity. The Harijans feel they are equal to the upper castes, at least in their relationship with God. Members of all castes go together in the same bus when they go to Sabarimala and mix freely during the pre-pilgrimage period. When they become Christians perhaps the processes are often not very different, whatever the Christian missionaries and the Hindutva missionaries may think or want to believe.



When I read the statement of Mrs Staines (wife of the Australian missionary, who was running a leprosy mission hospital in Orissa and was burnt alive along with his two young sons by some Hindu fanatics) that “the culprits should be forgiven” tears welled up in my eyes and I told myself: “Even I would like to convert to a religion that would help me to be as forgiving as Mrs Staines.”

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