

Political Prisoners

India being the "largest democracy of the world" has a rather ignoble and sordid record of undemocratically, rather brutally, stifling the dissenting voices of its own citizens. In a fundamental sense, the record goes back to the very founding of the Republic. Over the decades, as the broad masses gradually became disillusioned with the hollowness of populist slogans, and engaged in one militant struggle after the other, the State equipped itself with a whole series of draconian laws, supplementing the already available repressive provisions of the Indian Penal Code, promulgated by the British colonial rulers in 1860. Bizarre things began to happen, which could happen only in this "largest democracy of the world". Dissenters rounded up, massacred in custody, and declared as victims of "encounter deaths". Thousand met this fate. Tens of thousands who could not be so bumped off were kept indefinitely in another ingenious Indian category: "under-trial prisoners" - not charged, not brought before a law court, but simply held in prison. Years in a row. Tortured, bar-fettered, raped. And yet this is the 'largest democracy' of the world!

For a long time the myth of the "largest democracy" prevailed. Once the officers of Amnesty International in their London office expressed horror when they were told of tens of thousands of "political prisoners" in India, and given a huge dossier prepared by organizations like Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, and the Legal Aid Committee - both of Kolkata. That was in 1973. They soon learnt, after their own investigations. The International Commission of Jurists in Geneva intervened. Even the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations was forced to give a notice to the Indian government, back in 1973, to explain the phenomenon of "political prisoners" in their country. Tragically the government does not treat any activist of social movement as political once he is behind bars. He is treated as criminal and tried under criminal proceedings.

A temporary reprieve however came in 1977 with the routing of the Congress rule. But it was temporary, indeed.

Over the years since, as the conditions of the toiling masses have continued to deteriorate, and as many other struggles—based on identity and regional aspirations— began to challenge the status quo, and as massive struggles began to burst out in this recent phase of "globalization, privatization, and liberalization", the nakedly repressive character of the Indian state is all too obvious. There are tens of thousands of political prisoners held in Indian jails today. These prisoners are "...persons who have been arrested or detained, for partaking in struggles of political, social and economic significance, in whatever form, and were guided not by selfish interest, but by definite political views or ideologies, irrespective of the charges that the state has put on them..." □□ [contributed]