



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' ALERT - INDIA

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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HRDA/NHRC-SM/South/TN/18/02/2024

03 February 2024

To
Justice (retd.) Mr. AK Mishra
Chairperson,
National Human Rights Commission,
Manav Adhikar Bhawan,
Block-C, GPO Complex, INA,
New Delhi –110 023
Email: chairnhrc@nic.in

Respected Justice Mishra,

Subject: Requesting to initiate suo moto proceedings in the case of detention of five protestors by the Tamil Nadu Police on January 27, 2024 in Erode.

We are writing to you to bring to your kind attention that on January 27, 2024, residents of Chennimalai protested for removal of 300 flex banners which were placed without due permission. That banners were placed in the event of Taipusam festival at Chennimalai Murugan Temple. During the festival number of devotees visit the temple and around 1 lakh devotees usually take part on the final day. The protestors appealed to panchayat administration to remove the banners. Aggrieved by the protest Erode district police detained five protestors for staging protest.

The incident has been reported widely in the media and a link is shared here for your reference - [Five arrested over protest seeking removal of flex banners in Erode \(newindianexpress.com\)](https://www.newindianexpress.com)

The Right to protest is an essential element of the right to participate in any democratic dispensation, and restrictions imposed on this right must be closely scrutinized with respect to their necessity and reasonableness (A/61/312, para. 56)

Human rights defenders play a pivotal role in ensuring that protest and criticism are expressed in a peaceful and constructive manner. States should legitimize and empower human rights defenders in this role and encourage defenders to take full ownership of this role (A/62/225, para. 102).

The Right to protest is recognized under several international instruments, including:

- I. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 8),
- II. Article 5 (a) of the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders 1998 states that “For the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to meet or assemble peacefully”.

Supreme court in Mazdoor Kisan Shakthi Sangathan v. UOI 2018 17 SCC 32 held that: -

“54. The right to protest is thus recognised as a fundamental right under the Constitution. This right is crucial in a democracy which rests on the participation of an informed citizenry in governance. This Right is also crucial since its strengths representative democracy by enabling direct participation in public affairs where individuals and groups are able to express dissent and grievances, expose the flaws in governance and demand accountability from the state authorities as well as powerful entities. This right is crucial in a vibrant democracy like India but more so in the Indian Context to aid in the assertion of the rights of the marginalised and poorly represented minorities.

59. A particular fundamental right cannot exist in isolation in a watertight compartment. One fundamental right of a person may have to coexist in harmony with the exercise of another fundamental right by others and also with reasonable and valid exercise of power by the state in the light of the directive principles of social welfare as a whole. The court’s duty is to strike a balance between competing claims of different interests.”

In Anita Thakur v. State of J&K, (2016) 15 SCC 525 it was observed the Supreme court that:- *“12...holding peaceful demonstration in order to air their grievances and to see that their voice is heard in the relevant quarters is the right of the people. Such a right can be traced to the fundamental freedom that is guaranteed under Articles 19(1)(a), 19(1)(b) and 19(1)(c) of the Constitution. Article 19(1)(a) confers freedom of speech to the citizens of this country and, thus, this provision ensures that the petitioners could raise slogan, albeit in a peaceful and orderly manner, without using offensive language. Article 19(1)(b) confers the right to assemble and, thus, guarantees that all citizens have the right to assemble peacefully and without arms. Right to move freely given under Article 19(1)(d), again, ensures that the petitioners*

could take out peaceful march. The “right to assemble” is beautifully captured in an eloquent statement that “an unarmed, peaceful protest procession in the land of “salt satyagraha”, fast-unto-death and “do or die” is no jural anathema”. It hardly needs elaboration that a distinguishing feature of any democracy is the space offered for legitimate dissent. One cherished and valuable aspect of political life in India is a tradition to express grievances through direct action or peaceful protest. Organised, non-violent protest marches were a key weapon in the struggle for Independence, and the right to peaceful protest is now recognised as a fundamental right in the Constitution.”

15. Thus, while on the one hand, citizens are guaranteed fundamental right of speech, right to assemble for the purpose of carrying peaceful protest processions and right of free movement, on the other hand, reasonable restrictions on such right can be put by law. Provisions of IPC and CrPC, discussed above, are in the form of statutory provisions giving powers to the State to ensure that such public assemblies, protests, dharnas or marches are peaceful and they do not become “unlawful”. At the same time, while exercising such powers, the authorities are supposed to act within the limits of law and cannot indulge into excesses. How legal powers should be used to disperse an unruly crowd has been succinctly put by the Punjab and Haryana High Court in *Karam Singh v. Hardayal Singh* [*Karam Singh v. Hardayal Singh*, 1979 Cri LJ 1211 : 1979 SCC OnLine P&H 180] wherein the High Court held that three prerequisites must be satisfied before a Magistrate can order use of force to disperse a crowd:

First, there should be an unlawful assembly with the object of committing violence or an assembly of five or more persons likely to cause a disturbance of the public peace. Second, an Executive Magistrate should order the assembly to disperse. Third, in spite of such orders, the people do not move away.”

The Supreme Court in *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan v. Union of India*, (2018) 17 SCC 324 : 2018 SCC OnLine SC 724 at page 366 held that:-

“54. The right to protest is, thus, recognised as a fundamental right under the Constitution. This right is crucial in a democracy which rests on participation of an informed citizenry in governance. This right is also crucial since it strengthens representative democracy by enabling direct participation in public affairs where individuals and groups are able to express dissent and grievances, expose the flaws

in governance and demand accountability from the State authorities as well as powerful entities. This right is crucial in a vibrant democracy like India but more so in the Indian context to aid in the assertion of the rights of the marginalised and poorly represented minorities.”

Supreme Court in *Ramlila Maidan Incident, In re*, (2012) 5 SCC 1 : (2012) 2 SCC (Civ) 820 : (2012) 2 SCC (Cri) 241 : (2012) 1 SCC (L&S) 810 : 2012 SCC OnLine SC 186 at page 99 held that:-

“245. Freedom of speech, right to assemble and demonstrate by holding dharnas and peaceful agitations are the basic features of a democratic system. The people of a democratic country like ours have a right to raise their voice against the decisions and actions of the Government or even to express their resentment over the actions of the Government on any subject of social or national importance. The Government has to respect and, in fact, encourage exercise of such rights. It is the abundant duty of the State to aid the exercise of the right to freedom of speech as understood in its comprehensive sense and not to throttle or frustrate exercise of such rights by exercising its executive or legislative powers and passing orders or taking action in that direction in the name of reasonable restrictions. The preventive steps should be founded on actual and prominent threat endangering public order and tranquillity, as it may disturb the social order. This delegated power vested in the State has to be exercised with great caution and free from arbitrariness. It must serve the ends of the constitutional rights rather than to subvert them.

309. Privacy and dignity of human life has always been considered a fundamental human right of every human being like any other key values such as freedom of association and freedom of speech. Therefore, every act which offends or impairs human dignity tantamount to deprivation pro tanto of his right to live and the State action must be in accordance with reasonable, fair and just procedure established by law which stands the test of other fundamental rights. (Vide Francis Coralie Mullin v. UT of Delhi [(1981) 1 SCC 608]).

The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders 1999 states the following:

- Article 12 (2) and (3) "*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. In this connection, everyone is entitled, individually and in association with others, to be protected effectively under national law in reacting against or opposing through peaceful means, activities, and acts, including those by omission, attributable to States that result in violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as acts of violence perpetrated by groups or individuals that affect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms."

- Article 9 (1): *"In the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the promotion and protection of human rights as referred to in the present Declaration, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to benefit from an effective remedy and to be protected in the event of the violation of those rights".*

We believe that the detention of the protestors by the police is an act of reprisal against their activism.

We urgently appeal to you to exercise Section 12 (a) of the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Act, 2019, and take *suo moto* cognizance of this incident and initiate an independent inquiry through NHRC's investigation wing.

We hope and expect that the NHRC will intervene in this case impartially and in a time bound manner.

Yours Sincerely,

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

(Henri Tiphagne)

National Working Secretary

Protest to remove flex banners – 5 detained by Erode District Police.

On January 27, 2024, residents of Chennimalai staged a protest demanding the removal of 300 unauthorized flex banners erected during the Thaipusam festival at Chennimalai Murugan Temple. Despite the festival's significance, the unauthorized banners sparked public outcry due to their lack of official permission and obstructive nature. Subsequently, five protestors were detained by Erode district police for participating in the peaceful demonstration, a move perceived as a reprisal against their exercise of the fundamental right to protest.

The incident highlights a critical tension between the exercise of democratic rights and state intervention, particularly concerning the right to protest. The right to peaceful assembly and protest is enshrined in various international and domestic legal frameworks, emphasizing its pivotal role in democratic societies. However, the detention of protestors by the police raises concerns regarding potential reprisals against activism. In light of these developments, HRDA urgently appealed to National Human Rights Commission to come forward to take up suomoto and initiate an independent inquiry into the incident and ensure the protection of citizens' rights to peaceful assembly and expression.