

How to accept non-Hindus as Hindus

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Respected president and *shreddya* swamis, I have been asked to speak about if and how to accept non-Hindus as Hindus. Contrary to the popular belief, Hinduism has had a long tradition of accepting non-Hindus. In mediaeval times Hinduism accepted the Bactrian Greeks, the Scythians, the Pahlavs and Huns as Hindus. And it accepted South East Asians in Indonesia as Hindus. In either case it allowed the converts to keep their customs and even deities, but accepted them for their metaphysical beliefs and that brings us to how to accept non-Hindus as Hindus.

- In the late nineteenth century, when the vast land of Hindu India lay bare and helpless for the two jingoistic and militantly missionary religions of Islam and Christianity to convert, Mahrishi Dayananda, Founder of Arya Samaj, declared that not only we should be as willing to accept non Hindus as Hindus and started a movement to convert Muslims and Christians back to Hinduism. One of his early twentieth century follower, Swami Shradhaananda called it shuddhi movement. It was revolutionary thing at that time because the orthodox did not accept impure non-Hindus, as Hindus or pure. The former also did not want to pollute their respective castes by including the casteless non-Hindus. Swamiji had already done away with caste distinctions. The movement converted many Muslims in UP, Rajasthan and even Moplals in Kerala. Arya Samaj missionaries went to Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa and the Caribbean to prevent conversions and to convert back who were converted. They did a simple ceremony of *yagya* with a few Special mantras of purification from the Vedas.
- In more recent times, ISKON has been very active in converting non-Hindus as Hindus.
- Having agreed that Hindus can accept non-Hindus as Hindus, we need to define who is a Hindu. For the past 200 years, tablighis (Muslim missionaries) and Christian missionaries have been maligning Hinduism for its multiple Gods and multiple books and lack of a cohesive creed or doctrine. Blunt, in 1911, said that “Christianity’s strength lies in its definitiveness; the weakness of its opponent in the lack of it.” “Facile comprehensiveness of Hinduism has enfeebled it as a uniting principle,” John Seeley said in Expansion of England.
- Mahrishi Dayananda responded by taking the common denominator of all Hindu traditions, One loving but just God and Vedas as the ultimate authority of Hinduism, as unifying principles. He met the Hindu leaders at that time and laid down the ten principles of the Samaj as an outer shell, a bowl as it were, to hold the colorful salad of Hindu traditions. According to Mul Raj, the first president of the Samaj after Mahrishi’s death, there was nothing bidding on the *aryas* except the ten principles. These principles simplify our complex religion and counter the propaganda that we believe in multiple gods and our Vedas are not the word of God.

- Compare the ten principles with the few newer definitions of Hinduism and realize how much ahead of the time *Mahrishi* was.
- Once we have agreed upon the core principles or tenets of Hinduism, we need to clarify how to accept a non-Hindu - for his vegetarianism, his dress, his language, his love of Indian music or his practice of yoga and meditation. Or for his metaphysical beliefs and spiritual practices. Does every Hindu woman have to wear a salwar kameez, or speak Hindi or Tamil, or eat dosa? No, culture, religion and nationality are not identical. According to Durkheim, a religion is a unified system of beliefs, and practices that unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.” Some in the audience may argue that Hinduism is not a religion, but a dharma – yes dharma or orthopraxy or ethics/ righteous living are universal. But Hindu belief in an immanent God, karma and Vedas is not universal. This universalism is the bane of Hinduism. On a higher plane I also know that Vedic values can be applied universally, but America is a city of Churches, quoting Phillip Barthalme. Here one has to live in a well defined church. That church or religion is defined by a set of metaphysical beliefs and spiritual practices, that is, a religious identity, not by clothes, color or food. Food, clothes and language are culture. Hinduism is not a way of life as some from India argue. Hinduism is not geographically confined to India whose Hindus have Hindu Indian identity. We, in America have to accept or carve out an American Hindu identity and in Africa an African-Hindu identity. We have to accept a Hindu woman who wears a pant and blouse. We have to accept a Hindu who speaks only English or French and not Hindi or Tamil. We have to accept a Hindu who uses American paradigms and stories as exemplars instead of puranic stories. One who quotes Thoreau and Emerson as well as Geeta.
- Although many are attracted to Hinduism through cultural practices as henna, dance, or sitar, or most commonly by the charisma of a guru or through yoga and meditation but to become a Hindu they need to learn and accept the metaphysical beliefs that make up Hinduism, go through a conversion ceremony and then have a meaningful Hindu name (*naam abhipraayakum*). Our swamis out of the greatness of their hearts or for quick fame or money, in the past, were apologetic about calling themselves and the Hindu spiritual practices of yoga and meditation, Hindu and gave away yoga for usurpation by the west. I wish that they had demanded conversion to Hinduism before giving out the sacred knowledge or the sacred mantra. Imagine if only 1/3rd of the 16.5 million Americans who practice yoga had been converted to full Hinduism. Other may argue that at least they are sympathetic to Hinduism and Hindu ideas. I am not so sure.
- In mixed marriages we should not be apologetic about practicing Hinduism or asking the non-Hindu spouse the option of converting to Hinduism. We can offer concise books to our spouses and expose them to the best in Hinduism. I do not suggest persistent nagging but loving persuasion. Having a Hindu marriage as a Broadway show or putting a long tunic and dancing to bhangra does not make one Hindu, knowing about the Hindu concept of God, about the holy Vedas, or Geeta or knowing about the Hindu view of karma and reincarnation, sacraments of *naam karan* and *chuda* karma, and how to commune with God in a Hindu manner does.

- We should develop a formal system of teaching (catechism to borrow a phrase from Catholicism) those willing to convert and the recent converts. Arsh Vidya Gurukulam and Hinduism Today have done a stellar job in this regard. We need articulate and eloquent speakers of Hinduism in English like the Baptist ministers who will preach and promote Hinduism from the steps of the US Congress, mountain tops and from the university pulpits. These preachers have to be products of the American culture and not always imported from India. And we should not shy away from calling them missionaries as Arya Samaj did.
- We should treat all Hindus, new or old equitably, without judgment or condescension, and neither have we to put the new converts on a pedestal or show case them as a validation of the greatness of our Faith.
- Last, but not the least, I want to inform everyone about Arya Samaj Shuddhi ceremony. This information is courtesy of Acharya Darshanadanda, an Arya Samaj scholar and preacher.

Purification Ceremony – Shuddhi Vidhi **Ācharya Prem Bhikshu-Nitya Karma Vidhi**

The Brahma (priest) should perform the daily Yajna and toward the end before *Swishtakrit* offering, recite the following mantras with the meaning. Have the yajnopavit thread ready and give it to the person.

ओ३म् पुनन्तु मा देवजनाः पुनन्तु मनसा धियः ।

पुनन्तु विश्वा भूतानि जातवेदः पुनीहि मा ॥

O Omnipresent Lord or Wise Scholar! Purify my mind and intellect with knowledge and love.

May you purify all beings and also purify me (Yajur Veda, 19-39).

पवित्रेण पुनीहि मा शुक्लेण देव दी४त् । अग्ने क्त्वा क्तूर्ऋनु ॥

O radiant Scholar! With your honesty and integrity, purify my life, my intellect, and inspire me to do ennobling actions (Yajur Veda, 19-40).

यो पवित्रमर्चित्रयग्ने विततमन्तरा । ब्रं तेन पुनातु मा ॥

O Resplendent Creator! Purify me with the knowledge of the Vedas (Yajur Veda, 19-41).

यज्ञोपवीतं परमं पवित्रं प्रजापतेर्यत् सहजं पुरस्तात् ।

आयुत्रयमग्ने प्रतिमुञ्च शुभ्रं यज्ञोपवीतं बलमस्तु तेजः ॥

यज्ञोपवीतमसि यज्ञस्त्वा यज्ञोपवीतेनोपनामि ॥

This sacred thread is extremely purifying and uplifting. It is a symbolism to attain wisdom, which Prajāpati has been spontaneously entrusted to us from times immemorial.

O Soul, this thread brings longevity, strength, and radiance. O Brahma Sūtra! You are Yajñopavīt - the sacred thread. I bond you with this Yajñopavīt to perform yajña (Yajur Veda, 20-14).

यद्देवा देवहेडनं देवासश्चकृमा वयम् । अग्निर्मा तस्मादेनसो विश्वान्मुञ्चत्वँहसः ॥

O Wise Scholar! Free me from all behaviors that prevent me from experiencing the light of my soul as you show grace and compassion to all those who disrespect you, O Effulgent Scholar (Yajur Veda, 20-14).

यदि दिवा यदि नक्तमेनांसि चकृमा वयम् । वायुर्मा तस्मादेनसो विश्वान्मुञ्चत्वँ हसः
॥

O Wise Scholar! Whatever improper actions we might have done in the day or at night, grant me the strength of the air to overcome those impure actions (Yajur Veda, 20-15).
यदि जाग्रद् यदि स्वप्न एनांसि चकृमा वयम् । सूर्यो मा तस्मादेनसो विश्वान्मुञ्चत्वँ हसः ॥

O Wise Scholar! Whatever mistakes we did while awake or asleep, help us to get rid of them, O Sun-like Scholar (Yajur Veda, 20-16).
यद्ग्रामे यदरण्ये यत् सभायां यदिन्द्रिये । यच्छूद्रे यदर्ये यदेनश्चकृमा वयं यदेकस्या रूधि धर्मणि तस्यावयजनमसि ॥

O Wise Scholar! Whatever improper actions we did in the village, the forest, the assembly, with our senses and mind, with the working class and business people, and with anyone anywhere, you have the capability to purify us; please do purify us (Yajur Veda, 20-17).

10 Principles of Arya Samaj

1. God is the efficient cause of all true knowledge and all that is known through knowledge.
2. God is existent, intelligent and blissful. He is formless, omniscient, just, merciful, unborn, endless, unchangeable, beginning-less, unequalled, the support of all, the master of all, omnipresent, immanent, un-aging, immortal, fearless, eternal and holy, and the maker of all. He alone is worthy of being worshiped.
3. The Vedas are the scriptures of all true knowledge. It is the paramount duty of all Aryas to read, teach, and recite them and to hear them being read.
4. One should always be ready to accept truth and to renounce untruth.
5. All acts should be performed in accordance with Dharma that is, after deliberating what is right and wrong.
6. The prime object of the Arya Samaj is to do good to the world, that is, to promote physical, spiritual and social good of everyone.
7. Our conduct towards all should be guided by love, righteousness and justice.
8. We should dispel Avidya (ignorance) and promote Vidya (knowledge).
9. No one should be content with promoting his/her good only; on the contrary, one should look for his/her good in promoting the good of all.
10. One should regard oneself under restriction to follow the rules of society calculated to promote the well being of all, while in following the rules of individual welfare all should be free.