Over 330 tribals exchange Christianity for Hinduism.

Contributed by Satya Kumar
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At least 336 tribal Christians were “re-converted” to Hinduism on October 17 in a mass ceremony organized by the World Hindu Council in Orissa. The ceremony took place in the remote village of Baridia in Sundargarh district, about 280 miles west of Bhubaneswar, the state capital of Orissa. Those who decided to change their religion belonged to several nearby villages. “It was the largest purification programme carried out by us,” Gauri Prasad Rath, state secretary of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Council, said. “Three hundred and thirty-six people from 80 families who had been lured to become Christians were brought back to Hinduism.” Indian Christian leaders expressed shock and dismay over the incident. “This is nothing but a vicious and hostile hate campaign launched by the VHP,” said John Dayal, General Secretary of the All India Christian Council, the largest Christian body in India. “We have told the state government several times about this hate campaign.” Eyewitnesses said VHP leaders arrived in large numbers to collect the villagers. They then held a mass yagna or Hindu fire ceremony. “Holy water” was sprinkled on the Christians, who numbered 144 men, 117 women, 44 boys and 31 girls. A picture of the Hindu goddess Durga, along with traditional wrap-around garments and saris, were given to the Christians who converted to Hinduism. District police chief YK Jethwa said the district collector had informed him of the ceremony before it took place. “The (converts) also gave affidavits,” he said. “All of them had given prior intimation to the district administration about their intention to embrace Hinduism.” The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act requires any person wishing to change his or her religion to give a written affidavit to the local administration. Most Christian leaders oppose the Religion Act, characterising it as an “anti-conversion law.” “What is this thing called ‘re-conversion’?” Dayal said. “The church says man cannot make anybody change his faith. I can only tell you about God’s path. It’s for you to make up your mind.”

“When they convert to Christianity, it’s the work of the Holy Spirit.” Dayal also said the tribals who were being re-converted to Hinduism were not originally Hindus. Many of India’s tribal groups were originally animists -- worshipping the sun or nature -- but not traditional Hindus. “We believe that tribals have their own faiths,” Dayal explained. “So if we are converting them, we are converting them from whatever their religion was, not from Hinduism. “And when the VHP says it is ‘re-converting’ them, they are actually converting them to Hinduism and are doing it forcibly.” Rath dismissed Dayal’s arguments and charged the missionaries with “cheating” the tribals. “They tell the poor tribals that there is lot of superstition in Hinduism. They lure them with rice, money and jobs. They have also grabbed land.” Rath also claimed the tribals had made the decision of their own accord. “These people had contacted us themselves; we did not go to them,” he insisted. However, he conceded that most of the people who claimed to be Christians and then re-converted were not actively practising the Christian faith. “Some had been going to church; some were not.” Rath said the VHP would continue their re-conversion drive until the missionaries ceased their evangelistic programs. This was the second re-conversion drive launched by the VHP in recent weeks. In September last, 75 tribal Christians were re-converted in a similar manner in Mayurbhanj district, the site of the brutal murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in January 1999. Many senior VHP leaders attended the ceremony, which lasted several hours and included elaborate rituals. Speeches were also made through the public address system in the village, warning tribals to keep away from the missionaries. The VHP claims missionaries are converting tribals in one third of the districts in Orissa. To counter this, VHP members are now staging regular awareness campaigns in the villages, reading passages from the Hindu holy book Gita and preaching sermons against Christianity. “The only long-term solution is that all these people should come back to Hinduism,” Rath concluded. Orissa has one of the highest concentrations of Hindu extremists in India, and Christian communities throughout the state have suffered numerous attacks, the Staines’ murder being the most notorious example. (Courtesy: Compass Direct)