

# CONVERSION

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Leela is already twenty-one, and by our customs she should have been married five or six years ago. It is not good for a woman to remain unmarried in the village. Already the people look down on Leela and suggest that she is cursed by the gods and brings bad luck. Soon the people will accuse her of prostitution. So it is urgent that we arrange a marriage for her right away. But we are now Christians, and there are no Christian young men of our caste for her to marry. We have searched widely. The only good prospect is Krishna, a young Hindu who is willing to become a Christian if we give Leela to him as his wife. Is it sin if we marry Leela to him? Is his conversion genuine if he becomes a Christian in order to marry Leela?"

Virginia Stevens looked at the anxious mother who was pouring out her heart to her. Then she looked at the young woman sitting expectantly on the mat before her. What should she say?

For years the Lutheran missionaries had worked in Andhra Pradesh on the east coast of South India. They had many converts, but most had come from the *harijan*, or untouchable castes. A few scattered individuals had become Christians from the lower clean castes, but none from the high castes.

Then a leading South Indian evangelist, a converted Brahmin from the highest caste, held meetings in the area, and five families of Reddys became Christians. The Reddys are farmers and rank high in the caste order. Because of their land holdings, they are wealthy and control much of the regional politics.

The new Christians met in a house church led by Venkat Reddy, one of the converts. He was well educated and could read the Scriptures, but he knew little about Christian doctrine and practice. So he contacted Sam and Virginia Stevens, Lutheran missionaries serving in Guntur, a hundred miles away. They visited the new church and encouraged it in its new faith. They also spent time with Venkat Reddy to help him grow in his understanding of Christianity. The church had grown spiritually and had won three other Reddy families to Christ, but one urgent problem persisted. How should the parents arrange marriages for their children?

Indian village culture requires that parents marry their children to members of their own caste. To marry outside of caste carries a great social stigma. Those involved and their families are put out of caste and shunned. Even the untouchables will have little to do with them. But there were few Reddy Christians, and many of the new converts could find no Christian Reddys to marry their children. There were many Christian young people in the old established churches, but they were all *harijans*, and it was unheard of for Reddys to marry untouchables. To do so would bring disgrace on the Christian Reddy families and cut them off totally from their non-Christian relatives. The door for further evangelism among the Reddys would then be largely closed.

Three years had passed since the Reddy congregat<sup>ion</sup> was formed, and the problem was becoming more acute as the young men and women grew older. One young man ran away from home and married a Christian woman he met in college. She was from an untouchable background, so they moved to the city of Madras where they could hide from the censure of their rural communities. But this had caused great pain to the young man's parents, who remained in the village.

Then a distant relative of Leela approached her parents about the possibility of Leela marrying their son. Ram and Shanta, Leela's parents, at first said no, that a Christian should not marry a non-Christian. But two months later, when the relative returned and said that Krishna, the young man in question, was willing to become a Christian and be baptized if the marriage took place, they began to reconsider.

Ram was not sure. "He will become a Christian in name only," he said.

"But he will listen to us and to Leela," said Shanta. "She is a strong Christian, and can help him grow in faith. Look at her! She's well past the age of marriage. If we pass up this opportunity, she may never get married. You don't want to condemn her to that, do you?"

Ram looked at Leela, his only daughter, and said, "I know. But we have always said that our Christian God would care for us in important matters such as this. Certainly he can provide us a Christian husband."

The next time the evangelist came to the village, Ram Reddy asked him if there were any Christian Reddy men in other parts of Andhra for his daughter. He also made several trips himself to distant towns in search of a husband. But none of his efforts turned up a suitable groom.

It was then that Krishna Reddy's father approached Ram and Shanta, urging them to arrange the marriage and reminding them that his son was willing to become a Christian and be baptized before the wedding. Ram and Shanta began to wonder whether this was God's way of opening the door for their daughter's marriage. Or was this a temptation they had to resist? Was such a conversion genuine? Did God want them to marry Leela to a Christian from an "untouchable" background instead? Could they bear the shame and ostracism that this would bring upon them in the village?

Now as Virginia heard Shanta's story, she realized that the problem affected not only these parents, but also the future of the church among the Reddys. If Christians could not find spouses for their children, many Reddys would be afraid to convert. On the other hand, what did the Scriptures mean when it said that Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers? Would Krishna's conversion be genuine if he took baptism so that he could marry Leela? What would happen if such marriages became an accepted practice in the Reddy church? And how would she feel if her own daughter were denied marriage because her mother herself had become a Christian? Virginia breathed a prayer before she responded . . .