

PUCL Editorial: A Generation is Shifting the Tide

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A GENERATION IS SHIFTING THE TIDE

A new chapter in Indian history is in the making as lakhs of students and youth have been hitting the streets across the country over the past few weeks since 6th June, 2026 demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan to hold him accountable for the NEET entrance examination scam which led to the suicide of 20+ youngsters across India. Following the call for protests by the Cockroach Janta Party, a movement that began online as satire has grown into one of the most organic student and youth mobilisations in years. Visuals from these protests capture slogans and placards reflecting the discontent of an entire generation: not only with the NEET paper leak or the CBSE scandal, but with the BJP-led administration itself.

The young people demanded accountability from the Union government for a near total breakdown on the education system in India marked by numerous entrance exam frauds, paper leakages and worse in the last decade. The deafening silence of PM Modi who refused to respond to the anguished voices of youth whose futures have been literally destroyed by a failed education system, accompanied by the strident stand of the BJP Ministers that they are not "weak" like the UPA and will not cow down to popular protest pushed the youngsters to finally announce a march to Parliament from Jantar Mantar, the place they had been protesting non-stop from 6th June, 2026. Their frustration and rage against a state that refuses to be held accountable boiled over, visible in the echoes in youth protests across the country – in Mumbai, Patna, Ahmedabad, Bangaluru, Chennai and in almost 60 cities and towns across India.

One thing is certain: the mood has changed. The silence that fear demands has been broken; the might of a state unwilling to answer for its failures is now being met with an entire new generation questioning the Modi government and using humour as a powerful tool through reels, memes and videos. It is not an exaggeration to say that the conviction of those who fought against the British imperialists and dreamt of a free India articulated in the Constitution is visible again today in the eyes of twenty-year-olds who have never faced a lathi before and are not backing down from one now.

On 20 July, thousands marched from Jantar Mantar toward Parliament in Delhi, in one of the capital's largest street mobilisations in over a decade. Young people had travelled in from neighbouring states to join. What followed was the entire country watching the Delhi

Police respond to a peaceful march with force: tear gas, lathi-charges, and detentions that tried to stop the march before it reached Parliament.

Despite being violently beaten with lathis and in spite of arrests and FIRs, the youth have made it clear: they cannot be deterred and they will fight on. A perfect example of this fearlessness is a young woman who returned to the Jantar Mantar protest site in Delhi on 21st July, 2026 wearing a bicycle helmet, holding a placard and told the media, "We need to have protection in case Delhi police beat us up again. We are not scared of them and we won't run away, no matter what they do. We'll stay here till they listen."

Their fearlessness, their rage, their frustration, and their powerful and fluent use of humour and memes is shifting the tide before our very eyes. Their irony and humour is deflating the time tested toolkit of labelling protesters as anti-nationals or Pakistani or being foreign funded! One young man in Jantar Mantar distributing food to the protesters mockingly said, "This is a funded protest. The samosas are funded by Pakistan and the tea by Nepal!" Another example is how they have tackled the allegations of being anti-Hindu. When a protester was asked by a media channel what his name was, he replied saying "Mohammed Deepak"! Another instance is a video from the Jantar Mantar protests of a Muslim man dancing along with others to Hindu devotional songs. Their sharp and powerful use of humour has played a significant role in amplifying their criticism of a government that refuses accountability. A placard held by a young pregnant woman in a protest in Bangalore read, "Pregnancy cravings: Accountability!" Another placard at one of the protests read, "Modiji, blink twice if the teleprompter won't let you take questions."

The protests have taken apart a key element of the BJP's ideology, namely the relentless focus on promoting communal division for electoral gains. The protest sites have been models of fraternity in action with persons from every religious group participating. The protesters have relentlessly mocked the 'Hindu-Muslim', 'Mandir-Masjid' politics of the BJP asserting that the BJP is only distracting from the real issues of the youth, namely education and employment.

Reports from the ground describe protesters bleeding from lathi blows, and others treated for breathlessness, burning skin, and dizziness after exposure to tear gas. Parliament Street and Connaught Place bore the marks the next morning, blood stains on roads, overturned barricades, sandals and scarves left behind in the scramble. Protesters and rights groups have raised serious questions about the proportionality of the force used, about internet restrictions around the protest site, and about police personnel operating without visible identification, all of which sit uneasily against the basic legal protections which ensure that the right to peaceful assembly can be exercised by citizens.

The crackdown was not confined to Delhi. Solidarity protests broke out in cities and towns across the country, many met with the same pattern of detention. In Mumbai alone, police filed cases against more than fifty protesters across multiple stations after gatherings at Dadar, Shivaji Park and Chaityabhoomi. Students in Varanasi, Patna, Allahabad and other cities in Gujarat, Telangana, Karnataka and beyond took to the streets in response to the police action itself, the crackdown becoming its own reason to march.

It is worth remembering that while the call to protest began with a demand for Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation, the crowds at Jantar Mantar have not stopped there. Many now are openly demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well. From communal politics to the deepening nexus between state and corporate power, from unemployment to a broken system of examination governance, this generation is not asking for a reshuffle. It is asking for change.

Much of the mainstream coverage has lingered on the injuries suffered by police personnel while offering only glancing attention to the grievances driving the protest or the scale of the mobilisation, many times underplaying these numbers! A generation's demand to be heard on the question of their very future, has too often been reduced in the retelling to a law-and-order story. This is what happens when journalism

forgets its primary obligation: to speak the truth even when it is inconvenient, to question those in power rather than repeat their press notes, and to carry the voices of the people rather than talk over them.

A press that will not do this has failed to be the fourth pillar of democracy and has become something closer to a mouthpiece of the state, reporting the government's version of events as the only version, and treating a generation's grief and anger as a nuisance to be managed rather than a truth to be told. At the same time, the commendable efforts of independent news and media outlets, individuals with YouTube channels and other social media influencers have courageously brought the real stories of the protest to the world at large.

Undoubtedly, today the country's youth have thrown a challenge to the might of the state. No matter how tightly the state controls the media and the police, an entire generation has escaped that control, travelling long distances to stand in the sun, assembling by the lakhs, and turning their own phones into a press the state cannot shut down. One thing that these protests have already achieved, is that they have forced several individuals who are usually silent into speaking out in solidarity with the youth: from parents of students to film celebrities and social media influencers.

The state's response has been marked by an arrogance which shows in its unwillingness to be accountable for what happened on its watch. No resignation, no meaningful dialogue with the protestors, no independent inquiry on the police brutalities, no acknowledgment of the discontent expressed by protestors. From young children to college graduates, all these protestors have been saying is that, once you are elected into power, you are accountable to us!

After a month of silence, the Prime Minister chose to break his silence through an anodyne tweet, communicating the decision to 'set up fast-track courts to ensure swift and stringent punishment for those involved in paper leaks.' However the Prime Minister did not mention the protests happening just a few kilometres from parliament nor did he address the core demand of the protestors, the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan, showing a stunning obtuseness to the anger of the youth. Neither did he address the core question of why such leaks are happening. Is it because of a few bad apples who can be dealt with through fast track courts or is it an institutional failure with the responsibility lying with the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan?

Neither the Prime Minister nor the Home Minister addressed the burning question of who was to be accountable for the brutal injuries suffered by the youth including injuries on the head, limbs and pellet injuries. (For a first person account of the protest in Delhi with details on the nature of police violence see the following article by Kavita Srivastava in this issue.)

What was even more shocking was the peremptory and dismissive manner by which the Chief Justice of India responded to a request for urgent listing of a petition about the brutal attack by Delhi police on protesting students and youth in Delhi on 20th July, 2026. The Chief Justice remarked, "Don't waste our time. We are not interested in videos, we don't have time to watch."

At this crucial juncture, we cannot forget that a range of protests across India continue to demand accountability and justice from the state. Adivasi communities across several states continue to resist displacement from their forests and land. Adivasis in Madhya Pradesh have been holding 'chita' and 'faansi' demonstrations to show that the Ken Betwa River Linking Project will threaten their very lives. Farmers in Punjab remain locked in their own long struggle for fair prices and dignity, farmers in Bidadi, Karnataka stage protests against the acquisition of their fields for a government township. Residents near Visakhapatnam have raised alarms over the environmental and social cost of new data centre projects pushed through with little consultation.

The tide is shifting, and the right to protest guaranteed, not granted, by the Constitution is being reclaimed as the ground on which any movement for change can stand. Lawyers have started speaking

out in the Supreme Court as well as the high courts. Doctors in Safdarjung as well as AIMS have begun to express their disquiet at the forcible confinement of Sonam Wangchuk as well as the police violence on 20 June. The silence of the government has fed public anger with thousands coming to protest sites around the country in spite of the crackdown on June 20.

However, one cannot help but bear in mind the inhumane and cruel tactics of the current ruling regime. On 15th July, the powers of the Commissioner of Police, Delhi to detain under National Security Act, were extended from 19th July to 18th October. As Arundhati Roy wrote, "It is vulnerable young people up against a vicious, vindictive government that has shown itself to be merciless to those who oppose it. Revenge is surely being planned and will be visited on those it sees as the main instigators".

This is the moment for the human rights movement to join this wave, lending its solidarity, its legal shield, and its long memory of what these battles cost and what they can win. This is the moment for education reformers and youth rights activists to walk alongside this generation, and treat the protests as catalysts in the larger aim to demand for structural reform in public education. There is hope in this, and there is strength in it too, proof that even now, people will stand up, to ensure that our rulers do not betray the promise the Constitution makes to 'we the people'.

A GLIMPSE OF INDIA'S FIRST GEN-Z UPRISING

KAVITA SRIVASTAVA

24th July, 2026

*"Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget the perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget the perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in"*

The chorus of the song Anthem, by Leonard Cohen, sums up the upbeat moment on Delhi streets, where students stand fearlessly a day after the massive police violence, defying the Modi Government, with only one demand – Narendra Modi, Kursi Chhodo (resign).

On 20th July, 2026, the Delhi police brutally lathi charged young men and women, participating in the march to the parliament called by the Cockroach Janata Party. There were more than 1,00,000 young people participating in it. The police for the first time used pellet guns to target young people. So far, there have been four documented instances of pellet injuries. The police also thrashed them on their heads, hands, shoulders, legs, ribs. There are also instances of the serious sexual violence committed by the police, like tearing of the clothes of girls, shoving lathis into their genitalia and thrashing young women with lathis, until their blood. The police also dealt with the young students in an inhumane manner, dragging the injured and those resisting police action along the streets.

However neither the brutal violence faced by the students nor the lodging of criminal cases against the protestors by the Delhi police was enough to deter them from showing up on the following day. Lutyens Delhi seems to be now fully occupied by students and young people, with a resolve that they will leave only after Narendra Modi resigns. From the streets of Delhi it is loud and clear that the Modi Government has to go.

The CJP stage is no longer the centre of action. The movement now has its own steam, and is growing

larger every day. Protests erupted in more than 60 cities on 20 July 2026. And many more protests continued to happen on the following days as well.

It appears as if the young people will continue to hold fort, day in and day out, demanding not just resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan and Prime Minister Modi but also legal action against the perpetrators of police brutality and justice for the victims.

The making of a Gen Z protest group, called the Cockroach Janta Party

The CJP was borne out of a satirical post of communication strategist Abhijeet Dibe, an Ambedkarite. In response to the Chief Justice of India Surya Kant's remark demeaning the youth of the country as parasites and cockroaches, Dipke asked, "What if all the cockroaches came together?" It resonated with the youth, and CJP's Instagram handle got more than 22 million followers in less than a week.

With no organisational backing, a call was made by Dipke to stage a dharna in Delhi on the 6 June 2026, against the NEET examination leak and demanding the resignation of the education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Within a couple of weeks, three more young professionals joined Dipke as spokespersons, just before the protest. Environmentalist and innovator Sonam Wangchuk had also joined the movement.

Surprisingly the dharna was allowed at the Jantar Mantar, with hundreds of youth participating in it. From day one, the youth that gathered at the CJP platform, explicitly rejected the Hindutva narrative of polarising Hindus and Muslims and secondly, rejected the mainstream media, who were literally hooted out of the place. The protestors seemed to have a one point goal – to hold someone accountable for the systematic breakdown of the education system. The day-long Delhi peaceful protest had ended abruptly, but was followed by peaceful protests in several cities with the CJP leadership at the helm of it.

The Indefinite Sit in and Fast

The CJP finally came back to Delhi on 20 June 2026, where an indefinite sit-in was announced with the demand for the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan and compensation to the families, who lost their children due to the paper leak scam.

It is important to emphasise that the protest using tools, which consisted of speeches, revolutionary songs, slogans and poster making became a talking point in Delhi. Young people who called themselves Gen Z, took ownership of it as they all felt that it was their time to discuss the issue of education and their future on the streets and not leave it to a Government.

The dharna initially may not have witnessed huge crowds, but was enriched with the spirit of brotherhood. Muslim families brought in food every day, a modest chai wala supplied tea to all the protestors, old women cooked and brought food in small quantities. Families of more than twenty children who had taken their lives due to the NEET paper leak, came to the protest. They saw hope for the future of other children. With the mainstream media pushed out again, YouTubers and web portals became the messengers. Known for its tactics of distorting and demonising protests and expressions, the public decided not to allow them into the protest.

Police intimidation and the pushing of boundaries by the protestors

Throughout the month, the police in every way denied necessities to the protestors like electricity supply for the night, water in the public toilets, and raided the homes of Muslim and working class volunteers in particular, who were supplying food or participating in the protest. The police would often deny people entry arbitrarily. Students were particularly incensed by the police action, destroying an impromptu library set up by one of the student groups of Delhi University. The extent of surveillance seen at Jantar Mantar showed the state's complete disregard of people's privacy as well as their dignity and liberty. Towers of

the height of 15 feet were erected inside the protest site, with two men in shifts sitting behind the cameras and capturing all the activity happening at the protest site.

The Satyagraha phase of the movement

The epitome of a satyagraha is when the body becomes a tool to fight the system. The difficult phase of the dharna started with an indefinite hunger strike, with several young students also taking the decision of fasting, which included nine youth protestors with six of them from AISA. Of the six, three from AISA, namely Neha Bora, Aameen, Manish as well as Hamad from Punjab were going strong for 23 days. At the helm was the senior activist Sonam Wangchuk, environmentalist and leader of the Ladakh movement for statehood and schedule six status.

The Government instead of listening to them, and initiating a communication with the CJP leadership, abducted Sonam Wangchuk from the stage, now popularly called Operation White Chadar. The Government plan misfired; they thought the dharna would end or fizzle out, instead the crowd swelled up. By 18 July 2026, the number of young protestors reached more than 10 thousand. In fact, people came to the dharna and did not return home.

The CJP's Call for a March to the Parliament on 20 July 2026

I had come to the CJP protest over three days between 16th and the 19th of July. It was very heartening to see how disciplined the crowd was. Since the police had barricaded both sides of the Jantar Mantar, huge crowds had to accommodate themselves within a limited space.

A Delhi Police notice issued on the evening of 19th July stated that neither a permission for a march had been granted to the CJP nor they had sought such permission. They tried to appeal to the citizens, to not participate in any unauthorised gathering or March and cooperate in maintaining public peace, safety and security. This notice was roundly rejected by all the protestors.

On the 19 July itself, the crowds, outside the barricades, seemed more than the numbers inside. Young men and women kept pouring on all roads leading to the Jantar Mantar. Despite several trains from various parts of India being cancelled and diverted, people found their way to the roads, leading to Jantar Mantar. The crowds ended up on eight of the radial roads. People walking in a disciplined way, almost in rows. Both sides of the road had people moving, some towards Jantar Mantar and others returning from it, trying to access other areas.

The police were massed in large numbers. This included both the police in Khakhi uniform as well as the riot police, called the Rapid Action Force. News was coming in that the police, on all the roads, where people had gathered, were off and on using their batons to hit on the legs and push the people back.

Many protestors sat down on the side walks and railings and the fallen barricades. Several police vehicles, including the water canons, the tear gas shelling machines were all around all as signs of intimidation, but the marchers hardly noticed it. There was a celebratory mood, a junoon, a passion that they will change the present, and make a new India. Many of the protesters had copies of the Constitution in their hands, several were carrying placards with Modi's caricature, many carried blue flags as well as the India flag. All kept walking with a purpose.

I came back to Parliament Street where there were more than 40,000 to 50,000 students. People were getting restless, with the police stopping them and suddenly, we heard loud noises as if bombs were going off. They were tear gas shells being blown in the air, and with the white ammonia gas enveloping the area, students started retreating back, towards Tolstoy marg. But it was only for a few minutes that the students paused and then came back hooting at the police. This time the police retreated briefly and then came back violently, as if at war with the students. They started catching students and beating them

mercilessly.

Sometimes the beating was on the legs, the hips but it was worrying that the police were also hitting students on the head. It almost caused a stampede, but the students did not give up. The police could not drive them out with their lathis and tear gas shells and merciless beatings.

I moved into the Parliament Street end. Students were being fired on with tear gas shells and being beaten by police men and women. Students were running everywhere and falling on the streets. A stream of chappals and shoes seemed to be left behind as boys were running. The police in riot gear were chasing and hitting them. And pushing them to move towards Connaught Circus. But the students started pushing back, refusing to be driven away. We ourselves were drowned frequently in an envelope of ammonia gas.

Leaning against the wall of the hotel, we were able to observe the endless pushing of students by the police, towards Connaught Circus. The police's brief was to empty out Jantar Mantar and adjoining areas at any cost. In the backdrop of the loud sirens, shelling blasts and white fumes enveloping the people, despite the deep humiliation suffered by Gen Z and Gen Alpha who too had gathered in large numbers, the people forcefully asserted their presence. It was clear that no amount of repression could get them to take back their demands and leave the movement they had built.

The police were announcing that the crowds must leave or they would be arrested. The young people refused. They kept shouting Jai Bhim slogans and kept their morale high. And the announcements seemed to reach no one. Then almost next to us, they lobbed a tear gas shell, we moved fast and took rescue near the wall of the church. One young girl ran a bit and sat down on the chair and said she was in acute pain. She had been beaten by lathis and perhaps also hit by a stone. Her face was swollen and lips in particular were hurt.

Close to the Parliament Street police station, we ran into another girl who was crying. She had taken admission in one of the Delhi University colleges and stayed in a rented room, but was from Patiala. Despite her parents' denial of permission to come to Jantar Mantar, she took the train and came straight to Jantar Mantar. She was sobbing and traumatised with what she had witnessed.

Police Violence and Brutality

She kept saying that she saw too many women being lathi charged and who bled from the head. She also was sexually assaulted by the police and was unable to recover from that assault. She shared that the police had tried to pull her shirt and tear it, but she ran away.

We moved further and we were informed by one activist that a large number of people had been detained at the Parliament Police Station. We went in and found other women's activists and a former member of Parliament. It was shocking to hear the stories of violence.

One SFI member, also a PHD scholar, told us that five men were taken into a room. First they were asked about being Hindu, he said yes he was born Hindu. The policeman Mohit who took them to one room, which was like a torture chamber, asked them a question regarding Kunal Kamra's couplet, which he had made on the CJP stage, saying that they talk about Sita's husband and work for Nita's husband. He asked them whether they were angry with Kamra for that statement and whether it was making a laughing stock of Hindu gods. They said that it was for the courts to decide on whether it was right or wrong, so then they said, why are you men not outraged. The Muslims decapitate those who talk against their Allah, must you not express anger about it. Since they did not agree with this statement, each of them were beaten with batons and then made to sit on their haunches, with their palms spread out and were beaten again. They could also hear cries of help coming from another room where the police were beating people.

Similarly another boy who introduced himself as CJP Ludhiana was shirtless and he said that his shirt had been torn by the police. He had got a thrashing because he was asked whether he was Hindu or Muslim and he said I am Hindustani. When they insisted he reveal whether his identity was Hindu or Muslim, he was first threatened that his pants would be pulled down and his genitals would be checked. He was then beaten with the wooden baton. The marks on his body clearly showed how bad the beating was.

We met one girl who was detained at the police station from the protest site, after she was beaten badly on the breasts, her clothes torn by the policemen, and the assault by lathis had almost broken her elbow. She was also bleeding near the elbow, and when she was screaming at the police, they dragged her into the thana. Luckily one boy gave her a T shirt from the bag and she could cover herself. Despite bleeding badly, they took her separately and beat her in the police station along with two of her companions, instead of giving her medical help.

We also met one boy who was hit by a baton at the protest site where the nail from the baton went into his forehead, causing serious injuries and bleeding. He was taken away and detained in the police station where he was beaten black and blue and we could see lathi marks on his back.

Both these students, despite bleeding badly, were not taken for a medical examination. Instead, when they protested, the thana first aid box was given to them. They had to bandage the wounds of each other, without any help from the medical staff.

Most of the people injured did not go to public hospitals, instead reached private hospitals. However there were more than 250 people who were being treated at the three public hospitals. The injuries include Stun Baton shocks, pellets, fractures, head and limb surgeries, eye injuries including blindness among others.

Summarising Police Violation

Clearly, it can be stated that there was unprovoked violence by the Delhi police and RAF on the peaceful protestors not sparing children and minors, women, and the old. The use of excessive police force seemed as if the Indian state was out to make war on its own people. It was shocking to see that not a single policeman of any rank wore name tags. The violence did not consist of methods to manage the crowd but to seriously injure and humiliate the protestors. The extent of the sexual violence brazenly attacking women's bodies left women shattered. It was surprising to see that despite the huge placement of water canons they were not touched.

Excessive use of tear gas shells was observed. It was shocking to see that non-state actors including the RSS and Gaurakshaks with plastic batons were being allowed to beat up the protestors. The absolute shocker was the use of pellet guns which in the past were used in "insurgency" areas in Kashmir and Manipur. A large number of people were arbitrarily detained and subjected to violence inside the police stations. Many a times for not claiming we were Hindu or agreeing to the anti-Muslim narrative. The denial of medical access by the RAF outside the RML simply to reduce the numbers of injured was again observed for the first time. When the injured and the assaulted tried to lodge ZERO FIRs against the police, they were denied. One such instance was brought to our notice.

As I close it is important to note that youth protests have sprouted across the country, with young students remaining undeterred, and asking for change. New reinforcements are being brought in by the CRPF in the name of crowd management. However, this nationwide protest with Delhi as the epicentre, seems like a hopeful moment of change.

Kavita Srivastava is the National President of PUCL.

PUCL DELHI CONDEMNS ASSAULT ON STUDENTS AND ATTACK ON BOOK STALL AT THE COCKROACH JANTA PARTY (CJP) PROTEST SITE, JANTAR MANTAR

PUCL DELHI

(July 22, 2026)

The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) Delhi strongly condemns the actions of the Delhi Police against students associated with the All India Students' Federation (AISF) at the ongoing Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protest site at Jantar Mantar. The incident occurred on 20 July 2026 at around 1:30 PM at a protest site operating with due permission, where students had set up a book stall for participants in the democratic agitation. According to information received by PUCL Delhi, Delhi Police personnel attempted to dismantle the students' book stall and threw books onto the muddy road. The sight of books being flung to the ground at a peaceful protest is deeply disturbing and reflects a profound disregard for education, knowledge, and the democratic exchange of ideas.

Video footage of the incident shows student activist Bittu being detained and taken away from the protest site. Bittu and Vishal informed PUCL Delhi that they were first taken to the police booth at Jantar Mantar, where Vishal was slapped multiple times by police personnel, before being taken to Parliament Street Police Station. They further stated that their mobile phones were seized and that they were required to furnish personal details, including their Aadhaar card and other identity documents.

The students further informed PUCL Delhi that police personnel repeatedly abused them, referring to them as "gutter ke keede" and saying that they would be "cleaned" because they were "spreading filth." They were also threatened with "lamba bhejenge," in an apparent attempt to intimidate them with the prospect of prolonged criminal proceedings. Both students sustained injuries during the incident.

The actions of the Delhi Police raise serious concerns regarding the freedoms guaranteed under Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution. The use of such force against peaceful student protesters, the disruption of a book stall, the detention of students, the seizure of their mobile phones, and the intimidation through verbal abuse and threats are wholly inconsistent with the constitutional obligation of the police to facilitate, rather than suppress, peaceful democratic expression.

PUCL Delhi demands:

1. An immediate, independent, and impartial inquiry into the incident.
2. The suspension of the officers responsible, pending inquiry.
3. Accountability for the assault on the students, their detention, the seizure of their mobile phones, and the destruction and desecration of books.
4. A public apology for the treatment meted out to the students and for the desecration of books at the protest site.
5. An assurance that peaceful protests at duly permitted sites will be protected and that students exercising their democratic rights will not be subjected to violence, intimidation, or arbitrary police action.

A democracy cannot fear books, or students who choose to read. PUCL Delhi believes such police action is an attack on constitutional values of free thought, education, and democratic participation in a peaceful protest.

Aruj Maji, President, PUCL Delhi
TS Ahuja, General Secretary, PUCL Delhi
Vertika Mani, Secretary, PUCL Delhi

PUCL TAMIL NADU AND PUDUCHERRY STRONGLY CONDEMNS THE CUSTODIAL DEATH OF SABARIVARMAN

PUCL TAMIL NADU

(July 21, 2026)

Nagercoil 3rd Judicial Magistrate Sathyamurthy conducted an inquiry regarding this custodial death with Sabarivarman's family and jail officials. District Superintendent of Police Stalin also conducted an investigation. Following an inspection of the CCTV footage installed in the prison, a Chief Warder and two warders were arrested, and a case has been registered against them under various sections, including murder. All three have been placed under suspension. Furthermore, recent news reports state that eight prison inmates have also been arrested and booked.

Harmful tobacco products like gutkha and pan masala fall under the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA), 2006. The law states that for the first offense of possession and sale, the shop will be locked and sealed for 15 days along with a ₹25,000 fine; for the second offense, the shop will be locked and sealed for 30 days along with a ₹50,000 fine; and for the third offense, the shop will be locked and sealed for 90 days along with a ₹1,00,000 fine. Furthermore, classifying the harm caused, if it amounts to grievous hurt (injury), the maximum punishment is 6 years of imprisonment and a fine of up to ₹5,00,00! It is said that the deceased Sabarivarman committed this offense for the third time. Even for causing grievous hurt, the maximum punishment is only 6 years!

In the Supreme Court case Arnesh Kumar vs. State of Bihar (02-07-2014), it was ruled that in criminal cases where the sentence is less than seven years, rather than making an arrest, it is mandatory to issue a notice to the accused under Section 35(3) of the BNSS (Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita) and conduct an inquiry. This implies that judicial remand was unnecessary. Therefore, it is evident that both the police department and the Judicial Magistrate acted in violation of this principle.

The Supreme Court judgment in D.K. Basu vs. State of West Bengal (18-12-1996) explicitly outlines the guidelines to be followed while arresting a person. These guidelines were incorporated into the Code of Criminal Procedure through the Criminal Procedure Amendment Act of 2008. Consequently, this has also been emphasized in Sections 35 and 36 of the newly implemented BNSS procedure code. These guidelines were also violated in Sabarivarman's arrest! This is completely antithetical to the Right to Life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The continuous rise in custodial torture deaths in Tamil Nadu is a matter of grave concern. In the Jeyaraj-Bennicks custodial death case, 9 police personnel were awarded the death penalty this past April. Even after this, custodial deaths continue with cases like Ajith Kumar, Rakesh, and Sabarikumar.

According to data from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, 170 custodial deaths occurred between 2025 and March 15, 2026! India only signed the UN Convention Against Torture in 1997. It is noteworthy that to this day, India has not come forward to enact an anti-torture law in Parliament and thus provide ratification!

Cases must also be registered against the Judicial Magistrates, doctors, and government officials who are complicit in custodial deaths. Those subjected to torture and death in custody are predominantly the poor, vulnerable, and middle-class people; police torture never strikes those with political and financial influence.

The Police Department is under the direct control of the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Therefore, the Chief Minister must pay personal attention to avoiding custodial deaths! The Law Minister should also give special focus to this matter.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry urges the Government of Tamil Nadu to provide appropriate compensation to the family of the deceased Sabarivarman and to offer a government job to one of his family members.

R. Murali, President,

D. Sekar Annadurai, General Secretary.

People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

PUCL CONDEMNS THE ATTEMPT TO SUPPRESS THE PEACEFUL SATYAGRAHA BY SONAM WANGCHUK AND COCKROACH JANATA PARTY

PUCL NATIONAL

(July 19, 2026)

PUCL is outraged by the action of the Delhi Police in forcibly taking a fasting Sonam Wangchuk away from the site of his hunger fast in Jantar Mantar on the 21st day of his hunger strike.

This unconscionable action by the Delhi Police of forcibly disrupting a peaceful Gandhian protest which sought to awaken India's conscience, is not based on protecting the health of Sonam Wangchuk. The arrest amounts to a belated recognition by the Government that neither the protestor Sonam Wangchuk nor the issues being expressed by the youth can be ignored anymore.

The Modi government had the opportunity to heed the legitimate demand of the protesters that the Education Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan resign, thereby addressing the cause of the protest. Instead the government has sought to stifle the voice of the protest through the forcible arrest of Sonam Wangchuk and his lodgment in Safdarjung Hospital.

Sonam Wangchuk is fasting for a reason, namely the demand that the Education Minister resign. Instead of addressing the cause of the hunger fast, the government seems intent on silencing the moral voice of Sonam Wangchuk. The fact that even while a fasting Sonam Wangchuk was forcibly removed, the other students Neha, Ameen, Manish and Hamad were allowed to continue to fast only indicates that as far as the calculus of the state was concerned it was not concern for the health of Sonam Wangchuk which was the reason behind the arrest. The only reason for this differential treatment is that in the state's calculation, it was Sonam Wangchuk who had emerged as a galvanizing presence in drawing more and more people to Jantar Mantar and therefore he had to be removed.

According to Sonam Wangchuk's wife, Gitanjali Angmo, the doctors at Safdarjung have refused to share Sonam Wangchuk's health report, even while asserting that his potassium level is low. This lack of transparency by the doctors, led Angmo to lose trust in the hospital and made her move the Delhi High Court asking for Sonam Wangchuk to be shifted to a hospital of the family's choice which they could trust.

While the Delhi High Court rejected the petition, the issue of transparency by the hospital authorities in sharing medical information and not pursuing any treatment without the consent of the family remains alive.

The PUCL asserts that the Government has not demonstrated that the arrest of Sonam Wangchuk was in accordance with the judgment of the Delhi High Court which had directed that the 'medical condition of Shri Sonam Wangchuk shall, clinically and otherwise, be regularly monitored on daily basis' and 'depending on the opinion of the Doctors', 'medical intervention' to 'check his deteriorating health condition, shall also be taken.'

Neither the family members nor the leaders of the Cockroach Janata Party were shown the medical

reports, necessitating hospitalization.

Now the legitimate concern is that Safdarjung Hospital acting under the dictates of the Modi Government will without taking either Sonam Wangchuk or his next of kin, Gitanjali Angmo into confidence go ahead with forcible treatment. In the land of Gandhiji, a hunger fast is meant to awaken the conscience of the state.

However, far from their conscience being awakened, the Modi government is an action of astonishing hubris, seeming to be moving from a strategy of ignoring the voice of the youth to actively suppressing it.

The Government should read the tea leaves and realise that any attempt to interfere with the legitimate expression of the anger and anguish of the youth of this country will backfire on the government itself.

The Government must ensure that the right to assembly is protected on the 20th July when the students under the banner of the Cockroach Janata Party have asserted that they will march to parliament to assert their demands.

The PUCL asserts that instead of going down an unconstitutional path of suppressing a peaceful satyagraha by Sonam Wangchuk and the Cockroach Janata Party, the Modi government must pay heed to their legitimate demands.

It is up to the Modi Government to decide whether it wants to go down in history as a government which suppressed the voice of the youth or listened to it. It still has the chance.

PUCL WELCOMES THE RELEASE OF KHURRAM PARVEZ AND IRFAN MEHRAZ ON BAIL

PUCL NATIONAL

(July 24, 2026)

PUCL condemns the continuing suppression of human rights in Kashmir as well as in Ladakh using laws such as the UAPA

UAPA being a law which targets the right to speech, assembly and association must be repealed.

PUCL welcomes the release of Khurram Parvez and Irfan Mehrnaz on bail by an order of the Sessions Court subsequently upheld by the Delhi High Court.

Even as the PUCL welcomes this order it should be noted that Khurram Parvez was arrested in 2021 and Irfan Mehrnaz were arrested in 2023 and they have both been in jail since their arrests.

This unconscionably long detention only strengthens the argument of the PUCL that the UAPA is functioning as a de facto preventive detention law, completely at odds with the constitutional protection of speech, association and assembly and therefore has no place in a constitutional democracy.

The case against them was under the UAPA and pertained to Sections 17 (raising funds for terrorist act), 18 (Conspiracy to commit a terrorist act), 22 A (offence by persons in charge of Company), 22 C (punishment for offences by person in charge of Trust or society), 38 (membership of terrorist organisation), 39 (support to terrorist organisation), 40 (raising funds for terrorist organisation). They were also charged with Sections 124-A (sedition) and 120B (conspiracy) of the IPC.

As per the prosecution both Khurram and Irfan were charged with promoting 'the secessionist agenda and waging a disinformation campaign in furtherance of the interest of the proscribed terror organization',

namely the JKCCS which was described as an 'unregistered NGO.'

The prosecution also alleged that Khurram Parvez 'organized and participated in various secessionist programs, events, authored, published and disseminated false, misleading and one-sided reports and narratives with the object of creating, sustaining and spreading disaffection and hatred against the Indian State.'

The Sessions Court had recorded the argument of the counsel for the defence who had contended that, 'JKCCS is not a banned organization till date. There is no allegation that accused incited any violence, the allegation against the accused is that he managed to bring people of different ideology on one platform to discuss and debate and not to kill or to be killed. He had further argued that, the 'accused is a non-violent person who believes in resolving the deep-rooted conflict in his society through dialogue. This discussion is nothing but a non-violent political discussion, nowhere close to any offence especially under UAPA.'

The prosecution also argued that the human rights reports put out by JKCCS, namely 'Alleged Perpetrators' and 'Structure of violence' were done with the 'intention of creating disaffection against the government' as well as disclosed sensitive data regarding the army. The defence responded that both reports were 'till date publicly available on the official website of JKCCS'. The defence also argued that the report titled 'Alleged Perpetrators', was 'shared with Indian Army, which gave a public response to the same in the newspaper Kashmir Tribune on 12.12.2012'.

While there was no finding with respect to JKCCS by the Court, the PUCL would like to reiterate that the JKCCS, was a civil society organisation whose work was well respected both nationally and internationally. Their six monthly and annual reports on HR violations in J&K was objective, giving data of all sides, including combatants, civilians and the Indian Army. Their report, 'Alleged perpetrators', 'portrays the state of impunity prevalent in Jammu and Kashmir' and seeks 'accountability for institutional criminality.'

The PUCL in a previous statement on the arrest of Irfan Mehtez had noted that, 'this particular action of targeting human rights work of documenting, reporting and publicizing how the Indian state has violated its commitments to 'rule of law', constitutional principles and human rights, is of grave concern to all those concerned about the future of constitutional democracy itself. The work of documenting human rights violations by civil society groups such as the JKCCS is an essential part of the right to free speech.'

Even as the Sessions Court did not come to any finding regarding the arguments of the defence and the prosecution, it based its order on an observation of the Delhi High Court regarding similar facts in which Khurram Parvez had been enlarged on bail.

The Delhi High Court in that case had observed that, 'The appellants rights under Article 21 of the Constitution of India need to be balanced and may even trump the restriction imposed under Section 43D(5) of the UAPA.'

The Court held that, 'it is amply clear that the allegation attributed by the NIA against accused Khurram Parvez (A-1) in this case are mainly based upon testimony of oral witnesses, whose authenticity shall be tested during the trial. The accused is in custody since 22.03.2023 and there is no possibility of completion of trial of this case in near future, as charges against the accused persons have not yet been framed.

Moreover, the Hon'ble High Court has granted bail to the accused in RC No . 30/2021 , in which some what similar allegations have been attributed against the accused and also held that accused is infirm and deserves that special consideration.'

Even as the Delhi High Court upheld the order of the Sessions Court, it imposed even more stringent bail conditions. Thus both Irfan and Khurram are confined to Delhi and have to report to the NIA Headquarter every Tuesday and Friday. They are also prohibited from 'participating in any programme relating to the pending case and circulating any 'post, literature in any form'.

The bail conditions aim at nothing less than the complete stifling of speech of both parties who are writers by profession. The fact that they cannot go back to Kashmir and they have to report to the police station twice a week, make it extraordinary difficult to take forward a career or profession.

The PUCL contends that these harsh conditions on bail make a mockery of the constitutional protection of the right to speech and expression under Article 19(1)(a), the right to move freely throughout the territory of India under Article 19(1) (d), the right to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India under 19(1)(e) and the right to practice any trade or profession under Article 19(1)(g).

This bail order comes just a bit short of the seventh anniversary of the demotion of J and K from state to a union territory and the abrogation of Article 370. In the last seven years Kashmir has witnessed a deterioration of the human rights situation. Emblematic of this is the development of a carceral state. As Dr Mubeen Ahmed Shah in a recent article in the Kashmir Times, has argued that Kashmir has been institutionally transformed into a carceral state by using 'preventive detention, counterterrorism laws, surveillance, administrative restrictions, and the transfer of detainees to prisons located hundreds of kilometres away from their homes.'

What brings home , how prison has become the go to option in Kashmir for authorities dealing with a people they are striving to control are the shocking figures of arrest under the UAPA. Between 2019 and 2023, Jammu and Kashmir accounted for 3,662 arrests under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), representing roughly 35 percent of all UAPA arrests in India. In 2023 alone, the region recorded 1,206 such arrests, amounting to nearly 42 percent of all UAPA arrests across the country, despite constituting only a small fraction of India's population.

It's not just Kashmir which has suffered repression post abrogation. Post abrogation, the people of Ladakh have also been brutally suppressed when they put forward their legitimate demands. The people of Ladakh have been agitating for the recognition of their political rights, both to statehood as well as VIth Schedule status.

Sonam Wangchuk who was detained under the National Security Act for 170 days emerged as a symbol of state intolerance of democratic dissent. This agitation has been sought to be suppressed by brutal repression as well. The PUCL condemns the continuing suppression of human rights in Kashmir as well as in Ladakh.

The Indian Government cannot suppress a people through brute force, but must listen to the demands of the people and begin dialogue with them so that they can be redressed within the framework of the Constitution.

The PUCL demands that:

- 1) The cases under the UAPA targeting Khurram Parvez , Irfan Mehraz as well as other journalists and activists be withdrawn
- 2) The right to speech, association and assembly of the people of Ladakh and Kashmir be respected.
- 3) The UAPA being a law which targets the right to speech, assembly and association must be repealed.
- 4) The architecture of the carceral state which includes preventive detention, surveillance and administrative restrictions be dismantled.
- 5) The democratic demands of the people of Kashmir and Ladakh must be heard and responded to.

PUCL STATEMENT CONCERNING THE ATTACK ON HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND WRITER, SEEMA AZAD, PUCL NATIONAL SECRETARY

PUCL NATIONAL

(7th July, 2026)

A 6-page statement was issued on 26th June, 2026, allegedly by the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – North Coordination Committee (NCC), claiming that Seema Azad was a State Secretary of the party and because of her “revisionist” practices, associating with a CIA agent in India, and due to her ‘prioritizing bourgeoisie feminism over Marxism’ she was being expelled from the primary membership of the party. The note was read out on a news podcast called “Bastar Talkies.”

Seema Azad is a well-known human rights activist and feminist, active for more than 2 decades, in Uttar Pradesh and across India. She has done her Master's in psychology and LLB. She has been running a bi-monthly Hindi magazine called Dastak since 2004. She has worked as a journalist and has written 3 books. Her poems have been published in a number of magazines. She joined PUCL in 2006 and held the post of Organizational Secretary of UP PUCL since 2008. Thereafter she was elected as the President of UP State PUCL. Seema Azad was elected at the National Level first as the National Organising Secretary and subsequently as National Secretary of PUCL, in which position she has been functioning for several years. She was falsely charged by the UP Police with being a member of Maoist organization in 2010 and convicted in 2012. Her appeal is pending in the Allahabad High Court; it appears that the allegations against her are so flimsy that after conviction she has been granted bail by the High Court. Her prison memoirs in the form of 2 books include ‘Zinda Nama: Chand Taron ke Begair Ek Duniya’ and ‘Aurat ka Safar: Jail se Jail Tak’, in Hindi; the first Hindi book has been translated and published in English as ‘Unsilenced: Jail Diary of an Activist’. These have been widely read, appreciated and recognised as a major contribution to the prison writing genre of writing.

Seema has always categorically denied, ever being a member of or directly or indirectly being part of the CPI – Maoist party, let alone its state secretary. She has also given to us in writing now, specifically denying ever having been a member of the CPI Maoist party or in any way being associated with the said party too. Thus, the question of expelling her from the above-referred political party does not even arise.

We at PUCL stand by Seema.

It is not clear as to who has issued this statement. Whilst supposedly the letterhead is of the Communist Party of India (Maoist) – North Coordination Committee (NCC), there is a strong possibility that this letter is fabricated by some State agency which is trying to implicate her and frame her in some false case. It is all the more curious since the letter has not been sent to her but to a news portal. Even if by some chance it has been sent by the said political party, we do not subscribe to their false and distorted projection of her activities. Seema confirms that the allegations against her in the statement are wholly false and entirely imaginary, is defamatory and has no factual foundation.

On behalf of the PUCL National Executive Committee, we strongly condemn this wilfully mischievous misrepresentation of Seema's work and the allegations levelled against her and stand in solidarity with her. We at PUCL stand by our members doing public and transparent human rights work which is based on a belief in the progressive values of the Indian Constitution. To us, to do human rights works in a public, transparent and constitutional manner, however unacceptable it may be to the state, is nothing other than an exercise of the constitutional freedoms of speech, assembly and association which is guaranteed to every Indian citizen.

However this avowed commitment to the Constitution and its values has not stopped the State agencies from falsely implicating our members including Binayak Sen, Sudha Bhardwaj, TG Ajay, Fr. Stan Swamy and Seema Azad for the mere exercise of constitutionally guaranteed rights. All along, even as they

worked to hold state agencies to account for their lawlessness, they have always pursued the peaceful, legal path, eschewing violence, remaining committed to non-violent means of resolving issues and asserting the primacy of constitutional and human rights principles. We stood by them in the past and we continue to stand by them as exemplars in the courageous defence of the values of the Indian Constitution.

This statement is being released with the endorsement of and on behalf of the National Executive Committee of PUCL.

English translation of letter addressed to the President and General Secretary, PUCL, by Seema Azad, in response to the Statement dated 26.6.2026

I, Seema Azad, National Secretary PUCL, would like to officially inform PUCL that on the night of June 30th a press release was circulated on social media which also caught my eye where several false allegations were raised against me and my partner Vishwavijay. This was apparently released by 'CPI Maoist NCC' where they have termed us as traitors and several other allegations have also been made. When this letter reached us through several well-wishers as they were worried about the situation and it was then when we posted on social media that we have nothing to do with this organisation. I then informed both of you on a call on 1st of July.

On 2nd July the host of Bastar Talkies YouTube channel also read the 6-page letter where they repeated some more objectionable allegations. In the video they said that we have been members of the party (from where they're expelling us) and even went on to say that we have been the state committee members of CPI Maoist NCC.

On 4th July, human rights activist from Punjab, Arihant Kumar Maleri sent a letter to us personally showing his support and even posted it on Facebook with his friend Karam Barasat. After two days on the 6th, Bhagat Singh Students' Morcha also released the same letter that was earlier released by CPI Maoist NCC and was again circulated personally to a lot of intellectuals appealing that they boycott us. Immediately after this, former General Secretary of PUCL Uttar Pradesh, Kamal Singh started to instigate people against me on social media groups and personally messaging them.

After putting forth all the facts that I have with me I want to present my own viewpoint regarding the entire incident since I am a part of PUCL's national executive and through this I believe even PUCL is being targeted and hence it is my responsibility to clear the air.

I want to be absolutely clear in saying that I, Seema Azad, was never a part of the Maoist party nor any of its factions nor of any other political party. I was never a member, nor am I now. CPI Maoist NCC who has indulged in such kind of malicious targeting against me has no connection with me whatsoever and neither do I know them. Yes, I know Bhagat Singh Student Morcha as a student group based in Banaras Hindu University in Banaras. I don't know who these people are who are suddenly targeting me and their exact intentions behind that. I have been with PUCL since 2006.

I am the editor and publisher of the bimonthly magazine called "Dastak Naye Samay Ki". Whatever I do, whatever work I have done is in front of everyone to see and judge. What I have understood from this malicious campaign is that they want to "brand" human rights activists in a way that they are forced to face state oppression and if they're able to spoil the public image of the concerned person, they won't have any support whatsoever. Since the last few years, the government has been trying to do this and this entire incident seems to be a continuation of that. I'm presenting all the facts from my end and requesting appropriate action against this malicious campaign that is being organised against me and PUCL.

Seema Azad

PUCL CONDEMNS THE REMOVAL OF THE FILM 'SATLUJ' FROM ZEE5: THE TRUTH ABOUT PUNJAB'S DISAPPEARED CANNOT BE MADE TO DISAPPEAR AGAIN

PUCL NATIONAL

Restore the film and publish the reasons for its removal. Investigate every disappearance and prosecute the guilty, without state protection for the accused. Constitute a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Punjab disappearances. Ratify the International Convention against Enforced Disappearance.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) strongly condemns the removal of the film Satluj, directed by Honey Trehan and starring Diljit Dosanjh, from the Indian catalogue of the streaming platform ZEE5. The film was released on 3 July 2026 and was pulled down within two days. No order has been published and no reasons have been given to the public. Unnamed officials have told journalists that the film was taken down on 'security' grounds, and recent reports say that a committee constituted by the Government has concluded that the film 'goes against India's sovereignty'. ZEE5, for its part, has said only that the film will not be available in India 'until further notice'. In short, a film that was lawfully released has been made to vanish on the strength of an order nobody has seen, for reasons nobody has been told, without the filmmakers being heard. This is not how a government bound by the Constitution may act.

The irony should trouble every citizen. Jaswant Singh Khalra was abducted, tortured and killed in 1995 because he uncovered how thousands of people in Punjab had been made to disappear. Thirty years later, the film that tells his story has itself been made to disappear from Indian screens. The disappeared of Punjab, it appears, must be disappeared twice over, first in their bodies and now in public memory.

Three years of hurdles, then a takedown

The film, originally titled Punjab 95, spent nearly three years before the Central Board of Film Certification. The Board asked for close to 130 cuts and a change of the film's name before it would clear a theatrical release. The filmmakers refused to mutilate their work and opted for a release on a streaming platform instead. That release lasted two days. Since then, congregations and villagers across Punjab have been holding free community screenings in gurdwara compounds and village halls, and diaspora groups have done the same in London, New York and Toronto. The film has not been stopped. What has been damaged is the credibility of the certification process, and the guarantee of free speech under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which cannot survive if the executive can quietly achieve through a phone call what the censor board could not achieve through law.

The man who counted the dead

Jaswant Singh Khalra was not a professional activist. He worked in a bank in Amritsar. While looking for a friend who had gone missing, he began examining the registers of municipal cremation grounds. At the Durgiana Mandir cremation ground in Amritsar and the cremation grounds at Patti and Tarn Taran, he found that the Punjab Police had been secretly cremating bodies labelled 'unclaimed' and 'unidentified' through the years of the counter-insurgency, most intensely between 1990 and 1995. Families were never informed. Post-mortems were not conducted. No record was kept of how these persons had died. From the three cremation grounds he examined, Khalra estimated that across Punjab the number of such secret cremations could be as high as 25,000.

He made his findings public and refused to stop despite direct threats from senior police officers. Speaking at a gurdwara in Canada in April 1995, he told the story of the lamp that defies the darkness: 'every lamp says, I will fight the darkness, at least around myself.' On 6 September 1995 he was picked up from outside his home in Amritsar by Punjab Police personnel. He was illegally detained, tortured and murdered. His body was never returned to his family. It took the courage of his wife, Paramjit Kaur Khalra, the orders of the Supreme Court and a CBI investigation before six policemen were convicted for

his abduction and murder in November 2005. The Punjab and Haryana High Court enhanced the sentences of the main accused to life imprisonment in 2007, and the Supreme Court upheld the convictions in 2011.

How many disappeared? No one in authority has ever counted

The honest answer to the question of how many people disappeared in Punjab is that nobody knows, because the State has never tried to find out. The numbers on record tell their own story. Khalra's extrapolation was as many as 25,000 secret cremations. The CBI, investigating under the Supreme Court's directions, verified 2,097 illegal cremations in just the three cremation grounds of one district: 582 bodies fully identified, 278 partially identified and 1,237 never identified at all. The National Human Rights Commission, to which the Supreme Court referred the matter in 1996 with wide powers, limited its inquiry to those same three grounds, awarded about Rs. 27.94 crore as compensation over a decade of proceedings, and did not fix responsibility on a single officer. Those who have gone from village to village have found much more. The Punjab Documentation and Advocacy Project, after fieldwork in over 1,600 villages, has documented more than 8,000 cases of abduction, enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing and illegal cremation from across the State; 6,733 of these cases are the subject of a writ petition pending before the Punjab and Haryana High Court since November 2019, in which the families seek independent investigation, prosecution and reparation. PUCL urges that this petition, and every other pending matter arising from the disappearances, be heard and decided without further delay. The parents of the disappeared are dying one by one, still waiting for answers.

That the estimates range from two thousand to twenty-five thousand is itself the indictment. A State that made its own citizens disappear never counted them, and it has resisted every attempt by others to count. Behind each disputed number is a person who was taken away, a family that was never told, and a death that was never certified.

Disappearances are an attack on the rule of law itself

An enforced disappearance is not simply a murder concealed. It removes a human being from the protection of the law altogether. There is no arrest memo, no FIR, no body, no death certificate. The writ of habeas corpus, the oldest remedy known to our law, becomes meaningless when the State simply denies custody. The family cannot mourn, cannot inherit, cannot close the account. International law treats enforced disappearance as a continuing offence for precisely this reason: the crime is committed afresh every day the truth is withheld.

The precedent such crimes set is as dangerous as the crimes themselves. If officials can abduct, kill and cremate citizens in secret and face no consequences because the victims were labelled militants and the times were called extraordinary, then every guarantee in Part III of the Constitution is only as good as the government's mood. Punjab proved the point. The methods perfected there, the unacknowledged detention, the staged encounter, the unclaimed body, travelled to Kashmir, to Manipur and to other theatres of internal conflict. Impunity is never contained within one state or one decade. Each unpunished disappearance teaches the machinery of the State that disappearance works.

What the Supreme Court has laid down

None of this is a grey area in law. In *Nilabati Behera v. State of Orissa* (1993), the Supreme Court held that the State must answer and pay compensation for a death in custody, and that Article 21 does not abandon a person at the prison gate. In *D.K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* (1997), the Court laid down binding safeguards for every arrest and detention, precisely because custodial violence thrives on secrecy. In *Paramjit Kaur v. State of Punjab*, the Court ordered the CBI to investigate Khalra's abduction and referred the Punjab mass cremations to the NHRC. In *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India* (1997), a petition filed by this organisation concerning fake encounters in Manipur, the Court held in terms that a killing in a fake encounter is nothing but murder, and that administrative liquidation of citizens has no place under our Constitution. In *People's Union for Civil Liberties v. State of Maharashtra* (2014), again on a PUCL petition, the Court issued sixteen binding directions to be followed

in every case of death caused by police action: registration of an FIR, independent investigation by another agency or police station, magisterial inquiry, information to the family, and no gallantry awards or out-of-turn promotions for the officers concerned until their conduct is cleared. And in *Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association v. Union of India* (2016), which dealt with 1,528 alleged fake encounters in Manipur, the Court held that there is no absolute immunity for police or armed forces personnel, and that every allegation of an extra-judicial killing must be investigated and, where made out, tried as an ordinary crime.

The law, in other words, exists. What has been missing in Punjab, for thirty years, is the will to enforce it.

Prosecute the guilty, and stop protecting them

PUCL demands that every documented case of disappearance and illegal cremation in Punjab be properly investigated by an independent agency, and that criminal prosecution follow wherever the evidence leads, regardless of the rank the accused held then or holds now, and regardless of whether he is serving or retired. Murder does not become stale with time, and there is no limitation period for it.

We must also say plainly what experience has shown: accused policemen in Punjab were not merely spared, they were protected. Officers named in disappearance cases were promoted and decorated, and public funds have been spent on their legal defence. This must stop. A policeman accused of abduction, torture or murder stands accused of a crime against the very public he was paid to protect. He is entitled to a fair trial, but not to the treasury. The State must not extend to such accused persons, whether serving or former policemen, support of any kind, including the funding or conduct of their litigation. Its duty lies on the other side: to assist the prosecution with records, witnesses and sanction. Statutory sanction requirements cannot be allowed to become instruments of shelter, for no abduction, torture or secret cremation can ever be part of 'official duty'.

Truth and reconciliation: the lesson Punjab has not been allowed to teach

Punjab between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s was a society in conflict. Militant violence took a terrible toll of innocent lives, and the State's response took another. Societies that have lived through such periods, in Latin America, in South Africa, in our own region, have learnt one lesson at great cost: there is no lasting peace without truth, and no reconciliation without acknowledgment. India has never permitted itself that reckoning over Punjab. The NHRC's inquiry stopped at the boundary of one district. The courts have moved slowly where they have moved at all. The constitutional machinery, to speak frankly, failed the families of the disappeared, and that failure is one reason the same patterns have recurred in other conflict areas of the country.

PUCL therefore calls for the constitution of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the disappearances, custodial killings and secret cremations in Punjab between 1984 and 1995. It should be headed by retired judges of the Supreme Court or the High Courts, include representatives of victims' families and independent civil society, and be mandated to make a full public accounting of the disappeared, to acknowledge wrong where wrong was done, and to recommend reparation and prosecution. If the State remains unwilling, civil society will have no option but to convene an independent People's Tribunal to do the work of truth-telling, as citizens' tribunals in this country have done before. We remind the Government that India signed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2007 and has not ratified it to this day, and that Indian law still does not recognise enforced disappearance as a distinct crime.

A film is speech, and this speech is protected

The removal of *Satlj* cannot be squared with the settled law on free expression. In *S. Rangarajan v. P. Jagjivan Ram* (1989), the Supreme Court, dealing with a film, held that the State 'cannot plead its inability to handle the hostile audience problem' and that the danger anticipated from any expression must be proximate and direct, not remote or fanciful.¹⁵ In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), the Court held that discussion and advocacy of any cause, however unpopular, lie at the heart of Article 19(1)(a), and

that only incitement may be restricted.¹⁵ A film about a man whose killers were convicted by Indian courts, and whose findings were verified by the CBI and acted upon by the Supreme Court, is not incitement against India. It is India examining its own record, which is exactly what a democracy is for. In *Anuradha Bhasin v. Union of India* (2020), the Court further made it clear that orders restricting fundamental rights must be published so that they can be tested in court.¹⁵ Censorship by anonymous briefing, executed through a private platform, is censorship without accountability.

PUCL has said this before and says it again. In August 2025 we condemned the omnibus forfeiture of twenty-five books on Kashmir as an attempt to erase collective memory. PUCL and PUDR documented the anti-Sikh massacres of November 1984 in *Who Are the Guilty?* PUCL campaigned for years against TADA and its abuse in Punjab, and raised Jaswant Singh Khalsa's case at every forum available to it.¹⁶ The State's quarrel with Satluj is the same quarrel it had with those books. It is a quarrel with memory.

PUCL demands

- That Satluj be restored on ZEE5's Indian platform forthwith, and that any order or direction for its removal, along with the report and composition of the committee said to have examined it, the legal provisions invoked and the reasons recorded, be published immediately.
- That the filmmakers be given a full hearing, and that the CBFC certify the film for theatrical release without the cuts earlier demanded, in accordance with the law laid down by the Supreme Court.
- That community screenings of the film face no interference, intimidation or criminal action.
- That all documented cases of disappearance, custodial killing and illegal cremation in Punjab be investigated by an independent agency in a time-bound manner, and that criminal prosecutions be initiated against the perpetrators, whether serving or retired.
- That no accused official, present or former, receive state support of any kind, including the funding of his legal defence, promotions or awards, and that the State instead actively assist the prosecutions with records, witnesses and sanction.
- That the writ petition pending before the Punjab and Haryana High Court since 2019 concerning 6,733 documented cases, and all allied matters, be heard and decided expeditiously.
- That a Truth and Reconciliation Commission be constituted on the Punjab disappearances of 1984 to 1995, failing which civil society will be compelled to convene an independent People's Tribunal.
- That India ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and enact a law making enforced disappearance a distinct criminal offence.

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