

'My attackers were not a faceless lynch mob'

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Pictures of 78-year-old Swami Agnivesh being beaten up, his saffron robes torn, came at a time when the Supreme Court was laying down strictures against 'mobocracy'. He tells Himanshi Dhawan why hardline Hindutva which doesn't brook dissent must be nipped in the bud

You were in Jharkhand on the invitation of a tribal group. Why were you attacked?

I had gone to Pakur on the invitation of the Paharia tribe. Before that, I had informed both the Jharkhand CM and governor about my visit. On 17th morning, I was speaking to the press about the problems faced by the tribals with their land and forest rights in danger when I was informed that

members of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha were outside protesting against me. I invited them to come inside and speak to me. But they did not agree. When I stepped out, I was attacked by a crowd of 100-150 people who swooped on me. I was dragged, beaten up, abused, and my clothes torn. It was a lynch mob, except it was not a faceless lynch mob but one that was sponsored and supported by the powers that be in the state and central governments. I am not the first one to be attacked, many more have been lynched to death. Akhlaq Khan was killed in Dadri, so were Pehlu Khan and Junaid, and not a single murderer has been apprehended.

So far these lynch mobs have targeted members of the minority community. Do you think you were a target because as an Arya Samaji, your brand of Hindutva is considered too soft?

Very much so. What they called hardline Hindutva is the greatest threat to Hindu culture, or sanatan dharam. I believe in

fighting against caste, bonded labour, for equality of women and Dalits and have done so for decades. These pseudo-Hindus or hardline Hindus think I am the enemy of Hinduism. But I tell them that this is not Hinduism. Hindu culture has survived because of our amorphous character and the culture of dialogue. The hardline approach of causing harm to whoever disagrees is a kind of nascent fascism. If we don't nip it in the bud, it will cause immense harm.

The Supreme Court has directed the government to ensure that the country does not slip into a mobocracy. Do you think it already has?

Just giving a verdict is not enough unless the apex court appoints its own monitoring committee to look at every case. The day they were delivering this verdict I was being beaten up. I want this whole episode to be investigated by a sitting or retired judge. Why were the eight people arrested for attacking me let off immediately?

But the Jharkhand government has ordered an inquiry.

I don't trust the police. I had no security despite informing the state government of my visit. Even after I was attacked, no police came till half an hour.

A Jharkhand minister and some people on social media have alleged that you orchestrated the attack for publicity.

It is a laughable statement. I don't blame those speaking like this. I have received support beyond all my expectations.

What do you think needs to be done to counter hate crimes?

We need to unite all the forces of social justice, all democratic forces, and all those who abide by the Indian Constitution. They urgently need to come together whether they belong to social, religious organisations or political parties. The 2019 election is the biggest challenge. We have to face this challenge. All these attacks are happening at the behest of this government.

You were among the first signatories to campaign for the repeal of Section 377. Do you think the time has come for India to respect LGBT rights?

I saluted Chief Justice A P Shah's judgment in Delhi High Court. I am sure the SC order, whenever it comes, will uphold the dignity of all human beings, whether gay or lesbian.