Implications of the arrest of Indian environment activist

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Indian climate activist Disha Ravi was arrested by the police on 13 February 2021. The Government of India has charged her with sedition. As is common, the case will drag on for years and she would have to attend innumerable hearings – torture in itself. Already, she has spent ten days behind bars before being bailed out on February 23.

The 22-year-old Disha is charged with contributing to the ‘toolkit’ prepared by Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg for mobilizing support for the ongoing agitation of the landowners (farmers) of Punjab.

However, what has been published in media does not throw complete light on the matter. Here, we would like to discuss some untouched aspects of the entire issue.

Why was Disha Ravi arrested?

Disha Ravi has been an ardent admirer of world-famous Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg and has been associated with the latter’s well-known campaign ‘Fridays for Future’. Under this campaign, Thunberg urges the youth the world over to devote their Fridays to spreading awareness on environmental issues. Her movement has spawned hundreds of environment-related struggles all over the world and lakhs of youth have joined them in dozens of countries. These agitations and protests have forced many countries to withdraw their pro-corporate laws. Greta is just 18. The Time and Forbes magazines have counted her among the most influential personalities in the world and she has been nominated for the Nobel Prize twice.

Greta Thunberg had given a call for supporting the farmers’ movement in India. The Government of India says that Disha Ravi had a role in persuading Greta to do so. Due to this, Disha’s arrest became global news and media all over the world criticized it.

The Indian media criticized the Narendra Modi Government for unnecessarily persecuting and harassing a young girl who had nothing to do with politics. She was presented as a bold, sensitive and emotional girl who works on environment-related issues. These issues are considered harmless in India as they have nothing to do with religion or caste (though that is not true), do not affect the vote banks of the political parties and are unlikely to trigger aggressive or violent behaviour. The Indian middle-class does not mind its children joining movements on such issues. They believe that it just involves getting one photographed wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with slogans or holding placards. Since these movements do not harm anyone and talk about broad, often intangible issues, they are harmless. The middle class does not fear that participation in such movements can hurt the career of their children.

The media, too, does not take such movements seriously; though it does cover them in detail. And it saw the arrest of Disha Ravi from the same perspective. It was argued that overcomes by emotions, she jumped into the farmers’ protest. It was said that by arresting a middle-class, educated girl, the government had bare its foolishness and dictatorial attitude. Reports spoke of Disha being a vegetarian and working for a startup promoting vegetarianism and saying that she had ‘never breached any law while participating in protests and agitations on environment-related issues. This does sound odd. Can being a vegetarian be the guarantee of someone innocence? Can ‘never breaching any law’ be a badge of honour for any movement seeking change and transformation? The Indian media also drew the attention of its readers to the fact that Disha Ravi had not transgressed any Indian law and that toolkit is merely a document laying down the strategy for any movement and so, preparing a toolkit or circulating it cannot be termed a crime. The media urged the government to desist from this oppressive and vindictive course of action.

All this is true. But was it just foolishness and how-dare-you-question-me attitude on the part of the government that led to Disha’s arrest? Are government functionaries really not aware that making a toolkit for any movement and circulating it can never be proved as a criminal act before any Indian court of law?

Be that as it may, it is clear that preparing a toolkit for the farmers’ movement was only used as an excuse to arrest Disha. The fact is that she is being persecuted in connection with another issue.

And that issue is the failure of the government to amend the rules related to environment and the role of Disha Ravi in it. Some news web portals did discuss this aspect of her activities but only in a cursory manner. They did not link her arrest with it.

We will see how a news portal was also victimized for coming in the way of changes in the environmental laws and how all the developments link up.

Like many other Third World nations, the government of India, too, used the Corona-induced lockdown to foist such laws on the people which would have otherwise evoked strong protests. This period, when the people were concerned about their life and bread, was used by the government to push through many controversial decisions, including changes in labour laws and privatization of coal mining. Most of these decisions were music to the ears of Indian and foreign multinationals, which had been lobbying for them.

But despite all these changes, what was coming in the way of the corporates uninhibitedly preying on the country’s natural resources were the environment-related rules framed by India following it signing the 1972 Stockholm (Sweden) Declaration on Global Environment. Under these laws, it is mandatory to assess the environmental impact of any industry or so-called development project. ‘Environmental Impact Assessment’ continues to be a pre-requisite for granting approval to any and every project even after the dilution of the rules in 2006 by the then UPA government.

The corporates won’t be able to take full advantage of the laws framed during the lockdown unless they can secure environmental clearances easily. And for that, the rules related to environmental impact assessment need to be diluted. It goes without saying that most
big projects lead to destruction of environment and most of them have nothing to do with the welfare of the people at large. They are either money-making ventures or enterprises to satisfy the vanity of the government or the powerful corporates.

Shortly after the imposition of the lockdown, the government mooted a proposal for changing the process of environmental impact assessment. It was called Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020 and was published in the Gazette of India on 11 April 2020.

The draft notification proposed exemption from obtaining environmental clearance for a long list of industries and projects. It also proposed that rules regarding environmental clearance would not apply to projects that fall within an aerial distance of 100 km from the line of actual control between Indian and its neighbours. This means that besides other border areas of the country, these rules would cease to apply to all the seven states (Mizoram, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura and Assam) as almost all of their area is less than 100 km away from the borders as the crow flies. These states have rich biodiversity and invaluable natural resources. In keeping with the rules, the government invited suggestions and objections on the draft notification from the general public within sixty days of its publication i.e. before 11 June 2020.

In India, such exercises are generally a formality. If a new rule or law has direct implications for the people of any particular caste, religion or any other group, their respective organizations register their objections or come out with suggestions. But where the issue involves a policy on an issue of wider public interest, few take the trouble to proffer suggestions or raise objections. Most lack an understanding of the issue involved. Moreover, such issues are not considered a matter of life and death. Some NGOs do act but as has been mentioned earlier, their actions are merely superficial and cosmetic, limited to getting photographed and securing aid from foreign nations and organizations. They hardly enjoy any popular support. The governments are very well aware of their weaknesses.

What happened after the government invited suggestions and objections on the "Environmental Impact Assessment Notification 2020" draft rules, was unprecedented and left the government dumbfounded.

It began with some NGOs sending in their suggestions and objections, mainly for the sake of formality. But within a month, the trickle turned into flood. The Environment, Forests and Climate Change Ministry started receiving thousands of emails every day demanding scrapping of the draft notification and seeking extension of the deadline for submitting objections and suggestions. The correspondents argued that due to the lockdown, many persons would not be able to convey their views to the government. The emails came from all parts of the country – from the coastal states in the south to the Himalayan states in the north and from deep in the jungles of the northeastern states. The senders included young lawyers, students of different colleges and universities, students' organizations of northeastern India, politicians and socio-cultural activists.

The import of this barrage of emails can be assessed by a note of Sharath Kumar Pallerla, director, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate change. Summing up the view expressed in the emails received, he wrote to the ministry:

"The Ministry has issued a draft notification, inviting comments from the people amid a global health and economic crisis. This makes your priorities a cause for concern for us. When this notification was issued, America, Europe and India were facing an alarming situation due to the economic slowdown and the tremendous strain on public resources. After this, many countries, including India, went into lockdown under which severe restrictions were imposed and people were barred from public spaces. Even now, many offices are closed and people are working from their homes. These restrictions may continue indefinitely and it is unclear when normal life would be restored. The impact of the lockdown on public health, society and the economy is yet to be assessed. Currently, people in the urban and rural areas are struggling with problems related to food, employment, income and physical and mental health. You must also have noticed due to the stoppage of various activities during the lockdown, the air quality in many mega cities has improved, the rivers are cleaner and their flow is better than earlier. This shows that the system established by you to regulate industrial and human activities with a view to protecting our water and air from chemical poisons has failed. There are reports that the Ministry is approving more mining projects, more industries, more construction projects and more highways. This would ruin our forests and pollute our water resources. More land in coastal and other areas would be acquired. You are doing all this using the (current) Environmental Impact Assessment notification and other environmental laws. Still, for many affected persons, the Environmental Impact Assessment notification is the only way they can ensure that the developers reveal the designs and environmental impact of their projects. And because of it, they have to mitigate the impact of the project and follow all legal procedures. But you are making retrograde changes in the Environmental Impact Assessment notification at a time when the country is recovering.

Is this democratic? Is this correct? How can we continue all worry about the future of our environment when we are trying to battle the coronavirus and lakhs of persons are suffering due to the lockdown? In public interest, we demand that the Environment Ministry should withdraw the Environmental Impact Assessment notification 2020 with immediate effect."

According to a report carried by The Wire (Hindi) some top officers of the Environment, Forests and Climate Change Ministry proposed that in view of the protests by the people and the Covid-19 pandemic, the deadline for receiving suggestions and objections be extended to 10 August 2020.

However, let alone withdrawing the draft, the Minister in-charge, Prakash Javdekar took a unilateral view on the matter and without assigning any reason, rejected the proposal to extend the deadline in keeping with the popular demand and fixed 30 June 2020 as the last date. The media was informed about the new date.

Probably, Javdekar thought that if the time period is reduced, the number of objections would be lower. However, the opposite happened. Objections started flowing in at much a greater speed. Tens of thousands of emails started pouring in every day. In the meanwhile, environmental activist Vikrant Tongde moved the Delhi High Court with a plea that the deadline be extended up to the end of the Covid-19 restrictions or at least up to September. The court accepted the plea and extended the deadline up to 11 August. The court also made some sharp comments against the government. This was a big jolt for the government.

By 11 August, the last date for filing of objections, 17 lakh persons had registered their objections and emails were still flowing in. This was a record, which no other law promulgated by the Government of India could match, let alone a law which had nothing to do with issues related to caste or religion.

The brains, hard work and technical prowess of Disha Ravi and her associates were behind this deluge of objections. They had launched an email campaign, appealing to the people to oppose the notification and for that they had prepared a ‘toolkit’ with a detailed point-wise explanation of the disastrous consequences of the move and the strategy to deal with it.

The campaign also influenced some top officers and scientists working for the Government of India. As the campaign enjoyed the backing of world-famous environmentalist Greta Thunberg, it became a global issue with environmentalists and human rights activists from the world over expressing their concerns. Scores of research papers were published on what the notification, if it became a law, would entail for the Indian tribals and how many additional deaths would be caused by the pollution and the climate change it would bring about. The global image of India took a big hit due to these developments.

The Government of India, then, blocked the websites of Disha Ravi’s organization (Indian chapter of Fridays for Future) and of some other NGOs which were publicizing this campaign and sent notices to them under UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). This Act is invoked in cases of terrorism and sedition. Later, the government described this as its mistake and fresh notices were served on Disha Ravi and others, this time under the IT Act. This was criticized by the media and was seen as an attack on the democratic right to dissent and an anti-people action. The government later withdrew the notices under the IT Act, too, but the websites continued to be blocked.
The UN, too, took cognizance of the campaign of Disha Ravi and Greta Thunberg. The Special Rapporteur of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights flagged India for mounting this proposal and officially presented his concerns before the government. This was the ‘global conspiracy to defame India.’ Apparently, Disha Ravi had committed a grave crime by drawing the attention of the world towards the pro-corporate move of the government.

On 3 October, the Government of India issued an office memorandum, contradicting the charges of the UN Rapporteur and got it published in the newspapers. However, this group of young environmentalists successfully contradicted the contradiction and systematically exposed how the government had made false statements and how its minister had misled the Parliament. These activists told the people how the office memorandum issued by the government to contradict the statement of the UN Rapporteur shamelessly claimed that no big industry has been exempted from the condition of obtaining environmental clearance when the draft clearly talked about the exemptions.

Big media groups in India rarely publish stories on such complicated policy issues as few people have interest in them. However, a Hindi and English website called NewsClick consistently published reports, articles etc. informing the people about the fine print of the draft laws. As a regular reader of the content published by NewsClick on these issues, I can say that it has done the best reporting on the meaning and implications of the proposed provisions. Besides the fact that the website has a team of competent editors and writers, another reason for this was that NewsClick owner and editor Prabir Purkayastha is himself a scientist who actively participates in the activities of NGOs working on such technical and scientific issues.

Though NewsClick was known for opposing the anti-people policies of the government even earlier, very few people paid attention to the fact that immediately before the arrest of Disha Ravi, on February 9-10, the Enforcement Directorate of the Government raided its office and the homes of its owner and editors and registered cases of money laundering against them.

The fact is that all these were coordinated actions against persons and institutions which were trying to make the people aware of how the government was clandestinely trying to help corporates. We all know that the three agricultural laws passed by the Parliament are also aimed at benefitting the corporates in the long term. The landowners of Punjab are up against these laws. For want of awareness, small farmers, farm labourers and other lower and middle classes are keeping away from the farmers’ movement. The movement has only been able to the gamer support from a section of society in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh. Those who will have to suffer from the long-term impact of the farm laws are yet to come on a common platform. In fact, they are at loggerheads with each other. This movement is also suffering from a sense of jealousy towards other sections of society which have prospered due to the use of better agricultural techniques.

Disha Ravi may be emotional but it is young activists like her who have the skills and the capacity to break unholy government-corporate alliances. The corporates fear them precisely for this reason. The government, too, knows that ‘toolkit’ is of no consequence. The real problem is the apprehension that the movement may gather momentum through the toolkit with truth, sensitivity and facts as its building blocks. They also fear that the new tech-savvy generation, which has broken free from the shackles of religion and caste and which is unwilling to compromise with its civil rights and personal freedoms, can give birth to a new kind of politics.

(Pramod Ranjan is interested in studying the working of media organizations, philosophy of knowledge and analysis of the ignored aspects of literature, culture and society. He is an assistant professor in the Rabindranath Tagore School of Language and Culture Studies of the Assam University)

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