

# The Telegraph India

## 'Mourners' torment Agnivesh

Pheroze L. Vincent Aug 18, 2018 00:00 IST



Agnivesh ties the

turban on Vajpayee 18 years ago. Picture courtesy Swami Agnivesh

**New Delhi:** Eighteen years ago, human rights activist Agnivesh had tied a saffron turban on then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and urged him not to yield to pressure, during US President Bill Clinton's imminent visit, to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

On Friday, BJP supporters chased the erstwhile Vajpayee confidant down the road from their new central office, where he had come to pay his last respects to the departed leader, knocking off his turban and snatching his saffron shawl.

Agnivesh, a man in his late 70s who wears saffron robes and uses the honorific "Swami", had returned from Calcutta on Thursday night after an event at St Xavier's University.

He said he had called Union minister Harsh Vardhan on Friday morning to ask if he could catch a last glimpse of Vajpayee, whom he had campaigned for in 1977.

"He (Harsh Vardhan) said, 'Come after 10.30-11am, after the Prime Minister leaves and the security restrictions are relaxed'. I came up to the barricade (half a kilometre away) in a car with two colleagues and walked from there," Agnivesh told **The Telegraph**.

Agnivesh said: "TV reporters approached me as I came close to the gate of the new BJP office. I told them Atalji's stature was greater than the party's and that he inspires us to take forward his legacy of not discriminating on the basis of religion, and working towards friendship with Pakistan. Just then a group of people charged towards me shouting, ' *Gaddar!* Maro! Pakistan bhejo (Traitor! Hit him! Send him to Pakistan). *Bharat mata ki jai*.'"

Television footage shows Agnivesh being chased by men and women pulling at his clothes and throwing punches at him. Agnivesh said that most of the blows were borne by the two activists accompanying him, Vitthal Rao Arya and Bishnu Paul, who have lodged a complaint with Parliament Street police station.

The police are yet to register an FIR. Harsh Vardhan did not respond to calls, messages or emails from this newspaper.

"We were chased back to the barricade and the police made me sit in their jeep. The BJP workers started banging on the jeep. The police could not do anything and simply drove us back to our office (on Jantar Mantar Road)," Agnivesh said.

He said he had called Harsh Vardhan from the police jeep and told the assistant who received the call about the attack. "The call got cut. He (Harsh Vardhan) didn't receive my calls after that. No one from the BJP or the RSS has called me and condemned this," he said.

He said that at a time "nearly 200 innocent Muslim brothers, starting with Akhlaque in Dadri, have been lynched", the entire country had seen "a ray of hope in the revival of the memory of Atal Bihari Vajpayee".

"We all thought we would use this symbol of unity and social harmony - Atalji - to revive the old culture," Agnivesh said. "This is not an attack on me; it's an attack on what Atal Bihari Vajpayee stood for. Today's BJP, or a big section of it, is not happy to revive that legacy. Naya Bharat, which is Narendra Modi's Bharat, is very different from Atalji's Bharat," he added. Agnivesh was attacked last month in Jharkhand, allegedly by BJP youth wing cadres, on his way to a tribal congregation in Littipara.

Agnivesh said his earliest interaction with the Sangh had been accompanying Deendayal Upadhyaya during a campaign in Calcutta for the Jana Sangh in the mid-60s. Agnivesh - then Vepa Shyam Rao - taught commerce at St Xavier's College at the time.

Ironically, Friday's assault took place on Deendayal Upadhyaya Marg.

Agnivesh had moved to Haryana to work for the Arya Samaj in 1968, and started a party called Arya Sabha in 1970 to propagate "vedic socialism".

His main opponent was the Congress, and Agnivesh was jailed during the Emergency. Modi was then a Sangh *pracharak* in Haryana but their paths never crossed.

"Sometimes I think back and feel I shouldn't have been so critical of Indira Gandhi. There was repression but she never sent mobs to attack us," Agnivesh said.

After the Arya Sabha merged into the Janata Party, Agnivesh was asked to campaign for its Lok Sabha candidates in 1977. The first candidate he campaigned for was Vajpayee, who won from New Delhi. Agnivesh became a minister in the Haryana government later that year along with Sushma Swaraj.

"In 1981, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organised a march from Haridwar to Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu to oppose the conversion of Dalits there to Islam. Both of us (Agnivesh and Vajpayee) attended their meeting at the Boat Club, where they worshipped the Ganga water they had brought from Haridwar," he said.

"We both sat in front of the stage on the grass and I joked that selling the Ganga in bottles was blasphemy and that a better way to worship the river was to clean it. Vajpayeeji heartily agreed."

Agnivesh was part of the 1999 delegation that urged Vajpayee to shelve his party's demands for a Ram temple in Ayodhya, a uniform civil code and the repeal of Article 370 to attract allies. The delegation included journalist B.G. Verghese and former Supreme Court judge V.R. Krishna Iyer.

Vajpayee agreed, and the NDA manifesto had no mention of these.