What does ‘Being a Hindu’ mean in the Current Context?



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The following is a conversation between the members of RASA concerning the debate that has risen in the past few years in India.

Raghu: A few things have been bothering me for quite some time. This whole question of ‘Hindu’ and ‘Hindu power’ is actually becoming worse and worse because of the elections, not because of Modi or X or Y. It’s because of the nature of the electoral process. I’ll explain. If not for the elections, it doesn’t matter much what the number of a denominational group is, what kind of orientation you have towards your religion, etc. Today, with democracy coming in, people try to get votes based on two things. Firstly, to promise you that they are the best people to wield power. And secondly, to promise you that they will wield that power in a way that benefits you and your community/sub group.

The debate about wielding power in a just and fair way is the cover that no one really takes seriously. We must remember that in the first Indian election, Ambedkar lost to a "dalit" that the Congress put up. That was when the process of dividing and using caste-based differences for getting votes began. A little before that, the way the Pakistan-India partition happened was on a religious basis. So, gaining political power is the prime motivation and all kinds of methods are being used to get this power. This is where various kinds of fears can be brought in.

So, there are two axes on which voting is happening. One says "Who will use power for my benefit?" The other says "If somebody else has power, will it hurt me?" And therefore, the question is not just about which religion you belong to, but whether the religion you belong to is going to become the basis of how power is used.

The situation today is even more complicated because elections are influenced by forces that are covert and located anywhere in the world. It is a whole global phenomenon. For instance, Cambridge Analytica has been caught interfering in the US elections and Brexit. This makes it very clear that there are vested interests that are going to play up all these differences between people. The people who get elected are going to be playing the game, whatever the game is.

So, the question today of 'What does it mean to be a Hindu?' has taken on implications that are not in the realm of religion and philosophy any more. And hence a lot of confusion.

Let us step back a bit and see how Hinduism has grown in our land. Cultural stability and peace have been experienced for a long time. The political maneuverings in the courts of kings and their battles have not affected the cultural substratum. The studies of Dharampal and others point to the importance of the village and the village republic. There has been a huge cultural bed on which political activities have happened, none of which have had a very strong religious base. Even during the Muslim invasion there have been mercenary forces that fought on both sides. For instance, the Vijayanagar kings had Muslims in very prominent positions in their army. And one of the reasons they lost is because of defections and betrayals. Similarly, there were Hindus who fought in Tipu Sultan's army and so on. So, there has been a distance between political processes (largely kingdoms) and the religious processes. This is my reading. So, what do you people think about this?

Anita: I was recently thinking about the history of democracy, about the political process we followed when we had kings and kingdoms and so on. I was wondering where things started becoming so polarized with respect to the political party system. Satish and I were talking about the French Revolution and how that was the starting point of democracy, etc. My

questions: 1. Are we idealizing the past by saying kingdoms were all fine and there was no political issues? 2. How are capitalism and democracy intertwined? I see that capitalism plays the role of the mercenaries that you talked about, and therefore things are much more problematic.

Raghu: On #1. I'm not saying there were no political issues. I'm saying that the political formation, the political structure did not make it so important to know how many people in my kingdom are Hindu, Muslim and so on. On #2. That's interesting! I think that the issue of what belief a person in my kingdom had became important only after the Jaizya tax was imposed. Until then, there was no division at an every-day transactional level at all. Once a discriminatory tax is imposed and alien modes of land and property control get established, the old status quo gets badly disrupted. If you read Dharampal, it is clear that power was vested with the village republic. There was some buffering between the occupiers and the people. We were still one of the richest countries in the world until the British came. Until then, the village and the local mandalas held a lot of power over the resources. These structures were severely damaged by the time the British left and we were driven to penury. But I think democracy has made it much worse.

Anita: The power held by the local panchayats would have then really compensated for the centralized authority that the king would have had, to some extent.

Raghu: According to Dharampal and Claude Alvares, taxes were paid only when there were surpluses. That gave tremendous power to local authorities. This was changed to some extent when the Muslim rulers introduced the zamindari system, and then the Jaizya tax. And then, the British dismantling our economic, social and political structures turned the power equation completely in favour of a centralised state. And then comes in the worst thing: 'democracy'. Or more precisely, the effects of the autocratic capitalist system manipulating and driving the democratic processes, which play on the fears and ideas of safety and belonging to create vote banks.

Naveen: Raghu, the hypothesis you make about political and cultural spaces being much more separate in the past resonates with me. It must have been so because economies were much more decentralized, self-sufficient, and localized. Resources, culture and everything in general was a lot more local. Because of this strong anchorage in the local, whether the king lived or died (as long as the boundaries were safe and governance was reasonably good), it didn't matter too much for the people. Over the last 50 years, capitalism and democracy seem to have gone in two different directions. Capitalism has become more and more hypercapitalism and autocratic, while democracies have weakened more and more. If they had both gotten stronger in a healthy way, there might have been some hope.

Raghu: Let's examine this thesis carefully. If I understand the old structures right (and I'm coming from my discussions with Ganapathi Stapathi and Dharampal), most of what are called caste structures today were socio-economic structures. So, there was a local Viswakarma who dealt with the local reality and local belonging in a way that was in accordance with the rules of the larger guild. Many aspects of life were co-located like one's belonging, family, immediate cultural and religious affiliations, profession and so on. And across India, there seems to have been a horizontal pulling together of guilds. It is there in Europe also. But in India, these guilds have been very powerful. And each guild had a God. The Viswakarma community had a God who was called Viswakarma. The story of genesis, its culture and socio economic structure were held in myths and practices that reflected a specificity of the community while retaining the anchorage in the Hindu way. Viswakarma is related to Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, and these Gods in turn are anchored in Brahman. So, at one level, it anchors itself in a shared cultural base of the larger populous. The interface with others was defined by the idea *ahimsa paramodharmaha* (ahimsa is the primary anchor of dharma).

People governed themselves by forming panchayats at the local level and as the sub-units of Guilds. And at a very high level, all differences dissolve in the belonging to the Kingdom. The kings don't seem to have impacted the local structures all that much. And from there, we have gone into more and more oppressive structures where your belonging and the God you pay allegiance to have moved from being personal to political questions. In democracies, this process is getting much worse. That's the movement that I'm sensing. Business organisations are more like kingdoms; they don't seem to have answerability or accountability to the people, the nations, or the earth. On the other hand, they have huge influence due to the importance of money in democratic processes.

Naveen: MNC's especially.

Raghu: Why only MNC? Any organization is fundamentally non-democratic. There might be some mention of triple bottom line and so on. But the fundamental idea is to go colonise a market and extract as much profit as possible from the market. If the person on top decides that, in his long-term interest, he needs to be more compassionate/conscious, then that's fine. But if somebody like Jeff Bezos or the head of Walmart simply says "The profit I make is the only dimension really, and if people have to live on the edge to come and work in my organisation, it doesn't matter", it's a completely autocratic kingdom.

Naveen: And the more a democracy weakens, the more powerful these feudal lords become.

Raghu: Of course! Now that you bring it up, my feeling is that they will want to keep the

façade of a democracy going, because otherwise they will become accountable.

Naveen: Yeah. They pull strings from the back.

Raghu: Yeah. So, now all the social accountability, all the fall-outs of negative capitalism, have to be borne by the State. Isn't that how economic viability is calculated? Economic theory does not include any accountability for anything except what is held within the boundaries of the organization. Environmental and social impacts are even given a nice name called 'externalities'. So, you don't have to pay for the cost of coal being recreated. You just pay for the digging up and transporting of the coal.

Anita: Raghu, from what you say, it sounds like guilds are a different way of organizing than organisations today.

Raghu: Of course. Guilds (like the Viswakarma guild) were not organizations so much as self governing groups of people who became very accomplished in certain sets of skills. If some king needed their services and called them, they would go and serve him. And depending on which Stapati was called, he would call a group of people and set up something like a project team. After the project is over, the group gets disbanded. So the guild has to make sure that it stays vibrant.

Naveen: We largely resonate with what you are offering, Raghu. How do we build on this?

Anita: It seems like the personal and the social were intertwined which is not the case in today's context. When you said the Vishwakarma guild had its own Gods/energies that they believed in and that was part of the larger whole, somewhere the connection between the individual and the whole was built-in at different levels. But, now we seem to really want to break up the whole into smaller and smaller individuals devoid of that connection.

Raghu: Yes. A guild has a very high investment in creating networks that nourish and sustain the whole ecology. So there is a large community of people who have certain skills. These skills need to be developed, members of the guild need to be supported in times when there is no work, and a community that offers emotional anchorage needs to be developed. The Vishwakarma community has the same four role divisions that are referred to as castes. Some people look after the books, texts and the theory. Some are the skilled Stapatis, who take on the leadership in the design and architecture of the buildings. Some are more business-oriented and handle the business affairs of community. And many are skilled workmen who offer the support. If you look at sculpting as the central job, there are hundreds of people who are making the *uli* (the tools). Thus, a whole infrastructure / support structure

that gets built around the central skill. Then the important thing is that it disbands after that project. The same set of people don't necessarily get together for the next project, but the same set of people live together as a community.

The closest to this form of organization to guilds are bodies like that of the Chartered Accountants (CAs). But if somebody goes out of job, the Association of CAs doesn't look after them. It builds only skill infrastructure ignoring the community emotional infrastructure. Today an organization wants only an individual without any of these connections because it is then very difficult for an organization to manipulate a person who has strong emotional connections. The allegiance of the person has to be to the profit making purpose of the organization. It picks skilled individuals out of their context saying, "You work according to my rules. You are contractually bound to the organization". This contract is blind to the person's beliefs, religious affiliations, the entire community feeling and the like, so a whole part of the individual is supposed to be kept completely out.

Anita: Connecting this to the political system then, perhaps it comes in and says "Here is the system where you can assert that part of you which is not getting taken care of by the organisation".

Raghu: No. The political system is too large and distant, its major concern is governance. This is where I think the difference between the Hindu and the Abrahamic paradigm comes in. The Church, Islamic or Jewish structures are very hierarchical, controlled and strongly political organisations, but they provide the intermediate community. There is one book, one Pope etc. There is no such parallel in the Hindu paradigm. So the older communities which were loosely held without any external structural power that were the fall back have become dispersed. Where the community belonging is weak, the family is the only support. Today, what the Hindutva forces are trying to do is to say, 'Hey Hindus, unless you also have a structure that is similar to Abhrahamic structures, unless you also learn how to politicise yourselves, you are going to be unsafe'. Many of us have a problem with something like this, because our understanding of Hinduism has a very different base. It comes from this long tradition of local governance, Panchayat Raj, etc. You go and pray to any God you want. It doesn't make a difference so long as Ahimsa is the *paramodharma*. If the message (in this case, the Hindutva call) doesn't sit well with me where I have to make a strong political assertion based on religious belonging, it goes against my deep rooted ways immediately, how, then, do I act as a Hindu today? This is a double bind. *If I don't act, I am damned; if I do, I go against my grain!* We see what is happening today. Temple rules will get meddled with, Hindus get converted and so on. I thinks these acts are fundamentally *himsa*. As a Hindu, I am revolted by this idea of somebody not being given complete freedom to follow their own ideas, beliefs, non-beliefs, philosophy, etc. The current context is pushing , often violating

this boundary.

Naveen: Urgency is because of certain political danger that is clearly present.

Raghu: Yes. And how people have used the political power in the past. For instance, Rajat Mitra talks about what has happened to the Pandits of Kashmir. It does scare me to see that neither the Government nor any Hindu Organization has prevented this from happening. Whereas, parallely we know the destruction of temples happened in Pakistan where the Hindu populations, even Ahmadias and other non-Muslims, have been oppressed really badly. These contrasts make me anxious. So what do I do? Do I 'other' these people, or do I not? What does *ahimsa* mean in this context? You get the double bind?

Naveen, Anita: Yes, Raghu.

Naveen: I think this is the huge double-bind that every conscious thinking Hindu is faced with. If I am just reactive, I jump into the Hindutva brigade in some sense. If, as a self-reflective Hindu, I ask the question 'in doing what I am doing, what am I really doing?' I seem to find no shared ground for action.

Raghu: Yes. For instance, when I challenge a Christian friend of mine on certain beliefs of hers, she will sooner or later fall back and say "This is what the Pope has said". Recently a Pope said "We ought to start understanding other religions." She laughed and said "I have now been given permission to interact with Hindus as though they are human beings. Until now, the idea was that if somebody is different from me, he/she has to be saved." How do I reconcile that with some of my fundamental beliefs? One which says go inward and find your path; all Gods are forms created by man. I believe in *syAdwad;* nobody really knows. And for every statement that you can make from the brain, there are multiple other possibilities. So "Maybe there is God" is the fundamental Hindu statement. It is very difficult to say that there is God because a book says so.

Nasadya Suktam in the Vedas says that, even the Gods may not know how it all started. It is very clear that the God that we describe is an idea that the human being makes, and that any conception can never really touch the Reality. After we say this, we actually give a lot of space for self determination. The whole karma theory actually has its roots in the freedom to make choices. I, then, become responsible for what I do.

And then when someone comes in and talks about very clear binaries like "hell and heaven", "you and me", "if you cannot be with me you go to hell", etc. how do I answer this question? So the inherent beauty and strength of Hinduism then becomes the weakness.

Islam also says that Allah cannot be described or represented in a human form. But then the preacher stands there and says “I know Allah and Allah says this. So, just listen to me.” What logic allows the priest to say this? Whereas our priest cannot say this. In fact, I don’t see how any priest can say this. The human brain is very limited and how does he know? But in their religions, it is taken for granted that the priest who stands there actually represents God, and that God is very concrete. According to this priest, if you are with him you are fine. But if you are not with him, then God himself is going to punish you. It makes for a very strong political in-group solidarity and out-group violence which the Hindu mind cannot comprehend or hold. If I am really a Hindu, how do I grasp this statement? Because it is fundamentally false! So the only way I can deal with it is to try and help this Christian friend for example to question very basic beliefs that she has, this is to question belief itself. And that is a very contentious conversation to get into.

If a mind cannot grasp this fundamental limitation of being human with grace, it holds the fundamental limitation of being human with fear and therefore says “This is my belief.” It is a mind that cannot value internal freedom and choice. So what can I do as a Hindu? I can only say this is my clan, community, *deivam,* etc. and leave it open. These are all the most beautiful things about being Hindu. What bothers me is that these very beautiful things are challenged by questions like “Do you belong here? Do you belong there? Who will you vote for?” etc. Thus the Hindu way becomes a weakness and looks like a dispersed group confronting a structured force.

Priya: I completely resonate with all that has been spoken. I have been sitting with a lot of discomfort in the last few mins about something. When I say ‘I’m a Hindu’ (what I’m thinking or doing as a Hindu) it is not a religious statement. It is a statement made from an ethnogeographic location which encompasses the economic system, way of life, the cultural ground, foundation etc.

Raghu: Yes. It is being forced into being identified as a religion. That is exactly the point.

Priya: Then, it is a consequence of being colonised that we get in to this discussion where we make statements out of being a Hindu as being a religious thing.

Raghu: Not exactly. It’s because of the political democratic processes we have embraced. It is not just the colonisation. The colonisation does other things that we will come to later.

In the political scene today, there is a strong attempt to consolidate the Hindu vote. Behind that there is a huge angst (which I also share) that says ‘So far our governance processes have not been fair to the Hindu’. Somebody can argue with data or no data. But I strongly

feel that, for many reasons, it hasn't been fair. One reason has also been the stance that the early statesmen took saying "We are the elder brother, and so we will try to make our younger brothers feel comfortable". That stance seems to have backfired. Today there is a strong feeling in the average Hindu saying "Hey, this is my country and if anything goes wrong in India, irrespective of whoever creates the problem, the Hindu majority is made to answer for it. This basically means that, in everybody's mind, this is Hindustan. Does anybody other than a Hindu actually feel strongly for India? Why don't they stand with me for equity?".

Priya: Yes. If I give in to that and also talk from there, then it means that I am not locating myself on the deeper ground which is not a religious one, no?

Raghu: Yes, and that is exactly the double-bind that I am talking about. *If I have to really value what is Hindu, I have to pay a huge price. And I am being forced to pay this price because of the political context of today.*

Naveen: I feel the answer lies in the names of some of David Frawley's books, *Awaken Bharata* and *Arise Arjuna*. I think we need to discover that Arjuna and deeper Bharatha space. Unfortunately the Right is doing it reactively. We need to do what they are doing but from a deeper holonic space, where all tools and weapons are on the table. We need to fight and also nourish like Arjuna. We fight where we need to, nourish where we need to, and build bridges where we need to. All options are on the table but we use them with wisdom and the deeper anchorage rather than reactivity, which unfortunately most Hindutva discourse is caught in. That's my only disagreement.

Raghu: A highly structured and monolithic idea of Hinduism scares me too, because you are then becoming a reflection of the Abrahamic religion. You are trying to politicise a religious reality. You are creating an us-versus-them tension.

Naveen: And in winning that we have actually lost. And it is probably why many of us in Ritambhara feel we are quite a small group, because there are not too many like us holding this very actively. I haven't discovered too many, both within and certainly not on the outside. In a way, it's been a lonely place to be in. The question I am asking is "Can we be a dharmic Kshatriya and a Brahmana rolled into one?"

Raghu: Yes, that is the Krishna – Arjuna combination.

The third double-bind that happens in this process is what Priya was mentioning. This whole

colonised mind that one is running into. *Even if I have to speak as the thinking, sensitive Hindu, I keep running into the wall of colonised thinking*. Here are some examples.

First, the moment I speak something positive about India, sooner or later somebody will have to tell me what are the shitty parts of India are, as though I don't know it. This fundamental idea that I have to compare the best of everybody else with the worst of India I think is a very deep colonised state of mind. I cannot speak about myself with pride and leave it there. I don't know how much it is connected with this *ahimsa*, fears of assertion, etc. but this is something I have come across again and again, and I simply don't know how to deal with it. Because the only way of dealing with it is to say "Can you look at America and how shitty America is?" To argue like this brings *bhibhatsam* to myself. I think this is a deep colonisation. Then, how does one actually dialogue with somebody who is a thinking, questioning Indian and deal with this part of the colonisation? Can he, she and I develop a new framework that is indigenous, through which to look at the many things that we have to change?

The other is this Brahmin thing that you brought up Naveen. The more I think of it, the more I feel that the word 'Bhraminisation' is a huge escape that a lot of Hindus are colluding with because of the following reason. If I am not a Brahmin and somebody attacks Hinduism, I can simply say "This is not Hinduism. This is Brahminism." I can wash my hands-off. Apparently, when the Buddhist-Jain-Hindu debates were happening, the Hindu *vAda* was called *Brahman vAda* whereas Buddha was called *shoonya vAda.* It was the *Brahman* and the *Brahman vAda* versus *shoonyata* and *shoonya vAda*. I heard a scholar articulate the idea that this subtle but fundamental difference has been misunderstood by persons who have been translating our philosophies into English and called it Brahmin (Vedic Brahminism but it is Brahman-ism). Brahman-ism might actually be a better word than Hinduism.

The third difficulty is that owning up to our own hurt and the violence that has been done to us is becoming extremely difficult. That's also one of the reasons for this reactivity of the Right-wing. I don't know how to own my hurt, vulnerability and humiliations. To own the hurt and violation that's happened and really mourn what has happened to the beauty of this country, its cultural geographic space, is also not easy. Immediately people will say "Why are you talking about the old stuff?" This comes across to me all the time as denial and escape.

Naveen: It's a certain fear of touching the pain.

Raghu: Yes, fear of touching the pain, which then leads to an envy of the other, somehow hoping that I can run away from all this and become somebody else. So, every time when you talk about something positive, these people have only to refer to the negative without

understanding why we have arrived at this point historically. Just join the “other side”, be vociferously self hating, perhaps in the hope that in doing so one will magically be embraced by the other, or wash off one’s brownness!

Naveen: That’s the Left basically.

Raghu: Exactly.

Naveen: I have a response to what Priya had said. That whatever seems to be required of us seems so difficult. I am wondering what better dream than this to give our lives to.

Raghu: What else we can do? Do we even have a choice?

Naveen: I don’t have a choice. I might as well go down like Abhimanyu; go down swinging and happy and living it up. Who knows? Something might open up in the Chakravyuh or it might not! But, at least, we will have fun going down. What better dream to give on like this!

Raghu: It is very interesting that you are bringing up this *Chakravyuha*. At one level I guess in the new context that is coming up, which in a sense is the Chakravyuha, we are all Abhimanyu. We seem to know how to get in…

Naveen: We are already in!

Raghu: Yes, we are already in. All the double-binds I am talking about are about basically asking ‘How to get out of this in a meaningful, honorable, dharmic way’. What do I do?

Anita: As I am listening to this and what Priya brought up, it seems the question ‘How do we then prepare ourselves to engage in whatever be the conversation’ is where I am struggling with myself. I am already in it, like you say. But how do I then prepare myself to face what is being thrown at me? Otherwise, I find myself disengaging.

Raghu: Of course you can’t disengage. We really don’t know how to get out. True. But the problem is that even to create spaces to dialogue this is becoming very difficult. I think at one level it’s a very difficult question to answer.

Anita: Yeah. Not even answer. I think it’s a very difficult question to even engage with and touch.

Raghu: I think that is the first difficulty that we’re facing. How do we get, thinking sensitive, brave people to believe in themselves, see the dangers in the context and rise up.

Abhimanyus becoming Arjunas. This can't be just Hindus engaging in this question. It has be a group of people passionate about creating an India that Gandhiji would have been proud off.

Anita: Yeah. In this context. I mean in this political and socioeconomic context because otherwise people can assume that their Arjuna is rising in some other individualistic context, right?

Raghu: Absolutely.

Anita: I feel that this is probably one thing that we need to keep alive as a dream for this year for Ritambhara. I know we've all been trying, but can a group of us, like we have done with different programs, really put our energies and effort and see if we can get something going by next year?

Raghu: Naveen has already put himself out to work on it.

Anita: Yeah. So maybe I should ask myself what is the effort that I am willing to put in or towards this.

Raghu: I'm just struck by what you said Naveen, because, it means very seriously asking the question, "What is the right action today that will leave me proud of who I am, celebrating being Hindu?" This question of "What is the right action?" I don't think this is a problem for anybody who takes himself up as a crusader or a Jihadi.

Naveen: No way.

Raghu: No, I think that's another great double bind. *If I really have to be true to my understanding of Hinduism, I have to ask what is the right action, what is action that would be inclusive, Dharmic and so on and so forth. Whereas if I belong to a Jihadi or a crusading structure, I just have to go by what the Pope or an Imam says and I'm sure that in heaven I'm going to get huge rewards.*

Naveen: Yeah. Or if I'm a social justice warrior, I basically follow what I think is the human rights declaration and fight with that notion of the democratic ideal. To respond to Anita's question about how to prepare ourselves for the work. The answer, at least for me, lies in the best of the five Pandava propensities. If we can strengthen ourselves in each of those five (of course with Draupadi as the underlying driving force), if we can build knowledge for an embodied living of the best of the five, as an individual, organization, a community, a Sangha

simultanenously, it might create a solid foundation. Of course, creating conversations and spaces like these explorations is important. Looking at things like living systems, the Nakula propensities and everything. The best of the five Pandava propensities tell us how we should build ourselves.

Raghu: …without forgetting Abhimanyu.

Naveen: Of course. I think the more we are embodied and mature, we slowly move towards Arjuna. At this point we are definitely Abhimanyus and Arjunas wondering 'Should I even fight it? Am I even equipped to fight it?' Arjuna at the beginning of the war and Abhimanyus in the Chakravyuh.

Anita: Thanks Naveen for that clarification. I resonate. I have had some engagement with the activist and corporate worlds. At the moment, the householder identity is very strong for me. I have been wondering, as a householder I'm not even interested in participating in this whole election drama and the whole political system. And I think this conversation has really brought up this disconnect very strongly. Though I'm sure there are communities that may be impacted strongly by the political system on a day-to-day basis, I feel not impacted in some sense. So how do we draw people from different spaces into this reflection around how our lives as householders and the social, political, economics systems are intertwined?

Raghu: You're triggering me into two very interesting trains of thought. First is to be a true Hindu I have to own up that the householder is the hero. Mahabharata also starts with that. There's a discussion about this between Brahma and Vyasa where there's a statement saying that the most important ashrama is the *grahasthashrama.* The whole Mahabharata was written for the householder to understand what it means to be a good human being. So for us to shrink back into the household and avoid facing the challenge is a very un-Hindu thing to do, which unfortunately is the dominant trend. Whereas in the Abrahamic traditions, the hero is the warrior who goes out and kills, fights and acquires for the community. So there might be a need to discover what a new heroic action could be of a Hindu who really values the householder's space.

The other idea you're triggering is this. I remember reading in MD Srinivasan's or Dharampal's paper, where there is a comment that is made by the British people when they're facing the 1857 revolution. There would be columns of armed forces going across the land and the rest of the countryside would be continuing their work and harvesting as though this doesn't affect them. And the interesting thing is the earlier *dharma* of war was exactly that. That only the armed people fight. They honoured the rules of battle like two sports teams that play it straight! In the evening they would go and talk to each other. Even in the

Mahabharata that's how it's described. So the rules of war are very clear and are observed even by the Duryodhana faction most of the time. Maybe that is a very deep conditioning saying I have to be a good householder, let me look after my home, and if I can really look after my home in a way that is beautiful and dharmic, it will obviously create a whole nation that is dharmic. Let the armies fight. But today, I don't think that equation is right.

Gowtham: This new heroic action of the householder sits very well with what Naveen was saying as regarding to blow up where we have to, build where we have to, etc. Around the time before Naveen began this part of the discussion, I was wondering if we were trying to swallow the pill of this new arena situation that has been created among religionists. If so, then reactivity seems to be the only choice. As I was asking that question within me, I became very uncomfortable. I didn't want to continue with the discussion. My mind was trying to distract itself. I think part of the discomfort came to me from the time I spent in my Mandapam, which is located next to a Church. On Sundays, blaring speakers send out so-called *pravachanam* about Jesus with words like *vedam, abhyasam* and what not. So all this was running in the back of my mind when I was asking what does it mean being a Hindu?

Raghu: What you're saying is it evokes a certain anger because what you're talking about is cultural misappropriation and misrepresentation. Because the church is taking words that actually say 'self discovery', 'discover God in yourself' and putting them into a book which says, 'God is outside you', 'there's an external judge' and 'you're going to go to hell if you don't obey'. So, you're taking a whole set of ideas from one culture which you're actually othering and distorting them to suit your purposes. You're playing a clever game, an insidious kind of fighting. Obviously it will evoke your anger. So how do you respond to this without getting into all the other double-binds we are talking about?

Gautham: And most of the times it shuts me out. The Church seems to have this this need for a constant reassertion. And that's where it gets very uncomfortable for me. That any activity that the other Abrahamic religions do towards Hinduism or towards other religions, is a reflection of their aggression almost like a requirement of an assertion for their existence. So if I start reacting to it, it amounts to colluding with them.

Raghu: Yeah. But what do you do when our retreating is being taken advantage of? We need to discover how to answer this. Because for an aggressor like this, the modality is very simple. You get in and you aggress. Like this fellow in the Church appropriating Hindu terms. The moment he is questioned, he will start screaming saying, 'I'm being victimized. I'm just using some words. These fellows are trying to attack me'. Now, if I don't question him, he's gotten away with it. Whereas the Islamic aggression is a little more direct. He acts in a

predatory manner using terror. So it seems a little more upfront. Both these religions, like you're saying, believe that they have to aggress upon the other. I mean, I actually find religions like Judaism very easy. Having discussions with people of the Jewish faith is not intimidating at all because I know they're not going to try to convert me or any one else. They can't just by the sheer belief of that religion that you can only be born a Jew. They have to respect you and you have to respect them. So there's no question of their aggressing on me. A dialogue between them and me can only be exploratory.

Priya: I'm once again sitting with a discomfort. It is in the language we use like the term 'Hinduism'. I feel like there is really no Hinduism, as in there is no -ism in what we are upholding or standing on. This is a sort of ground that we're standing on. And this doesn't have an -ism as a Judaism or something else. Are we getting sucked into that language?

Raghu: Yes. Just slow down. That is the double-bind we started talking about when there is a belief-based, binary-based 'other' who is coming and challenging you, and you don't have any of those ways of looking at yourself and your religion. I don't even have the luxury of believing that there's a God who would reward me if I killed somebody who doesn't belong to me. How do I respond? That's a central question. Whereas, between the Muslim and the Christian, there is no such difficulty. The question that you're asking will not arise. The Christian will defend Christianity by saying Christ is the greatest God because of such-and-such reason. The Muslim will defend Islam saying that Allah is the greatest God, and if you don't listen to me, I'm going to attack you. Both of them have a strong ground to fight. If this idea of God is completely false ground in my system, how do I engage with the believers?

Priya: Locations are very different. So you're fighting from very different locations actually.

Raghu: Correct. And we are fighting a person who has a certain justification for violence and violation that I don't have. Therefore, how do I fight? Because the fight is happening all around us. We can't shut our eyes to it anymore.

Naveen: Yes, there is a sword to our neck. It's not a luxury to fight. We are right there and it's only denial that says, I'm still away from the battlefield. I am very much inside the Chakravyuh. 'Will I open my eyes and see the knife on my neck or not?'