

Who's the real Hindu?

Karan Thapar, Hindustan Times

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Does the VHP have the right to speak for you or I? Do they reflect our views? Do we endorse their behaviour? They call themselves the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, but who says they represent all of us? This Sunday morning, I want to draw a clear line of distinction between them and everyone else. My hunch is many of you will agree.

Let me start with the question of conversion - an issue that greatly exercises the VHP. I imagine there are hundreds of millions of Hindus who are peaceful, tolerant, devoted to their faith, but above all, happy to live alongside Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Jews. If any one of us were to change our faith how does it affect the next man or woman? And even if that happens with inducements, it can only prove that the forsaken faith had a tenuous and shallow hold. So why do the VHP and its unruly storm troopers, the Bajrang Dal, froth at the mouth if you, I or our neighbours convert? What is it to do with them? Let me put it bluntly, even crudely.

If I want to sell my soul - and trade in my present gods for a new lot - why shouldn't I? Even if the act diminishes me in your eyes, it's my right to do so. So if thousands or even millions of Dalits, who have been despised and ostracised for generations, choose to become Christian, Buddhist or Muslim, either to escape the discrimination of their Hindu faith or because some other has lured them with food and cash, it's their right.

Arguably you may believe you should ask them to reconsider, although I would call that interference, but you certainly have no duty or right to stop them. In fact, I doubt if you are morally correct in even seeking to place obstacles in their way. The so-called Freedom of Religion Acts, which aim to do just that, are, in fact, tantamount to obstruction of conversion laws and therefore, at the very least, questionable.

However, what's even worse is how the VHP responds to this matter. Periodically they resort to violence including outright murder. What happened to Graham Staines in Orissa was not unique. Last week it happened again. Apart from the utter and contemptible criminality of such behaviour, is this how we Hindus wish to behave? Is this how we want our faith defended? Is this how we want to be seen? I have no doubt the answer is no. An unequivocal, unchanging and ever-lasting NO!

The only problem is it can't be heard. And it needs to be. I therefore believe the time has come for the silent majority of Hindus - both those who ardently practice their faith as well as those who were born into it but may not be overtly religious or devout - to speak out. We cannot accept the desecration of churches, the burning to death of innocent caretakers of orphanages, the storming of Christian and Muslim hamlets even if these acts are allegedly done in defence of our faith. Indeed, they do not defend but shame Hinduism. That's my central point.

I' m sorry but when I read that the VHP has ransacked and killed I' m not just embarrassed, I feel ashamed. Never of being hindu but of what some Hindus do in our shared faith's name.

This is why it's incumbent on Naveen Patnaik, Orissa' s Chief Minister, to take tough, unremitting action against the VHP and its junior wing, the Bajrang Dal. This is a test not just of his governance, but of his character. And I know and accept this could affect his political survival. But when it's a struggle between your commitment to your principles and your political convenience is there room for choice? For ordinary politicians, possibly, but for the Naveen I know, very definitely not.

So let me end by saying: I' m waiting, Naveen. In fact, I want to say I' m not alone. There are hundreds of millions of Hindus, like you and me, waiting silently - but increasingly impatiently. Please act for all of us.