

TESTING THE METTLE

■ Swami Agnivesh has become suddenly controversial after the attack on him at Jharkhand recently. While one section says he represents Indian spirituality that transcends religion, the other feels he is a 'fake' sanyasi. Does he polarise society? What impact do his teachings have on society?



VALSON THAMPY

Desperate attempts are underway, in the wake of the Pakur atrocity on this riddle of a man called Swami Agnivesh, to label him as a 'fake sanyasi' and a parasite on foreign funds. C.P. Singh, the Jharkhand minister, inaugurated this calumny. Apparently, a minister, for no reason other than that he wields political power, has the expertise to separate sanyasis from counterfeits.

What is involved here is not merely a question of who Agnivesh is but also who we are. Are we morally free individuals who are responsible for what we think and believe; or only mouths that parrot what we are told? The second issue pertains to the ease with which anyone who is inconvenient can be discredited. A lifetime's spiritual struggles and sacrifices can be tarnished in a single tongue-lash. You are executed without an opportunity to tell your part of the story. In principle, this is what lynching is all about. So, what C.P. Singh, in effect, took off from where the physical assailants left, shifting the lynching it to verbal level.

Agnivesh, let us say with C.P. Singh, is a fake sanyasi. We, unlike him, have then to see how we arrive at this conclusion; lest we endorse the view that human beings can be killed with words without a question raised about it. Those who endorse this are morally as culpable as the brainwashed perpetrators of lynching.

What struck me about Swami Agnivesh, some three decades ago, was that he was different from the religious men I had encountered. I was an academic then and something of a religious fundamentalist. As a result, I kept a distance from him, despite being fascinated. I, too, had imbibed the canard that by associating oneself with those of other faiths, one risked undermining one's faith.

But the Agnivesh genre of radical spirituality struck me as strangely authentic. It pointed to his living faith. I noticed the strength and courage he exemplified in addressing the issues of our times, unimpaired of consequences. I was struck in particular by his historic mission to end 'sati' in the wake of the controversial Roop Kanwar episode (4 September 1987) in Rajasthan. I found here spiritual power impacting the realities of my life-world in a decisive way. It shattered my prejudice that God stayed confined within the church compound.

It took me, still, several years to align myself publicly with Agnivesh. The moment of breakthrough came in 1996, when we took the decision to work as an inter-religious partnership to articulate, in words and deeds, a spiritual perspective on national and global issues. That partnership remains. So, what I state here is also a personal testimony.

It was from Agnivesh that I learned that true godliness transcends religion. I had noticed it in Jesus of Nazareth. But my understanding of it had remained hazy and vague. By the way, spiritual insights remain in this state until they are 'earthed' through action. The bane of religiosity is that spiritual ideals are not made to impact the world.



Social activist Swami Agnivesh after being beaten up by a mob in Pakur district of Jharkhand on July 17.

The usefulness of religion has come to be seen as the escapism it affords. So, religion becomes a palliative. Agnivesh believes that religion as social spirituality needs to be the power for transformation. He is the exact opposite of a status-quoist. Hence, the offence.

The assumption that those who are enlightened should renounce the world is common to all religions. So, our ancient seers and ascetics lived a life of seclusion, like the desert fathers in the early centuries of Christianity. Agnivesh has, through his life and mission, 'transgressed' this religious taboo. But, could Lord Ram have been an embodiment of righteousness without encountering the politics and poetics of unrighteousness? The spiritual vision of the Bhagawat Gita is about encountering the manifes-

tations of adharma that this world of conundrums and contradictions throws up from time to time. Escapist religion, in contrast, has this attraction that it keeps God in abeyance so that the world can remain a playground for the will of man. It became clear to me that Agnivesh's struggles and interventions were not because he relished invention controversies, but because he tried to make the will of God prevail in real life. He doesn't wear his religion up his sleeves, but godliness is the fountain spring of his interventions and initiatives.

Is there a way to pursue the will of God, without becoming unpopular with those who are defying it in all respects? What is overlooked today is the fact that a necessary offence indwells between the two blocs. It is a semantic

impropriety to denote this as 'polarisation' in its political connotation. In that context, tearing a people apart, with political gains as the shaping purpose, is the intended aim. In the spiritual context, the offence felt in certain quarters is a by-product, never an intended effect, of adhering to the will of God. Spirituality stands steadfastly on the foundation of universal humanity. All-embracing unity - not homogenising uniformity - is its hallmark. The 'offence' Agnivesh creates to those who differ from his outlook should not be belittled as polarisation. The sun does not polarise day and night. It only stays true to itself. Day and night follow as consequences.

So, there is no denying the fact that Agnivesh is an inconvenience for those who claim the world as their freehold. He is a riddle to those who believe that God stays entrapped by religious orthodoxy as a slave to religious establishments. He is a headache to those who believe that social spirituality, of which passion for social justice is the essence, is a heresy. Why shouldn't swamis too be demonised, if they seem square pegs in round holes to the powers that be?

But, the power of spirituality is the power to transform. Transformation results from the pursuit of collective perfection. God dwells within every form of life as an infinite urge to transcend itself. This is most powerfully present in human consciousness, as compared to the rest of creation. That is why killing a human being and

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Swami Agnivesh the social worker doesn't wear his religion up his sleeves, but godliness is the fountain spring of his interventions and initiatives which include his support for popular agitations

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tions to which persons and societies remain vulnerable. Unpopularity and calumny are its necessary consequence.

Yes, Swami Agnivesh is controversial. Yes, he is an irksome riddle to some. But he is a necessary and invaluable irritant; the like of which causes a pearl to form in the oyster. What do the profiteering peddlers of the pearls know of the pain of oysters?

(The writer is former principal of St Stephen's College, Delhi. Views are personal)