PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE FOR DEMOCRACY AND SECULARISM (PADS)

Withdraw police case against Prof Kancha Ilaiah and revoke the ban on Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle

(Public Statement issued by People's Alliance for Democracy and Secularism on 6 June, 2015)

A case has been filed by the Hyderabad police against well known Dalit writer and academic Kancha Ilaiah on a complaint by Vishwa Hindu Parishad members for hurting their religious sentiments. The complaint was filed on the basis of Ilaiah's article *Devudu Prajasamya Vada Kada?* (Is God a democrat?) published in a Telugu daily on May 9. In the said article Ilaiah had argued that the possibility of democracy, or its lack inside different religious groups depend on the conception of their God(s). The VHP activists have accused Prof Ilaiah of comparing Hindu gods with God in Christianity and Islam, and of ridiculing their worship. Police have filed a case under sections 153A and 295A which prescribe imprisonment upto three years for spreading enmity among groups of people and outraging religious feelings. The police action against Ilaiha has come around the same time that the IIT Madras has derecognised a student group Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle that organises discussions around socio-cultural and political issues. The group was derecognised after an anonymous complaint against it was filed with the central HRD ministry. While many political parties and groups have justifiably come out in support of the APSC, it is surprising that Prof Ilaiah has received little solidarity.

Both these incidences are a proof of the aggressive intent of Hindutva forces to attack any discourse which publicly questions their castiest, Brahminical and majoritarian understanding of Indian society. Successes of Mr Narender Modi in the recent elections have emboldened them further . These incidences however are also a proof of a more longstanding character of the institutions of the Indian state. This character is rarely discussed and commented, but without countering it the democracy in the country can not be deepened. When faced with a decision to make, the Indian state has protected communal interests and attacked critical inquiry and free speech. While political leaders and ministers like Thackereys, Togadias and Sadhvi Jyoti have gone scot-free after publicly using threatening and abusive language against religious and regional minorities, police cases under sections 153A and 295A are routinely filed against individuals, and books and artworks banned for supposedly hurting religious sentiments of different groups. Perhaps the only thing 'secular' about actions of the Indian state in this regard is that it has done so to satisfy demands from all religious groups. Rationalist Sanal Edamaruku has been forced into exile due to a blasphemy complaint by the Catholic Church. Before him artist M F Hussain was forced into exile due to legal cases filed against him by Hindutva outfits. A number of books have been banned and authors like Tasleema Nasreen and Salman Rushdie prevented from appearing in public due to demands from Muslim groups. It goes without saying that in the unprincipled politics of 'hurt sentiments' the better organised, funded and aggressive groups have been more successful. And now, when the Hindutva forces have the political backing of the central government, it is only inevitable that they are at the forefront of the clamour to prosecute individuals and groups, and ban books, discussions and ideas which 'hurt' their sentiments.

While institutions of the state in supposedly democratic and secular India have been proactive in protecting all kinds of religious beliefs, it needs emphasis that India has also had a tradition of questioning religious inequities, orthodoxy, and obscurantism from a rational and humanist perspective. Buddha had raised his voice against Vedic rituals and sacrifices. *Charvak*'s school of philosophy was an established *darshan* that did not believe in gods. Medieval Bhakti poets and saints like Kabir and Nanak questioned, and even very bravely satirised superstitions of every religion. In the nineteenth century, an upper caste Hindu reformer like Dayanand Saraswati had the guts to initiate his movement by raising a *Pakhand Khandini Pataka* (flag against pompous rituals) in a Haridwar *Kumbh*. In the modern era lower caste reformers and thinkers like Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar have been at the forefront of campaigns against the caste and gender inequities of Hinduism. This tradition of radical questioning is the heritage of all social forces that stand for democracy in the country. Against this tradition, the political programme of Hindutva is authoritarian, its cultural politics is driven by hatred and narrow minded pettiness, and it shrewdly manipulates popular faith and superstitions for its political ends.

People's Alliance for Democracy and Secularism demands that :

1. The police case under sections 153A and 295A against Prof Kancha Ilaiah be immediately withdrawn, and the derecognition of Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle by IIT Madras be immediately revoked.
2. Sections 153A and 295A of the IPC be repealed, and in their place laws against hate speech be enacted which give protection to oppressed and marginalised communities from humiliation, threat and abuse.

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