

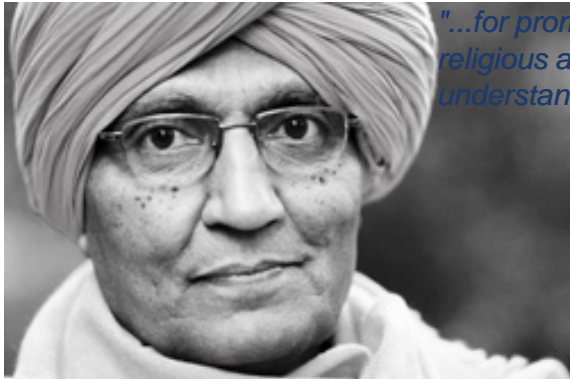


The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Swami Agnivesh (India)

Joint Honorary Award with Asghar Ali Engineer (2004)



"...for promoting over many years in South Asia the values of religious and communal co-existence, tolerance and mutual understanding."

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

Swami Agnivesh was born as Vepa Shyam Rao on 21st September 1939, the grandson of the Diwan (Chief Minister) of a princely state called Shakti, now in Chattisgarh. He gained law and business management degrees, became a lecturer in Calcutta and for a while also practised law. He comes from an orthodox Hindu family, but in 1968 he became a full-time worker of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist movement, and two years later became a sanyasi, renouncing worldly possessions and becoming, in the process, Swami Agnivesh.

On the same date that he became a "renouncer", Agnivesh co-founded a political party, the Arya Sabha, to work for political order, founded on Arya Samaj principles. The principles were spelt out in a book published in 1974, *Vaidik Samajvad* (Vedic Socialism). This rejects the lopsided materialism of both capitalism and communism in favour of what the Arya Sabha constitution calls "social spirituality".

When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in 1975, cracking down on opposition parties, Agnivesh and some colleagues were arrested. He was in jail for 14 months. After the 1977 elections which swept Indira Gandhi from office, Agnivesh was elected to the Haryana state legislative assembly, becoming education minister. He rapidly became disillusioned, resigned and decided to devote all his energy and time to social justice movements.

During this period he began to denounce bonded labour, a cause for which he became well known. He founded the Bandhua Mukti Morcha (BMM, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front) in 1981, and is still its Chairperson. Swami Agnivesh puts the number of child labourers in India (despite constitutional provisions) at 65 million. Some are in debt bondage or have been pledged by parents in return for financial advances; some are lured by procurers who promise bright prospects after training. BMM has secured the release of more than 172,000 Indian workers, and has helped create

a number of trade unions, including the All India Brick Kiln Workers, the Stone Quarry Workers and the Construction Workers. Working also at the international level, Agnivesh has also thrice been elected as Chairperson of the UN Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery.

Agnivesh has had a high profile with a number of social issues apart from child and bonded labour:

In 1987 he led a 18 day long 'padyatra' (march on foot) from Delhi to Deorala in Rajasthan to protest against sati (the immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyres) following a particularly notorious incident. The march was stopped, and Agnivesh briefly gaoled, but both received widespread, sympathetic coverage. The Indian Parliament later enacted the Sati Prevention Act. Back in Delhi Agnivesh launched a campaign against female foeticide, which also resulted in legislation.

In 1988/89 he led a movement to secure the entry of 'untouchables' into Hindu temples which were discriminating against them. Again he was arrested but the action had a substantial impact on public opinion.

In 1989 he led a multi-religious march from Delhi to Meerat to protest against and defuse communal violence that had claimed the lives of 45 Muslim youths. Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer was also a prominent participant in the march.

From 1989-95, he participated in a number of people's movements (including Narmada Bachao Andolan) in respect of land, water, forests and fisheries issues, and campaigned with women's movements against alcohol in both Andhra Pradesh and Haryana, winning total prohibition (for a short period) in both states.

In 1999, concerned about escalating religious fundamentalism and obscurantism, he helped to launch a multi-religious forum called Religions for Social Justice, which led a group of 55 religious leaders to the place where an Australian Christian missionary and his two sons had been burned to death in their sleep by Hindu religious fanatics. The leaders in The Times of India on the theme of religious tolerance and reconciliation, written by Agnivesh, attest to the impact of this initiative. For many years he has also written articles in leading newspapers jointly with a Christian priest, Rev. Valson Thampu.

For many years, Agnivesh has deplored in newspaper articles the consumerism and materialism that he perceives to be undermining Indian culture. In 1997, the Arya Samaj movement launched a people's movement against the 'western cultural invasion' and the 'neo-colonialism' of the WTO and World Bank.

Four years later, Agnivesh led a protest march from Mumbai to Gujarat against economic globalisation.

In 2002 happened the massacre in Gujarat, which disturbed Swami Agnivesh deeply. He once again organized a group of 72 eminent religious-social leaders who spent five days in the violence affected areas of Gujarat and denounced the Hindu fundamentalist organizations and sectors responsible.

In 2004, Agnivesh became the president of the World Council of Arya Samaj.

Quotation

The unique spiritual genius of India breeds a composite culture of harmony and mutual respect. ... For the world order to be one of peace and justice, for the global village to be a theatre of right livelihood, it is imperative that a new and proactive spiritual vision commensurate to the challenges of the emerging world order be enunciated without delay."

Swami Agnivesh