

India: Widespread Arrests and Harassment of Civil Liberties Activists and Lawyers

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In the early hours of 7 June three Dalit rights activists, a professor and a social activist from across three cities - Mumbai, Nagpur and Delhi were arrested. They are Surendra Gadling, who is the General Secretary of the Indian Association of People's Lawyers, Professor Shoma Sen, Head of Department of English, Nagpur University, Sudhir Dhawale, Dalit activist, Republican Panthers and Editor Vidrohi from Mumbai, Rona Wilson, Public Relations Secretary, Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners and Mahesh Raut, anti-displacement activist from Bharat Jan Andolan and former Fellow at Prime Minister's Rural Development (PMRD) for Gadchiroli District.

The arrests, purportedly made in response to what started out as First Information Report (FIR) filed with police on 8th January with regard to violence that occurred at a Dalit commemorative event in the Indian state of Maharashtra, on 31st December, 2017. The event had been organized by the Dalit, Campaign for the Celebration of Bhima Koregaon Victory. [1] The FIR was converted to the much more serious "conspiracy case" in March 2018 and now has had sections of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) added to it. All these are repressive measures that the Indian state has routinely used to suppress democratic and people's movements. The arrests today have thus been made under UAPA, which has several draconian provisions which ensure long detention and makes it difficult to obtain bail.

These arrests come in the wake of the mass demand by Dalits, several political parties, human rights organizations and activists for the arrest of the leaders of Sangh Parivar [Hindu ethno-nationalist] organizations, Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote, who were actually responsible for the violence on 1st January, 2018 at Bhima-Koregaon. However the government of Maharashtra, which is a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, has been protecting the actual perpetrators of the violence and has been attempting to create a false narrative that the violence at Bhima Koregaon was caused by the (Dalit) Elgar Parishad and that banned Maoist organizations are involved.

More importantly, Advocate Surendra Gadling has been defending people in political cases, and has been handling many important, crucial cases. Arrest of Surendra Gadling is clearly linked with case of Profesoor Saibaba2[2]. Mr Gadling was constantly being intimidated by police, so as to make him give up doing these cases. Saibaba's bail matter is listed for hearing this Friday.

The Dalit coalition which includes around 260 mass organizations had organized the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Bhima-Koregaon in which Dalits had played a major role in vanquishing Peshwa rule. The Abhiyan had organized a mass meeting on 31st December, 2017 at the historic Shaniwar wada in Pune, with several prominent speakers. The Elgar Parishad was organised with the stated objective of fighting the Nav-peshwahi (New Peshwas - Hindu ethnonationalists-. The program was hugely successful and attended by thousands from across the state. However on the following day, those commemorating the event at Bhima-Koregaon were attacked by a mob carrying saffron flags (symbol of Hindu-ethnonationalists) and instigated by Sambhaji Bhide and Milind

Ekbote, two right wing activists who are closely connected with the ruling BJP and this attack was part of a pre-meditated plan.

It is also no coincidence that the arrests and repression are happening at a time when there is a judicial enquiry headed by Justice J. N. Patel (Retd) into the January violence, to ensure that submissions from the victims of the Hindutva and State violence are suppressed. It has also happening at the time of forthcoming elections in the State as well as in 2019. The BJP government needs to polarize Dalit and Bahujan [non-Dalit marginalized castes] votes. And also to create a terror narrative thereby protecting the real terror culprits Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote who will ensure votes for the BJP.

We strongly condemn this open show of State terror and complete bypassing of the Rule of Law by the BJP governments in the State and the Centre and demand the immediate release of Advocate Surendra Gadling, Professor Shoma Sen, Sudhir Dhawle, Rona Wilson and Mahesh Raut forthwith .

** Those arrested have been involved in struggles for civil liberties, in defence of political prisoners and for the end of caste oppression. The arrests come at a time of political manoeuvring by Hindu ethnonationalists seeking to establish their hegemony with a view to sweeping upcoming elections. These arrests have come in the wake of marginalized and oppressed castes who mobilized for an event of historical importance at the start of 2018. During the event violence broke out, instigated by Hindu ethno-nationalist leaders. However the BJP government of the state of Maharashtra where all this is happening , have been protecting the perpetrators and mounting false cases against those who are working for civil liberties, equality and justice. The government is using the power of the state to suppress popular, progressive movements and bolster their conservative, right-wing, ethno-nationalist agenda. [CERAS]*

** Professor G..N. Saibaba, is a wheelchair-bound former English professor of Delhi University who was convicted in March 2017 for his Maoist links and for “waging war” against the country.*

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Footnotes

[1] Bhima-Koregaon Shaurya Din Perna Abhiyan