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Agnivesh: Activist swami who fought against bonded labour

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Renowned social activist, Arya Samaj leader and former politician Swami Agnivesh passed away at the age of 80 at the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences here on Friday. He was suffering from liver cirrhosis.

He wore many hats in his lifetime, ranging from lawyer to politician, but his role as the face of the movement against bonded labour and someone who brought the issue in focus in the 1980s is what Swami Agnivesh will be remembered for most.

In 1981, he founded the Bandhua Mukti Morcha (Bonded Labour Liberation Front), which continues to



Swami Agnivesh

raise issues surrounding bonded labour in India. He was the chairman of the Morcha. Over the years, BMM estimates to have secured the release of more than 1,72,000 bonded labourers. Renowned internationally, Swami Agnivesh was thrice elected as chairperson of the UN Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery.

Recognition for his work

came in the form of several national and international awards, including the Anti-Slavery International Award in London, 1990, the Freedom and Human Rights Award in Berne, 1994, the Rajiv Gandhi Award for Communal Harmony, and the Right Livelihood Award from Sweden, 2004.

Swami Agnivesh was born Vepa Shyam Rao on September 21, 1939, in Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh.

He gained degrees in law and commerce, became a lecturer in management at the reputed St Xavier's College in Kolkata and for a while practised law. In his student days, he gravitated towards the Arya Samaj and began a life-long relationship with it.