

JSA and MFC Joint Statement condemning harassment of Dr. Sudhakar Rao of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh

Dated 19th May 2020

We, the members of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan and Medico Friend Circle, strongly condemn the harassment and police brutality meted out to Dr. Sudhakar Rao of Vishakhapatnam.

On 16th of May 2020 Dr. Sudhakar Rao, government doctor and anaesthetist at the Area Hospital, Narsipatnam, Visakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh, was manhandled by police. He was beaten, his hands tied, and he was paraded half naked on the streets of the Visakhapatnam city before being taken to the King George Hospital. The shocking videos of this event in the news and social media are evidence enough that such a treatment has indeed occurred. The alleged offence was that he was inebriated, not of sound mind and was using foul language. The ill-treatment is at odds with the nature of the offence and raises the question why this has occurred.

Digging into the background of this Dalit doctor shows that he has been suspended since 8th April 2020 for criticizing the Government of Andhra Pradesh for its callousness with respect to the provision of PPE, specifically N95 masks for doctors treating COVID 19 patients in ICUs and operation theatres at great risk of infection. He made the further allegation that every minister and senior state official is using the N95 mask and criticized the government for its callousness with respect to front line COVID doctors.

In this time of pandemic, any complaint by a health worker with respect to their own protection must be taken with the utmost seriousness and respect. In contrast we continue to see gag orders to suppress genuine criticism and, in this case, suspension at a time when we need more health professionals in the government sector. It also needs to be noted that there is a severe shortage of anaesthetists, and their work needs them to come in close contact with patients who may be either explicit or latent carriers of the virus.

The event faded from memory till 16th of May when the public humiliation was carried out.

Dr Sudhakar has averred in personal communication to the media that the police have planted liquor bottles in his car and that he and his family were constantly threatened and abused on the phone for his public criticism. Dr Sudhakar's family has pleaded that he is in a bad mental state because of the harassment meted out to him.

Though the police assert that there was no connection between his public criticism of government and the humiliation meted out to him, there has been police excess. However, it is puzzling why this excess occurred unless one looks at Dr Sudhakar's recent criticism of the Government of AP, and suspension. Once we do so, it is clear that the campaign to terrorize him, the defamation, the humiliation, and the vicious attack by the police has occurred as a systematic programme of vendetta against a criticism of the callousness of the officials of the Government of Andhra Pradesh. The use of a stereotype of alcoholism, drug addiction and mental unsoundness to stigmatize the doctor is not only to justify police actions but also to discredit his criticism of the government's callousness on the issue of provision of PPE. Such treatment by the government of a doctor will demoralize the health personnel struggling to provide medical care in government hospitals with inadequate protection. Moreover, a person that is indeed of unsound mind or otherwise anxious, depressed or even inebriated, calls for a humane and caring response, not violence and brutality.

In this specific case, it must be pointed out that such a treatment of parading a half dressed person in public would never have occurred if the doctor had belonged to one of the upper castes with a strong political connection. The police action demonstrates clear brutality in dealing with a person of an oppressed caste.

It has been reported that the police constable who has ill-treated the doctor has been suspended. However, it is quite clear that said constable would not have resorted to such extreme measures in full view of public and TV cameras without the approval of superior officers. The constable who has been suspended is a scapegoat to avert public outrage against the almost certain involvement of the upper echelon.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan and Medico Friend Circle condemn this atrocity and call upon the Government of Andhra Pradesh to punish the police functionaries

concerned for said act of brutality towards a doctor and a human being who was unable to protect himself.

We demand that the government of the State of Andhra Pradesh issue a public apology to Dr Sudhakar and provide protection to him from all sorts of harassment and abuse.

We demand that the enquiry regarding the charge against Dr Sudhakar be completed as soon as possible, and he be reinstated to work at the earliest, ending the mental torture he and his family are facing.

We demand that informal gag orders on doctors criticizing the functioning of the system be lifted forthwith.

We further demand that adequate personal protection be provided to doctors who work selflessly and at increased risk in the pandemic.

- Jan Swasthya Abhiyan
Medico Friend Circle