

## Religion Should Be A Matter Of Informed Choice: Swami Agnivesh

Naz Asghar 01 Feb 2018



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New Delhi : Social activist and Arya Samaji Swami Agnivesh has said religion should be a matter of informed choice and wished for an ideal set up where there was a certain minimum age for choosing one's religious values, like we have for voting, for marriage etc.

"Everyone of us in this society carries the burden of a religion that we did not choose for ourselves. It would be so redeeming if we were allowed to do so," Swami Agnivesh said participating in a panel discussion here. He spoke about the dangers of institutionalised religion.

Agnivesh, who was born in an orthodox brahmin family in Andhra Pradesh, said he was taught untouchability by his elders as his 'dharma' and had to accept that as he as a child had no other option. The discussion, whose theme was 'Hinduism and Hindutva', was organised by a group of civil servants and war veterans on the 70th anniversary of Gandhiji's assassination. It was moderated and presided over by chairman of the Indian Humanist Union Vir Narain.

Dr Ram Puniyani, who heads the Centre of Study of Society and Secularism, and poet and former civil servant Ashok Vajpeyi were the other prominent panelist. They all spoke about how organised and institutionalised religion in alignment with political power had created havoc in society everywhere in the world through the ages. They said that in the present day India, Hindutva, which was quite different from Hinduism, represented such phenomena.

Dr Puniyani also brought out how the British played the game of divide and rule by encouraging formation of civil associations on religious lines. They backed Muslim nawabs and zamindars in formation of Muslim League as they exploited the fears of these classes from the rise of newer ones with the rise in commerce and industry and introduction of modern education. The British declared the rajas and landlord as representatives of Muslims of India.

The formation of the Muslim League led to the formation of Punjab Hindu Sabha and eventually Hindu Mahasabha. On the other hand, newer classes were forming secular association like the Indian national Congress, the Republican Party of India and Naujawan Bharat Sabha, founded by Shaheed Bhagat Singh. It was the fear of losing political power to these classes that led the Hindu and Muslim elites to propound the theory of their religion being in danger, Dr Puniyani said.

He said the same dynamics could be seen in play in the case of the present day Hindutva, which was trying to usurp the entire culture, identity and history of India.

Mr Vajpeyi in his remarks highlighted the rich history of dissent in the country, and also said that today's Hindutva was not a religious movement at all. He said it was unfortunate that today all religions had become very aggressive and enemy of their own plurality.

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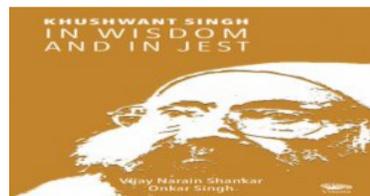
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The discussion, whose theme was 'Hinduism and Hindutva', was organised by a group of civil servants

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