

Stan Swamy: A prototype of Incarnational Spirituality

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On 5 July, when Dr. Ian D'Souza, the medical Director of the Holy Family Hospital, Mumbai informed the High Court of Bombay that Fr. Stan Swamy reached his eternal abode around 1.24 pm the judges were left speechless and fumbled with words. Stan's death created an unprecedented spontaneous response. Many opined that in Stan's death the systemic injustice was obvious, as the crusader for the freedom of undertrial prisoners taking recourse to legal remedies, died as an undertrial prisoner under the 'investigative care' of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), Taloja prison authorities and the judiciary for alleged offences under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Expressions of anguish, pain and solidarity support echoed nationally and internationally, calling Stan's death as 'institutional murder'. The Jesuits, friends, media, former

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judges, human rights, Adivasi and Dalit activists, academicians, political leaders cutting across party lines and the public stood together in paying rich tribute to the life, mission and martyrdom of Stan. Stan's prophetic words, "I am not a Silent Spectator: Why truth has become so bitter, Dissent so intolerable, Justice so out of reach" turned out to be an unambiguous reality in his death. Many echoed his prophetic words with nuanced understanding of truth, dissent and justice as foundational principles of democracy, especially in the current context. Despite a sense of frustration, a number of Civil Society Organizations considered Stan's sad demise as an opportunity for political education of the masses, to defend democracy. Many individuals and organizations duly recognized the justice mission of Stan and vowed to take forward his legacy. Stan became a modern icon of hope for the historically subjugated Adivasis and poor.

8 October 2021 will mark one year of arrest of Fr. Stan Swamy. On this day, believing the words of the members of the National Investigation Agency, Stan left Bagaicha, with a hope to return soon. The officials of NIA told him that he had to come to the NIA camp office in Ranchi to meet with a higher officer and answer a few questions. However, after reaching the camp office, the NIA informed the Jesuit colleges of Stan that they had arrested Stan. The NIA did not have the guts to tell an 83- old person in Bagaicha that they were arresting him. Was it because they knew that Stan was an honest man, and they were only obeying their master's commands? Despite being arrested and put behind the bars in Taloja prison, Mumbai for more than 8 months, no officer ever dared to ask him anything. Stan died without knowing the questions the 'higher officer' wanted to ask. It looks that the NIA had no questions to ask, and their only

purpose was to arrest him for alleged offences without a possibility of bail under UAPA. While the NIA might have assumed Stan's death as the end of an episode, they were quite oblivious of the evocative power of Stan's death. Some called Stan's death as an institutional murder. In fact, in Stan's death, the State, the NIA, the prison authorities as well as the judiciary stood naked.

However, in death, God glorified Stan. Stan's death at the age of 84 in custody enkindled fire and a sense of anguish among many. His death was an occasion to raise questions against systemic injustices, especially the draconian law, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), citizens right to bail, inhuman prison conditions and treatment of elderly persons and to make a clarion call to defend democracy and right to dissent.

Over 200 organizations have come together forming a platform under the banner, Defend Democracy, organizing a series of programmes at the state and national levels. A number of human rights organizations and academic groups, nationally and internationally, are engaged in creative conversations to understand the design of the current political dispensations and the need to work together to protect the secular and democratic ethos of India. The political parties submitted a memorandum to the President of India demanding withdrawal of UAPA, as it has been heavily misused. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM has announced block-level demonstrations across Jharkhand on 8 October 2021 to mark the anniversary of the arrest of Stan Swamy and to highlight issues such as civil liberties, the release of political prisoners and the scrapping of the UAPA Act. The emotional ripples created by Stan's imprisonment and death may evaporate in a few

years. But history will remember Stan, as a Jesuit priest, a human rights Adivasi activist, one who refused to be a silent spectator and was ready to pay the price, without budging to the evil designs of the mighty state power which continues to deny justice to the poor. In this essay, how Stan progressively realized his call as a Jesuit priest, is explored.

Stan imbibed the spirit of GC 32

In 1975, General Congregation (GC) 32 signified a major transition in how the Jesuits understood the connection between their mission and the service of faith and promotion of social justice. Until then, priesthood was closely linked to ritualist, sacramental and pietistic practices and works of charity. Systemic injustices were not highlighted. The binary understanding of sacred and secular also determined the hierarchy of the Jesuits. From the ministry point of view, the Jesuits who lived in highly protected institutional religious communities and served in schools and colleges were considered as the 'core' in the religious order and those who worked in rural parishes or engaged in social service among the poor were deemed to belong to the 'periphery'.

GC 32 Decree 4 defined the mission of the Jesuits as 'The Service of Faith and Promotion of Justice'. Putting an end to the binary understanding of sacred and secular, the Jesuits started experiencing sacredness in the secular. Faith and justice were considered as inseparable components. Participating in the lives of the poor and working for their rights and dignity, hitherto considered as a secular and mundane act, assumed significantly a new understanding of faith. God continues to be present amidst the suffering humanity, suffers with them and participates in their quest for freedom and dignity.

In Decree 4, it was clearly stated that, “There is a new challenge to our apostolic mission in a world increasingly interdependent but, for all that, divided by injustice: injustice not only personal but institutionalized: built into economic, social, and political structures that dominate the life of nations and the international community. Our response to these new challenges will be unavailing unless it is total, corporate, rooted in faith and experience, and multiform.” (GC 32 D 4 nos. 6 & 7). It also recognized that the modern world offers us new tools to understand human, nature and society and consequently, we must undertake a thoroughgoing reassessment of our traditional apostolic methods, attitudes and institutions with a view to adapting them to the new needs of the times and to a world in process of rapid change, through discerned actions (GC 32 D 4 nos. 9 & 10). Amidst the growing inequality, violence, war and discrimination and exclusion of the vulnerable communities, the Jesuits were called to experience the crucified Christ in the daily suffering of the masses and structural injustices. Such a shift in understanding of faith demanded an incarnational approach.

Incarnation is an invitation for a radical transformation

Every Jesuit goes through the Ignatian gift of Spiritual Exercises at least twice in their lifetime. The contemplation on the Incarnation in the Spiritual Exercises helps the Jesuits to realize that all of us are born in an unjust society. The imaginative contemplation of the Trinity helps the retreatants not only to understand the external contrasts - men and women being born and being laid to rest, some getting married and others getting divorced, the old and

the young, the rich and the poor, the happy and the sad, so many undernourished, sick, and dying, so many struggling with life and blind to any meaning, but also to realize that all of us are part of it. Potentially, this contemplation also invites us to critically look at the ascribed identities, such as, caste, ethnicity, language and culture which shape our attitudes, values and actions. Consciously or unconsciously, many take refuge under these identity markers as these are helpful to access position, power and authority in a hierarchical society. Even after rigorous religious formation, the grace “to see Jesus more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow him more nearly” remains a distant dream, as it demands personal conversion and the need to premise one’s life on ethical foundation.

Enlightenment under a mango tree

As Stan writes in his autobiographical notes, his personal conversion took place when he, as a young scholastic, was teaching in a school in Chaibasa. For someone in the early 20’s, hailing from Tamil Nadu and formed in Ignatian spirituality, visiting the poor Adivasis living in abject poverty in the villages would have been an adventurous exercise. However, as he continued to visit the villages, the communitarian way of life of the Adivasis, their culture and tradition challenged his preconceived notion of the poor and the values system that he had imbibed from childhood. He saw everything as ‘new’.

During one such visit to a village, a Ho tribe student took him to his house. The student’s father welcomed him to his hut. As a sign of welcoming Stan, the father asked his son to climb a mango tree and pluck the ripened fruits to be

sent with Stan for the Jesuits in Chaibasa. As the son was plucking the mangoes, the father ordered him not to pluck fruits from a particular branch. Stan was bewildered, as he saw many ripened fruits in that branch. Stan asked, “Why are you telling your son not to pluck from the particular branch”. The father answered, “That’s for the birds of the air”. Stan, who had all along seen people hoarding things for the future, couldn’t understand the wisdom of the Adivasi man.

It was customary for Adivasi men and women to bring their produce from the field or what they had collected from the forest to the weekly public market, sell and buy what they required. The way the Adivasi women were treated in the marketplace by the educated and cultured communities was unacceptable to Stan. One day, he found a *dalal* (broker), forcefully taking away chicken from an adivasi woman and threw some money on the ground. Unable to question the *dalal*, the woman silently picked up the coins and left the place. This exploitative image deeply anguished Stan and at that moment he decided to commit his life to walk with the Adivasis to fight for their dignity and rights.

Adivasi value system as Stan’s ethical basis

Despite lack of education, poverty and material dispossession, he found Adivasis living a happy life. No one went to bed hungry as each family cared for the other in the community and there was a sense of compassion, solidarity and fraternity. They revered nature and believed that nature would nurture them. Animals and birds were considered part and parcel of the human family. They worshipped spirits. Women and children were treated as equals with men. Decisions were taken in common, where every member of the community

had a voice. These observations and experiences were completely in contrast to the socio-cultural setting in which Stan grew up and was socialized. He felt ashamed of what he had learnt and decided to deform himself. He also realized that the Adivasis worldview has much more to offer to build a strong ethical foundation which neither the Jesuit nor priestly formation could offer. Learning from the way of life of the Adivasis, eventually, he decided to build his philosophy of life premised on truth, justice, dignity and rights of the marginalized. This ethical basis gave him a different outlook to approach and understand the Gospel, historical Jesus, institutional Church, mission of the Society of Jesus, functioning of the State and the dominance of the prevalent non-Adivasis worldview.

Abounding love for historical Jesus

Many considered Stan as an ardent critique of the institutional church and Jesuit ministries. As much as the poor felt consoled by his presence, thinking, writing and actions, the authorities did not. In fact, he was considered by those in power and authority as 'a thorn in the flesh'. A few days after Stan's death, I asked Stan's younger brother, Thomas Albert, about his health. He said, "I want to tell you something. About 15 to 20 years ago, a number of priests and religious people used to advise me to talk to my brother Stan and to communicate that he should not criticize the church or church authorities. Now all of them have become great admirers of my brother and they consider him as a prophet of our times. This is a great consolation for me".

All through his life, Stan's most important mission was to bring the historical Jesus, rather than the institutional church

or the religion, and His values alive in our contemporary society. As Jesus cast his lot with the excluded and marginalized during his times, Stan wanted to imitate him as closely as possible. During his 16 years of stay in Indian Social Institute, Bangalore apart from training priests, religious and lay people in social analysis, he worked for the land rights of the Dalits, adhering to the then government policy 'land to the tillers'. 'Go to the poor, live with them, learn from them and then you make your contribution' had been his mantra to the trainees.

He would not spare any view, including these from the Jesuits, if the gospel values are compromised. Knowing that the Jesuits are sinners, yet called to be the companions of Jesus, (GC 32 D2), Stan desired that all the Jesuits should lead by example, following the historical Jesus, in personal, communitarian and ministry life. From an analytical perspective, he would succinctly bring out the clash between the capitalist and the socialist values, in the secular parlance and the disparity between the capitalist and gospel values in religious parlance. His arguments were so powerful and uncompromising that some found his words and thinking unpalatable. However, Stan never had anger towards any individual. He would reiterate that we are called to act justly and to love and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:6-8). He had special love for Pope Francis and found him truly a Jesuit and prophet of our times.

He was happy to learn more about historical Jesus, even when he was in Taloja prison. One of the books that he asked from prison to read and share with his companions was *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* by José Antonio Pagola, originally published in Spanish in 2007 and translated into English

in 2014. In this admirable book, Pagola has attempted to put Jesus at the centre of Christianity, which entails having the poor and the marginalized in the foreground, living with compassion, accepting people as they are, being inclusive, taking up the Cross and trusting the Father. Stan tried to model his life, as a true follower of Jesus.

This book was read not only by Stan but also by a few other inmates in the prison. During the discussion, Stan has told his co-accused, “How difficult it is to be a follower of Jesus”. One of the accused seemed to have stated, “Though I was brought up in a traditional Christian family, I consciously chose to be a non-believer looking at the contradictions in the institutionalized Church. But Stan showed me the compassionate, merciful and just face of Jesus. He brought the historical Jesus alive in the prison. He never complained about his pain and suffering. His concern was always about others”.

In one of his letters, Mr. Arun Ferreira wrote, “Stan’s simplicity was also greatly influenced by the life of Jesus. Jesus, for Stan, was the Galilean who proclaimed the reign of God not as something of the future, but something in the present, in the community of the most oppressed and despised and by the most simple acts of unconditional love” (The Scroll, August 12, 2021).

Adivasi values, Gospel ethics and Constitutional principles – A holy triad

Stan believed that the Adivasi value system resembled the gospel ethics and the constitutional principles, especially the values enshrined in the Preamble of the Constitution, namely, justice, liberty, equality, fraternity and dignity.

This holy triad made him a different person and an authentic Jesuit priest. In fact, this triad gained him many friends from different walks of life. He was a simple and unassuming person. Stan was fondly remembered in Taloja prison by many prisoners, as he respectfully related with every prisoner, irrespective of status, religion and age in the same manner. He developed a non-complaining and non-compromising attitude. Till the end he lived his cherished values derived from the historical Jesus. He gracefully underwent pain and suffering till his death. Despite his age and age-related illnesses, he had no complaints about prison life. Considering his deteriorating health, some of his cellmates bought dry fruits for him. He refused to take them and said, "Peanuts are more than enough for me". Even when he was in hospital, he wanted to be shifted to an ordinary ward and did not want to have expensive treatment.

Such principled life gave him the moral authority to demand the state to follow the provisions of the Constitutions and Panchayatraj Extension in Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act. He questioned the justification of the state for signing over 100 MoU with multi-national companies for extraction of minerals without the consent of the Adivasis, and thus violating the PESA Act. Stan felt that the State acted more like a middleman than being the protector of the marginalized. He challenged the State power within the framework of the Constitution, filing Public Interest Litigations in the High Court of Ranchi. The courts never rejected his PILs, as the judges felt prima facie case in the petitions. All his arguments were based on facts and evidence and on the provisions of law and judgments of the Supreme Court. No state power could counter him, legally. He never stopped voicing the concerns of the poor Adivasis and their inalienable right to

land, water, forest and minerals in the sub-soil. He wrote extensively in the newspapers. Finally, the State found a way to suppress Stan by filing a false case, linking him to the Elgar Parishad case (Bhima Koregaon case), a place which he had never visited in his lifetime. The State also accused him of being a Maoist, allegedly from the letters found in the computer and hard drive. Stan had clearly stated that these letters were interpolated, and he had no knowledge of how these letters were found in his computer. By analyzing Rona Wilson's computer, the Arsenal Consulting Agency has undoubtedly established that the alleged documents were interpolated, using malware. Probably, Pegasus software has an answer, which only the government will be able to establish who inserted those letters. Knowing full well, the State designed a plot to put him behind the bars by foisting false cases against him Stan decided to go through prison life as a true follower of Jesus.

Truth and Justice cannot be imprisoned

Stan's Calvary journey began on 8 October 2020, when he was arrested by deceit. The evil design of the State could not crush him. He won the hearts of many inside the prison and outside. The public was waiting for his words of wisdom from prison. 'Humanity is bubbling in Taloja prison' and 'A caged bird can still sing' reverberated in the hearts of many, generating enormous energy to speak truth to power. Stan became an icon for human and Adivasi rights activists, nationally and globally. He went through his prison life magnanimously as he knew he was a victim of state oppression. He knew he was paying the price for not being a silent spectator. His poems inspired the young and the old.

He found Prison life, a great leveller and wrote:

*Nothing is mine
Nothing is yours
Everything is ours*

*Lo, this commonality is wrought by compulsion
If only all humans would embrace it freely and willingly
All would truly become children of Mother Earth*

As the world was celebrating New Year 2021, Stan wrote:

*May Truth embolden us
To speak truth to power
And be ready to pay the price*

Love winning over hate was his Easter message.

*Light overpowering darkness
Hope replacing despair
Love winning over hate
Is the message of Jesus risen

But fight we will till the end
Not so much just to save our skin
But to speak truth to power
Counting all the while you all are with us in mind and heart.*

Stan was a mystery

Stan was understood and loved by several persons, and he was equally misunderstood by many, which included the Church personnel as well as the Jesuits. Many understood the humane qualities and his profound faith in Jesus after his death. In his death, Stan inherited a greater number of followers. Many of us appreciate practical shrewdness as an acceptable way of life, often hovering around unethical

practices, as against principled ways of life. Stan's deep faith in the Gospel and the Constitution helped him to follow what he cherished as ethical way of life or spirituality beyond religious rituals and practices.

During the last days when he was seriously ill, Stan had an opportunity to interact with the High Court judge when his bail petition came up for hearing. Stan was adamant. The judge offered him medical treatment in a hospital. Stan was categorical. Either he wanted to be in Taloja or in Ranchi with his friends, which baffled his friends and lawyers. Finally, his friends convinced him to accept the legal complexities and that he should agree for a medical treatment in a hospital. Stan obliged.

Mr. Arun Ferreira reflected on this aspect of Stan in his letter published in the Scroll. He said, "I failed to see his point of view and often argued with him in an attempt to educate him on the nuances of legal strategy. But this seemingly naive view was in fact his profound understanding of what freedom meant to him. It did not only mean the availability of unrestricted movement, but essentially the pleasure to communicate and share with one's own and the ability to speak the truth. Thereafter, in all his communication to his Jesuit colleagues and Advocates, Stan insisted that the court hearing his bail be informed of this, his desire.

In May, when the High Court heard Stan via video conference and he was given the opportunity, he reiterated this. Relief from incarceration could only mean to be with one's own people [in Ranchi, Jharkhand]. This wasn't tutored, just well thought of." (The Scroll, 12 August 2021)

Stan had deep self-awareness. He knew what was going to happen. Giving a video message on 6 October 2020

that I am not a silent spectator and his eventual arrest on 8 October 2020 were more than coincidental. His death on 5 July 2021, a couple of hours before the special High Court hearing, which was 'about to grant him interim bail' again was more than accidental. His conversation with Fr. Joseph Xavier over the phone on 27 June 2021 that he was surrendering himself as a Jesuit to the universal body of the Society of Jesus and asking his friends to continue the mission reminded us of the words of St. Paul: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7).

Born in Tamil Nadu, incarnated in the world of Adivasis, Stan has given us a new way of understanding and living Jesuit priestly life in the Indian context. It is to meaningfully combine the gospel ethics and Constitutional principles and being rooted in the struggles of the excluded and marginalized whose dignity is violated in the mission of Justice and Reconciliation (GC 36). This way of life is not just a possibility but a reality, for all those who believe that God is operative in history ever renewing the phase of the earth, amidst all adversities. It is no surprise that even those who do not believe in religion will consider Stan as a liberative icon in the days to come.