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POLITICS

Swami Agnivesh On Lynch Mobs, Modi's 'Hate Mongering Campaign' And Fake Saffron

"Junaid, Pehlu Khan, so many others have died, but he has never condemned these with sincerity."



By Betwa Sharma

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BETWA SHARMA/HUFFPOST

NEW DELHI — Arya Samaj leader Swami Agnivesh was attacked by a mob on July 17 in Pakur, Jharkhand, as he stepped out of a press conference on tribal rights. Leveling blame at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Yuva Morcha and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad

(ABVP), the 78-year-old social activist said they had falsely accused him of supporting cow slaughter and beaten him up.

Agnivesh, a former lawmaker and education minister in Haryana, told *HuffPost India* that his assault in BJP-ruled Jharkhand was a "state sponsored attack". The eight men who were arrested in connection with the violence were released on the same day. The circumstances of their release are unclear.

In a recent conversation, Agnivesh, who has been a crusader against bonded labor and the caste system for decades, talked about his ordeal on June 17 and why he believes it to be a consequence of Hindutva politics and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "hate mongering campaign."

Over the weekend, another man, Akbar Khan, was killed by cow-vigilantes in Rajasthan.



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Can you describe the attack?

I couldn't believe my eyes. A menacing crowd of 100 and 150 people just pounced on me. I folded my hands, but they were so angry, they were shouting nasty abuses, hurling mother-sister abuses at me. They hit me, punched me, kicked me, and threw me to the ground. When I was on the ground, they climbed on top of me and kicked me. They tore my clothes and threw my turban on the ground. I was shell shocked. It all happened in a few minutes. I thought it was the end. I was prepared to die that day. It was a typical lynch mob. Someone was saying '*gau-maas ke samarthak, Bharat chodho*' (supporter of cow flesh, leave India). I have never supported beef. The dominant slogan was Jai Shri Ram, Jai Shri Ram.



They hit me, punched me, kicked me, and threw to me to the ground. They tore my clothes and threw my turban on the ground.

What happened next?

For the next half hour, they were just sitting there. Some people took me back inside the hotel. The hotel people locked it from inside. I was hurt very badly. My backbone and my ribs were deeply injured, and several injuries on my legs and backs. When I recovered a little, I tried to contact Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh, but that was not possible, maybe he was busy. I left him a message, saying that it is something very urgent, but he hasn't called me back till now.

Then, I contacted the SP (Superintendent of Police) Pakur. I told him this has happened to me, a murderous assault has taken place and I don't see any security around. He said we did not know, no one told us about your arrival. I asked my organizer friends and they said we have the receipts for each one of the letters we have given. So then, he said, I will send the DYSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police). I asked him to come and see what had taken place. I called up the District Magistrate and even he did not come. Then, I complained to the Chief Secretary Jharkhand and told him that I'm calling your district officials and nobody is turning up. What am I supposed to do? Then, I think he called and admonished them. Nearly half- an-hour to one hour later, only the police chief (SP) came. And he sat down, smug, as if nothing happened. Then, they took me to a hospital. The DC

(District Collector/Magistrate) came to see me at the hospital. I found the attack state sponsored and party sponsored without any provocation.

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I complained to the Chief Secretary Jharkhand and told him that I'm calling your district officials and nobody is turning up.

Who do you blame for the attack?

I blame Modi, Amit Shah, his regime, the state governments under the BJP and the central government, for building this hate mongering campaign and spreading this polarization. I blame Modi for the attack on me because he has been promoting these hate mongering forces, directly or indirectly, and trying to play up hardcore Hindutva politics, and that is why it has come to such a pass.

Even Sushma Swaraj was trolled very badly. They didn't physically attack her, but through words and phrases, they tried to destroy her. For what reason? She simply tried to help a Hindu-Muslim married couple. One after the other, heinous crimes are happening in the name of religious bigotry and communalism, but they are not condemning it. To give everything a communal angle, even an obscure communal angle, will destroy the country as well as our ancient civilization.

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One after the other, heinous crimes are happening in the name of religious bigotry and communalism, but they are not condemning it.

PM Modi condemned cow vigilantes in 2017.

Modi should have seen to it that lynchings came to an end. He is the supremo, it isn't BJP sarkar, but Modi sarkar. I find him not condemning communal lynchings from the depth of his heart. He has been allowing these things to continue for a long time. He doesn't denounce it then and there.

In the past three years, not a single of Mohammad Ahklaq's killers has been convicted. To have an announcement from a temple to gather people, break into a house and thrash a

man to death in front of his family. This should have shaken him. The prime minister should have visited him, next day, condemned it and promised justice. But he didn't do it. Junaid, Pehlu Khan, so many others have died, but he has never condemned these with sincerity. He tweets on the smallest of things, but not this.

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I find him not condemning communal lynchings from the depth of his heart.

You wear saffron. The colour of the BJP and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) is saffron. What is the difference in saffron?

The difference is that one is authentic and the other is fake. They use saffron for all sorts of narrow political ends. The saffron is a symbol of purity and fire. It is the color of fire. It symbolizes that you have to be universal in your approach, you cannot be sectarian, you cannot resort to use of force or ever support violence. The caste system is violence, gender inequality is violence, hate speech is violence, discrimination is violence. We have to be non-violent.

What is fake saffron?

Fake saffron has been promoting or at least compromising with the birth-based caste system. The RSS have never fought against the caste system, which I consider to be the most abominable system anywhere in the world. A child by birth is designated *oonch* or *neech* and some are treated as untouchables. This is the most abominable thing that can happen to any human society, and based on that social hierarchy, is the economic hierarchy. If you look at the victims of modern-day slavery, the overwhelming majority come from the lower castes, Dalits, Advasis, women, and Dalit communities of Christians and Muslims.

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Fake saffron has been promoting or at least compromising with the birth-based caste system.

What is political saffron?

The political saffron is to polarize people under this broad identity: Hindu. No matter what your caste, even if you eat beef, but call yourself Hindu.

The RSS is not fighting against the caste system, but it still says Hindus should come together. The BJP edifice stands on it. Savarkar (RSS ideologue) said that you have to target the Muslims and Christians, don't trust them because they can never be loyal to this country. Repeatedly Mohan Bhagwat (RSS chief) gives speeches that anyone born in India is Hindu. This is a very narrow and shallow definition of Hindu.

Hindu is amorphous and a way of life. Anyone can do anything in terms of prayer and ritual, or not do anything, and still remain Hindu. But ever since the BJP started fighting for Ram Mandir and many other things, they started giving it a distinct shape, calling Ayodhya to be like the Kaaba, Rama to be the idol. They have tried to semitise Hinduism.

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What did you make of Rahul Gandhi saying he is Hindu and a Shiv Bhakt in Parliament.

He took this line during the Gujarat election. Congress called him a *juneu dhaari* Hindu, going to all those temples that he had never visited earlier, trying to match Modi. This was something unusual. I belong to Arya Samaj, which does not believe in idol worship. I did not think it was necessary for him to do that. It was followed by the Karnataka election in which he made it a point to visit temples.

Because Modi, RSS, BJP have polarized in the name of Hindus, the Congress feels that it is alienated from the Hindu mainstream. What I think he (Rahul Gandhi) wanted to say in his speech in Parliament was that I'm a Hindu, but I'm not a hate monger, I'm a Shiv Bhakt, but I'm not a hate monger.

But should he make any reference to religion?

I think it is a political strategy. All said and done, politicians have to go by perception, not facts. It looks a little childish on the part of the leader of the Congress Party to make these ritualistic, dogmatic assertions of being a Hindu. But Rahul Gandhi and the Congress can

never be the Hindutva type of Hindu and that is what he wanted to tell the Opposition and the ruling party that you have purge yourself of hate.

But is it right to invoke religion?

How I see it from a distance is planning his next strategy for 2019, that is a narrow objective. I wouldn't call it good but I wouldn't dismiss it altogether.

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