

Agnivesh on Hindutva

[Swami Agnivesh is the President of the Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha ('World Council of the Arya Samaj'). A well-known social activist, he has played a leading role in the struggle against communalism in India. Yoginder Sikand recently spoke with him. Excerpts :]

Q: How do you explain the recent wave of bomb blasts that have taken place across India ? How can this dangerous phenomenon be tackled?

A: Clearly, behind such attacks is a certain ideology at work whose major objective is to create hatred between the different communities. That, rather than just killing innocent people, is the real objective of those behind these dastardly and cowardly acts. These forces, who could be both internal as well as external, and who could include extremist Hindus, extremist Muslims or others, clearly do not want people of the different communities to live in peace with each other.

Among the various steps that should be taken to counter this form of terrorism is for people to isolate the forces within their own respective religious communities that seek to foment communal hatred. If a Hindu name emerges as being behind a certain terrorist attack, it is for Hindus, in particular, to fiercely condemn such a person or organization, not just as a criminal but also as anti-Hindu. And the same holds true for how Muslims should respond if the person or outfit behind a terror attack bears a Muslim name. Terrorism cannot be tackled simply by the government machinery without this sort of social or public mobilization against it. In this, it is particularly crucial to desist from branding or associating any particular community with terrorism, because terrorism does not know any barrier of community. It is wrong to associate terrorism with any religion. It is also crucial, that if a person claiming to belong to a particular community engages in an act of terror, those others who also belong to the same community must fiercely condemn his act as not just being a crime but also a gross violation of the religious teachings of the community in question. Only then can these elements be denied any social sanction or support.

And this is now beginning to happen. A number of leading Muslim clerics have issued fatwas against any form of terrorism, no matter what the religion of the perpetrator. And Hindu leaders should also begin to say the same thing. Recently, I issued a statement on behalf of the Arya Samaj appealing to all Hindu religious leaders not to support those Hindutva activists who have been accused in the Modassa and Malegaon terror attack cases. I appealed to them to expose Hindutva terrorists, for they are giving the entire Hindu community a bad name. I pointed out that numerous Muslim ulema or religious leaders have organized mass rallies and have issued fatwas condemning all forms of terrorism, including that engaged in by self-styled jihadist groups. Recently, I attended a huge inter-faith conference in Madrid to denounce all forms of terrorism, which was organized by the King of Saudi Arabia. I suggested that Hindu religious leaders should also do the same and forcefully condemn all forms of terrorism, including that done in the name of Hinduism or by Hindus, as anti-Hindu, anti-religion and anti-human.

I made the same point at the National Integration Council meeting that was recently held in Delhi , where I said that leading Indian maulvis are issuing fatwas against all forms of terrorism and organizing mass rallies, some of which I have also addressed, to denounce it, and I asked why Hindu religious leaders were not doing the same.

Q: What has been the result of this appeal of yours to Hindu religious leaders? Are

they coming out to forcefully condemn terror engaged in by Hindutva groups, just as many Muslim clerics are now openly speaking against terrorism done in the name of Islam?

A: Unfortunately, many Hindu religious leaders continue to remain silent on this. To remain silent on such a heinous matter can, in some cases, be construed as tacit approval. But I am still making efforts to make them realize the gravity of the situation.

Q: In recent years there is a growing tendency in some circles to associate Islam, in particular, with terrorism. How do you see this development?

A: I think this is completely unfair. It is a product of the imperialist agenda of certain Western powers that need to create the spectre of radical Islamism as allegedly posing an immense threat to the West so as to help the West justify its continuing hegemony, its global power and its control over West Asian oil resources. Using this warped logic, and without any evidence, America has attacked and devastated Afghanistan and Iraq and seems to be bent on taking on the whole Muslim world. George Bush openly calls for a 'crusade', and thus seeks to lend credence to the thoroughly bankrupt theory of the 'clash of civilisations'. The Western media has been forcefully propagating this thesis, and now, especially after 9/11, large sections of the Indian media are also parroting the same bogus theory.

To repeat, to seek to associate terrorism with any religion or community is completely wrong. I think, and I have said this publicly, that George Bush is the world's No. 1 terrorist. It was the Western establishment that, along with its client regimes, created the Taliban and armed Saddam, and the Bin Laden family is a business partner of the Bush family. In the same way, the Congress, under Indira Gandhi, propped up Bhindaranwale, but he later turned into a Frankenstein. Likewise, the first victim of terrorism in free India, Mahatma Gandhi, was killed by a Hindu, not a Muslim. It was not a Muslim who killed Indira Gandhi or Rajiv Gandhi. And so you can easily see through the falsity of the slogan, 'All Muslims may not be terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims' that is so frequently mouthed today.

Q: What do you have to say about the recent revelations about some Hindutva groups being involved in fomenting terrorism in India ?

A: Yes, this phenomenon exists and the media is gradually bringing it to light. Hindutva ideologues have been consistently seeking to equate Islam and Muslims with terrorism but now that evidence is surfacing of the close involvement of radical Hindutva outfits in terrorism they are saying that terrorism must not be sought to be associated with any religion. But this is precisely what they were doing all this while with regard to Islam. They are saying that the so-called Sadhvi who has been arrested in connection with the Malegaon blasts should not be called a 'terrorist'. Rather, they say, she should be termed as an 'accused' because the charges against her have not been as yet proved by the courts. But if that is the case, then why do they refer to the Muslims nabbed by the police, but against whom the courts have not passed their verdicts, as 'Islamic terrorists', without demanding the same sort of proof? You can call them 'suspects' or 'accused', but why jump to the conclusion that all of them are actually terrorists without the charges against them being proven?

There is ample evidence to show that Hindutva groups have been involved in planning and executing acts of terror, but, unfortunately, for its own political purposes, the Government has done little to curb this and has sought to play this down. Nor has the media given this the serious attention that it deserves. Such terror attacks obviously help the Hindutva lobby as they widen the Hindu-Muslim chasm, which, in turn, makes it

easier to play on Hindu sentiments in order to win Hindu votes. One cannot rule out the possibility of Hindutva elements in being behind some of the other blasts besides the ones in Malegaon, Modassa, Nanded, Kanpur and so on that are now coming to light. Blasts could have been done by any group, Hindu or Muslim or whatever, but it is wrong to jump to a conclusion without proper investigation.

If this so-called Sadhvi, dressed in the saffron robes of a sanyasin, is really involved in this blast it is a matter of great shame for Hindus. Hindutva terrorists are a blot on the name of Hindu society. It seems that they have taken upon themselves the task of giving Hinduism a bad name, to give it the shape of terrorism. In actual fact, they are enemies of Hinduism and the Hindu society. They want to divide and thereby destroy the country, using terror for building their vote-banks.

Q: Do you think there is any ideological link between radical Hindutva and terrorism?

A: The roots of the notion of Hindutva go back to Savarkar, who coined the term in the 1920s. Before that, he appeared to champion Hindu-Muslim solidarity, but following his stay in jail in the Andaman Islands his views completely changed, and he then started claiming that the Hindus and Muslims of India were, in effect, two different nations. He appealed to Hindus to militarize themselves. He argued that those who did not follow religions that were born in India were not real patriots or genuine Indians. And so, according to this poisonous thesis, Muslims and Christians were to be considered as not true Indians, deserving of, at best, second-grade citizenship.

This thesis of Hindutva gave a handle to the proponents of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan . I am convinced that if there was no Hindutva, there would have been no separate Pakistan , and India would have remained one. And the millions of Muslims who stayed behind in India after the Partition I consider to be much more patriotic than the Hindutva-walas, because the former were offered the dream of a seeming utopia, of 'heaven', if they migrated to Pakistan , but they refused to migrate, and, instead, they stayed on in their homeland. And this they did despite all the immense threats, challenges and fear that they were forced to face, and despite the repeated anti-Muslim pogroms and pervasive discrimination. Who, then, can dare question their patriotism?

The ideology of Hindutva, as we know it, is inextricably linked to terrorism, in both theory as well as in practice. And Hindutva is even worse than that—it is sheer fascism. The greatest victims and sufferers of Hindutva fascism will not be Muslims or Christians, but, rather, Hindus themselves.

Q: Why?

A: History clearly tells that if any form of fascism is not combated by the community or people in whose name it claims to speak, it will eventually destroy that people or community. Thus, when Hitler went about massacring the Jews the German Christians remained silent, and because they did not oppose his Nazism they had to face huge loss of German life in the Second World War. When Bhindaranwale and his henchmen went about killing Hindus, many Sikhs remained quiet, and eventually more Sikhs than Hindus were killed by the Khalistanis. In Kashmir , self-styled Islamist extremists have killed many times more Muslims than Hindus. Likewise, because radical Islamist groups in Pakistan were fanned by the state, and there was no effective Muslim protest against them, they now pose a potent threat to the peace and prosperity of the people of Pakistan , the vast majority of who are Muslims, and many Pakistani Muslims have fallen victim to them. So, I find that there is no reason to believe that if Hindus do not speak out and assertively protest against Hindutva fascism they would not have to suffer immensely later. It will prove to be a disaster for them, and, besides this, it would only give India a

bad name. I firmly believe that all forces, groups and people that are genuinely concerned about the welfare of India, must stand up against Hindutva fascism.

Q: What do you feel about the way the government has gone about seeking to tackle the problem of terrorism?

A: There is no uniform approach across the country. So, for instance, people witnessed the state-sponsored genocide and massive wave of terror in Gujarat in 2002, that caused the deaths of vast numbers of innocent Muslims.

But the role of the state in such heinous violence targeted against innocent people, which is a form of terrorism, did not start with Modi. The nefarious role of top bosses in the Congress Party in orchestrating the large-scale massacre of Sikhs in 1984 is well-known. So, various governments have sought to fan violence against minorities for their own political purposes, and no discussion of terrorism in India can leave out this crucial dimension.

Then there are other forms of terrorism. The killing of some 3000 innocent people in America on 9/11 was a terrible crime, and it must be condemned, but the West does not want us to talk of other forms of terrorism in which Western powers and elites are directly implicated. Some 7000 children die in India daily, mainly due to poverty, which is caused by a skewed and totally inhuman notion of 'development' propagated by Indian and Western elites. Is this not a form of terrorism also? In some senses, it is a worse form of terrorism, not only because it is of a far greater magnitude but also because it causes prolonged pain and suffering to its victims, unlike those who die in an instant terrorist attack. Some twenty-five thousand dowry-deaths of women are recorded every year in India. Is this not also a form of terrorism? Is not female foeticide a form of terrorism? All forms of terrorism, whether in the name of religion, community, nation, gender or whatever, needs to be sternly condemned and struggled against. □□□