

Press Release – Immediately Release Dr. GN Saibaba! (March 10th 2021)

The Committee for the Defence and Release of Dr. GN Saibaba organised a press conference at the Press Club of India in Delhi which was addressed by writer Arundhati Roy, former Member of Parliament in the Rajya Sabha D Raja, General Secretary of the National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) Muralidharan, former President of DUTA Nandita Narain, professor Parminder Singh, filmmaker Sanjay Kak, wife of Dr. Saibaba and women's rights activist Vasantha and Delhi University professor Vikas Gupta. Dr. GN Saibaba tested positive for COVID-19 on February 12th 2021. A wheelchair bound former professor of Delhi University with 90% disability and several severe co-morbidities, Dr. Saibaba remains incarcerated in the Nagpur Central Jail. The speakers strongly underlined the need for his release, immediate and adequate medical care and access to his family to ensure his recovery.

After repeated appeals by Dr. Saibaba and other inmates to the jail authorities to test the inmates at the Nagpur Central Jail, he was eventually tested for the COVID-19 and the results were positive. Vasantha spoke of how 13 out of 25 people in his barrack tested positive. Despite this, none of the inmates were taken to the hospital. They were provided basic antibiotics and told to fend for themselves. Distressed by the neglect of Dr. Saibaba's health she asked, "why was he not taken to the hospital? Why is a person suffering from post-polio paralysis, a person who cannot walk, a person whose heart and mind work but every other part of his body is affected not being given bail? Why is the State afraid of giving him bail?" She spoke of how he was not allowed to meet his dying mother or even perform the last rites after her death. When so many others were being given parole, bail or even being acquitted after being released from jail, why is Dr. Saibaba still being held in custody? She spoke of the terror she felt when she heard of the death of Kanchan Nannaware, a prisoner with a severe ailment in the heart who was operated on and died during surgery, a surgery performed without informing her husband or family. Speaking of the strength shown by Dr. Saibaba who consoled her over the phone, she said, "he told me to not lose my confidence as these dark days will not continue for long. Every period of repression has to end. So, he asked me to continue fighting boldly for his release." Reiterating the inhumanity of denying a person with such severe ailments reprieve, Muralidharan said, "the experience of Dr. Saibaba amounts to nothing but torture, cruelty and indignity." As someone speaking for the rights of persons with disabilities, he said, "we are demanding that they implement the laws enshrined in the Constitution." With COVID-19, Muralidharan felt that when the government is willing to acknowledge that persons with disabilities are more vulnerable then why are they not releasing Dr. Saibaba? He said that denial of assistive devices like wheelchairs for persons who cannot walk amounts to torture. In light of the torture faced by him, Dr. Saibaba must be released.

Laying out the current political climate where anyone fighting for the rights of others faces false cases, Nandita Narain reiterated the unequal nature of the law wherein, "today, justice looks at the face of the person standing before it and gives justice accordingly. If you are a Saibaba, Sudha Bharadwaj or others, false cases are foisted on you, something proved beyond doubt by the Arsenal Report." She said, "we are here to demand his release on bail and proper medical treatment instead of the anda cell." Also speaking of the use of electronic evidence to accuse, charge and convict dissenting voices, Prashant Bhushan spoke of the manner in which emails are planted in computers as revealed by the Arsenal Consulting Report. He drew attention to Justice DY Chandrachud's dissent in the Supreme Court in the petition filed by Romila Thapar and others in light of the Bhima Koregaon arrests where emails which were allegedly recovered from the computers of people using a language unknown to its purported author. He said, "they are now going after everyone who is seen as against the government. They have even gone after journalists who have written stories against the government. The method of doing this is by making any kind of charge. As seen in the Delhi Riots case, they have gone after people against whom they have no evidence, people like Devangana Kalita, Safoora Zargar, Umar Khalid besides many others, all of whom are targeted under the UAPA." He felt that this law is utilised due to the provision where at the first instance, without any investigation into the facts of the case, the judge is expected to establish if there is a prima facie case against the accused. He concluded by saying that, "unless the police are held accountable for foisting false cases, they will go on doing this." Likewise, the continued incarceration of Dr. Saibaba amounts to torture and he called on the courts, the establishment and the others to ensure that he is released immediately.

Drawing connections between the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, Sedition Act, the role of the BJP-RSS and the incarceration of Dr. Saibaba, D Raja said, “today, anyone who questions the government is targeted. We are facing a grave threat to the ethos that we have been proud of. Today, we are witnessing fascist rule. Why are they afraid of Dr. Saibaba? They are not afraid of his body but his brain. The government is afraid of the questions raised by people like Saibaba and the hundreds and thousands of people coming to the streets questioning the policies of the State.” Remarking on the mental agony of the family of Dr. Saibaba, he felt that people from all sections of society must come together to demand his release. Highlighting the physical ailments of Dr. Saibaba, Vikas Gupta found the inordinate delays by the judiciary amounts to denial of justice. He hoped that, “the judiciary will learn a little more sensitivity and release Dr. Saibaba expeditiously.” As a member of the defence committee for Dr. Saibaba, Sanjay Kak reminded everyone of the threat posed by Dr. Saibaba for simply drawing attention to the Operation Green Hunt. But today, the threat to his life is also a threat to us and what lies ahead for all of us. Calling Dr. Saibaba a prisoner of conscience, he said that Dr. Saibaba was appealing to the conscience of the people, just as those at the borders of Delhi today are appealing to the conscience of the people of this country. He found that, “it is a tragic situation that this tussle over an embattled nation is being conducted over a body like that of Dr. Saibaba. And so, it becomes our duty to continually speak for his release.”

Marking the importance of the questions raised by people like Dr. Saibaba, Prof. Parminder Singh spoke of the condition of the people of Central India. Those struggling for their land, water and minerals belong to a glorious history of struggle by tribal communities in India against the predatory acts of the government, something repeatedly raised by Dr. Saibaba. He found that, “if we consider the imprisonment of people like Sudha Bharadwaj, Rona Wilson, Gautam Navlakha and others, it becomes clear that they were speaking against the acquisition of resources, against the attack on the natural resources of this country.” He felt that it was out bounden duty of all the democratic people and organisations to speak against the neoliberal policies of the state. Locating the struggle against acquisition of land in central India with the present-day struggle of the peasants in the outskirts of Delhi he found that, “this is also a part of the same struggle as the ones waged by tribals and Dalits. Today, the peasants fear that their land will be acquired under one pretext or another.” He felt that it is not merely a question of livelihood under threat but the resources of the people under attack by the corporate world. And to defend these rights is to defend the basic rights of the people of this country to their livelihood, resources and culture and to live a life of dignity. In this context he found that to demand the release of Dr. Saibaba becomes absolutely urgent and legitimate as his incarceration is part of the onslaught against all those who speak against the attack on the resources of this country.

Starkly reminding the audience of the changing conditions over the last five-six years, Arundhati Roy spoke of how the incarceration of Dr. Saibaba, a person in judicial custody, amounts to torture every single day that he spends behind bars. She said, “every single day something irreversible is happening to him. This is every day, slowly taking something away from him. While there is a sliding scale of access on the basis of ability, caste, class etc., for a person like Dr. Saibaba who is paralysed waist down, for him even in judicial custody he is tortured every day and everything that happens to him is irreversible.” Speaking of Operation Green Hunt and the period where hundreds and thousands of security personnel were released to wreak havoc against Adivasis, she spoke of how people expected the Adivasis to protest non-violently. Drawing parallel with today, she spoke of how the struggle being fought today by peasants was being fought by Adivasis over all those years. At one time Saibaba, Sudha, Gautam and others were fighting it. It has now reached the borders of Delhi. It has not reached our homes. The people have understood that their land is being corporatised. She said, “what we are witnessing now is not politics, it is pathology.” She said, we have to remember that some of the best lawyers in this country, including Dr. Saibaba’s lawyer, Adv. Surendra Gadling, is in jail. Anyone who stands up for anyone is in jail. Remarking on the threat looming over everyone daring to speak for the release of others, she said, “Today, it is dangerous to be in the defence committee. Whoever speaks for Saibaba is likely to be picked up, be it Rona Wilson, Hany Babu and others.” She felt that the nation is being hypnotized in some way. We have to capture the alternate, the reality, and disable this onslaught on the people of the country.

Committee for the Defence and Release of Dr. GN Saibaba