

# How to become a Hindu?

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## **Abstract**

Conversion from one religion to another is an age-old phenomenon. However, there has been some confusion on whether a non-Hindu can take specific steps or follow some processes to convert to Hinduism. This confusion is amplified by the often-heard statement 'You cannot become a Hindu, you have to be born a Hindu'. This paper will research to see if there is an established process to become a Hindu. It will aim to understand if there is a reference in Vedic literature or other historical sources of such conversion. It will also explore if current-day Hindu dharma has any process, formal or informal, for non-Hindus to accept and formally convert to Hindu dharma. the 'conversion into Hindu dharma' question will automatically elicit the question of who is a Hindu or who is a good Hindu, and how an existing Hindu becomes a good one. This paper will not address "How to become a *better* Hindu." We will limit our scope to only address the process that should be followed for a non-Hindu to convert to Hinduism.

## **Full Paper**

Conversion from one religion to another is an age-old phenomenon, and people often convert between religions. Proselytization as this process is called, is very rampant in the west, and in third-world countries where various sects of Christianity and Islam are very active. Hinduism does not teach or preach or put any kind of pressure on a non-Hindu to convert. In spite of that, millions of individuals worldwide have left their native religion to follow Hinduism for many millennia. A vast majority of these people choose to follow Hinduism by their own will, developing an understanding through a particular teacher or guru or help from a section of Hindu society.

This paper will make an effort to investigate the attitude Hindus have toward converting non-Hindus to Hinduism. We will research the existing methods on how to become a Hindu. If no adequate method is discovered, we will make recommendations for the development of a standardized procedure for becoming a Hindu and the criteria the proposed method should follow.

### **What do Hindus think?**

When asked what they thought about the need for a formal process for a non-Hindu to become a Hindu, the Hindu response was varied. A fair number of respondents respond with the following types of comments:

- You cannot be converted into Hinduism, you have to be born a Hindu.
- Just start practicing a Hindu way of life, and you don't need to do anything special.
- Just be a good person, that makes you a Hindu automatically.
- Just follow the scriptures, and you will be a Hindu.
- We never convert anyone.
- If you follow whatever religion you do, be a good person, you will attain Moksha.
- All paths lead to the divine, so no need to convert.
- Everyone is already born a Hindu.
- Hinduism is not a religion, it is basically a way of life.

If you have good deeds, have humanity in your actions, and love in your heart then you are a Hindu.

Hinduism or Sanātana Dharma doesn't want anything from you, but it definitely wants to give you everything. The thought is there in your mind then you are Hindu. There are no one to issue you a certificate. Think that you are the universal human being, not a Hindu, Christian, or Muslim. You belong to all the Religions, which have the same syllabus in different languages.

While many other Hindus confessed that there is no formalized method that is well-known or universally accepted, and yet acknowledged a strong need for one. Especially since the world has gotten so small, and many non-Hindus when exposed to Hinduism and its unique concepts, and its Yoga and meditation techniques, become desirous of becoming a Hindu.

In spite of the comments displayed above, we agree with the second group of Hindus, that a non-Hindu who wishes to become a Hindu should have the opportunity to do so. Many Hindus downplay the need for a formal process to convert someone who is desirous of becoming a Hindu. We believe these deniers are being inconsiderate of the need for the newcomer to mark an occasion in their lives that may just be the most profound moment for them. Downplaying the right of this newcomer to celebrate this occasion of being accepted into a new identity, philosophy, and way of life, possibly into a new society and circle of friends, is not fair on the part of Hindus that deny the need for such a process. Every other occasion in one's life is marked with a large ceremony, be it a marriage, moving into a new house, welcoming a new born into the world, welcoming a new employee, completing a phase of education and moving on to a newer phase, etc. So why should converting into Hinduism not be marked with a special ceremony?

### **Did Non-Hindus Convert to Hinduism in the Past?**

Though a search of the Vedas did not yield any mention of any formal process for converting into Hindu dharma, there is plenty of evidence of foreign invaders, immigrants, and conquerors that eventually got assimilated into Hindu society, and converted into Hinduism.

In the Shanti Parva section of the Mahābhārata, Chapter 65, Indra instructs King Mandhātṛi- what should be the duties and dharma of classes of people living in his kingdom that are foreigners from “Yavanas, the Kiratas, the Gandharvas, the Chinas, the Savaras, the Barbaras, the Sakas, the Tusharas, the Kankas, the Pathavas, the Andhras, the Madrakas, the Paundras, the Pulindas, the Ramathas, the Kamvojas”. Indra opines that they should follow the Vedic dictates to follow a dharmic life, do *Sevā*, take care of their families, support the learned but poor Brāhmaṇas, and be peaceful. This is clearly a guideline from the King of Devatās, Indra himself, on how to welcome non-Hindus of a foreign origin into the Hindu fold. The earliest specific recorded example of conversion into Hindu dharma is of Greeks that came to conquer India around the 4th Century B.C.E.

There were also the Hūṇas that came during the reign of Skandagupta, and ended up assimilating with their vassal kings and adopting a Hindu identity. There is some confusion regarding when this took place, as many dates of Indian history are going through revisions. The Gupta dynasty could have been around either during the 3-5th century B.C.E. or the commonly accepted 4-5th Century C.E. Ādi Sankarāchārya is famous for having converted many Buddhists and Ajivikas into Hindu dharma by defeating them in *shastric* debates. While most historians believe he lived around the 8th Century C.E., some believe that he may have been around in an earlier period. In Sindh, during the 8th century C.E., an invader named Mohammed Bin Qasim forcefully converted many Hindus. *Devala Smṛiti* was used as an authority and a guide to reconvert these folks back into Hinduism.

### **What Process for Conversion into Hindu Dharma exists?**

Our research into formal processes of converting into Hinduism, yielded six main processes..

1. *Devala smriti*, a process developed by sage Devala
2. *Shuddhi* process by Arya Samaj
3. 'Paravartan' - *Ghar Wapsi* by some organizations
4. Customized processes used by various *Sampradāyas*
5. 'How to become a Hindu - A guide for seekers and born Hindus'.-A book by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of Hawaii
6. A Ritual to Become and Be a Hindu - a manual by Dr. B.V. Venkatakrishna Sastry of Florida.

A discussion of each of these processes follows.

### **1 Devala Smriti:**

A Maharishi by the name of Devala is mentioned in a few places in the Shastras. Sri Krishna praised him according to one of the Smritis. Ādi Sankarāchārya mentioned him in the Brahma-Sutra as having authored some *Smritis*. The Devala Smriti has been documented by a researcher Dr. M.L.Wadekar and is theorized by scholars to have been written in the 8th century CE. This smriti mentions how many Rishis approached Devala who lived along the banks of the river Sindhu and enquired about how to purify those Hindus that were kidnapped by *mlecchas*. The third chapter of Devala Smriti outlines the process of how to reconvert those Hindus that were forcibly converted to other dharma. We could not find anybody in the modern day mentioning this process, so we believe that this process is now obsolete.

### **2 Shuddhi Process by Arya Samaj:**

According to the Arya Samaj, most of what they do is reconversion. They started this process in 1922 when Pandit Rishiram set up this process. The process is described as a shuddhi karma or purifying ceremony and takes about 90 minutes to complete. The converted has to recite some *shlokas* from the four Vedas while undergoing a *homa*/ Their process only converts one back into Hinduism. The applicant goes through an official process of getting a certificate of conversion from the local government office and publishes the event in a government gazette. The applicant has to sign an affidavit which states that the applicant who is currently non-Hindu, is willingly converting to Hinduism, and also has to state his newly adopted Hindu name he will be known afterwards.

### **3 'Paravartan' or Ghar Wapsi:**

VHP, like Arya Samaj has a process for reconversion for those who had converted out of Hinduism. Hence its name *Ghar Wapsi* meaning Returning Home. The process discusses the following steps -(1) Prepare the right atmosphere by reminding the ex-Hindus of their ancestral heritage, to influence them by *sevā*, to help them solve their problems etc.(2) Do collective *Paravartan* by first studying and understanding the community or the *jāti* that got converted and is being attempted to reconvert back to Hinduism.(3) Do individual or a family's *ghar wapsi* by understanding their reason for having left, to alert them about the pros and cons of converting, to alleviate the misunderstanding in their minds which led to their leaving in the first place, to assist them when they come back, to arrange for their marriages into Hindu families.(4) The ceremony itself involves getting the written approval from those converting on an application form. It should occur in the place where they currently live, or in a place nearby. A Pandit should lead a *yagya*, *Satyanarayan Katha*, *Deep-kriya*, cow-worship, *Ramāyanapātha*, Tulsi-puja, or a Kuldevi puja should be conducted. (5) The converters should be welcomed with symbolic gifts like religious books, Rudraksha, or Tulsimāla, or even new clothing.(6) In post conversion process, a coordinator should keep in contact by visiting them regularly, by arranging *bhajans* or kids' education centers, help celebrate religious festivals etc.

#### **4 Customized Processes by Various Sampradāyas:**

In addition to these many conversion techniques, various *Sampradāyas* have customized conversion procedures. Swami Vivekananda declared that conversion is not only possible but desirable. Vivekananda helped convert many people to Hinduism and said that they have to truly believe in the faith and he gave the devotee new names. Swamiji also firmly instructed that to convert followers of other religions to Sanātana Dharma, great efforts should be made to bring others into Hinduism. These include encouraging the devotees to join Hindu organizations, perform *pujās*, and read the Bhagavad Gītā. Swami Vimurthananda Maharaj believed that people should convert to Hinduism by surrendering to the Lord and understanding and believing in Hindu culture completely. Ammachi introduced Hindu dharma to people by encouraging them to participate in different Hindu organizations so the devotee becomes immersed in the culture. “The vast majority of Ammachi’s American devotees are converts from the Siddha Yoga and Transcendental Meditation (TM)” (Oxford Academic).

#### **5 How to become a Hindu by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami:**

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami’s formal process of conversion involves six steps. First and most importantly, the individual wishing to convert must join a Hindu community that evokes spiritual devotion. Next, the devotee should write a point-counterpoint that compares Hinduism with different philosophical systems in order to demonstrate a clear understanding of similarities and differences. The third step involves separation from the devotee’s former religious mentor. The devotee individually meets with their former mentor to discuss his/her decision to convert to Hinduism and their desire to leave the religious organization.

Then, the individual must proceed to adopt a Hindu name that is placed in all legal documents. The devotees are urged to utilize their Hindu name at all times. The fifth step involves the *nāmakaraṇa saṁskāra*, the name-giving sacrament where the Hindu name is received. This holy sacrament signifies the formal entry into a certain sect of Hindu dharma where a *nāmakaraṇa saṁskāra* certificate is provided. The final step to a formal conversion following the severance and name-giving is announcing in a local newspaper that the devotee has officially entered the Hindu fold through the *nāmakaraṇa saṁskāra*.

#### **6 A Ritual to Become and Be a Hindu by Dr.Venkatakrishna Sastry:**

The ritual to become a true Hindu lasts for 60 minutes that is recommended to be administered by an experienced individual. Three days of religious review during the first year of the ritual is highly recommended to ensure that the individual converting to Hinduism remains a Hindu. A ten-minute daily prayer is also recommended for the devotee to live as a true Hindu. The route to becoming a Hindu also involves going to temples and attending *pujās*. The ritual recommends the devotee read the Bhagavad Gītā in order to truly understand what differentiates Hindu dharma from the Abrahamic religions. The Gītā talks about the real science, philosophical traditions, and sacred readings involved in Hindu dharma, it is the essence of the Upanishads. As each Hindu religious authority provides a certain path of Hindu religious identity, this ritual to become and be Hindu marks the steps for embracing the identity of a Hindu.

### **Our Proposal To Develop A Standardized Process**

We believe that following are some of the key characteristics of any new process that involves conversion into Hinduism.

1. Must be based on shastras
2. Must be designed by and accepted by a cross section of heads of various

### *Sampradāyas*

3. Must be adaptable to all situations with some modifications
4. Must be a Shareware, all should be able to use the process freely
5. Must form the backbone of all processes derived by various *sampradāyas*
6. Must be promoted and blessed by multiple Hindu organizations such that it becomes the world standard
7. Must have various version - a shorter one and a longer more detailed version
8. Must create videos to serve as example of the process to help others
9. Must have no individual ownership, give ownership to the Society and Temples
10. Must be broad and generic to fit those from various backgrounds, countries etc.

### **Conclusion**

Currently no Universally applicable, standard process exists for converting into Hinduism. Non Hindus should have the opportunity to convert to Hinduism, in spite of confused opinions of some Hindus to the contrary. We recommend that as a further project, someone ought to take up the creation of a universal, uniform, process to welcome/convert anyone into Hindu dharma. A process which is based on Vedic customs, and signifies the satisfaction of the main tenets of Hinduism, and is blessed by a cross section of Hindu dharma's religious Gurus. Due to the diverse backgrounds of those seeing to convert to Hinduism, and due to the vast number of *sampradāyas* and Gurus and their unique way of interpreting the shastras, the newly developed process should be flexible enough to fit those that want to convert, and also be customizable by the various sampradayas and Gurus. This needs to be an inter-*Sampradāya* effort, and needs to be supported by all Hindus.

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