

INTERVIEW

Putting their lives on the line for socialism

Wednesday 4 May 2005, by [BULL Sue](#), [SWAMINATAN Srilata](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2005).

Few participants at the Third Asia-Pacific International Solidarity Conference, held in Sydney on March 25-28, could have failed to notice the enthusiastic presence of a small, dynamic Indian woman. Whether she was singing “We Shall Overcome” in Hindi or addressing forums on a variety of issues from globalisation to women in Asia and debates about Maoism, Srilata Swaminathan presented a picture of the Indian class struggle that was both enlightening and inspiring.

Swaminathan is the president of the All India Progressive Women’s Association and a representative of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation - the CPI(ML). She speaks passionately about the building of mass movements and struggles in her country.

India is still a country of immense poverty and injustice, where violent repression is used by all levels of government means that revolutionary socialists face death on a daily basis. However, according to Swaminathan, these dangers have not dented the commitment of tens of thousands of socialists.

The CPI(ML) has some 180,000 members. It organises 2 million trade unionists, 150,000 in its women’s organisation and 100,000 in an associated student organisation - impressive figures by anyone’s standards. Swaminathan argued they are quite small by Indian standards, where a single trade union alone can number hundreds of thousands of members.

The CPI(ML) may be small but it is very influential in the north-eastern states of Bihar and Jharkhand, where whole villages count themselves as part of the CPI(ML). This is where the CPI(ML) have eight elected members of the two state parliaments.

At the last national conference of the CPI(ML) in Patna, capital of Bihar, the whole city was festooned with red flags and hammers and sickles. As Swaminathan said: *“This is the way we do things in India. Nothing is ever done on a small or half-hearted scale because just expressing an opposition opinion in some parts of India can be a life-or-death experience.”*

“Many of our cadre have been killed or imprisoned over the years.” When comrades leave in the morning nobody knows if they will come home in the afternoon. The reason? Because CPI(ML) cadre put themselves on the line every day. Whether it is in defence of the basic human rights of peasants, against racism or sexism, for trade union rights or against imperialism. These activists work from village to village, town to town or state to state organising peasants and workers in defence of their rights. They organise small picket lines or sit-ins and hunger strikes or huge mass rallies and gheraos [blockades] that surround whole parliaments. They face the guns and repression of police, landlord thugs and mafia hit-men. Their courage is breathtaking.

“It was only two months ago that one of the CPI(ML) s most significant leaders was assassinated in an isolated village in Jharkhand. His name was Mahendra Singh and he was the only communist in

the 81-member Jharkhand Legislative Assembly. He was the longest serving of any of the CPI(ML) MLAs, having been first elected in 1990, before Jharkhand was separated off from Bihar in 2002."

According to Swaminathan, Singh was more vocal, more outspoken and more dynamic than all the rest of the opposition members in the Jharkhand Assembly. *"He had become a real thorn in the flesh, continuously exposing the corruption of the assembly, the BJP ruling party, the police and the coal mafia. This was why they had him in their sights. Mahendra was a real fighter for justice and totally committed to defending the rights of the poor and the powerless, as well as exposing corruption."*

In December of last year, Singh filed a report to the assembly regarding the killing of a local lawyer. He presented evidence that implicated a superintendent of police, Deepak Varma, senior conservative BJP figures and the state's notorious coal mafia. Singh also reported that the superintendent had even issued threats against him. The case was shaping up as a major embarrassment for the government.

At 4.30pm on January 16, the day after Singh had filed his nomination to seek re-election for his fourth term of office, he was gunned down by three men who pumped 23 bullets into his body.

Singh's wife, Shanti Devi, was on the phone to him at the time and could hear the shots down the line. Shocked and horrified, the CPI(ML) cadre swung into action. There were demonstrations throughout the country, demanding that Deepak Varma be arrested and brought to justice and that the BJP government and coal bosses be investigated.

Meanwhile, Mahendra Singh's son, Vinod, an alternative film-maker in Mumbai, was located. He was asked to be the replacement candidate as nominations closed the next day. Despite his grief and the obvious dangers, he agreed. He knew that if the CPI(ML) lost this seat then much that the party and his father had fought for could be lost. They had a month to campaign and the funeral to get through.

Fifty thousand people turned up to the funeral. It was a measure of how deeply Mahendra Singh was admired as a leader and courageous fighter for the oppressed. It also showed the mobilising power of the CPI(ML). The funeral was only a few days after the murder and many people would have walked scores of kilometres to get there.

According to Swaminathan, cadre were then sent in from everywhere to help with the election campaign. If the party lost Jharkhand, then the CPI(ML) would have lost its ballot symbol, a flag with three stars. This is an important acquisition in a country with huge illiteracy rates.

Swaminathan was in Jharkhand for one week and drove 2000km around the state, often trailing Vinod Singh. She told Green Left Weekly : *"It rained endlessly but in some places the people waited patiently for a whole day, just to see and hear Vinod. In Sariya, the BJP chief minister gave a speech just 100 yards from us. There were only 50 people listening to him but he was surrounded by 300 police, with their snipers on various roof tops. Meanwhile, 5000 were listening to Vinod despite the police intimidation. Even Vinod's sisters spoke at this meeting."*

In the end, Vinod Singh won by 28,000 votes - an increased vote due to the "sympathy wave", as Swaminathan called it. It was also a real testament also to the courage and commitment of whole layers of CPI(ML) cadres.

And how does Singh feel about all of this? *"He's only 24 and has left a career as a filmmaker for the incredible risks and pressures of being a communist parliamentarian and his father is dead",* said Swaminathan. *"But he's taking it in his stride. He is very brave and comrades know the dangers. Now the Jharkhand committee of the party will have to work with Vinod and train him."*

"Even our members of parliament are directed by collective decisions", Swaminathan said proudly.

Perhaps "We Shall Overcome" was the right song for Swaminathan to sing at the Sydney conference. It's no coincidence that it is also a favourite of Indonesian leftists, who also face a struggle of similar proportions.

P.S.

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