PUCL strongly condemns the vindictive and arbitrary arrest of Advocate Surendra Gadling, Mr. Sudhir Dhawale, Mr. Rona Wilson / Rana Jacob, Ms. Shoma Sen and Mr. Mahesh Raut on 6th June 2018. They have been reportedly booked under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), on the allegation of spreading controversial pamphlets and delivering hate speeches in connection with the Bhima Koregaon violence that broke out in January 2018. Even before their arrest, systematic raids were carried out by the police at their premises early in the morning. It is reported that the above persons are being taken to Pune on transit remand from their respective locations by the Pune police.

All these above persons have been active in various movements and organizations, and have publicly defended the rights of Dalits and various sections of marginalized people. The simultaneous arrests at all India level (Nagpur, Pune, Mumbai, Delhi) by State authorities, smack of predetermined planned attack on people who have been protesting against injustice and atrocities perpetuated by various State and non-State Hindu right-wing groups. These arrest amounts to blatant violation of citizen’s rights to freedom of expression and voicing dissent, and is clearly a move to target individuals working for rights of the marginalised sections of society, and to produce a chilling effect on voices of dissent.

This has been a standard protocol followed by State for years. Under the garb of countering “Naxalites” any democratic protest is labeled as unlawful activity against the “State.” People are arrested and incarcerated in jail for years. They are subsequently released as the State fails to prove their case. The whole purpose being to crush any protest against injustice, deny people their basic citizenship rights, deprive them even of their basic means of livelihood. Prejudicial narratives that above persons are “maoist sympathisers” or “top maoist operatives” is already underway in the mainstream media.

We are all aware that in the recent violence in Bhima Koregaon area following the Elgar Parishad in January 2018, Mr. Milind Ekbote and Mr. Sambhaji Bhide, both belonging to Hindu right wing organizations, against whom many complaints and FIRs have been lodged, were denied anticipatory bail even by Supreme Court. But the State Government has not arrested them yet. These two pro-Hindutva leaders, have a history of allegations against them for causing communal and caste tensions, rioting, and were alleged to have desecrated the Samadhi of a Dalit icon in Pune on 29th December 2017. Both of them have deep links with the RSS and are clearly being protected by the ruling dispensation. Meanwhile, people who have been protesting against the very violence are being targeted by the government.

We are also aware that Professor Saibaba, who suffers 90% disability from a post-polio paralytic condition, has been lodged in Nagpur jail in most inhuman conditions under similar charges and even denied bail in violation of all fundamental rights and human dignity.

This government has failed to protect people against violence perpetrated against them. It has failed
to take even preliminary action against persons like Mr. Bhide and Mr. Ekbote who are implicated in the violence but is trying to suppress people who are protesting against that very violence and have been consistently working for social justice.

We condemn the state reprisals being ordered against the activists and unequivocally demand that Adv. Surendra Gadling, Mr. Sudhir Dhawale, Mr. Rona Wilson / Rana Jacob, Ms. Shoma Sen, Mr. Surendra Gadling, Mr. Mahesh Raut be released immediately and raids being carried out at premises of various activists be stopped. We further demand that Mr. Bhide and Mr. Ekbote be immediately arrested and that the investigation and trial against them be conducted in an expeditious manner. We demand that stringent action be taken against the Hindutva forces spreading communal and caste hatred and violence, and demand justice for victims of the Bhima Koregaon violence.

Mihir Desai,
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