

Adivasi Rights Activist Stan Swamy's Life and Work Demonstrate Why the Powerful want him Silenced

The 83-year-old Jesuit has been accused of being a member of a banned Maoist party and being involved in a conspiracy to instigate caste violence.

Tony PM & Peter Martin



FATHER STANISLAUS LOURDUSWAMY'S

arrest on the night of October 8 has caused a stir among many people in Central India, where he has spent 70 years relentlessly fighting for the rights and values of the region's indigenous people.

The police allege that 83-year-old Jesuit priest is a member of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) and was involved in a conspiracy to instigate caste violence in the Bhima Koregaon village near Pune in 2018.

To those of us who have known Swamy, these claims are absurd. Through this account of his concerns and campaigns, we hope to offer greater insight into the reasons the authorities consider him so inconvenient.

To stand up and fight for justice and truth, no matter what religion, culture, and ethnicity one belongs to: that is the mantra of Stanislaus Lourduswamy, popularly known as Stan Swamy. What matters most for him is to be humane in all his relationships.

The breakthrough

Born on April 26, 1937, in a village in Tamil Nadu's Tiruchirappalli, Swamy went to the well-known St Joseph's School in the district. Inspired by the work of the Jesuit priests with whom he came in touch with during his school days, Swamy decided to join the order himself – but in undivided Bihar.

He started religious studies on May 30, 1957, committing himself totally to the cause of the marginalised and the poor.

The real breakthrough with regard to his ideas about social action came in 1965, when he began his regency, the stage at which trainee Jesuits spend two years taking up one or two works of the order. Swamy spent this time at St Xavier's High School Lupungutu, Chaibasa, West Singhbhum.

His experiences as a teacher and hostel prefect had a deep impact on him. He used to go to the weekly bazaar in Chaibasa on Tuesday (the Mangal-haat) with his students and saw for himself how the outsider merchants and their agents cheated the Adivasis. "I felt pain but could not do anything about it," he said.

On holidays, he visited his boys and their families in their villages. It gave him a sense of their culture. The values they held deeply impressed him.

Studying in the Philippines

Another decisive turn in his life came after his regency, when he went to Manila in the Philippines in 1967 to study theology. Alongside, he did a Master's in Sociology. Some of the subjects dealing with indigenous peoples gave him a greater understanding of how indigenous peoples were exploited in various regions of the world and their struggles.

Back home in the Jesuit Jamshedpur Province in 1971, he was given the responsibility as the Director of the Catholic Relief Services charity for the area. He spent nearly two years – 1971 and part of 1972 – setting up a godown for relief supplies and arranging for a vehicle and an office so that the relief projects would run smoothly. He also trained two of his ex-students to do office work and handle the distribution of relief materials. But, he said, "That was not my cup of tea."

During this period, he also attended a three-month course on community development at the Indian Social Institute, Bangalore, and kept in touch with the director, Henry Volken.

Next significant turn came in his life when he told the head of the Jamshedpur Jesuit Province, Bill Tome, that he wanted to live in an interior Ho village, learn their language and get to know them about their world from closely within. With Tome's blessings, Swamy moved to Badaibir village. He shared a room that one of the families readily offered. He contacted the youth in a radius of about 15 kms and helped them to think critically about their lives in all its dimensions. Soon enough, some of his ex-students and some volunteers with backgrounds in the All India Catholic University Federation joined him.

The village community offered them a small plot and all the residents helped to build a small hut with a room and a kitchen. Two nuns who Swamy had

met at the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore joined them. The house was open to anyone who wanted shelter.

The early and mid-'70s saw an upsurge of students and youth all over the country led by leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, who called for civil disobedience. The Indian Social Institute in Bangalore became a hub for university students who were looking for an alternative vision of society and they asked the institute to teach them the fundamentals of Marxian analysis of society.

Further studies

Volken then felt that an Indian Jesuit should head the institute and take on the new challenge. He proposed Swamy's name. But Swamy, on his part, felt that he needed to study more about Social Analysis. He got a scholarship to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium for a year from 1974 to June 1975. Although Swamy could have proceeded to do a doctorate, he felt he should come back and take on the new role of guiding youth from the exploited and oppressed sections to understand society and its dynamics scientifically so as to develop effective strategies of action to bring about change.

Thus Swamy started the long stint – 1975 to 1990 – at the Indian Social Institute Bangalore where together with Dr Duarte Barreto and several other committed colleagues, he tried to reach out to several hundred young men and women from the fringes of society through systematic training sessions. He then followed up in their fields of action.

Soon, participants from various parts of the country as well as from the neighbouring countries of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal began to attend the three-month intensive course on Social Analysis and Community Organisation. The Indian Social Institute also published a series of booklets on social analysis.

Understandably, some members of Catholic hierarchy were upset by the institution's "Marxist leaning". But the Jesuit superiors stood by the team.

Swamy's effort to train people in scientific social analysis and his lived example of taking the side of the oppressed and exploited has inspired many social activists in South Asia and beyond.

In 1991, Swamy felt that he had served a sufficiently long time at the institute and decided to come back to his "first love", the Adivasis of Jharkhand. Returning from Bangalore, he stayed at the Jesuit community of St. Xavier's High School Lupungutu, while working to revive JOHAR – the Jharkhandi Organisation for Human Rights.

A little later, he moved to stay at the office of JOHAR, which began advocating for popular causes and reviving the traditional self-governance (Munda-Manki) system of the Ho society. Simultaneously, he began contacting various social activists and socially committed persons.

Resisting displacement

Towards the end of 1990s, the phenomenon of Adivasis and Moolvasis being displaced from their lands became rampant. Other Jesuits also became involved in mass struggles. The Netarhat Field Firing Range project in Palamu and Gumla districts and the Koel-Karo Dam in Ranchi and West Singhbhum were threatening large-scale displacements of residents. Jesuits involved in social action felt that there was a need to establish a centre in Ranchi to coordinate the efforts of organisations and movements in fighting the massive processes of marginalised communities becoming pauperised. Stan Swamy was given the responsibility of creating this centre.

In June 2001, Swamy moved to Ranchi from Chaibasa and started to live at Gharana Apartment, Purulia Road. He began to contact organisations and movements in a process of coordinating the struggles against dispossession. Meanwhile, the search for a piece of land for setting up the proposed social action centre, named Bagaicha, bore fruit: the Ranchi Jesuit Province agreed to gift an acre of land on the campus of the Agriculture Training Centre, Namkum, for the purpose.

Swamy began to look for an Adivasi architect to design the structure. The central zone of the Jesuits took on the responsibility of financing the construction. Work began in 2004 and was completed in 2006. Since then, Swamy had been living at Bagaicha, fully involving himself in addressing various issues affecting the people of the land.

In the mid-2010s, the Munda Adivasis of Jharkhand's Khunti district began erecting stone slabs in their villages inscribed with the provisions of the Schedule Five of the Indian Constitution that grants special autonomy to tribal areas. This followed an age-old tradition of erecting stone slabs to demarcate ancestral lands by commemorating the contributions of ancestors and came to be known as the Pathalgadi movement.

However, the state's Bharatiya Janata Party government perceived the movement to be "anti-development and anti-national". It deployed paramilitary troops and police forces to suppress the movement. As the news of the repression spread, many people posted comments on social media about the government's ruthless approach. The state government filed sedition cases against 20 activists, including Stan Swamy, on the basis of their Facebook posts stating that the government should engage in peaceful dialogue with the Adivasi people involved in Pathalgadi movement rather than repressing it.

Corporate interests disturbed

Swamy's work with Jharkhandis has provided a solid orientation and sense of commitment to numerous organic intellectuals and community-based grassroots people's movements working to bring change. Swamy has also authored many books, especially, about Adivasi rights and how they have been violated by the government and those associated with power.

He adopted a "scientific" analysis of social relationships, structures and systems following that of Karl Marx in which he distinguished the ruling class from the working class. In Jharkhand, he kept his focus on issues affecting Adivasi societies,

especially, defending their land and community rights over natural resources in their ethno-territories. He is alert on all ideologies, processes and policies that have been violating Adivasis' special constitutional and legal rights, speaking out against them.

Swamy's relentless fight against displacement and the violations of Adivasi rights by the government and corporate houses has made it difficult for some companies to advance the kind of model they favour – development that impoverishes the many while favouring the very few, advances inequality and

injustice and causes environmental and ecological disasters. Consequently, there have been continuous efforts by the powerful to silence him.

Tony PM is a freelance researcher and social activist in Ranchi. He has been closely associated with Stan Swamy since since 1993.

Peter Martin is an advocate in the Jharkhand High Court. He has been associated with Swamy since 2009.

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