



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' ALERT - INDIA

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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Ref No: HRDA/South/TS/01/06/2019

June 4, 2019

To

Mr. Khaleel Ahmed,
National Focal Point – Human Rights Defenders and Deputy Registrar,
National Human Rights Commission,
Manav Adhikar Bhavan,
Block-C, GPO Complex, INA,
New Delhi – 110023
E-mail: hrd-nhrc@nic.in

Dear Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert – India – Urgent Appeal for Action – Repeated Threats to scholar and activist, Dr. Sujatha Surepally and students of Satavahana University, Telangana.

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 writing to express our grave concern over the patently false and insidious accusations and threats by the right-wing student outfit ABVP against Dr. Sujatha Surepally, a prominent Dalit feminist scholar, human rights defender and Head of the Department of Sociology, Satavahana University, Karimnagar, Telangana as well as against students of the University.

Source of Information on the Incident:

- A communication from the defenders in the region
- Reports from Social Media and regional print media
- The Regional Coordinator of HRDA for South of India

Status of the Human Rights Defenders:

- Dr. Sujatha Surepally is a widely respected dalit activist and human rights defender. As an academic scholar, she heads the Dept. of Sociology at the Satavahana University, Karimnagar.
- Students of the Satavahana University, Karimnagar who have been demanding action against sexual harassment and institutional mechanisms.

The Perpetrators:

Akhil Bharatya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a student outfit affiliated to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Date of Incident:

May 15, 2019

Incident detail:

Since a few months, Dr. Sujatha Surepally, a professor of Sociology at the Satavahana University, Karimnagar, along with the University Students Joint Action Committee has been at the forefront of demanding justice for the victims of sexual harassment and action against perpetrators, in particular, one Dr. Srinivas Panchala, Assistant Professor Department of Botany, University College of Science. After raising the issue consistently, the University constituted a committee and reportedly took disciplinary action against him in March. It is believed that, Dr. Srinivas has active connections to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing organisation.

Around this time, Prof. Surepally, accompanied her students on a university sponsored and financed study tour to the adivasi areas in Bhadrachalam district of Telangana. However, certain BJP-affiliated organisations and particularly ABVP, initiated a misinformation campaign, branding her as a 'Maoist sympathiser', falsely accusing her of facilitating a meeting of the students with Maoist leaders, under the 'garb' of a study tour. On May 15, 2019, the ABVP also carried out a protest and filed a complaint with the police about alleged 'Maoist activity' in the Satavahana University.

Incidentally, the above two instances are not unrelated. Dr. Surepally, has been at the forefront of raising numerous public interest issues for more than a decade now as an activist and academic of the University. And for this, she has been repeatedly at the forefront of attacks and hate, particularly from right-wing and casteist organizations. The ABVP, a right-wing student group has been unsuccessful in gaining a foothold in the University, largely due to her active engagement with a cross-section of students to imbibe constitutional and secular values.

ABVP has been making many attempts to impose right-wing ideology in universities across the country and this been resisted by progressive student organizations, including at Satavahana and by Prof. Surepally. And precisely because of this, time and again she has had to face vitriolic abuses and threats.

This malicious campaign seems to be ABVP's attempt to protect a male faculty accused of sexually harassing women students at the University. It is indeed most unacceptable that when the entire nation is being woken up to the serious issues of sexual harassment at workplaces, an outfit claiming to be a student body is spearheading a counter-campaign to malign those very women protesting harassment!

Besides, the manner in which the ABVP has sought to portray a University approved regular anthropology study tour into a 'planned visit to Maoist areas' is a calculated attempt to defame the Professor, invite hatred towards her and place her in a further vulnerable position. Since she, along with the students are fighting for justice, there is clearly an attempt to divert the issue and tarnish her reputation and the students.

It may be noted that as a faculty, Dr. Surepally is not affiliated to any of the individual student groups, but only supports the concerns of students, faculty and workers on campus, in so far as their legitimate demands and interests are concerned.

It is also well-known that Dr. Sujatha is a firm follower of the father of the Constitution, Dr. B.R Ambedkar and has been pursuing democratic modes of action always. Many civil rights groups in Telangana, including the employees union of the Satavahana University have already condemned these allegations.

It needs to be mentioned here that this is not the first time that Dr. Surepally is being attacked. In December 2017 as well, the ABVP ran an extremely demeaning, casteist and misogynistic campaign against her on social media, alleging that she has 'instigated' students to insult 'Bharat Mata' and that she herself 'burnt the poster of Bharat Mata', during Manu Smriti Dahan. She was called 'anti-national' and insinuations were made that she is spreading naxalism in the university.

On 25th December, 2017 observed as Manusmriti Dahan Din, a practice started by Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar in 1920s against the caste hierarchy, dalit students of *Satavahana University* held a democratic protest by burning the Manusmriti inside the campus, for which they were attacked by right-wing elements (from outside the campus). However it was established later that Dr. Surepally was not even in the university that day; she was in Hyderabad. She filed a complaint with the Karimnagar Police Commissioner against BJP spokesperson Bandi Sanjay and the women's and minority wings of the RSS for defaming and harassing her, but no action was taken.

Prof. Sujatha has also been vocal in the campaign for release of the lawyers, activists and writers arrested in Bhima-Koregaon case on fabricated evidence. On a wide range of issues, she has utilized social media and online networking for building solidarity. All this, coupled with her identity as an outspoken dalit woman has pushed her into a situation of vulnerability subject to constant targeting. It is widely perceived that she is being singled out for her principled stands against social injustice and state repression. HRDA unequivocally condemns these abusive and defamatory campaigns to malign and threaten Prof. Sujatha Surepally and the student protesters at Satavahana University. Their right to articulate and organize for legitimate concerns in the University within a constitutional framework needs to be fully protected by the university authorities and the Telangana Government.

It is further brought to the notice of the Commission that academic freedom is essential for healthy education and therefore there is a need for institutions and scholars to have autonomy to exercise it. Exercising this freedom may lead to challenges and tensions and hence there is a greater need for existence of robust protections for academic freedom. International human rights law protects academic freedom under freedom of expression and right to education and the same is found to be enshrined under Indian Constitution as well.

Therefore harassment and intimidation of Dr. Sujatha for exercising her autonomy towards academic freedom which is well within the constitutional framework of the country amounts to infringement of her fundamental freedom of right to free speech and expression.

Appeal:

We, therefore urge you to immediately take necessary steps to ensure that the Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police, Telangana:

- Order an immediate, independent, thorough, transparent, effective and impartial investigation into the above-mentioned incident of harassment and intimidation of human rights defender Prof. Sujatha Surepally and the students of the Satavahana University.
- Take immediate action on the perpetrators, in this case the persons who have acted in an unlawful manner, on behalf of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP);

- Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of human rights defenders Prof. Sujatha Surepally and the students of the Satavahana University, who are asserting their legitimate rights.
- Ensure provision of reparation, compensation, apology to the human rights defenders and the families of the defenders for the psychological sufferings they are undergoing;
- Put an end to all acts of attack and harassment of human rights defenders like Prof. Sujatha Surepally.
- Ensure that law-abiding academics and activists like Prof. Sujatha Surepally have the liberty to carry out their activities as defenders of human rights without any hindrances or threats.

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,
Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Henri Tiphagne', with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.

Henri Tiphagne
National Working Secretary