

'Terrorist' Saints and the Dove

The past few weeks have seen India's indigenous people, the Adivasis come into public focus; with social activists and a section of the media airing what they feel are injustices against them. They have been sympathetic witnesses to the poverty and deprivation of these people, as also to the wanton grabbing of their lands by powerful corporations with influence in the right places. All of this is not new. It is part of the unfortunate history of the adivasis.

What has brought it to the surface over the past few weeks was the arrest and imprisonment of Fr. Stan Swamy, an ailing 83-year-old Jesuit who has been working hard to align the Law with tribal rights. On a Thursday evening in October, officials of India's National Investigation Agency arrived in Ranchi, in the state of Jharkhand and whisked him away to Mumbai. He was jailed, accused of treason and being a Maoist, an anti-national terrorist, involved in a conspiracy to create violence in the Bhima-Koregaon case and plotting against the government.

And you and I, with ADA written across our chests,
Would we be wrong in saying,
"There but for the grace of God and Time
goes our Federico Sopena?"
He did for the Adivasis in Raigad district
what Stan Swamy is doing in Jharkhand today.

And now. The conscience of the country
is protesting against Fr. Stan's arrest and demanding his release
And the release of others: Imprisoned voices.
Human rights activists, intellectuals and scholars,
Put away for the scowl on their faces
at what they thought was the bending of the Constitution;
And the tarnishing of Democracy's sheen.

Public protests today. On any issue.
What do they look like?
Crowds of crumpled faces.
Hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands.
Holding placards with demands and clever slogans, badly lettered.
Hoarse voices tearing the air and our complacency
into useless shreds.
What have they achieved until now?
Broken bones, some coffins and
the hardening of jaws in those ivory towers.
Protests are not Persuasion,
which is what we want them to be.

Keep in mind the arithmetic of our own persuasion:
our two-paisa clink in the jingle
that goes to make up our country's voice.

We need the amplification of good sense,
a stirring of public conscience, however difficult it may seem
via the good offices of like-minded, right-minded souls.

We need to wear His face.
Design the expressions that will
speak our words in a tone of voice
that is uniquely ours.
Not many voices but one.

We are the David to the Goliaths of misunderstanding.
Pick those five smooth stones:
Insight, Prudence, Love, Peace and Empathy,
with the hope that one of them
will fell the Philistine in good time.

Know that protests are no more than
Masochistic exercises in self-flagellation;
more likely self-sacrifice.
Martyrdom will not buy the change of heart you are looking for.
And It flies in the face of scripture:
Be as prudent as serpents but as harmless as doves.

Know that the dove sends messages too:
Delivering billet doux to heart and mind
for a persuasion of a different kind;
Possible image for the Church
as messenger of Peace and Goodwill to men,
The envelope that contains all that we want to convey,
be it our pleas for justice, freedom, righteousness.

This the Church has done
in saner moments like this one.
Quiet voices gently directed to the ears
of the more righteous among politicians
and the more balanced in the media,
making them our spokespersons,
mediators who may persuade more effectively,
despite the jarring noises of trolls and bigoted panellists on show.
And then, of course a visible demonstration
On bended knee and folded hands
in the courts of the One who we believe will listen:
Every day prayers and Masses are offered in the sight of everyone
for the health, safety and release of Fr. Stan Swamy
and the others imprisoned with him.

For the sake of our Adivasi brothers and sisters
For Fr. Stan and his suffering mates
For the memory of Fr. Fede Sopena
Let's be the dove.

Links: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/stan-swamy-arrest-bhima-koregaon-case-elgar-parishad-nia-6843742/>

<https://scroll.in/article/976136/arrested-advansi-rights-activist-stan-swamys-life-demonstrates-why-the-powerful-want-him-silenced>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54490554>