

## What eminent people have said about Swami Agnivesh



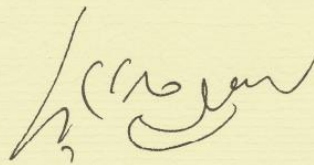
THE DALAI LAMA

### FOREWORD

Since I was a boy in Tibet, I have regarded India with great respect and admiration. India may be the only country whose civilization and culture have survived intact from their first beginnings. It is a civilization that has given rise to a long series of great teachers endowed with both human intelligence and a sense of responsibility towards the community. Consequently, a rich and sophisticated philosophy of non-violence, tolerance and pluralism has flourished here.

Swami Agnivesh, who it has been my privilege to know and meet on many occasions, is a contemporary exemplar of these ancient values. He is someone who doesn't simply hold fast to his principles, but whose practical turn of mind moves him to take whatever opportunity he can to put them into effect. He has been unflinching in his work to improve the lot of the underprivileged and downtrodden, especially bonded labourers and child labourers, and has been vocal in his support for equal rights for women, such as their right to education and to read scripture. His work to foster inter-religious harmony is reflected in the respect in which he is held by the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist, Bahai, and Jewish communities in this country. He has also stood firm in his resolve to create peace and defeat terrorism by engaging in dialogue and cementing the bonds of friendship.

I'm sure the essays and reflections that many of his friends and supporters from a wide range of backgrounds have contributed to this volume to celebrate his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday will serve as an inspiration to others to emulate his compassion in action. I am very happy to have this opportunity to add my own congratulations and prayers for his continued long life, good health and for the fulfilment of all his virtuous wishes.



May 25, 2009



**Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer**  
**Former Judge, Supreme Court of India**

A cyclonic sadhu, a social spiritualist, a saffron-robed sannyasi and universal visionary—these profound superlatives apply aptly to a man who was born a little over three score years ago at Shakti in a princely state in Madhya Pradesh as the grandson of the diwan of that primitive part of Bharat. Shakti produced Agni, if I may metaphorically present the metamorphosis of this Andhra student, Calcutta University alumnus, lecturer and lawyer for a brief while, eventually to renounce a professional career and lucrative future and announce himself as an activist Arya Samajist, sloughing off all orthodoxy and flaming forth as Swami Agnivesh, a global firebrand for whom humanism is the burning creed, compassion the consuming passion and injustice a raging allergy, a red rag anathema and a perennial bete noire. He was also a minister in Haryana for some time but how could this anti-establishment rebel remain in office when his soul is at peace only when struggles, for causes of human justice are in his blood and bones? So we have today a universal human being for whom nothing that affects or afflicts humanity is alien. He is a karma yogi, who has only one cosmic vision—a just world order, a synthesis of the temporal and spiritual values, a concern for the human rights of the marginalized and a commitment to battle for the liberation and dignity of the have-not, handicapped and humiliated. Swami Agnivesh is my intimate friend, a soulfully close fellow -traveller with me and one for whom I have great

regard. Who has not, if he knows his mental, moral, spiritual value-vistarama? For him religion whatever its name, uplifts, spirituality makes him sublime, and social action, selflessly performed, transforms the universal order. Countless awards have been showered on him. Numerous institutions have been associated with him. Many Subjects which debase society have provoked his relentless opposition. Sanatan Dharma, in its divinised, modernised version, is his tireless goal. Mindless of results, he raises his strident voice for gender justice, against bonded labour and child labour, for religious harmony and communal amity, against environmental pollution and diabolical destruction, for simplicity in life and charity in spirit and against five -star profligacy and infatuated 'affluenza', for human right of children ,prisoners and custodially tortured people and against consumerist gluttony and dehumanisation. Inc truth and justice and against untruth and injustice by ministers, bureaucrats and judges. TO describe this encyclopaedic agni is beyond the parameters of a foreword. So I conclude without prolixity. Fundamentalists are his foes; so too the mareecha globalisation who see only markets and profits but miss men, women and children. He is Gandhian but not an obdurate obscurantist using the Mahatma or Hinduism or other faddist cults. Bandhua Mukti Morcha, in its noblest amplitude, is his mission. The two hundred odd pages of pen power reveals the planetary patriotism of a great human wonder. Let me quote his address at the Parliament of Religions as proof of his conviction.

Above all our society needs, to be liberated from the prison house of communal hatred and hostilities and the inevitable dissipation of energies and resources this involves.

The rise of religious fundamentalism is made possible only by the dilution of our commitment to social justice.

One of the foremost needs in the Indian context today is to reform the very idea of religion. Our tragedy is that we have too much of religion and too little of spirituality. Religion without spirituality, especially in its social dimension, tends to be a system of oppression and exploitation. It was against Christianity without a commitment to social justice that Karl Marx issued his informed indictment. Human history, including the Church, has been the richer for that. It is time that a similar spiritual ferment took place in our context too. But that will not happen as long as

this is left in the hands of professional clergy and the hangers-on of the religious establishments. People whose hearts are set ablaze with compassion and truth need to devote themselves to the task of impacting our society from a spiritual perspective and produce the fruits of the resultant transformation so that the religious establishment is forced to take note of it. While religion can be the exclusive preserve of the religious, spirituality is under nobody's monopoly. He who gives a glass of water to quench the thirst of another is spiritually more evolved than those who chant their scriptures with their eyes closed on the giant agony of our world.

My poetic mood, viewing India and the world and the hidden agendas of those who control society, is unhappy. At the sunset of life, my brief hour sees the darkling hues in the sky. But when I meet Agnivesh I remember Shakespeare: What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! in form in moving, how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! Never at rest but ever in the meditational communion with God, Swamiji is diamond-hard in his conviction, honey-bee in his sweet collectivism for all suffering humans. He defends the Constitution of India because humanism and compassion are fundamental duties in Article 51 A and hates fanatical fundamentalism because rabid religiosity poisons the soul and promotes hatred. He is aware of the reality of religious pluralism in India and desiderates the comradeship and reconciliation of the quintessence of all religions. He thunders against everything that degrades the composite cultural heritage of India. May I give the last word on this Foreword to Swami Agnivesh himself by a quote from an autobiographical note of his?

"Religions for Social justice is aimed at creating an active forum for uniting the various religious traditions that flourish in this country. Their scattered existence, insulated both from the burning issues of the times and from each other, is the root cause for their ineffectiveness in creating a society on the foundation of justice and peace. Given the needs and challenges of today, the dialogue between religions cannot be limited to words and concepts. Religions must discover a shared agenda to promote the good of all people and to safeguard the health of the society. This will effect a paradigm shift from conflict to cooperation,

from communalism to spiritual humanism through which religions will become a constructive, rather than destructive influence on societies and nations. To this glorious goal we commit ourselves."

Swami Agnivesh, the vibrant wonder of social and spiritual activism during our times, has devoted his total personality for the transformation of Indian society with a world vision and humanist mission. For him, spiritual nexus is a fraternal factor in bringing all true religions together. In his life, he breathes the truth of the words of Vivekananda, the volcanic sadhu: 'Religion is the manifestation of the divinity already in man'. Be you Hindu, Christian or Muslim, you belong to humanity as a unity and must banish acrimony, antagonism and goddist conflicts in a dynamic camaraderie. The art of living and the science of being consistent in the realization of the higher being latent in every person regardless of creed and community, race, religion, region and the colour of the skin. He stands for human liberties in their nobler dimension of free thought, free speech and free pursuit of happiness. Such is his social philosophy that he battled for every person's dignity and against humiliation, injustice and starvation which afflicts far more than a billion hungry people on the globe. His heart melts for all territories and for all traumatized people on our planet. He is a universal man and any subject that relates to governance of man has relevance to his ideology of liberation from slavery and deliverance from distress and disablement.

Salutations to Thee, Swami Agnivesh.

## INTRODUCTION

### SWAMI : THE ACTIVIST



Asma Jehangir

(An eminent social activist and Human Rights crusader from Pakistan.)

Swami Agnivesh. I first heard about him through a fellow lawyer in Pakistan, an eminent constitutional expert. That was 12 years ago. 'There are no Swamis in Pakistan', he lamented. Later, as I learnt more about this man who dropped the trappings and privileges of being a government minister in order to be an activist, I was drawn to the image and the work of the Swami. I first met him at a workshop on child labour in Malaysia in 1986 and was even more taken with this forceful advocate of children's rights. Until then I had been pulled in two directions about the issue of child labour, between the view that child labour should be banned outright and the view that in impoverished societies like Pakistan and India, it is impossible to outlaw child labour and therefore it should be legalized so that it can be regulated and child workers' rights—like working hours, pay and health—can be regulated. It was the Swami's forceful arguments that convinced me that the only way in dealing with this issue is to abolish child labour. In addition, he has observed that the growth rate of population is much higher among communities where unemployment is rampant. 'Obviously', he says, 'if the child labour system is not removed, the temptation of having more earning hands could not be contained.' Another argument he has advanced for banning, rather than regulating child labour, is the correlation between illiteracy and servitude. In the areas where parents find more job opportunities for their children, the incidence of dropouts in schools is maximum. The Swami has pointed out that if we do not

liberate 55 million children from their jobs today, we would be responsible for keeping them illiterate for the whole of their life. Thus, the natural corollary is that the level of illiteracy cannot be shrunk without eradicating child servitude. It is correct that child labour thrives wherever there is poverty. At the same time, child labour is often equally acceptable amongst families who may not be living in abject poverty. The social acceptance of child labour has encouraged parents to send their children in the labour force and provided governments with an excuse to explain it away in terms of 'evil necessity for the poor'. This conceptualization of the issue has helped the Swami to act upon his ideas unlike a lot of activists who act first and think later. And make no mistake, the beauty or force of the Swami's work lies in his activist approach—an approach which takes a lot of commitment, energy and courage. It is difficult to be a successful activist.

It is even tougher to work on empowering the most disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of the society. Those who have been doing so, see that when working in this area you can expect no regular or sustained support from the very people you are trying to help. Their dependency, in fact, sometimes increases the burden of the person or persons trying to give them the impetus to push them forward out of the rut of despair they habitually live in. They are easily intimidated and are powerless—this I know from my own experience as a lawyer working with bonded labourers and abused women. Just when you think your case will work to their advantage, they back down—sometimes pushed into such corners by extreme poverty and the psyche of being disadvantaged.

They may be 'persuaded' to withdraw by offers of what is to them a substantial amount of money or pressurized into withdrawing, after being promised that if they do so, they will not be harassed by the thugs of the powerful and influential people they are usually up against. And you are then left practically helpless, because you cannot offer a better alternative, or force them to continue to fight for the larger cause for others like themselves, because for them at that point the 'smaller' causes of safety, security and finances are more important. I have had judges saying to me, 'Mrs. Jehangir, we hope you will choose your cases more carefully next time. Look, your clients are not even willing to stand by their statements. Are you not embarrassed to continually be espousing such people?' But the Swami will agree that such drawbacks and setbacks only strengthen the will of the activist to fight on.

The world of today or of the past has diverse value systems. There are no such things as an Eastern or Western value systems, or for that matter

a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew or a Hindu value system. Swami and I belong to different religions and genders, to enemy countries, which have their own political agenda. But we share a strong bond, because we have a similar mission, ideology and commitment. And this transcends all boundaries. There are conservative values and liberal values. Some people, in any society, have values according to which men and women have separate roles to play, men should not weep and women should not become presidents. There are people in all societies, whether Western or Eastern, who believe that their particular religion is better than another, or that force is the only way to progress or that war can be a solution to human problems and conflicts. My values, the Swami's values, and those of our friends and fellow-workers, no matter which part of the world we live in, which religion or gender we belong to, or which country's passport we hold, are the values of justice, liberty, equality and peace. And as I said before, they are not restricted to any society, religion or gender. The Swami is my friend of values. Such values are not universal, nor localized to any region but are universally spread. And the values a person lives by through his or her actions speak louder than words, or works of intellectualization. The Swami's actions certainly have done so. He has been in the forefront of the anti-sati, the anti-child-labour and bonded labour, and anti-casteism and anti-communal movements in India.

In 1987, the case of young Roop Kanwar shook not only India but all of South Asia, with reverberations throughout the world. This was the case of a 'sati'—self-immolation—by a young widow in Rajasthan, supposedly in accordance with ancient Hindu tradition. Sati is outlawed in India but has been glorified by religious extremists who actually encourage this practice. The Swami took the issue head on, challenging a prominent religious Shankaracharya from Puri, whose statements on sati had been particularly virulent in a public debate. The Swami threw this challenge at the Shankaracharya while engaged in a 19-day march from Delhi to Deorala in Rajasthan where the sati took place and where a monument to the young widow had been raised, further glorifying her act which many believe was not a voluntary one. The Swami's grasp of the symbolism of his march is obvious in his statement then, that he and his marchers were not trying to break the platform built in memory of Roop Kanwar, but were trying to break the deep rooted evil in the minds of the people who could stand there and watch her burn to death. And in challenging the inherent cruelty of the situation, there is no doubt in my mind that the Swami threw a spanner in the works of the status quoists, which too many people accept unquestioningly.

It is not easy to challenge religious orthodoxy, particularly in societies like ours, dominated by illiteracy, poverty and traditionalism disguised as religious dogma. It is to the Swami's credit and it speaks for his courage that his march captured public imagination in India. He had to fight and win a High Court order against his march before he could continue and there was by all accounts, a record crowd in the High Court when his case was heard. Later he was arrested along with hundreds of supporters before reaching Deorala, by a government that was obviously afraid to tackle religious orthodoxy in a similarly straightforward manner. Although the marchers were not allowed to reach their destination, they had succeeded in an important task: to raise a fresh debate on sati, dowry, child marriage and related evils. Even the pro-sati organizations acknowledged the impact of this peaceful Gandhian tactic. One of their members told a reporter at the time that no matter what move the pro-sati organizations made at that point, the marchers led by the Swami would emerge as winners. 'We cannot ignore the Swami,' he said. Indeed, Swami Agnivesh makes it difficult to ignore him. He emerged from that incident as an 'activist catalyst' and in the end, a big force in his challenge to the Shankaracharya, although a public debate was not allowed to be held as he was again arrested.

In 1988, he again challenged religious orthodoxy and bigotry by marching towards the temple town of Nathdwara, Rajasthan, in order to focus attention on the fact that the Dalits of India – the untouchables or the Harijans (children of god), as Gandhi preferred to call them – are not allowed to enter temples. His companions on this march were dozens of Dalits. Again he was arrested along with his companions, and not allowed to enter the town. But he told reporters, 'Our success lies in the fact that we have forced people to take sides on this issue and sowed the seeds for further questioning of obscurantist customs'. He also observed realistically that as long as the Harijans are economically dependent on the local high castes, they will not be in a position to come out openly on this issue. And indeed, economics, rather than religion, emerges as the key factor here, for temple and other houses of worship can be a lucrative business. This particular temple, a thriving business, was controlled by people living in posh areas of Bombay. The issue of Harijans or Dalits, etc., can be so emotional that when the Mandal Commission increased the quota for these disadvantaged people in government jobs, people burned themselves to death over it. So it takes a lot of courage to tackle it. But the Swami continued.

In 1989, he made a prophetic observation at another of his by now famous marches. 'The biggest problem today', he told a public gathering, 'is the Ramajanma-bhoomi-Babri Masjid issue'. This was at the end of a

4-day peace march from Delhi to Meerut, a city which had twice been the site of communal clashes by then. He pointed out that in a town with 15 temples and 27 mosques, extremists from both religious communities wanted 'that one piece of land'. He also pointed out that religious extremists were distorting the issue to suit their own needs, and that they in turn were being used by politicians for electoral gains. Just 2 years later, the issue exploded when a Hindu extremist organization destroyed the mosque, leading to the most bloody communal riots in India since partition in 1947. The reverberations of these disturbances are still felt in Indian society and indeed, all over the sub-continent, making the task of communal peace and harmony more difficult but also firing up the will of those working to promote these issues and making them more determined to work towards peace. It has brought the liberal forces of the subcontinent closer and together they stand a better chance to confront those who wish to use religion to promote their political vested interest.

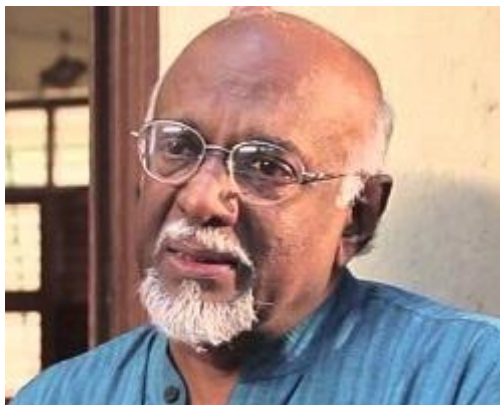
Swami Agnivesh's understanding of the issues he is combating is clear and deep. He does not view them in isolation but links them, as a thinking man, to economic and political issues and trends. Perhaps this is where his success lies in allowing him to capture media and public attention, and thus raise these questions before the largest possible number of people, spreading awareness and making them think. He also has a knack for universalizing issues, thus gathering more support for the cause. In 1989, he was part of an effort to link the entire South Asian region to combat child labour and the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude (SACCS) was born, consisting of 60 NGOs. In February 1993, SACCS undertook a 2000 kilometer march through the poverty-struck state of Bihar and UP, to Delhi and along the way, they got contestants for the General Assembly seats in UP to pledge in writing that they would endeavour for the abolition of child labour and press for a law for free and compulsory education for children below the age of 14. The names of those who did not agree with these objectives were published in the newspapers with an appeal for people not to vote for them. Thus at one stroke, the issue of child servitude was once again brought to public notice as a burning topic, and political will was generated to abolish it. Behind this is a vision that acknowledges the power of the people, the collective will. It sees that no one can go it alone, and is actively engaged in constantly mobilizing the masses.

The Swami's efforts to eradicate child servitude dates back to over a decade. In 1984, the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, of which he is the Chairperson, exposed the child bonded labour system in India when they filed a petition on behalf of 32 children aged between 6 and 12 who

had been kidnapped and forced to work. These children were beaten and branded with hot irons, and hung upside down as punishment. The Swami's BLLF filed a writ petition 12125/85 in the Supreme Court of India. The Court made a landmark judgement declaring that the constitutional right to life incorporates the right of every citizen to live with dignity. This ensured that even the bonded labourers have the right to live in a dignified way.

The Swami and his BLLF continued the struggle and their constant lobbying was instrumental in eventually getting the 1986 Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act passed. But merely having a law on the statute books is not enough. In countries like ours, independence from centuries of colonial rule has not automatically meant a society free of exploitation or one that is governed by wise and good people. On the contrary, in India as in all of South Asia, there is a palpable lack of commitment by the governments, lack of political will to implement the laws, and often, collusion between government and police officials and powerful landlords or other influential people who are instrumental in repressing the masses. Given this situation, it is crucial that dedicated, courageous people like Swami Agnivesh take up cudgels on behalf of the disadvantaged, and constantly raise a voice for them. The task that the Swami has taken upon himself is that of a watchdog of society, who constantly guards against excesses. And where the system comes in his way, he agitates to raise public awareness about the injustices – thus creating a pressure that the government of the day cannot afford to ignore. Behind this is a vision that acknowledges the power of the people, the wisdom of collective will. Swami Agnivesh started the movement to liberate bonded persons, his voice carried across India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. It is people like him who are affectionately known in our society as 'institutions' rather than 'individuals'.

(Introducing Swami Agnivesh for the Freedom and Human Rights Award in Bern, Switzerland-1994)



## **Sadanand Menon – Eminent Journalist**

### **‘An Aesthetic of Erasures’**

This is the larger framework within which I am putting forward my points. I consider it a great honour to have been invited to contribute to this volume felicitating Swami Agnivesh. I have been influenced by his actions since 1981 when, along with him, I carried my camera into the bonded labour zones of Haryana. A year later, I saw him in action in the iron ore mining belt of Dilli Rajhara at the Bir Narain Jayanti organized by the Chattisgarh Shramik Mines Sangh during the days of Shankar Guha Niyogi. I have heard him address rural and urban audiences in Hindi, Telugu, Chattisgarhi, Haryanvi and English. I have seen his fearless involvement on the streets of Delhi soon after the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, when he went into the affected areas and faced rioting mobs bent upon murder and arson. I can safely say that but for him, some of us of the Nagarik Ekta Manch were sure to have been lynched by the mobs on that November day, in 1984, in Delhi .

Agnivesh epitomizes the best practices of amplifying the public sphere through his personal courage and commitment. In later years, I have also been part of some amusing conversations between him and my colleague, the pioneering dancer, choreographer and women’s rights activist Chandralekha. Both the arts and feminism were a new area for Agnivesh and it was interesting to see him try and make sense of someone like Chandra and her ideas. But there was also great mutual respect and it was very moving when, on one of his occasional visits to Chennai, he called on Chandra who had just come out of a cardiac surgery, and on her request, placed his Arya Samaji turban on her head. It is one of my prized photos, both of them sitting together with their irreverent smiles.



### **About Swami Agnivesh's Book- Applied Spirituality**

Dear Swami Agnivesh ji,

Greetings!

Owing to ill health, I had not been able to read the little book you had given me for some time on reading it recently, I found much beauty in its subject as well as in your exposition. You have a remarkable command over the English language. I came across many words that seemed new to me but when I understood their meaning, they filled me with joy.

You have distinguished religion and spirituality in a beautiful way. I have not seen such detailed nor appropriate description elsewhere.

I have succeeded in coming outside the illusory definition of religion by the virtue of Lord Buddha's teachings on true spirituality. This is also attracting people around the world to the practice of Vipassana. your book will also have similar impact on people

wishing you good health and long life !

Sincerely,

Satyanarayan Goenka



### **Surendra Mohan -The Human Price of Flawed Development**

When I accompanied Agnivesh to the distinguished lawyer Gobind Mukhoty in order to request him to take up the Asian Games Village case, Mukhoty surprised me by asking Agnivesh where he had disappeared from being his colleague in the St. Xavier's College in Kolkata. I learnt then that the sanyasi with me was once a teacher in a prestigious academic institution. As many know, that case made the Supreme Court to observe that all employment where minimum wages were not being paid was to be regarded as forced labour and violated the Fundamental Rights of a citizen. Thereafter, Agnivesh plunged headlong in liberating and rehabilitating the bonded labourers. Before that, he had served as minister of education in the government of Haryana and was active in reforming the Arya Samaj as well. Wherever there was a call to serve the poor and the exploited, he rushed to help them. In the Narmada Bachao Andolan, he was involved from the beginning. However, he never minimized the importance of parliamentary politics and was keen to get elected to Lok Sabha. It is a different matter that he was a national-level worker and did not build his constituency. He joined the Janta Party President Chandra Shekhar in his yatra from Dulahipur in Agra district

of U.P. to Bharatpur in Rajasthan in the early 1980's as in both these places, the Dalits had been terribly wronged. In 1984, he and I sought to initiate contacts among non-party activist groups and contacted the Indian People's Front, the Shetkari Sangathana of Sharad Joshi, Karnataka Ryot Sangam and the Bharatiya Kisan Union. Although we could not make a headway in that direction, the campaign to get employment included in the list of Fundamental Rights in which the Citizens For Democracy, the All India Railwaymen's Federation, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, Nikhil Bharat Banbasi Panchayat, Centre for Democratic Socialism, Lok Samiti, Khet Mazdoor Sabha and Agnivesh's Bandhua Mukti Morcha were participants led to the inclusion of this issue in the election manifesto of the National Front and the Approach Paper of the Ninth Five Year Plan.

On the precise role of a sanyasi in a country like ours, the query put by the French Nobel Laureate Romain Rolland in 1927 to Swamy Shivananda, President of the Ramakrishna Mission at that time, about the attitudes of Ramakrishna, the Guru, and Swamy Vivekananda, his disciple, on the question of service. ...'It appears to me,' observed the French novelist, "that the most essential feature of the personality of Vivekananda was the mournful and heroic obsession of human suffering and of evil; to fight against or to console' and asked....'What was his (Ramakrishna's) attitude to the cruel injustices of nature and of society, of unfortunate people and of those oppressed or persecuted? Was he content simply to love them?..'. This attitude that a sanyasi must fight against such injustices of the society to the unfortunate people, the oppressed and the persecuted, has been adopted by Agnivesh, in line with the example of the great savant Vivekananda.



**Arjun Sengupta - ( Chairperson - National Commission on  
Un - Organized Sector Labour and Former Union Minister )**

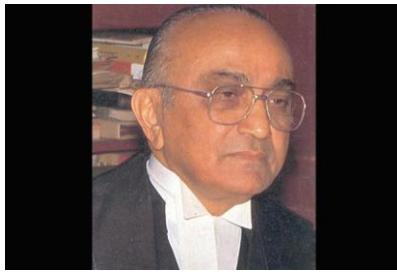
**A Reality Check**

Swami Agnivesh is a rare human being, who took to the life of a sanyasi, giving up his worldly attachments to devote himself to the service of the poor and vulnerable of the world he knows. He is a religious practitioner, who is not engaged in preaching or converting, nor in the rituals of temple-worshipping or public exhibition in pursuit of an abstract God and salvation. He just decided to work for the poor, the wretched of this earth – millions of whom that afflict India, which is not shining or prospering and which happens to be the overwhelming part of our population. I do not think that he believes that he can solve the problem of poverty in his lifetime. Nor is he a revolutionary who believes to change the power structure in favour of a new society uplifting the poor. He does not have a new philosophy to preach nor a new religion to spread. He only believes in working for the poor, to address their specific grievances and to organize them so that they can assert themselves in exercising their rights.

The universe of his poor, the toiling and exploited labouring masses is the unorganised informal sector workers who do not have the

minimum protection of law or any social security, employment security or wage security. They are 93% of our working population. Swami Agnivesh devoted his life in organizing them, fighting for them in courts of law or agitating for their minimum wages. Our National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector was set up in 2004 to analyse the problems of the Indian unorganized workers, to explore the conditions of their work and promotion of livelihoods and make appropriate recommendations. The idea was that if all problems were spelt out and concrete steps, following the recommendation, were taken for the improvement of their welfare, the Unorganised Sector workers will for the first time be enabled to exercise their rights, and decide their destiny. Swamiji was an advisor of our Commission and made valuable contribution to its deliberation.

‘Swami Agnivesh is a part of the movement which is trying to mobilize the unorganised workers, inspire them towards collective action to exercise their rights. It may take quite some time for such a movement to fruition. It all depends on the environment of policy changes and the politics of governing a country as diverse as India with an enormous multitude of interest groups and social formations. But Swami Agnivesh and his friends have got them all right by claiming the privileges as claim, rights or entitlements. To enjoy the benefits of rights, they must be exercised by the right holders. They must be mobilized and inspired to demand the fulfillment of their rights and call upon the state authorities to change the legislative framework and then to maintain a constant vigil on their full and effective implementation.’



### **Justice P.N. Bhatwari – On Human Rights**

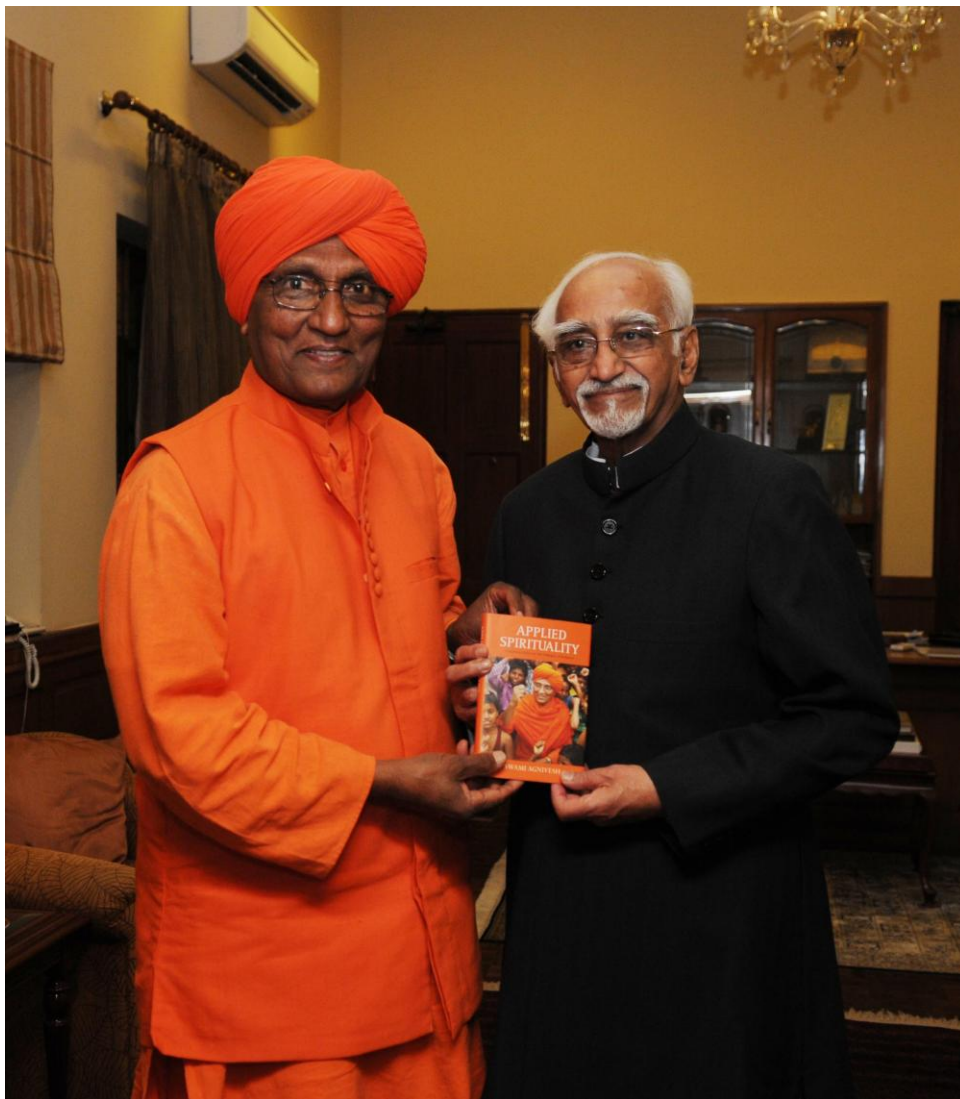
The Bonded Labour issue became an issue because of Swami Agnivesh. Bonded labour had been there for ages and nobody had given thought to it. Then he came to court with it and brought it to my notice. I ordered the state govt to institute an enquiry and they came up with appalling reports of how these thousands of labourers were kept in sub-human living conditions, not allowed to go out – and there was nobody for help, they were “invisible” to society. I went there myself and visited many of these places. The plight of women, children, ailing people living in single tiny rooms where they had to crawl in to enter – it was shocking – the filth, utter poverty and sub-human existence. I took up their cause and fought to free them. The Govt gave full support and the Press took it up – it became a widely talked about movement. Fortunately there was a NGO I knew and most of these freed bonded labourers were absorbed there. So it was possible to both free these unfortunate people and provide them with basic needs. Long after, on the day I was being felicitated after having retired as CJI, those people sent me a wreath of cardamoms they had woven with their own hands for me – it was the most touching tribute and I still cherish that garland.



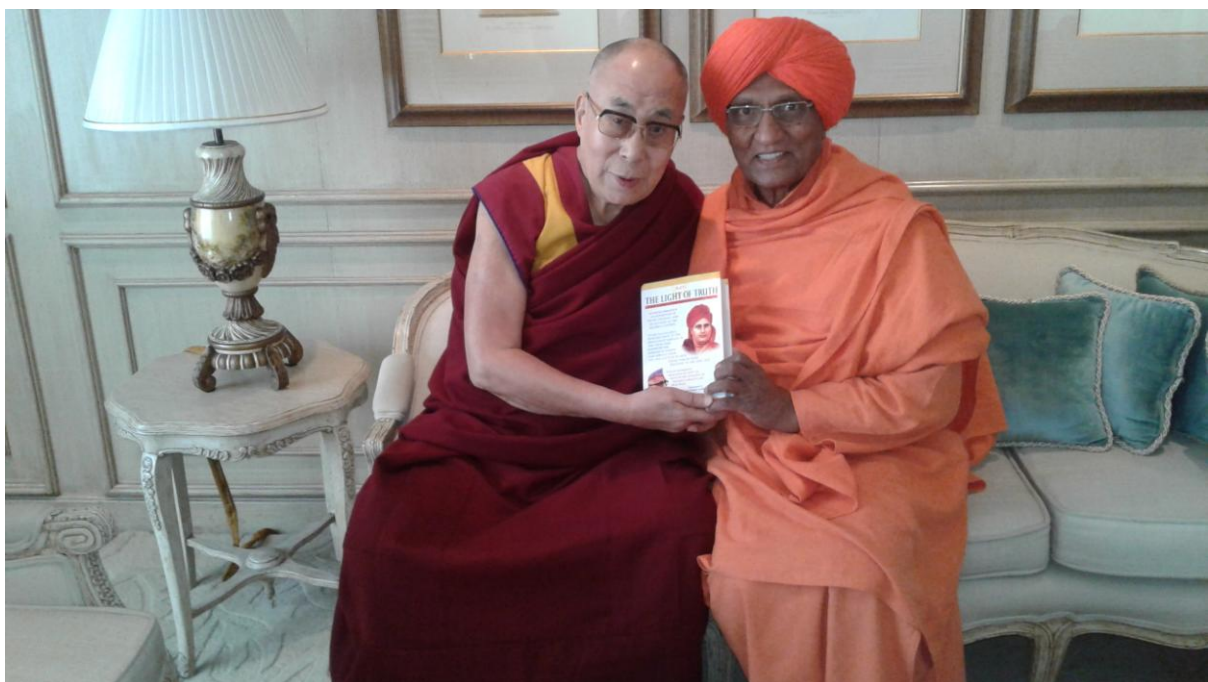
**Swami Agnivesh presents Applied Spirituality book to Pope Francis.**



**Swami Agnivesh presents Applied Spirituality book to Shri Pranab Mukherjee  
,Former President of India.**



**Swami Agnivesh presents Applied Spirituality book to Shri Hamid Ansari ji , Former Vice President of India.**



**Swami Agnivesh presents Satyarth Prakash book to Dalai Lama ji.**

## A Short C.V. of Swami Agnivesh



**Swami Agnivesh**, an activist based in New Delhi, India, is a leader of Arya Samaj, and Former Board member of KAICIID (King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue). He was awarded the Right Livelihood award, known as the Alternative Nobel, in 2004, for his work for social justice. Late Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer called him a cyclonic swami, reflecting his dynamism and the diversity of his activism.

He was born as Vepa Shyam Rao in 1939, the grandson of the Diwan (Chief Minister) of a princely state called Shakti, now in Chattisgarh, and part of an Orthodox Hindu family. Later on he obtained Law and Business Management degrees, became a lecturer in Kolkatta's famous St. Xavier's College 1963-1968. Also practiced law in Kolkatta High Court under Sabyasachi Mukherji who subsequently became Chief Justice of India.

In 1968 he became a full-time worker of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reformist movement, and two years later became a sanyasi, renouncing worldly possessions and becoming, in the process, Swami Agnivesh in March 1970. With Swami Indravesht led various movements of students, teachers and farmers in Haryana. In 1974 as a trusted lieutenant of Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan led his movement in Haryana. Spent 13 months in Ambala Central Jail during emergency. He studied Mahatma Gandhi's literature and was deeply influenced by Gandhian thought. He was elected MLA in Haryana and

was Minister for Education for a short stint. He resigned 1979 , Nov. and plunged in the movement for the emancipation of Bonded Laborers and Child Slavery.

Swami Agnivesh a powerful communicator in Hindi and English, has worked on many social issues nationally and internationally such as abolition of untouchability and caste system in Hindu religious society, women's equality, and religious tolerance and reconciliation. He is a strong advocate of interfaith action for social justice. First International Anti-Slavery Award was given to him in London in 1990, Freedom and Human Rights Award in Berne , Switzerland in 1994, Rajiv Gandhi National Sadbhavna Award in 2004 and Right Livelihood Award ( Alternative Nobel for Peace in 2004.)

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