

7 June 2018

India: Five human rights defenders arrested in a coordinated crackdown

In the early hours of 6 June 2018 five human rights defenders, **Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Sudhir Dhawale, Shoma Sen** and **Mahesh Raut** were arrested in different parts of India. They are being charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) with spreading controversial pamphlets and delivering hate speeches in connection with the Bhima Koregaon violence that broke out in January 2018.

[Surendra Gadling](#) is a human rights lawyer and General Secretary of the Indian Association of Peoples' Lawyers (IAPL). Among those he has represented are numerous human rights defenders arrested on fabricated charges. [Rona Wilson](#) is a member of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners (CRPP), which has campaigned against the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and other repressive laws. [Sudhir Dhawale](#) is a Dalit rights activist and the editor of the Marathi magazine 'Vidrohi'. [Shoma Sen](#) is a professor at Nagpur University and a long time Dalit and women's rights activist. [Mahesh Raut](#) is a land rights activist working with Gram Sabhas in the mining areas of Gadchiroli.

In the early hours of Wednesday 6 June, Indian police simultaneously arrested the five human rights defenders in a nationwide operation. Surendra Gadling, Shoma Sen and Mahesh Raut were arrested in Nagpur, Rona Wilson was arrested in Delhi, and Sudhir Dhawale in Mumbai. The human rights defenders were taken to the city of Pune in western India.

According to local human rights defenders, Maharashtra police have said that the five were arrested based on evidence "indicating links with banned Maoist groups" and for their "involvement" in inciting violence on 31 December 2017. Violence occurred during Elgar Parishad, a Dalit commemoration of the anniversary of a battle the Dalits had won 200 years previously against the Peshwas (upper caste rulers). The commemoration had turned violent at Bhima Koregaon (near Pune) on 1 January 2018.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arrests of Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Sudhir Dhawale, Shoma Sen and Mahesh Raut as it strongly believes that they are directly linked to their peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Surendra Gadling, Rona Wilson, Sudhir Dhawale, Shoma Sen and Mahesh Raut, as Front Line Defenders believes that the human rights defenders are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Conduct independent investigation into the widespread violence organized against Dalits, including human rights defenders, in the aftermath of the Bhima Koregaon commemoration;

3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in India are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from all restrictions.