

## **Civil society groups assert freedom of speech and dissent in face of government attacks on democratic rights**

Pune | April 21, 2015| Members of civil society in Pune today came together to condemn the NDA government's recent crackdown on civil society organisations like Greenpeace India. Releasing a protest letter that over 180 organisations and citizens have today sent to Mr. Rajnath Singh, the Union Minister for Home Affairs (attached here), these Pune-based organizations declared the crackdown as 'shameful' in a country that has a history standing up for social justice, ecological sustainability, and the rights of the poor.

"The move by the central government to freeze Greenpeace India's bank accounts and block sources of funds is a blatant violation of the constitutional rights to freedom of expression and association. It also seems to be an attempt to warn civil society that dissent regarding developmental policies and priorities will not be tolerated. These are dangerous signs for the future of democracy in India," said Ashish Kothari of Kalpavriksh.

"Dissenting from the government's development policies, helping communities who are going to be displaced by these policies to mobilise themselves, and generating public opinion for the protection of the environment can by no stretch of imagination be considered anti-national, or against public interest. Protecting the environment and human rights are in fact fundamental duties enjoined upon citizens by the Constitution of India", added Shripad Dharmadhikary of Manthan.

"In fact, any reasonable policy of sustainable development (which the government claims to adhere to) will itself put into question quite a few of the mining, power, and other projects currently being promoted", said K.J. Joy of SOPPECOM.

These and other civil society activists including Sujit Patwardhan of Parisar, Parineeta Dandekar of SANDRP, Neeraj Jain of Lokayat, Satish Khot of National Society for Clean Cities, and Jugal Rathi of Sajag Nagrik Manch, called upon the government to immediately take back these illegitimate, unfair, and repressive moves, and respect the freedom of speech that all Indian citizens have a constitutional right to.

Appealing to other members of civil society and other social movements, Neeraj Jain of Lokayat said, "This is not just an attempt to silence Greenpeace, but it is an attack on the very fabric of democracy. Whoever values free speech and the right to dissent from policies and programmes that are anti-people and anti-environment, needs to get involved in this fight. Rest assured, if this government is allowed to silence Greenpeace, it will come after others next. But attempts to brow-beat civil society will not make the issues of social and environmental injustice disappear. We will not be cowed down by such attempts."

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