



Long Live Fr. Stan!

We are witness today to a heightened terrorizing by the State of the marginalized sections of society and of those who support the marginalized sections, in order to stomp over their lives and usurp their resources, especially land. The State has been deploying various means to do this, one being the weaponising of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967 (UAPA), or by repeatedly invoking the equally draconian National Security Act, 1980, for crimes, or under the guise of redressing or preventing crimes, that can well be handled by the existing criminal law, if only the police and other authorities are efficient with their investigations.

We live in times when the State backs narratives that emphasise that the sections of society, marginalized on the basis of caste, class, creed, gender, sexual orientation, place of origin, or any other axis of discrimination, are responsible for their own misery, and that they are to be looked at with suspicion, rather than be supported when they organize and stand up for their right to live a life with dignity, which include rights to their lives – to be protected from feudal lords and dominant castes, and rights to their lands – to be protected from corporate marauders. We also live in times when those who usurp lands and pollute the environment are projected by the State as benefactors, and farcical hearings are held, and authoritarian laws like the Major Port Trust Authorities Act enacted, to enable them to take the lands out of the purview of their say and of other laws.

It is in such times that a Fr. Stan Swamy who breathed his last yesterday, the 5th of July, 2021, was arrested under the UAPA. And rightly, as he himself said two days before he was arrested, “What is happening to me is not something unique happening to me alone. It is a broader process that is taking place all over the country. We are all aware how prominent intellectuals, lawyers, writers, poets, activists, students, leaders, they are all put into jail because they have expressed their dissent or raised questions about the ruling powers of India. We are part of the process. In a way I am happy to be part of this process.”.

As one of the persons who was inspired by Fr. Stan, from the time I first heard him talk as a college student in the 1980's, I salute Fr. Stan, but I would not stop at that, for what use is it that we salute him, but do not emulate the principles and life that we salute? It is against this backdrop, that I choose to reflect on a recent incident in Goa, of three unnatural deaths at Vasco, and the complete silence from the powers-that-be, as if the lives of working class migrants.

Human rights defenders in a small state like Goa are often faced with dilemmas, and also have to grapple with many false assumptions, beginning with the first assumption that a worker, like a domestic worker, in your apartment has to be the thief, when your cash or jewellery gets stolen. There is not even a thought that someone else could have done it. Also,

the word 'offence' in the public eye is loaded.



It is not seen as a theft of people's money, if it is a Vijay Mallya who is decamping with dues to the bank, in which you and I bank, to the extent of nine digit plus figures. He ran into a loss, we are quick to say. It is also not theft if the bank is advancing this same person a loan against plastic chairs, and the bank officials are thus complicit in the loss of monies, which sets in motion its own upset in the economy. This, even as the poor and the not-so-poor will not get loans even against their little or not-so-little homes that they have. It is not an offence if an industrialist is reaping huge profits from a factory, by slow poisoning the people around via his factory, and the authorities and adjudicating bodies take forever to adjudicate in that regard.

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The next assumption is that it is OK to beat a person into confession. In this twenty-first century, how are we still following these traditional and barbaric practices? Are we still not evolved into a society that can conduct inquiries with civilised twenty-first century methods? Quite apart from the fact that it is grossly criminal for the police to take the law into their hands.

Do we realize that the same ethic can come to haunt all of us at a time when freedom of speech and expression and association are at a premium? If someone makes an accusation against you, is it OK that the police presume that you are guilty and beat you into confession, completely denying you your self-esteem? Or is it OK that the State can arrest you for some vaguely-labeled unlawful activity under the UAPA? What are the ominous portents in the statement of Chief Minister of Goa, that he will brook no criticism against the police, which statement he ironically makes on Goa Revolution Day?

Another assumption is that protocols and just practices can be flouted in the case of the poor and the working class. Hardly is it ever understood that when the protocols are arbitrarily changed, it is usually to hide something and almost always to the prejudice of the powerless. In the recent case of three unnatural deaths at Vasco, it seems strange that the post-mortem which should ordinarily have been carried out at the South Goa District Hospital Margao, since the incident took place in the South, was done at the Goa Medical College Bambolim.

Finally, yet another assumption is that those who speak truth to power are terrorists. There are often pressures and societal practices that bar thee victimized from speaking up, and that's why sometimes others need to speak instead. It is in this, in standing up for what seem like lost causes and bringing those lost causes to the table, that we can truly pay a tribute to Fr. Stan Swamy.

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