Dear Dr. Ranjit Singh,

We, the undersigned individuals from civil society working in the Human Rights space condemn the arrests of Arun Ferreira, Gautam Navlakha, Sudha Bharadwaj, Varavara Rao, Vernon Gonsalves, and raids made at the houses of others. The arrested have been advocating and protecting the rights of the most marginalized communities and indigenous peoples in the country. They have unimpeachable credentials and a strong body of human rights work spanned over decades.  Further, these human rights activists are arrested for their alleged role in the Bima Koregaon riots. The move based on flimsy evidence is a cynical ploy to absolve Hindutva-affiliated persons such as Milind Ekbote and Sambhaji Bhide against whom FIRs have already been filled for their role in inciting and orchestrating the Bhima Koregaon riots.

We believe that they have been targeted to divert attention from the Sanatan Sanstha conspiracy, as well as discourage human rights defenders protecting land and forest rights of indigenous communities from the corporate cronies of the ruling government. An effort is being made to malign people's movements by clubbing all genuine protests as orchestrated by naxals and maoists particularly those in the recent past such as anti-sterlite and villagers protesting land grab by multinational companies, such as POSCO struggle.

Speaking to NDTV, Ramachandra Guha also blamed it on the "corporate cronies of the ruling government," who, he said, were bent on grabbing tribal land, forest and mineral resources. The arrest of the activists was meant to take away the only representation the tribals have, he said.

The arrests of these human rights activists are part of a pattern of harassment and repression of human rights work in India committed by the police forces/government These arrests are to be seen in continuation of the arrests of five other activists on suspicion of inciting the Dalits in June 2018, and attempts to silence other pro-justice voices such as Gauri Lankesh.

The actions of the police forces/government are in breach of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the right to liberty (Article 9) and the rights to freedom of expression (Article 19), peaceful assembly (Article 21) and association (article 22). The raids and arrests also undermine government commitments towards Human Rights Defenders, detailed and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution A/RES/53/144, which protects the rights of human rights advocates to promote human rights at the national and international levels. These actions, arbitrary raids and arrests are also in violation of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution of India namely Articles 14 (right to equality and equal protection before the law), 19 (freedom of speech and expression) and 21 (right to life and liberty). Due processes of law and justice have to be followed and arrests cannot be used as a strategy to intimidate and silence critics of the Government.

We demand immediate release of the arrested individuals and dropping of all the charges to let human rights defenders continue their work with dignity.

Signed by:

1. Dr. Harpreet Kaur, Researcher
2. Gopinath K Parakuni
3. Sandeep Pattnaik
4. Dev Nathan
5. Prabhir Vishnu Poruthiyil
6. Priti Darooka
7. Sandeep Saxena
8. Namit Agarwal
9. Trishna Mohan Kripalani, Lawyer
10. Stephen Ekka
11. Adv. Amita V. Joseph