

## The men in white

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At the meeting convened by the orthodox group under the auspices of The Parsee Voice journal at the Framjee Cawasjee Institute at Bombay's Dhobitalao, there was a preponderance of priests both on the stage and the front row. They were there to speak, listen and applaud the speakers at the three-hour-long meet.

There is no doubt the priests took pride in their orthodoxy and their opposition to accepting into the faith children of interfaith marriages, the adoption of non-Parsi children, the acceptance of the resurgent and neo-Zoroastrians in Eurasia, the formation of a Zoroastrian world body as opposed to a Parsi Zoroastrian world body. The impression they strongly conveyed is that the priesthood in India, with the exception of a handful of priests, is orthodox. Even the Athornan Madressa students in Dadar that Parsiana interviewed (see "The ABC of the sudreh-kusti," Parsiana, November 2003), almost unanimously viewed intermarriage as one of the main threats facing the community. Many of the views expressed by the Parsi clergy are based on their genuine apprehensions. And their outlook is shared by many lay Parsis as well.

But the priests have to offer guidance and comfort to the entire community. They should not be alarmists. They must have a deeper understanding of modern day realities and examine and explain events in the larger perspective.

If there are no vultures at Doongerwadi and if by consuming human bodies that have imbibed Diclofenac the birds would die of poisoning within 36 hours, should the community pursue the aviary project to breed vultures in captivity? Zoroastrians expose corpses in the dakhmas to feed scavengers, not kill them. The clergy have to explain this to the community and help them make the transition to solar concentrators rather than refer to the panels as a "back door entry to cremation."

So also with interfaith marriages. With 30 percent marrying out of the faith in Bombay and many more elsewhere, the priesthood should pave the way for acceptance; reunite families torn apart because a son or daughter has married a non-Parsi. It is the priests who should welcome the progeny of such unions and urge them to worship at the fire-temples, undergo the navjote ceremony and be good Zoroastrians. If the sway of the orthodox is to extend beyond the strongholds of Maharashtra and Gujarat, they have to realize that they have no copyright on Zoroastrianism. If the orthodox dismiss the intermarrieds, the neo and resurgent Zoroastrians, the Zoroastrians in North America, the UK and Iran, who are they left with?

Dastur Khurshed Dastoor of Udvada, the only High Priest who had not signed the infamous letter issued by his six seniors earlier this year, voiced his views which supported the orthodox tenor that evening. Repeating the popular "quality, not quantity" cliché he chose to elaborate on conservationists not mating pandas with cats and dogs to ensure the survival of the panda species. Fortunately, many of the orthodox speakers that evening had gone beyond that erroneous concept of genetics and species survival.

Scholar-teacher Khojeste Mistree termed the North American Zoroastrian leaders disparagingly as "mandarins" and lamented that even in Iran, the Zoroastrians were following the 'Gathas only' school of thought. Even in the UK the winds of change are blowing.

If this is happening in Iran, the US and parts of India it is only because the orthodox have unwittingly through their pronouncements tarnished the image of the other texts, scriptures and dogma of the religion. If the other aspects of Zoroastrianism are to be taken seriously this can only be done if the rules, rituals and tradition are viewed objectively, explained logically and practiced universally. If rituals and scriptures are reasons used to bar all except a handful from participating in religious ceremonies and customs, they run counter to Zoroastrian theology.

If the religion is to survive, as also the Parsis, the priests and their followers have to reform. Their beliefs, based on racism and caste must have a new grounding in love, understanding and universal brotherhood.

Today the Constitution of India provides Parsis greater freedom of choice than does our religion. Yet we pride ourselves on belonging to a religion that permits freedom to make choices. By removing that prerogative, we are not practicing Zoroastrian precepts.

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