

**Press Statement:*****Drop FIR against Amnesty Intl India!***

PUCL condemns the actions of the Bengaluru Police in foisting a case of sedition, creating enmity and other charges against Amnesty International India and unnamed staff for holding a meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2016 in Bengaluru on human rights abuses in Kashmir in which families of victims participated. From the statement of Amnesty it is evident that the police had been informed about the meeting, were present at the venue and had observed firsthand the event and therefore had knowledge that the allegations of the VHP about the meeting were politically motivated and false. That the Karnataka police chose to register a FIR despite all this only highlights the dangers of arming the state with such draconian laws like the anti-sedition laws.

The 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2016 event itself was in the backdrop of the 2015 Amnesty International report "*Denied: Failures in accountability for human rights violations by security force personnel in Jammu and Kashmir*". The Report focused on the travails of families of persons who lost their loved ones due to excesses by security forces. This report is in the public domain. Families of victims of State violence were present to narrate in first person, the situation in Kashmir and the difficulties in claiming justice and accountability in cases where innocent people are killed in encounters or enforced disappearances. The meeting itself included showing video films of testimonies of other victim families, a panel discussion, musical performance and skit.

PUCL sees the recent registration of an FIR for sedition against Amnesty International, India and the witch hunt into the finances / funding of the organisation as yet another instance in the long string of events where the State has used right wing, majoritarian groups to stifle dissent, prevent discussion and control debate. There is a visible pattern across the country – from the incidents in JNU, Hyderabad Central University, Allahabad University, or the witch hunt against Teesta Setalvad and Javed Anand and their organisation CJP, Indira Jaisingh and Anand Grover of Lawyers Collective, Green Peace and now Amnesty International – where, in every meeting discussing human rights violations suffered by minorities and dalits, or excesses of security forces whether in Kashmir, North East or in Maoist regions, a small fringe group creates a commotion, which is used to first disrupt the meeting and thereafter to harass the organisers by slamming cases against them. Seldom is any action initiated against the individuals who disrupt meetings in the first place.

For instance, in the present incident, the local police were informed and were present at the meeting. Why were the disruptors not removed by the police present in the venue or why was no FIR registered against the persons who appeared to have come prepared to disrupt and actually disrupted the meeting?

It also needs to be highlighted that the repeated invocation of the anti-sedition offence (sec. 124 A IPC) over any other section of IPC is mainly to create a public opinion that those who demand accountability of the state and its agencies, including the police, para military and security forces, are essentially “anti-national”. This creates a negative image about them amongst common people; the ‘anti-national’ tag, in turn, ensures that the state can further persecute them without much adverse public opinion.

It is in this context that we need to also notice that irrespective of political party in power, most governments tend to abuse the extremely coercive, anti-democratic, anti-sedition provision, sec. 124A IPC to silence dissent and crush criticism. There is little difference between a BJP government invoking sedition provisions against Dr. Binayak Sen in Chhattisgarh or the AIADMK government invoking sedition laws against peaceful, anti-nuclear protestors in Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu or cartoonist Aseem Trivedi being arrested in Maharashtra or the case launched by the TMC government in West Bengal against academics; more recently in the last one year itself, is the sedition case against JNU Students Union leader, Kanhaiya Kumar in Delhi, the Tamil folk singer Kovan in TN for criticising the government’s liquor policy and against Hardik Patel for rallying the anti-reservation struggle involving Patels or Patidars in Gujarat; the latest to join this long list of infamous sedition cases is the present case against Amnesty International India launched by the Congress government in Karnataka. In all these cases, what weighed were political considerations of the ruling parties and governments dealing a death blow to the rule of law and functioning of the criminal justice system.

It has been a long held position of PUCL that the anti-sedition law (sec. 124A IPC) should be repealed immediately. It is ironical that in Britain itself the sedition clause has been repealed while India continues to retain it.

PUCL appeals to all concerned citizens, democratically minded groups and human rights movement to once again give a call for repealing sec. 124 A IPC and to launch a mass citizen’s campaign to make ordinary citizens aware of the dangerous, anti-democratic nature of this archaic, colonial era provision of law.

PUCL also demands that the Government of Karnataka and the Karnataka Police immediately withdraw the FIR lodged against Amnesty International, India for the meeting organised by it on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 2016 in the United Theological College in Bengaluru.

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