

## **Open letter to Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India**

16 January 2018

Copy: President of India

### **200 ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF BHIMA- KOREGAON AND CONTINUING ATROCITIES AGAINST DALITS AND MINORITIES IN INDIA**

This open letter by UK organisations listed at the end call on you, the Prime minister of India, to take action against the perpetrators of violence against Dalits. We also call on you to release the many thousands of Dalits falsely arrested and imprisoned since the peaceful remembrance of the 1818 battle at Bhima-Koregaon.

On 1 January 2018, Dalits and Ambedkarites gathered in Bhima-Koregaon village to pay tribute to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives to defeat the Peshwa ruler, Bajirao II of Maratha Confederacy<sup>i</sup> in 1818. At the time of the battle, the Peshwas openly considered the Mahars as Untouchables and made them tie a broom to their waist to sweep away the dust of their footprints, and a pot around their neck to collect their own spit to avoid pollution from them. The defeat of the 28,000 strong Peshwa forces by 800 strong soldiers, majority of whom were Mahars, is therefore a significant episode in Dalit history. Dr B R Ambedkar acknowledged the importance of this battle as a fight for equality and dignity.

During the procession to the memorial in Bhima-Koregaon, Dalits were pelted with stones and cars were set on fire by hoodlums displaying saffron flags. There was a clear absence of police numbers considering the volume of people expected to verge on Bhima-Koregaon to mark the 200 year anniversary. This is a clear failure by the State Government of Maharashtra to protect people marking the event. We are very disturbed and alarmed that two Dalits were killed and many other Dalits, men, women and children were injured – some seriously.

It has been reported, the disruption and violence was pre-planned by some right wing Hindutva leaders, who had visited the areas a few days prior to the 200 anniversary and incited hatred among the local residents and instigated the violence. We question how much the BJP State Government's police and intelligence services knew about the visits of the Hindutva leaders that have alleged to have taken place in nearby villages over a month prior to the significant 2018 anniversary. We also question why sufficient police numbers were not provided to protect the congregation that ranged up to a few hundred thousand annually, and was expected to grow many-fold because of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This has all contributed to deliberate violation of the long established local traditions and histories of communal harmony and Dalit-Maratha co-existence. An FIR<sup>ii</sup> was registered on 2 January 2018 against Sambhaji Bhide of *Shiv Pratishthan Hindustan*, and Miland Ekbote, President of *Samasta*

*Hindu Aghadi*, for allegedly orchestrating the clashes and inflammatory speeches<sup>1</sup>. We are alarmed no arrests have been made to date of these two people.

Maharashtra Bandh protests<sup>iii</sup> on 3 January 2018 called by Prakash Ambedkar saw many hundreds of thousands of people come out on strike onto the streets of Maharashtra<sup>iv</sup>. This strike and protest highlighted the atrocities against Dalits during the Bhima-Karegaon incident and the unlawful arrests of many thousands of innocent Dalits at the remembrance on 1 January and since then.

Alongside the Bhima-Koregaon incident this year and the arrests of Dalits that continue, we are deeply concerned about the increasing violence against Dalits, Tribal and minority people, the failing access to justice, and threats to freedom of expression. This is against the backdrop of an openly far right Hindutva agenda and some unfriendly Economic Development Projects. We are deeply concerned about:

- The fundamental right of freedom of speech and expression guaranteed in the Constitution - is systematically being eroded. Those who speak up for human rights and justice and call the Government to account on the social evils of Caste-related atrocities and discrimination are being persecuted, threatened or jailed. Mr Chandrasekhar Azad-Rawan, Soni Suri, Professor Siababa, Professor Kancha Illaiah Shepherd are just few examples. Gauri Lankesh the Indian journalist-turned-activist from Bangalore, Karnataka, was murdered in September 2017. At the time of her death she was known for being a critic of right-wing Hindu extremism.
- The disproportionately higher number of minorities, including Dalits and Adivasis, are in jails in India as pointed out by the collaborative study 'Democracy in Jail'<sup>2</sup> published in November 2017 by Professor Irfan Ahmad and Dr Zakaria Siddiqui.
- Increasing caste-related violence that includes the incident on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2017 in Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh India where over 50 houses of Dalits were set on fire and destroyed, Dalit men were beaten up and their women molested. Instead of the police taking swift stern action against the culprits, a number of Dalits who saw fit to defend themselves were arrested. This included a young lawyer Mr Chandrasekhar Azad- Rawan. After months in custody, on November 2, the Allahabad High Court granted Chandrasekhar bail and found the baseless charges against him were politically motivated. Instead of releasing him from the custody, the UP Government invoked the National Security Act against him. This is blatant action to silence him and curtail his democratic rights.
- The measures in *The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013* are making little or no progress. This is failing to be a deterrent to manual scavenging. Employment in this unacceptable area continues due to the lack of proper implementation of the law by the authorities.
- The open coal mining in Chhattisgarh, India that forms the Development Agenda is forcing the displacement of Tribal and Adivasi people and forcing them to live in alien so-called 'civilised' land where they are not equipped to handle their normal way of life. Those who choose to remain face life threatening health impacts which has been confirmed in a recent study conducted by medical and public health experts of People First Collective India

called *Health and Environmental Impact of Coal Mining in Chhattisgarh*<sup>v</sup>. This can be seen as nothing short of Ethnic Cleansing.

- The horrific experience of Dalit girls and women seeking justice in cases of rape. Human Rights Watch's report November 2017 report "*Everyone Blames Me - Barriers to justice and support for sexual assault survivors in India*"<sup>vi</sup> includes chilling examples of local village councils deterring them from reporting cases of rape by a higher caste men; of police delaying or not even registering the First Incident Report; and some girls/women being subjected to the further humiliation of a two finger examination (already banned) by doctors to establish if a rape has taken place.

- Openly democratic figures like Jignesh Mevani (recently elected MLA in Gujarat) and Umar Khalid (JNU Student Activist) are being denied their democratic right to freedom of speech, instead they are being investigated/intimidated under various concocted and fashionable charges that have been levelled against them. Many thousands of Dalits have been arrested and jailed for exercising their democratic rights since Bhima-Koregaon.

**We call on you, Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India to:**

**a. arrest Sambhaji Bhide of *Shiv Pratishthan Hindustan* and Miland Ekbote president of *Samasta Hindu Aghadi* for instigating the clashes and inflammatory speeches that resulted in violence at Bhima-Koregaon on 1 January 2018**

**b. release the thousands of Dalits and other activists, including Chandrashekhar Azad Rawan, falsely arrested and imprisoned for protesting against the atrocities**

**c. provide free medical aid and compensation to the victims of these atrocities; and**

**d. conduct a comprehensive and transparent Public Inquiry into the Bhima-Koregaon incident.**

Ambedkar Mission Society, Bedford  
Ambedkar Mission Society, Glasgow, Scotland  
Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance  
Asian Rationalist Society, Britain  
Bhagwan Valmik Sabha, Bedford  
Bhagwan Valmik Mandir, Birmingham  
Bhagwan Valmik Mandir, Coventry  
Bhagwan Valmik Mandir, Oxford  
Bhagwan Valmik Mandir, Southall  
Bhagwan Valmik Mandir, Wolverhampton  
Buddha Dhamma Association, Southall  
Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC)  
Dr Ambedkar Buddhist Organisation, Birmingham  
Dr Ambedkar Memorial Trust, London  
Federation of Ambedkarite and Buddhist Organisations UK  
Guru Ravidass International Organisation for Human Rights UK  
Indian Workers' Association (GB)  
IndiaMattersUK  
Indian Scheduled Caste Welfare Association  
Jagat Guru Valmik Mandir, Gian Ashram, Birmingham  
Punjab Buddhist Society UK,

Wolverhampton

Kanshi Radio

Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha UK, Europe and Abroad - umbrella body the following in the UK:

- Bedford - Gurudwara Ravidass Bhawan
- Berkshire-Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha
- Bilston-Sant Dera Baba Gobind Dass Temple(Ravidass)
- Birmingham -Gurudwara Ravidass Sabha
- Bradford-Gurudwara Shri Guru Ravidass
- Darlaston-Shri Guru Ravidass Temple
- Coventry- Gurudwara Ravidass Sabha, Jesmond Road
- Coventry- Gurudwara Ravidass Temple 2, Foleshill,
- Derby - Shri Guru Ravidass Temple
- Derby- Shri Guru Ravidass Community Centre
- Erith Kent -Shri Guru Ravidass Bhawan
- Gravesend, Kent- Shri Guru Ravidass Temple
- Hitchin/Letchworth - Shri Guru Ravidass,
- Leicester- Shri Guru Ravidass Temple
- Luton- Gurudwara Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha, Luton
- Newham -Shri Guru Ravidass Bhawan
- Southall –Gurudwara Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha
- Southampton- Shri Guru Ravidass Bhawan
- Strood - Shri Guru Ravidass Bhawan
- Walsall -Gurudwara Ravidass Sabha
- Willenhall -Gurudwara Ravidass Sabha
- Wolverhampton- Gurudwara Ravidass Sabha
- Glasgow- Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha

South Asia Solidarity Group

Southall Black Sisters

Voice of Dalit International UK

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maratha\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maratha_Empire)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/states/withdraw-cases-against-bhide-ekbote/article22392486.ece>

<sup>iii</sup> India Today <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=o-g9AAUUm0>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/03/commemoration-of-british-military-victory-sparks-riots-in-india>

<sup>v</sup> [https://pfcollectiveindia.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/raigarh\\_report\\_final-2.pdf](https://pfcollectiveindia.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/raigarh_report_final-2.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/11/08/everyone-blames-me/barriers-justice-and-support-services-sexual-assault-survivors>