

India: Release Dalit folk singer and activist Kovan immediately

(Bangkok, 5 November 2015) – Authorities in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu must immediately release Dalit folk singer and activist S. Sivadas, also known by his stage name Kovan, who was arrested under India's archaic and excessive sedition law for singing songs satirizing the chief minister and state government of Tamil Nadu.

Kovan was arrested in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu on 30 October at 2 AM in the morning by plain clothes police officers and was later charged with sedition, provocation with intent to cause riot and public mischief. In the early hours of the day, with no notice to any of the family members where he was being taken, he was taken to Chennai, nearly 375 kms away. He is been placed under judicial custody till at least 12 November 2015.

"Kovan has been arrested for simply exercising his fundamental right to freedom of expression. Free speech in a democracy includes the right to criticize elected representatives and dissent," said Henri Tiphagne, chairman of FORUM-ASIA. *"The Tamil Nadu government should immediately release Kovan and stop infringing on people's basic freedoms."*

Kovan is a member of Makkal Kalai Ilakkiya Kazhagam, or People's Art and Literary Association, a group that performs folk songs and street plays on important issues such as women's rights, and rights of marginalised groups including Dalits. He was allegedly arrested for two songs which ask the state government to stop profiting from state-run liquor stores at the expense of poor people.

"Kovan's case is another reminder that India should urgently repeal the regressive sedition law which is a remnant of its colonial past. This law has been used too often to muzzle the voices of human rights defenders, journalists, artists and a range of other critics in India," said Tiphagne.

Background

Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code defines sedition as any act or attempt "to bring into hatred or contempt, or excite disaffection towards the government." Offence under this law is often punishable with life imprisonment. This law is inconsistent with international standards on freedom of expression. Mr. S Kovan, a 52-year-old Dalit Tamil folk singer, hails and lives at Maruthanda Kurichi, Oraiyur in Tiruchirappalli city of Tamil Nadu. He is leading the cultural wing of Makkal Kalai Ilakkiya Kazhagam or People's Art and Literary Association which is a 30-year old movement working for the weaker sections of the society with an active cultural wing that performs folk songs and street plays on socio-economic-cultural issue.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a Bangkok-based regional human rights group with 47 member organisations in 16 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expressions, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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