Statement from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) Students, Alumni and Faculty members

We, the undersigned students, alumni, faculty, staff and other members of the TISS community stand with Mahesh Raut and the four other activists who have been arrested unfairly and demand for their immediate and unconditional release.

On the morning of June 6th, 2018, the Pune Police investigating the Bhima Koregaon case arrested Mr. Mahesh Raut. Mahesh is an alumni of TISS, a former fellow at the prestigious Prime Minister’s Rural Development Programme (PMRD) and an anti-displacement activist working with gram sabhas on implementation of laws like PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) and FRA (Forest Rights Act). He was arrested from Nagpur, where he had been staying for his ongoing medical treatment. On the same day, the premises of Mr. Sudhir Dhawale, Dalit activist and editor of Marathi magazine Vidrohi, Professor Shoma Sen, Head of the English literature department at Nagpur University, Advocate Surendra Gadling, general secretary of Indian Association of People’s Lawyers (IAPL), and Mr. Rona Wilson, secretary of the Committee for Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP) were raided and they were arrested too. Even as the police informed that they were being picked up in connection to the Bhima Koregaon case, the media started releasing news about them being ‘top urban Maoist operatives’. Subsequently we were also informed, again by the media, that they had been apprehended as a money trail between banned Maoist organisations and that had been discovered, in connection to funding Bhima Koregaon and the Dalit-Bahujan-Maratha-Muslim protests that ensued. All the accused have been in police custody since then. The police have not managed to produce a single piece of evidence in court, except for two letters that they claim were discovered from Mr. Rona Wilson’s laptop, the authenticity of which are yet unverified and which are being considered highly dubious.

These arrests and searches have been purportedly conducted under the FIR registered on 8 January, 2018 at Vishram Baug Police Station, Pune with regard to Elgar Parishad organizing the Bhima-Koregaon Shaurya Din Praerna Abhiyan in Pune on 31 December, 2017. This FIR, originally registered u/s 153(A), 505 (1)(b), 117 and 34 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), was turned into a conspiracy case in March 2018 and now has had sections of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) added to it. The arrests have been made under UAPA, which has several draconian provisions that ensure detention of up to six months without any evidence required and make it difficult to obtain bail. Meanwhile, Manohar Bhide, one of the two chief accused in the violence unleashed on the Dalit bahujan masses marching to celebrate the Bhima Koregaon Shaurya Din, remains unarrested.

Mahesh pursued his Masters degree in Social Work from the TISS, Mumbai campus in 2009-2011. He was popular among students teachers and staff alike and seen as a bright student as well as an active member of the student body. After graduating from TISS, he qualified for the Prime Ministers Rural Development Fellowship and went back to his home district, Gadchiroli, to work on better implementation of Government programmes. His work required him to visit remote villages and interact with local communities. In 2013, during one of his field visits, he was detained by the police, who did not know about the nature of his job. He was then released in thirty hours after being given a clean chit by the then Minister of Rural Development, Shri Jairam Ramesh and the then Gadchiroli District Collector, Shri Abhishekh Krishna. His sincerity and commitment shows in his decision to continue working with the
people of Gadchiroli, even after the fellowship period was over. He was currently working on strengthening local self governance and Panchayati Raj and for the constitutional and human rights of adivasi communities in the district, in spite of repeated police harassment and surveillance of his family and himself.

Mahesh has always been outspoken about the ground realities of Gadchiroli. In conversation with The Wire, he states, “Whenever people raise any matter of violence, we’re labeled as anti-national or doing naxal propaganda. It becomes easy for the police to curb any voice of dissent(...) It’s a matter of who own resources. Whatever is happening in Gadchiroli, ranging from illegal arrests, false cases on people, it has direct relations to the anti-mining protests.” (https://thewire.in/134393/gadchiroli-adivasis-mining-displacement/?utm_source=alsoread).

We condemn the flimsy baseless allegations been made to round up these activists, the undemocratic provisions of the UAPA being used on them and the unfair media trials and fake narratives being built around them to poison public opinion. Mahesh and the others were working relentlessly with marginalised communities for their rights and we strongly feel that they are being persecuted for the same. We condemn the Central and State Governments and the Maharashtra Police for their undemocratic actions. We stand by the friends, family and colleagues of those arrested and for the rights of the arrestees themselves.

We, the undersigned students, alumni and present & past faculty of the various campuses of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences -

1. Condemn the arbitrary arrest of Mr. Mahesh Raut, Mr Sudhir Dhawale, Professor Shoma Sen, Advocate Surendra Gadling and Mr Rona Wilson.
2. Demand the immediate release of all the five activists at the earliest.
3. Demand that those responsible for the Bhima Koregaon violence be brought to justice and prosecuted for their crimes against Adivasi Dalit Bahujan under SC/ST Atrocity Act. We also demand a repeal of the current amendments in SC/ST Atrocity Act which help protect those who are committing crimes against the SC/ST communities.
4. Repeal of undemocratic laws like UAPA, NSA, AFSPA and the Sedition Law used to silence progressive, pro-people citizens and to give impunity to the police, military and paramilitary forces.

P.S – If you endorse the statement please respond to to freeallpoliticalprisoners2018@gmail.com with name and batch and subject line as TISS endorsement.