

Detention of Human Rights Activist

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## More Lessons of Ayodhya

INCREASINGLY, the message progressive movements, whatever the focus of their mobilisation, have for all progressives appears to be, 'you may support us, but you may not say a critical word about how we function or our actions'. Gautam Navlakha (September 11) expends so much emotion on the attack on the exhibition put up by Sahmat and the state's response but can only, in a condescending fashion, acknowledge the issues which ought to be discussed within Sahmat.

There can be no second opinion about condemning either the attack on the Sahmat exhibition in Ayodhya, or the state's fence-sitting in the matter. However, it seems to me that Sahmat's own response to the entire episode is a most telling comment. Sahmat and its supporters seem to have been completely unprepared for such opposition. Surely, given the prevailing atmosphere and the nature of the panel such violence should have been expected, whatever Sahmat's intention? And certainly, given its activities at other levels, Sahmat cannot have been unaware of the need to know the adversary? Then again to have brushed aside the criticism that the panel may have "hurt the sentiment of ordinary people" speaks of a certain intolerance. The issue is not whether it trampled on widely held beliefs, but that it did not consider these feelings important, or at least had given little thought to the matter. This speaks of political naivete or, worse, a disregard for the opinions of those at whom such efforts are directed. Ask any women's group or people's science group and they will tell you how much time is 'wasted' on trying to assess the impact of material being exhibited on the people. This has to be done even more painstakingly on issues such as communalism, because we have to acknowledge that there may be a wide gulf between the feelings, opinions and values being projected by progressive elements and those of the people. Unless we take cognisance of that and give recognition to it in our efforts, there will be others who will capitalise on this gulf. A case in point is Sahmat's attempt to offer classical fare: certainly there ought to be no bar on who should participate in or enjoy the classical arts, but does it not make more sense in a campaign to promote plurality to use forms which are closer to the people?

I sincerely hope that Sahmat and others will use public forums to engage in discussion of the issues that the Ayodhya incident has thrown up and to make public the debates within the group. Our greatest

strength lies in underlining democratic processes of opinion-formation and mobilisation.

Bombay

K PRAKASH

## Detention of Human Rights Activist

R R SIVALINGAM was detained by the state under the powers conferred by Section 3(2)(e) of the Foreigners Act 1946 "for regulating the continued presence of the foreigners" in the Special Camp at Chengalpattu, Tamil Nadu, since August 6, 1993. This means detention for an indefinite period and even the threat of possible deportation to Sri Lanka. He has also been kept in solitary confinement.

Sivalingam is a holder of Sri Lankan passport and citizenship and of Indian origin. An MA from Madras Christian College, LLB and an educationist, he took premature retirement as Director of Education, under the ministry of education in Sri Lanka to work for the rights of Tamils of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. He was also a practising lawyer and attorney-at-law in the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka and founded such organisations as Indian Community Council and Indian Cultural Association and was a member of the Board of Trustees of Estate Education Trust managed by the Indian High Commission in Sri Lanka.

Ever since his return to India in August 1983 he has tirelessly continued to work for the human rights of Indian Tamils repatriated from Sri Lanka and also other deprived sections of the society here. He was involved in the founding and setting up of the Indo-Sri Lankan Development Trust for rehabilitation of Sri Lankan repatriates, Repatriates Rehabilitation Research and Information Centre, Kotagiri Institute of Non-Formal Education for Vocational Training, Malayala Makkal

Maruvazhvu Manram, etc. He is also the president of the National Conference of Repatriates, the president of Democratic Workers Union, the convener of Coimbatore Human Rights Forum affiliated to PUCL, active member of FIAN—International, an international human rights organisation, etc, and has been taking up issues of human rights of the dalits, adivasis, women, etc, besides the repatriates especially in Nilgiris and Coimbatore districts of Tamil Nadu. We believe that it is precisely his involvement in human rights issues of the oppressed which has prompted the state to detain him and to harass him.

Sivalingam's residence permit to stay in India had been extended since his arrival in 1983 on a routine basis up to December 31, 92. His application for further extension of the period had been deliberately kept pending to create an excuse to harass him. His application for Indian citizenship in 1989 after the mandatory period of residence in India of five years (which was vouched by no less a person than C Subramaniam, former union minister and governor of Maharashtra) has also been kept pending. Moreover, his aged mother (his father is dead) and his wife are Indian citizens. He is over 60 years and his health frail, being afflicted by ischaemic heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. We fear that his continued detention and solitary confinement would have dangerous implication on his health.

We appeal to readers to send telegrams/ letters of protest condemning the government action in detaining Sivalingam and demanding his immediate release to the president and prime minister and the governor and chief minister of Tamil Nadu.

V P SARATHY (CHAIRMAN)

C R BIJOY (MEMBER)

Coimbatore Human Rights Forum,  
Coimbatore.

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