

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

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Shri A. K. Parashar

National Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders & Joint Registrar
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Dear Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action – Tamil Nadu: Intimidation of Writer / HRD by Sangh Parivar Elements objecting to portions of his 2010 book- Reg

Greetings from Human Rights Defenders Alert - India!

HRD Alert - India is a Forum of Human Rights Defenders for Human Rights Defenders. It endeavours to initiate actions on behalf of Human Rights Defenders under threat or with security concerns.

We are now writing to express our grave concern regarding the intimidation of Mr. Perumal Murugan, an eminent writer – human rights defender, by elements of the Sangh Parivar, who are now objecting to certain portions of his book *Madhorubagan*, brought out in 2010.

Source of Information on the Incident:

- The Regional Coordinator of HRDA for the East of India
- Media Sources

The Human Rights Defender under attack:

- Tamil writer Perumal Murugan, who is the target of an organised campaign by the Sangh Parivar, which has taken objection to his novel *Mathorubhagan*.

Perumal Murugan is a professor of Tamil and a well-known Tamil writer and scholar. He is one of those rare contemporary writers who has formally studied Tamil.

However, in his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, he deftly avoids punditry. When he was doing his doctoral studies in Chennai, on the works of an earlier Tamil novelist, he came into contact with leftist writers and the influence has been a lasting one.

He is a human rights defender as most of his work focuses on marginalised people. One of his earlier novels, *Koolamadhari*, is about a Dalit goatherd. He has, singlehandedly, produced a dictionary of the dialect of the region, *Kongu Vattara Sollagarathi* in which he has documented the proverbs, terms and metaphors of the working-class people of the region. Through his writings and research, Perumal Murugan has documented fast-disappearing customs and language usage, including proverbs, and his works act like social archives. It is one such custom, featured in *Madhorubagan* that has turned out to be the centre of current controversy. The practice of researching the historical and cultural backdrop of a literary work is not much in evidence in the Tamil literary world. Murugan, who was awarded a grant by the Bangalore-based India Art Foundation to do the background research for the novel, did extensive fieldwork and gathered material, a part of which he has used in this novel.

The Perpetrators:

- Elements of Sangh Parivar (The Sangh Parivar refers to the family of Hindu nationalist organisations which have been started by members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or are inspired by its ideas. The Sangh Parivar represents the Hindu nationalist movement).

Date of Incident:

The 19th of December, 2014

Place of Incident:

Tiruchengode, Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu

Incident:

According to sources, on December 19, 2014 there was a protest in Tiruchengode in Tamil Nadu, where activists of the Sangh Parivar burnt copies of the novel *Mathorubagan* written by Perumal Murugan and demanded a ban on it. The protestors did not relent even after Mr. Murugan issued a clarification to assuage the

feelings of those who had been offended by the contents of the book. Mr. Murugan had agreed to remove certain portions in the next edition of the book.

Perumal Murugan clarified that his intention was not to hurt the feelings of anyone, and the publisher, Kalachuvadu, stood its ground. In deference to the protestors, the police are reportedly considering filing an FIR (First Information Report) against Mr. Murugan who has written about consensual sex that took place in the dead of the night of the car festival of the Arthanareeswarar temple in Tiruchengode in the past.

In some places in Tamil Nadu, there prevailed a custom in the past in which at festivals a childless woman could pair with an unknown man she fancies and can have a child. In the Ardhanariswara temple in Tiruchengode, this ritual formed a part of the annual chariot festival. The character Ponna's family members persuade her to take advantage of this provision. She assumes that the plan has her husband's endorsement and disappears into the darkness during the festival in search of a partner who could gift her with a child. It is this denouement which has provided material for Hindu fundamentalists to target Perumal Murugan and the publisher. The protesters seem to have conveniently ignored the fact that the story is set in the past, 75 years ago. The author has only dealt with a century-old folk myth and it cannot be seen as a commentary on the present day society. Culling out a portion of a book and quoting it out of context is being widely seen as an attempt to achieve political mileage.

This act of the Sangh Parivar elements is nothing short of a fascist attack on the rights of a writer and attempt to impede his freedom of expression.

Appeal:

We, therefore urge you to immediately take necessary steps to ensure that the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Director General of Police

- Order for thorough, transparent, effective and impartial investigation into the above-mentioned events and bring to book the Sangh Parivar elements who are denying the freedom of expression of the writer Perumal Murugan
- Ensure that no charges are made against Mr. Murugan by the Police who are contemplating the filing of an FIR
- Ensure provision of adequate compensation to the writer for the mental agony caused and the maligning of his reputation

- Along with local district officials put an end to all acts of harassment against all human rights defenders in general to ensure that in all circumstances they carry out their activities without any hindrances;
- Conform with the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 9, 1998, especially:
 - Article 1, which states that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”
 - Article 12.2, which provides that “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration”;
 - More generally, ensure in all circumstances the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms including the freedom of expression in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and with international human rights instruments ratified by India is strictly adhered to in Tamil Nadu.

Yours sincerely,



(Henri Tiphagne)

Honorary National Working Secretary