

[Swami Agnivesh](#)

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INTERVIEW

Swami Agnivesh

Outspoken, fearless and looking for change, this dynamic swami champions the oppressed in the spirit of Swami Dayananda Saraswati

Swami Agnivesh became a successful professor of business and law in his early twenties, despite being born into poverty. At the age of 28, he dedicated his life to India's masses and became a sannyasin in the tradition of the Arya Samaj, founded by Dayananda Saraswati. Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, had a congenial meeting with Swami Agnivesh during the Millennium Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders conducted at the United Nations in August, and Swami later visited Subramuniyaswami in Hawaii. Now 60, the unabashedly iconoclastic and reformist swami expressed his views to Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik at his modest Delhi office in August, 2000. Here are excerpts from that interview and from Swami's recent writings.

The Vedas

The Vedas are the divine words of God and were not created by man. I treat them with a lot of reverence and feel that reading them is our dharma. Vedas are books of knowledge for all humanity. They talk of eternal principles and exist for all times and all places.

Personal life and mission

I never attended any Christian school at any stage of my life. But I taught at Saint Xaviers College in Calcutta from 1963 to 1968. There I was teaching business management and law. I was very much impressed by the dedication, simplicity of living and lifestyle of the staff, whether they were teachers or missionaries going out into the slums and helping the poor. What was it that motivated these people to leave their prosperous country in Europe and live here in squalor to work for a cause? They were motivated by something higher. I asked myself, "Born in India, should I aspire to go to the US or Canada or Europe to lead a comfortable life, or should I dedicate my own life to working in the service of the poorest of the poor?" That was one real great motivation in my becoming a swami. In 1968 I left my home and my job in Calcutta and went to Haryana. On March 25, 1970, I became a swami, after two years as brahmachari.

I was initiated by Swami Brahma Muni, a great Vedic scholar. However, I accept Swami Dayananda Saraswati, his life, mission and teachings, as guiding principles. But I do not consider him to be the guru in the sense that most other gurus are taken. He is a guru because he inspires me to find the truth. Swami Dayananda Saraswati is the founder of the Arya Samaj. But in a broader sense, there are many, many other gurus. I am also inspired by Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Buddha, Vivekananda, Gandhiji and Karl Marx.

Karma

According to the theory of karma, every action bears fruit. Some believe that because you must experience the fruit of bad karma, in accordance with this law of God which cannot be

changed, then you must suffer throughout your life silently. Yet I was born in a poor family. I did a lot of hard work and became a successful, wealthy person. So I got the fruit of my karma. This is an example of cause and effect. I was told that I was born poor due to karmas of my previous birth and that I would not be liberated and would remain like this despite what I did. But no, I got educated and my actions were value based. So this caste based on birth is said to be karma. Actually, it is reversing the true karma theory. The karma principle is based on simple cause and effect.

Dharma

Consider the idea of dharma in the Vedic tradition. Understood properly, dharma is a spiritual concept that pertains to the foundation and sustenance of the created order. But dharma aims not only at supporting the existing scheme of things, it also brings out the ideal potentials in the order of creation. From this perspective, two categories of spiritual tasks become clear. First, there is a need to reinforce what is good and righteous. Second, there is a need to resist and reduce the distortions in any given socio-economic order. It is because of this that Swami Dayananda emphasized that a sense of mission is basic to the practice of religion.

The caste system

Anything based on birth cannot be the principle for governing society. All individuals must be allowed to develop their potential. Why should we mar this potential by saying that if you are born a woman, you will always be less than a man? Saying this would be wrong. The caste-based system in Hindu society today is the worst thing that any society could have. This is the main reason for the downfall of our Hindu

society. This is why Hindus are converting to Islam and Christianity.

Bonded labor

Slavery persists in our age in various forms. The bonded labor system is considered to be one of the most virulent and prevalent contemporary forms of slavery. In most developing countries, the informal money-lending system coupled with usurious rates of interest, sometimes as high as 200%, gives birth to a phenomenon called debt bondage. Here the employer entraps a laborer by offering an advance to be paid off through future earnings. But since the wages are low and the employer frequently makes deductions for accommodation and tools, the worker cannot repay. As the debts mount, the employer insists that it be passed from parent to child or even grandchild. Cases have been found of people slaving to pay off debts eight generations old.

Besides grinding poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and other such economic factors, the social-cultural factors like the abominable caste system, ethnic and racial and gender discrimination are responsible for the perpetuation of this scourge. Little wonder that in a country like India, 90 per cent of the five million bonded laborers and 55 million children in servitude, belong to the untouchables or to the tribals.

Children are the worst victims of bondage and servitude. Child bondage is found in many parts of the world, not only in Asia as is commonly assumed, but also in Latin America and Africa. The number of children who are victims of bondage seems to be on the increase, despite protective national and

international standards. Legislation is not always adequate, and enforcement is generally weak.

These children are made to work for 14 to 16 hours a day. Their working places are unhygienic, poorly ventilated and dimly lit. In most cases these children reside in the working sheds, devoid of all basic civic amenities. They are susceptible to all sorts of occupational diseases like tuberculosis, bronchitis, skin infections, defective vision, cancer and deformity of various organs of the body. Some studies indicate that their span of life is reduced by 20 to 25 years.

Child Labor

Child labor, as a separate phenomenon from bondage of children, is a perennial problem in India. The architects of India's constitution were fully aware of this menace and incorporated articles mandating nonemployment of children and requiring their induction into school. Another mandate was the provision of a free and compulsory elementary education for all children up to the age of 14. Yet it is a tragic irony that despite a plethora of prohibitive laws and international conventions, this abominable child labor system has been thriving uninhibited. Some of them are victims of illusory promises made for prospects after training. The major areas of their employment are agriculture, carpet industry, brassware industry, glass and bangles industry, leather industry, gem cutting and polishing, matches and fireworks, stone quarries, brick kilns, handlooms and more. Once I went to the Supreme Court of India in conjunction with a case about child labor. As I was discussing the matter, a 10-year-old boy brought tea to our group. I told the others, "See, even here in the Supreme Court itself we have child laborers!"

It is commonly contended that child labor as a harsh reality is born out of social, economic and historical causes. It is believed that four factors--namely poverty, unemployment, population and illiteracy--are the main reasons for this malady and removal of these is a prerequisite for wiping out the child labor system. But we argue the other way. Our experience and various studies conducted by researchers corroborate the fact that child labor is equally, if not solely, responsible for causing and perpetuating unemployment, poverty, population growth and illiteracy.

What will the future bring?

I think India should tell the world that, as we enter the new millennium, we are marching into the realm of science and technology. It is high time we stop things that divide human society in the name of religion. The dharma for one has to be the dharma for all. We cannot call it religion, for religion may be equated with sect. Every human being should be at a level of equality to aspire for the divine. Manu has given ten principles of dharma. Those who practice these principles are dharmic and those who do not are adharmic. Every soul must be given the freedom to find the truth. Each soul must walk his own path to liberation. No soul will be denied access to liberation.

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