

Lost political narratives: What earns Swami Agnivesh ire of powers that be

It is his standing up for the rights of the pahadiya adivasis that makes him a trouble-maker and he is doubly annoying as he is a sanyasi who is not speaking the language of Hindutva

Aparna Vaidik July 24, 2018 Last Updated at 11:24 IST



On the afternoon of July 17, in the town of Pakur in the state of

Swami Agnivesh

Jharkhand, a group of Bhartiya Janata Yuva Morcha workers affiliated with BJP, gheroaed Swami Agnivesh, raised slogans of 'Jai Sri Ram' and severely beat him. He was saved by a group of journalists just in time.

Two narratives have emerged in the wake of the mob attack. The Hindutva narrative presents Swami Agnivesh as not being a good Hindu or not being Hindu enough and, therefore, the attack on him being a legitimate one. The Hindutvavadis have no discomfort with the presence of sanyasis in democratic electoral politics as long as they are Hindu enough, such as, Yogi Adityanath, Uma Bharati and Sakshi Maharaj, etc. In the liberal narrative Swami Agnivesh is being seen as a Hindu sanyasi who on most days peddles soft Hindutava but now unfortunately has his own people turning on him. In this instance the liberals are condemning mobocracy and violence while they are actually less sanguine regarding the presence of sanyasis in democratic politics. They see all saffron-clad people speaking in local dialects as charlatans and frauds or as uneducated populists. Their religiousity makes them suspect in the eyes of the liberals who feel religion is a private affair and has no room in politics.

In between these two narratives there is one another narrative of modern Indian politics that has got lost. This narrative relates to the presence of saffron-clad sanyasis who embraced asceticism but instead of passing their days meditating in a mountain cave remained engaged in worldly activities, especially grassroots activism, rural mobilisation and democratic politics since the time of Revolt of 1857, where several yogis, gossains and sadhus fought against the British. Swami Vivekanands and Swami Dayanand Saraswati marked their historical presence in latter half of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay was to immortalise the patriotic sanyasis in his *Anandmath*, a text that remained the centrepiece of nationalist imagination.

Gandhi's call for non-cooperation in 1919 was another momentous event when people with all shades of politics – radical, revolutionary, religious, and moderate – entered the nationalist fray. Several sanyasis also stepped up. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, a dasnami sanyasi who had already been working for caste upliftment, rose as a peasant leader in the 1920s and his political movements led to the passage of the Bihar Tenancy Act and the Bakasht Land Tax; Swami Darshanand and Swami Vishwanand, organised the coal miners in the Ranigunj-Jharia area; Baba Ram Chandra, a labour organiser in Fiji returned to India and became the leader of Kisan Sabha in United Provinces; and Sanyasi Bhawani Dayal, an Arya Samaji associate of Gandhi from Transvaal were some of them. For these sanyasis, social and political activism was an extension of their religious philosophies ranging from vaishnavism to the writings of Swami Dayanand.

These sanyasis' belief systems and political disposition also made them trenchant critics of Hinduism. They wrote commentaries on a range of issues and problems that plagued what they saw as 'Hindu' society. In many instances they combined their religious belief with an engagement with life and works of Gandhi and Marx. Soham Swami's *Commonsense* (a text that influenced Bhagat Singh), Swami Karpatri Maharaj's *Marxvaad aur Ramrajya*, Swami Sahajanand's *Gita Hriday* are some such examples. These political sadhus were also in stark contrast to the likes of Yogi Adityanath (a mathadheesh who comes from the Nath warrior lineage) in their devotion to social and political regeneration at the grassroots. They could well be seen today as the 'intimate enemies' of the Hindu right-wing and neo-liberal religiosity.

In order to appreciate the life and actions of these swamis one has to redefine one's understanding of asceticism (*sanyaas*), which is generally associated with the imagery of a sage, a guru or a rishi devoting his life to quiet contemplation and teaching in a forest abode. That is but one form of asceticism. There are several shades and kinds of ascetics or renunciates: the ganja-smoking matted-haired mendicants; the ash-smeared aghoris roaming the funeral grounds; the gossain or naga armed sadhus belonging to different akharas practising wrestling and martial arts; the shankaracharya variant, living in maths, devoted to a life of mind and quiet piety; and of course the new-age gurus doling out spiritual solace to the aspirational middle-classes. The political sanyasis being discussed in this article are yet another distinct variant.

The history of asceticism or ascetics was not always one of (and still isn't) devotionism, monasticism, worldly renouncement, and/or non-violence. Such a notion of asceticism began to take shape in the Indian subcontinent from the sixteenth century onwards and accelerated in the late eighteenth century with the growing prominence in northern India of the rasik ramanandis, the devotional and monastic sect of vaishnavite ascetics (the devotees of Lord Rama).

In contrast was the waning of the other two ramanandi sects the tyagis and the naga ascetics who were either associated with violent yoga practices or the akhara life where they trained in martial activities. Concurrent political developments such as the quelling of the sanyasi and fakir rebellion in late 1790s, the waning of political prominence of gossain warrior ascetics, and the criminalisation of peripatetic groups such as banjaras and fakirs 'the armed vagrants' by the British Governor General of India Warren Hastings (1773-1785) brought the devotional and monastic ascetic orders in public prominence. This in turn hastened the tying together of the idea of asceticism with world-renunciation.

In the twentieth century Gandhi's emergence on the political scene as the Mahatma infused this mystique of the suffering renunciate with imagery of ahimsa, non-violence and the figure of the Sanyasi as a truth-speaker, a person disinterested in the material luxuries and devoted to the ethical service of society came to be firmly ensconced in the public imagination. With Gandhi, political asceticism more importantly transformed into a weapon of political resistance. Hitherto, there had been examples of political leaders becoming sanyasis (such as Aurobindo Ghosh and Jatindra Nath Bannerjee) and sanyasis who were active in arena of social reform, but now it became absolutely legitimate for sanyasis to be engaged in political work

and in anti-colonial resistance. In fact hereon political asceticism became an inveterate political and personal choice for most leaders, including the young revolutionaries.

Swami Agnivesh is amongst a bevy of leaders who have led grassroots social movements across India: Vinoba Bhave and his Bhoodan movement, Chandi Bhatt of Chipko Movement, Medha Patkar of Narmada Bachao Andolan, Sundarlal Bahuguna of anti-Tehri Dam movement, Baba Amte and his pioneering work for the rehabilitation of leprosy patients, and Shankar Guha Niyogi who founded the Chhattisgarh Mines Workers' Union to name a few.

Swami Agnivesh has similarly devoted his life to various causes such as anti-Sati agitation, prohibition in rural areas, child labourers and more specifically to the cause of bonded labourers. His efforts led to a landmark-ruling of the Supreme Court that identified any employee earning less than the statutorily fixed minimum wages as bonded labourer.

What earns Swami Agnivesh and his ilk the ire of powers that be is that they speak up for the subalterns: rural women, landless peasants, bonded labourers, tribals and workers. The mob attack on Agnivesh was precipitated because he had gone to Pakur on invitation of the Pahadiya Adivasi organisation to speak at an event defending their land rights. The BJP government has proposed changes in the tribal tenancy laws (the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 that safeguards tribal lands and prevents their sale to non-tribals) for the state to acquire land which will be given over to private companies for bamboo cultivation and for setting up paper mills. It is his standing up for the rights of the pahadiya adivasis that makes him a trouble-maker and he is doubly annoying as he is a sanyasi who is not speaking the language of Hindutva. Therefore, the narrative being spun is one of him being an 'anti-national' and 'anti-Hindu' deserving death by lynching.

Perhaps the time has come to retrieve the lost narratives of modern Indian politics and to rethink our ideas regarding relationship between religion and politics. The political sanyasis were an enigma that defied staid definitions of religiosity and secularism. The very presence of these figures in Indian political arena demanded a widening of one's understanding of relationship between religion and politics which is now being challenged by Hindutavavadis' attempts to impose one definition on Hinduism and liberal discomfort with religiosity of any kind. History and historians as some people will have us believe are useless ('This happened. Then this happened. Then this. Ok work done for the day') but the dismissal of the varied narratives of the polyphonic history of the Subcontinent will close inclusive spaces, leaving the field open to the bi-polar narratives that in time will rob Indian democracy of its regional and ideological richness.

The author is Associate Professor of History, Ashoka University

Disclaimer: Views expressed are personal. They do not reflect the view/s of Business Standard.