

Prakash Louis: 'We need many more Stan Swamys'

Interview with Prakash Louis, author of *Fr. Stan Swamy: A Maoist or a Martyr?*

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A widely published author, Prakash Louis has been working quietly for the cause of Dalits, tribal people, minorities and other marginalised communities. He is a co-founder of the South Asian People's Initiative (SAPI) and was associated with the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi and Bengaluru, as its executive director. Be it talking about the condition of the minorities and the anti-conversion laws in various States or writing about Father Stan Swamy, who was the 16th person to be arrested in the Bhima Koregaon case, Louis keeps it straight, simple and based on facts.

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Incidentally, Stan Swamy maintained that he had never gone to Bhima Koregaon in his life, a fact that Louis states in his book *Fr. Stan Swamy: A Maoist or a Martyr?*, which has been published by Media House. Louis spoke to *Frontline* about the book and the condition of the minorities in India today. Excerpts from the interview:



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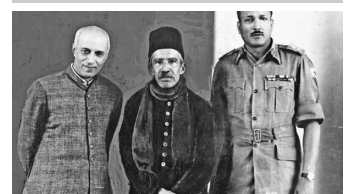


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Failed ideas of

Your book on Father Stan Swamy was released barely a couple of months after his death on July 5. How did you manage to bring out the book in such a short span of time?

Since the Bhima Koregaon incident in 2018, I have been collecting material. When the National Investigation Agency [NIA] came into the picture, I was reading, researching and trying to make sense of things. Then, ever since Father Stan was arrested on October 8, 2020 [and charged by the NIA under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for his alleged role in the Bhima Koregaon violence], I have been trying to gather more material. I work mainly in Jharkhand, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. So I know the situation at the ground level. I have also written books on the rights of the Scheduled Tribes in India, the indigenous people's struggle, and so on. It was known territory for me.

Did you speak to Father Stan Swamy about your plan to write this book?

No. The events took such a turn that I could not talk to him. Since his mobile phone was taken away [after his arrest], it became difficult. To talk to others who were with him also became difficult. But I had spoken to some people earlier.

The book is about Stan, his times, his works. His death was martyrdom; his life was all about commitment to the tribal people. It is not something that was superimposed. He learned from them. He joined them. He worked with them. That is why he could do something for them. I have tried to bring out some of the struggle of the movement.

You said, "Stan Swamy's death was martyrdom" whereas the book's subtitle is "A Maoist or a Martyr?" How does one actually see him?

The government calls him a Maoist. The common citizen

Jawaharlal Nehru



The nowhere train



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of this country who is conscious of what is happening, the social activists, the human rights activists, journalists and students, they all call him a martyr. He was an 84-year-old person who was also suffering from Parkinson's disease and other ailments. For such a person to go through what he did was sad.

I believe he was denied a sipper in jail in his last days...

Those incidents were the motivating factors for me to write this book. Some of us have been following those instances very closely. The denial of the sipper was bad. Secondly, he wanted bail so that he could go back to Ranchi. He always said: "I belong there. I want to go back home. I would like to die there." He also wanted proper [medical] treatment, which he was permitted only in the last stages of his life. These things motivated me to write.

Further, I was upset with all that had happened in the Bhima Koregaon case and the way Stan's own case was handled. Then there was a book, *Begunah Qaidi*, that also provided me food for thought. I realised that these issues were coming to the fore, so this was the right time to come out with this book on Stan. It has very little on his life, just a brief sketch. The rest of the book is about his struggles.

You write in the book that Stan Swamy wanted to go back to Ranchi rather than Tiruchirappalli where he was born in 1937.

I am from Salem in Tamil Nadu, but I would like to die in Patna, Bihar. That has been my *karambhoomi* [the place of my work]. Stan moved to Jharkhand (which was then Bihar) and wanted to breathe his last there. He said: "These are my people. I want to be there."

So did he regard the Adivasis there as family?

Yes, true. They were his family. He belonged to them. It

was not a question of where he was born but where he worked. In 2019, he had gone to south India for some time. He had gone to the place where he was born for just two days. There, too, he was told not to go back to Ranchi as he was likely to be arrested there. He said he would go back to Ranchi whatever happened.

You referred to his passionate involvement with the Adivasis. But over the years, we have seen successive governments in India displace the Adivasis from their homes and their land, territories and forests, under the garb of development. How do you look at this?

The fourth chapter of the book deals with this. It talks of the 14 issues that Stan was involved with. Stan spent 30 years with the Adivasi communities of central India. For two years, he lived in an interior Ho Adivasi village in Singhbhum district. He enjoyed Adivasi hospitality. He realised then how the present capitalist order stands in direct contrast to indigenous values insofar as inequality is the hallmark of success in life and cut-throat competition is the order of the day. He saw how the outsider traders exploited the simple Adivasi villagers when they went to the market.

Unfortunately, every government ultimately wants tribal resources, but not the tribal people. Many of us look at their displacement on the one hand, but on the other, the constitutional provisions [for their protection] are there. And we always hope that the constitutional provisions can be implemented. Every time, Stan experienced frustration along with the tribal people, but he did not give up.

What were his tools for protest when he took up the causes of the tribal population? Did he always follow democratic norms?

Yes, he used only democratic norms for protest. Fundamentally, he came from a tradition where he was

brought up to follow the constitutional provisions and the judiciary. Within the Constitution, there is the right to protest. It was always about non-violence, peaceful protest. He also trained people. He wrote petitions, mobilised people, made them aware of their rights.

How did he go about it?

Basically, he observed, researched, analysed and understood. He organised training to make people understand the provisions of the Constitution and where they were violated. He also sought to establish the rights of the poor, the marginalised.

For training, he used whatever methods were available. Whether it was Gandhian or Phule or Marxian or Ambedkarite methods, he used them all. He remembered all those who were martyred for the cause of the tribal people, like, say, Birsa Munda. He used the tools within the system, and continued to have faith in the Constitution of India.

The Pathalgadi movement

How and when was he dubbed a friend of Maoists?

It was the time when they [the protesters] studied the undertrials in jail. They started an organisation, which was later interpreted as a frontal organisation of the Maoists.

Which year was this?

It was sometime in 2015. They began their study of the undertrials then and continued it for the next few years. The study was published. That woke up the then Bharatiya Janata Party government, which dubbed the organisation a front for Maoists. The study showed that out of the 102 persons they interviewed, only three admitted that they had any relations with Maoists.

Then there was PESA, or Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, which is when the Pathalgadi movement came to the fore. People started erecting a *pathal* [stone plaque] inscribed with provisions of the Constitution that [stated that] tribal people could not be alienated from their land.

In the mid-2010s, the Munda Adivasis of Jharkhand's Khunti district began erecting stone slabs in their villages. They were inscribed with the provisions of the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution that grants autonomy to tribal areas. This followed an age-old tradition of erecting stone slabs to demarcate ancestral land by commemorating the contributions of the ancestors, and came to be known as the Pathalgadi movement. Stan Swamy and other activists were drawn to the movement. The government dubbed all of them Maoists and tried to put them in prison. The BJP government projected the movement as “anti-development and anti-national”, and deployed paramilitary troops and police forces to suppress the movement.

As for the Bhima Koregaon case, you have clearly written that Father Stan Swamy was in Ranchi (at the time of the protest). Yet the police implicated him.

The entire Bhima Koregaon issue needs to be examined with facts and figures. Along with Stan, there were many others who had nothing to do with it. Stan had not even gone to Mumbai for a long time. It was the Pune Police who came to Ranchi.

Suddenly, somebody in the ruling class realised that Bhima Koregaon was the best bet to book the so-called “urban Naxals”. Any one who offered an alternative idea to the dominant viewpoint could be booked under that. When the Maharashtra government fell, and a new regime came, the case was shifted from the Pune Police to the NIA. Until late 2019, there was no mention of Stan's name. He was implicated much later.

In the book you talk of the NIA taking away his computer, and implicating him...

Yes, all that was taken away by the Pune Police itself. Initially, we were told there was no *prima facie* evidence against him. Later, some evidence was possibly planted. This was used as a ploy to arrest as many members as possible whom the present regime considered somewhat a threat.

[In the book, Stan Swamy is quoted as saying: "This shocked me because I have never been to Bhima Koregaon in all my life nor had I anything to do with what happened there on January, 1, 2018. They seized my laptop, mobile and SIM card, some CDs and some documents lying on my table."]

The present regime also accused Stan Swamy of proselytising the Adivasis.

From a broader perspective, one understands that this [proselytising] is the easiest weapon of any regime, be it the BJP or the Congress. Remember so many Bills on Freedom of Religion came during the Congress regime. This has always been used as a ploy to target the Christian community. Stan being a Christian, it was the easiest [method]. But then there was no evidence to pursue that claim, nor was there any evidence of the celebration of what we call as the mass, which is central to Christians. Nor did anyone say, oh, he was trying to convert me. But as he was working among Adivasis, it was the best bet to get him, to falsely accuse him [of forced conversion] and arrest him.

How far was Stan Swamy influenced by the movement inspired by Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s?

I think possibly he was influenced in his younger days. Jayaprakash Narayan stayed in the Bihar-Jharkhand belt when he talked of total revolution. Stan would have been

influenced, but it may have been only one of the influences, not a major influence.

You have also written a book called “Rights of the Minorities in India”. Do you think it is becoming increasingly difficult to be a minority in India?

I think it is obvious. It has become extremely difficult to live, professing a particular belief or social and cultural mooring. If you are a Muslim or a Christian, anybody can bash you, thrash you, lynch you, kill you or accuse you of being anti-national. It is dangerous. It is extremely difficult to live and work [as a minority]. It is not expected in a secular and pluralist society.

The new anti-conversion laws brought in by the governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand, are they not against the Constitution?

They are all very much against our Constitution. They are also against the spirit, history and legacy of this country. Whatever problems were there earlier, things were not this bad.

Probably that is why we needed Stan Swamy?

Yes, we need many more Stan Swamys to stand up, stick their necks out, and say that whatever is happening is not acceptable to any Indian, not just Dalits, Adivasis, Christians, women, children and youth across religions, regions or castes.

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