

# Teacher, companion, motivator: Adivasi-rights activist Dayamani Barla remembers Stan Swamy

The Caravan / by DAYAMANI BARLA\*  
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To understand the life struggle of Stan Swamy, it is necessary to understand the history and struggle of the Adivasi community in Jharkhand and the country. There is a need to understand the traditional rights that Adivasis have on natural resources such as water, forest, and land. It is only then that we can appreciate what Swamy stood for and fought for. Swamy was a Jesuit priest and an Adivasi-rights activist who was arrested in 2020 and booked under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019. He was denied bail and died on 5 July 2021. In my many years as an activist in Jharkhand, I closely knew Swamy. We began to interact often after I met him at a program related to Adivasi-rights in Ranchi around 15 years ago.

Jharkhand is a tribal state. The tribal community of Jharkhand has a special history of clearing the forests and bushes, then setting up villages, protecting the forest and land while also fighting dangerous wild animals like snakes, scorpions, tigers, bears and lions. The tribal community's history, language, identity, socio-cultural and economic values rest upon this heritage. History is witness that the struggle against the plundering of the natural heritage of the tribal community has been going on since the 1700s–1800s. There is an unbroken chain of heroes of the Jharkhand tribal community from 1855 to the early 1900s, such as Sidhu-Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav, Phoolo-Jhano, Sindhriya, Birain, Veer Budu Bhagat, Telang Khadiya, Kanu Mundu, Donka Munda, Birsa Munda and Jatara Tana Bhagat, who fought against exploiters, including the British.

After India's Independence, in the name of development, the natural resources of Jharkhand started being exploited indiscriminately. The indigenous farming communities of the state have been uprooted from their forests, land, villages and homes in the name of development. Their history and identities have been erased. Even after the formation of the Jharkhand state in 2000, the forcible eviction of the tribal community from their villages has been increasing rapidly. The Chhotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act, 1949, which gave land rights to Adivasis and restricted the transfer of tribal land for industrial use, were the fruits of the heroic struggles that were begun by Sidhu-Kanhu and Birsa Munda—these acts are being violated openly. The tribal society has been continuously agitating against the poison of displacement.

Born in 1937 in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, Swamy stood with and worked for Adivasis, farmers, and the exploited and downtrodden communities of Jharkhand. He studied sociology, and after completing his PhD abroad, he came back to India and worked at a research institute, the Indian Social Institute in Bangalore. In 1965, in the battle-hardened land of Jharkhand, Swamy moved to Chaibasa in state's the Kolhaan division to work with a Jesuit organisation. During his time in Chaibasa, he became closely involved with Adivasi issues and gradually became a part of the struggle to protect the rights of the tribal community of Jharkhand.

Swamy was very impressed by the simplicity, sincerity and collective lifestyle of the tribal society living in the lap of the environment. For three decades, Swamy stood firm like a Sarjom tree to protect the constitutional rights of tribals, farmers, Dalits, and the marginalised communities of Jharkhand. He continuously raised his voice against a range of issues impacting these communities—displacement due to big projects, the questions of forest rights and forced mining, the protection of Adivasi language and culture, starvation deaths, labour rights, the incarceration of Dalit youth, or the question of state repression.

In 1996, the government passed the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, or PESA. It was enacted to allow self-governance for people living in scheduled areas through traditional gram sabhas. Subsequently, a wave of happiness spread through the tribal community of Jharkhand and the whole country. There was hope among the tribal community to establish their self-rule in their villages. On 27 December 1996, the Adivasi community conducted a huge victory procession in the Khunti district. Along with this, civil rights groups began conducting awareness campaigns to make Adivasis aware about their rights and about the provisions of the PESA Act. Swamy played an important role in the campaign to implement the law at the ground level along with spreading awareness about PESA. At that time, he lived on Purlia Road in Ranchi. All of us young people who had been involved in mass movements for land rights started actively participating in this self-government process. We began to engage in journalism and decided to launch a magazine. Social workers, writers, journalists, non-movement partners, all of us used to come to Swamy's place to discuss pertinent issues.

In 2006, Swamy set up Bagaicha, a community centre in Ranchi to work for tribal rights. The centre served as a space where people can come together and discuss social issues. It houses a library with all kinds of books for the intellectual development of the children of the area. The campus is full of plants and fruit-laden trees. A traditional akhra has also been built in the middle of the premises. In the Adivasi villages, an akhra is an open space where people gather for cultural activities or to discuss issues affecting the community. There are numerous posters on the walls inside Bagaicha that display information about various welfare schemes and

central laws such as the Right to Information Act, 2005 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. There is also art and pictures of the many Adivasi lives destroyed by mining and big development projects. The pictures hanging on the walls speak volumes and tell many stories. Whenever I stand there and look at the pictures, I am reminded of the Native American Museum in New York, America, which captures the shrill, screaming echoes of America's aboriginal communities after they were completely removed from their soil.

Twelve years after the formation of Jharkhand, Swamy conducted a detailed study on the development and displacement of Adivasis along with figures of the number of people displaced by various projects till date. This information was printed in posters and circulated among the public. It also hangs on the walls of Bagaicha.

After Swamy started living in Ranchi permanently in 1990s, I began meeting him frequently in many programs related to Adivasi rights. Like others, I used to address him as Father. One day, he said, "Dayamani, I am not Father for you, I am your elder brother, you call me Dada." Then, I started addressing him as Dada.

Swamy was always generous with whatever he could offer to those working for Adivasi rights. Since 2008, the Arcelor Mittal Corporation has been trying to build a steel plant in Jharkhand that will displace people from 40 villages in the Khuntu and Gumla districts. For years, I have been travelling to the various villages impacted by the project to raise awareness among Adivasis and farmers. For some time, I started living in the villages.

Whenever I used to talk to Dada about this issue, he would say, "Whenever you need some rest, come straight here and stay for three–four days, read and write, then go to the field."

In Ranchi city, the cost of renting a hall for public programmes was high. Often, we could not afford it. When we needed to have a meeting of 50–60 people, we would ask Dada for space. Whenever we asked for a place, Dada offered space in the Bagaicha campus. Dada used to say, "Okay then, you people cook your khichdi and eat it in the canteen. Can you do that? The place will be from my side."

In 2013–14, the country's politics was taking a new turn, when the Aam Aadmi Party entered the electoral fray. The whole country was looking at the Aam Aadmi Party as a third front in politics. Socialist ideologues, writers, journalists, educationists, lawyers all started joining the party. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the party nominated the leaders of the mass movements in the country as candidates. Then, I was also given a ticket from the Khunti Lok Sabha seat. I approached Dada about this. I kept talking about contesting the election, and Dada kept listening with his head bowed. After a while, he said, "Dayamani, politics will not solve all the problems, because change is not possible with one or two people, I do not believe so. But if you have taken the decision, then I am with your decision."

Since 2014, the government began accusing many of the country's social activists, writers, and human rights activists of being anti-nationals or terrorists. Activists involved in the mass movements were charged with sedition and labelled as "Urban Naxal." By 2016, in Jharkhand too, under the then Raghubar Das government, leaders of the several movements were branded anti-national and Urban Naxal.

Meanwhile, in 2016, the state government organised "Momentum Jharkhand"—an investment promotion campaign aimed at attracting industries to the state. The government announced the creation of a "land bank" for investors with 21 lakh acres of land. It assured industrialists that land will be made available through a single-window system without any hassle or delays, wherever needed. This move was strongly opposed by Left parties in the state and many social organisations. Several protests were held across the state. Swamy took part in these programs and wrote articles raising many questions on this issue. He argued that the government had established the land bank by violating the rights given to gram sabhas under the fifth schedule of the Constitution. He said it also violated the PESA Act. Swamy studied and inspected the land. He verified the account numbers and plot numbers of the areas included in the land and travelled to villages to tell people that their land had been included in the land bank.

In most rallies, even those on social issues, people usually compete to walk ahead, but Swamy always used to walk far behind. He was never seeking the public limelight. Even in the programs, he would sit towards the end of the hall within common participants rather than with the leaders.

Most recently, Swamy raised questions on the central government's decision to auction 41 coal mines in June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of these coal mines are located in Adivasi-dominated areas. Swamy highlighted that the land was being auctioned without taking the consent of the local village council and landowners. He said it violated several laws such as the PESA Act and the Forest Rights Act. Swamy also wrote articles highlighting that it is the duty of the state to assist in the formation and registration of local grassroots cooperatives and to provide initial resources such as necessary capital, technical expertise, management skills, marketing routes so that it can benefit marginalised communities. Throughout his work, Swamy always supported and spoke for the rights of tribal communities and indigenous farmers. Dada is not with us today, but he will live on in our memories as an ideal teacher, a companion of our struggle, a well-wisher, parent, and motivator.

The Bagaicha centre also has a stone plaque bearing inscriptions of the names of Adivasi martyrs, who died in the struggle to protect the forests, lands, language and culture of the Adivasi community. On 18 July 2021, Swamy's name was added to the inscriptions on the stone pillar.

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