PUCL Salutes Sudha Bharadwaj and her fight for Justice!

Sudha Bharadwaj marks her fourth birthday in prison today, November 1st, 2021, when she completes 60 years. She has been in jail along with the other BK-16 accused as undertrials, with the state neither commencing the trial nor releasing her on bail.

Sudha’s life is a testament to a passionate concern to redress injustice and redressing injustice is nothing, if not the mandate of the Constitution. This continued detention of someone who has dedicated her life to bringing the ‘constitution to life’ for the adivasis of central India and the working class and other marginalised sections, is a continuing affront to all those believe in a plural, democratic and inclusive India.

The PUCL believes that Sudha Bharadwaj and the BK-16, as well as thousands of others, are being detained and prosecuted because their viewpoints are at odds with the ideology of the current political dispensation. Their continued detention is nothing other than an attempt by the Central Government to send out a message that dissent will not be tolerated and democratic voices will be silenced.

What is the dissent which the central government is so afraid of?

- The Dalit activism of Sudhir Dhawale and the Kabir Kala Manch trio of Gaichor, Gorkhe and Jagtap which proclaims Ambedkar’s view that ‘Hindu Raj’ will be ‘the greatest calamity for this country’.
- The trade unionism and legal activism of Sudha Bharadwaj as well as Vernon Gonsalves, Surendra Gadling and Arun Ferreira seeks to make the state accountable to the Constitution.
- The Adivasi activism of Father Stan Swamy (who is no more with us) and Mahesh Raut which seeks to implement the constitutional promises to the Adivasi people.
- The civil liberties activism of Gautam Navalakha and Rona Wilson seeks to make the ‘Deep state’ consisting of the army, police and intelligence agencies accountable to the rule of law.
- The intellectual activism of Hany Babu, Shoma Sen, Anand Teltumbde and Varavara Rao which asserts that universities too are spaces of activism and that the writer’s ‘imagination cannot be imprisoned’.
Remembering Sudha Bharadwaj and the BK-16’s forms of activism is to remind ourselves again of a continuing injustice. It is to remember that the injustice can take particularly cruel forms. Gautam Navalakha’s partner, Sahba Husain recently wrote that the seventy year old Gautam Navalakha was being denied simple facilities like, ‘phone access to his lawyers and family, and some fresh air to walk in once or twice a day.’ As she poignantly put it, ‘It is not too much to ask for these simple facilities’.

The PUCL demands that the Maharashtra state government accede to these basic demands and ensure that all prisoners are able to live a life of dignity as mandated by the Supreme Court and the Constitution of India. The right to dignity which consists of access to reading and writing material, letters to family, clean air and safe water cannot be denied to prisoners, whatever be the nature of the charges against them. Even as we feel the pain of family members denied what should be basic rights, we know that the love for justice cannot be extinguished. The forms of activism which the BK-16 represent are very much alive and the tribute we can pay to the BK-16 is to continue to take forward their vision of a plural, inclusive and democratic India in our own lives.

We mark Sudha Bharadwaj’s fourth birthday in detention today, 01st November, 2021, by rededicating ourselves to fighting for her release. We also reiterate our commitment to work for the release of the other BK-16 in jail, as well as the release of the thousands of other political prisoners – the prisoners of conscience - who are in jail, merely because they chose to exercise their constitutional right to the freedom of speech and association.

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