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Stan Swamy: A life dedicated to Adivasis

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Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest, who spent long years working among his beloved Adivasis the eastern Indian tribal state of Jharkhand, died on Monday in Mumbai.

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Ranchi: The words “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race,” from the Bible seems to sum up the life of Stanislaus Lourdasamy, 84 or Stan Swamy as he was known.

Swamy, a Jesuit priest, who spent long years working among his beloved Adivasis the eastern Indian tribal state of Jharkhand, died on Monday in Mumbai, hours before his appeal for bail in a case where he is ironically accused of being an 'Urban Naxal' was to be heard.

In 2016, moved by the plight of Adivasi prisoners in Jharkhand, many of whom were falsely branded as Naxalites, Swamy did a research on them titled “Deprived of rights over natural resources, impoverished Adivasis get prison: a study of Undertrials in Jharkhand.”

His study found that 97 per cent of undertrials interviewed said that allegations that they were linked to Maoists were false, and 96 per cent of them earned less than Rs 5,000 a month, underlining the fact the poorest and the most vulnerable in the state were the among the ones arrested under stringent anti-terror laws.

It also found that 31 per cent of undertrials and a little over a third of

the convicts were tribals. The percentage of tribals in jail was far higher than their proportion of the population.

His study coming after three decades of work among the tribals which focussed on their community, land and forest rights, was considered authoritative but also discomfited the powers that be.

Swamy who was born in Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu according to his friends, studied theology and did a Masters in Sociology at the University of Manila in the 1970s. Later he studied at Brussels where he struck up a friendship with Archbishop Holder Camara whose work among Brazils poor influenced him.

He later worked as Director of the Jesuit-run Indian Social Institute at Bangalore from 1975 to 1986. He came to Jharkhand some thirty years ago and took up work among the tribals. Among other issues he took up the causes of tribals marginalised after their lands had been taken over for dams, mines and townships, often without their consent.



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Stan Swamy, a cancer patient who also has Parkisons disease, was arrested from his home in Ranchi on October 8, 2020.

He also worked for the release of tribal youths from prison, often in cases where they were falsely accused. Two days before NIA took him into custody in connection with the Bhima Koregaon case, the Jesuit priest claimed stringent laws such as UAPA were being misused to arrest tribals 'indiscriminately' in a video message.

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on October 9, last year had filed a charge-sheet against eight people, including Father Stan Swamy, for their alleged involvement in inciting a mob to violence in Bhima Koregaon near Pune on January 1, 2018.

Swamy, a cancer patient who also has Parkisons disease, was arrested from his home in Ranchi on October 8, 2020. Despite protestations that he had never been to Bhima Koregaon, he was still taken to Mumbai where he was produced before a court and remanded to judicial custody.

He is possibly the oldest person to be charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), officials had then said.

NIA officials had said investigations established he was actively involved with the CPI (Maoist).

The NIA also alleged that he was in contact with "conspirators" – Sudhir Dhawale, Rona Wilson, Surendra Gadling, Arun Ferreira, Vernon Gonsalves, Hany Babu, Shoma Sen, Mahesh Raut, Varavara Rao, Sudha Bharadwaj, Gautam Navlakha and Anand Teltumbde – to further the group's activities.

The agency alleged that Swamy had also received funds through an associate for furthering their ideological agenda. Besides, he was convenor of the Persecuted Prisoners Solidarity Committee (PPSC), which the authorities dubbed a frontal organisation of the CPI (Maoist).

They said literature, propaganda material of the CPI (Maoist) and documents related to communications for furthering the group's programmes were seized from his possession.

Swamy on his part had alleged that material had been planted on his computer and he was being falsely accused. Ahead of his arrest, Swamy had posted a video saying the NIA had been interrogating him and had questioned him for 15 hours during a span of five days.

"Now they want me to go to Mumbai, which I have said that I won't go," he had said, citing the pandemic. The video, posted on YouTube, was recorded two days before his arrest.

"I have never been to Bhima Koregaon for which I am being accused," he had said. He had added that he had sought to be questioned through video conference and hoped that better "human sense" would prevail.

"...what is happening to me is not something unique or happening to me alone, it is a broader process taking place all over the country. We all are aware how prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists, student leaders are all put in jail because they have expressed their dissent or raised questions about the ruling powers of India," Swamy had said in the video.

He had said he is part of "the process" and in a way happy to be so because he was not a silent spectator and is part of the game.

"I am ready to pay the price whatever be it," Swamy had said. The Bhima Koregaon case was taken over by the NIA on January 24 last year. Pune Police has alleged that the violence was caused following speeches given by members of the group Elgar Parishad on December 31, 2017. Violence broke out the next day.