

Repression of Rights:

Modi's Response to the Farmer's Protest



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The arrest of 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi was the latest in a series of heavy-handed tactics that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is using. Ravi's arrest, the most recent of many to target activists, indicates the government's attempts to suppress support for thousands of farmers who have been protesting for months against agricultural reforms.

Ravi was accused by the government of being an "editor and key conspirator" in creating a farmers' protest "toolkit," a widely-shared online document that contains a brief argument for why people should support the farmers' protests. The toolkit, containing a list of suggested actions and resources for farmers and advocates internationally, also puts a target on the backs of the leaders of the Indian Farmers' protest. Ravi's arrest, which came after her public support for the document, is a part of Modi's government crackdown on all forms of dissent in the country.

Critics of Modi's government say the charges against Ravi are politically motivated and represent an escalation of the Indian government's clampdown on dissenters. Subir Sinha, a lecturer in institutions and development at the University of London, says, "It's a brazen move by Modi to ramp up repression and wait to see if there are international repercussions."

Not only arrests, but social media bans have been put in place by the Indian government. The government wanted approximately 1,100 accounts removed from Twitter, based on their belief that these accounts are spreading misinformation about the farmers' protests. Twitter was rebuked by India for not promptly complying with government orders to take down certain content, and the social media giant was warned that it must follow local laws to operate in the country.

The government officially installed bans with New Delhi's declaration that #farmergenocide was incendiary and baseless, alleging that it was being used to spread misinformation about the Indian government. This is incredibly pervasive; according to German data firm Statista, India is Twitter's third-largest market behind the United States and Japan, with more than 17 million users as of January 2020.

In response to the bans, the social media giant posted that "In keeping with our principles of defending protected speech and freedom of expression, we have not taken any action on accounts that consist of new media entities, journalists, activists and politicians." The current face-off against the government puts the company in a bind, where Indians have to juggle between advocating for the right of free expression and complying with local laws.

This was not a sentence I expected to write, but Rihanna was one of the first celebrities to ask why the world was not paying more attention to the farmers' protests in India. On February 2, 2021, the pop singer tweeted to her 101 million followers, bringing

the crisis to light for many. Rihanna explained that the Indian government planned to decrease regulation on corporations, which would ultimately leave farmers vulnerable to exploitation and susceptible to extreme poverty.

Upon this tweet, many were able to understand how the government is suppressing and endangering thousands of farmers. The farmers—many of whom come from the Punjab region of northern India, which has a large Sikh population—say that the government's attempt to deregulate the agricultural sector will destroy their livelihood, according to Human Rights Watch.

However, this is not just a matter for India, and it is not about just the reforms; Sikhs are now being threatened with potentially devastating pogroms, which have only increased during the government's repression of protests. Since the protests began last year, Modi's far-right government has tried to violently suppress Sikhs, lashing out at critics in a way that exposes how a nation widely regarded as "the world's largest democracy" is close to becoming an authoritarian state.

This is not the first time Sikh and Punjabi residents of India have been impacted on a larger scale. After the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards, anti-Sikh riots erupted the following day. According to Time Magazine, more than 3,000 Sikhs were killed in New Delhi and an estimated 8,000 to 18,000 or more Sikhs were killed in 40 cities across India.

Time Magazine portrayed eyewitness accounts that described how law enforcement and government officials participated in the massacres by engaging in the violence, inciting civilians to seek vengeance and providing the mobs with weapons. Barba Crosette, a former bureau chief for The New York Times in New Delhi, pointed out that "Almost as many Sikhs died in a few days in India in 1984, then all the deaths and disappearances [of Sikhs] in Chile during the 17-year military rule of Augusto Pinochet between 1973 and 1990." Political stability has remained a challenge for minorities in India, for more than its 21 million Sikhs, as the government is building off of anti-Sikh sentiments in order to suppress the current protesters. But these protests have persisted during the Indian government's dangerous regression in free speech rights and pursuit of its Hindu nationalist agenda.

Peaceful activities protesting against discriminatory citizenship policies, such as the Citizenship Amendment Bill and the Essential Commodities Amendment Act, are facing repercussions for opposing controversial new farm laws. Authorities have continued to make baseless claims against activists of incitement, and journalists and senior politicians are facing baseless criminal cases for reporting incidents. The United Nations was involved, and the human rights office called on Indian authorities and farmers to find equitable solutions with due respect to human rights for all.

Indian authorities like to boast of the country's democracy and pluralism, but their actions all too often belittle their own words. Sikhs, Punjabis, activists and journalists are being targeted by a government that wants to limit their rights and livelihoods, and this persecution needs to stop. It is time a proper discussion began about accountability and reparations.

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