**COALITION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN INDIA**

**STATEMENT DEMANDING**

***FABRICATED CASES AGAINST ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISTS PIYUSH MANUSH AND MANSOOR ALI KHAN BE DROPPED AND FOR THEIR UNCONDITIONAL AND IMMEDIATE RELEASE FROM PRISON***

**19th June 2018**

We strongly condemn the late night arrest (on 18th June 2018) of Piyush *Manush* Sethia of Salem Citizens’ Forum and Mansoor Ali Khan, an actor, who are engaged with a range of social and environmental justice causes. Piyush is a widely respected social and environmental activist who has relentlessly worked to protect farms and forests, and also organized communities to revive tens of lakes and forest patches. Their arrests is the latest indication of the gross disregard Tamilnadu administration has for peoples’ interests, and for human rights and the environment.

Piyush’s politics is to organize and fight all forms of oppression: be it by the State, Caste based oppression, or by environmentally destructive corporate forces. He has mobilized communities in claiming the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Consitution of India, and is widely acknowledged for his civil disobedience efforts in exposing corrupt forces. In so doing, Piyush has exploite to the hilt his fundamental freedoms, particularly his Freedom to Express. His efforts have gained popular support and hurt anti-democratic and corrupt forces fundamentally.

For engaging in such liberating politics, Piyush has been targeted time and again. In July 2016, the police picked him up for organizing protests against the Muluvadi Gate over-bridge in Salem, illegally detained him, then held him in solitary confinement, tortured him for days, and almost killed him. He survived as his wife Monica Sethia managed to secure his release on bail. Undeterred by such assaults on his fundamental freedoms and on his body, and on the security of his family, Piyush returned to fight more vigorously against oppressive forces, against corruption, against environmental destruction and against social ostracization of the Dalits.

**Arrested for questioning social devastation and environmental destruction:**

Piyush’s arrest now is the direct outcome of his participation in a very popular resistance by farming and other impacted communities to the building of a 8 lane (900 feet wide) 275 kms long Chennai-Salem expressway at an estimated cost of Rs. 10,000 crores[[1]](#footnote-1). The project would require 2800 hectares of prime farmland, cut through eight reserve forests (fragmenting forests and wildlife corridors), directly displace 32 human settlements[[2]](#footnote-2), and permanently fragment and destroy the culture and economies of tens of villages and towns.

There already are three roads connecting these two cities and they can be easily strengthened at a fraction of the cost of the proposed fourth road – the 8 lane expressway! This expressway cleared by Union Minister for Road Transport, Highways, Shipping and Water Resources Mr. Nitin Gadkari in February 2018 as a fast track project, has been rushed through into tendering for construction, even though land acquisition processes have not even been initiated. This access controlled expressway offers no benefit whatsoever to any of the tens of directly impacted villages and towns. In fact, this massive road will slap a swathe of environmentally brutal concrete across some of the finest farms irrigated by the Cauvery river, and will interfere directly with the flows of the river. While the need for this super-expensive project is in serious question, the Tamilnadu and Union Governments have engaged in a high pitch media campaign to claim the massive displacement and devastation of farmers and pastoralists, and of riverine ecology and forests, as ‘development’.

**A Project for today’s Super Rich by stealing from the poor and future generations:**

The Chennai-Salem Green Expressways is part of a grand scheme of financialising farm land to promote and incentivise mega investment opportunities, all to benefit the super-rich of India[[3]](#footnote-3) to make even more money. It is well known that these super rich today control some of the biggest infrastructure firms, and also play a fundamental role in shaping the politics of this country. This expressway, and such other projects, are a schema for them to trigger further financialisation of farmlands, achieved by pushing a host of infrastructure facilities such as airports, Special Economic Zones, and ‘smart cities’ for the rich. Such projects are to be linked with a range of ports and roads promoted along the coastline, where too there is extensive impact on coastal ecology and lives of fisher folk, and which are being actively resisted by the impacted communities.

None of these projects are an outcome of democratic decision making and participatory planning that are to be overseen by District Planning Committees as is mandated in Article 243 ZD of the Constitution of India. These ‘infrastructure and urban development’, pitched as a solution to India’s economic crisis and poverty, are essentially economically ill-conceived projects. Time and again, such projects have pushed the poor more into distress, widened socio-economic inequities, and caused a draconian and undemocratic politics where abuse of power becomes systemic, and is employed to protect the interests of the rich and powerful. It is such destructive politics that Piyush Manush, a key participant in the Coalition for Environmental Justice in India, has worked to expose over decades and systematically.

**Stop Fabricating Cases against Human Rights Defenders:**

We strongly condemn the arrests of Piyush Manush of Salem Citizens’ Forum and of actor Mansoor Ali Khan. From the FIR of the police, it is blatantly evident that the Tamilnadu police have relied on hearsay and fabrication of ‘evidence’. The theatrical statement that is claimed to have been made by Khan - “If the eight-lane project is implemented, then I will kill eight people and go to jail”, is clearly that – theatrical. He is not known to ever engaged in violence, nor is he part of any organisation that has engaged in such violence. If anything, this statement is clearly an expression of his angst at how projects destructive of the people of India and her environment are being promoted by those in political power, and those who control those in power. If this constitutes grounds for Khan’s arrest, then the jails of India should be overflowing with thousands of trolls who advocate communal and misogynist comments, and yet are followed by none less than Prime Minister Modi.

*Prima facie*, the charges filed against Piyush Manush and Mansoor Ali Khan appear fake and fabricated. The FIR itself reveals that it is based on claims of a Village Accountant that Piyush Manush and Mansoor Ali Khan threatened them on 31st May 2018. If this were true, would it take the Village Accountant over three weeks to bring such ‘threats’ to the attention of the police? And are the Tamilnadu police so incompetent that they could not take corrective action for three weeks? Anyone can see that this is nothing but an egregious abuse of police power.

This is very serious crisis not only for the people of Tamilnadu, but for all of India. Piyush, as a human rights defender, has intensely suffered two years ago from illegal confinement and torture. That case is still being adjudicated. And now another major criminal case has been fabricated against him. This has got to stop. If the Government has administrators who have the talent to argue their case, they must do so democratically, as is required of all officials. There should be zero tolerance for such blatant abuse of power, and for employing such tactics in attacking social and environmental activists with false and fabricated cases.

**We are all Piyush. We all are victims of police massacre in Thoothukudi.**

Piyush is not alone. Each and every one of the undersigned, and thousands and millions more who are not signatories to this statement, echo these concerns, and are with Piyush and Mansoor. The world watched with horror as sharp-shooters of Tamilnadu police murdered in broad daylight on 22nd May 2018, 15 activists demanding closure of toxic and illegally run Sterlite Copper Smelter at Thoothukudi. The impacted communities had suffered decades of toxic pollution, and had resorted to a sit-in protest over 100 days because of the insensitivity of the Tamilnadu government to their just cause. The violent attack on them by the Tamilnadu police clearly indicated that the government was The eventual ‘closure’ of the plant by Tamilnadu government, and that after engaging in killing of defenceless protestors, and that too after the Courts had expressed outrage, clearly exposed that the administration had worked over years to protect the interests of the infamous British Corporation Vedanta, which owns this factory, and has a history of similar human rights and environmental violations globally.

The violent streak and the systemic abuse of pwer by Tamilnadu police has been exposed time and again. Piyush and Mansoor’s arrests is only the most recent instance of the systemic and wanton engagement in abuse of police power. We condemn these actions in the strongest terms and demand that:

1. The false and fabricated cases filed against Piyush Manush and Mansoor Ali Khan be dropped immediately and they are released immediately.
2. The Tamilnadu government must constitute a Joint-Legislature Investigation into this incident and place the report on the floor of the Assembly with due dispatch.
3. Victims of such abuse of police power must be compensated, and those guilty of abuse of police power must be punished.
4. The entire justification for this expressway project, including Detailed Project Report, Due Diligence Report, Environmental and Social Impact Review Reports, Forest Impact Reports, Techno-Economic Viability Studies, etc., must be placed in public record, and also made accessible in Tamil.
5. The Chennai-Salem Green Expressway must be subjected to review per procedures contained in Article 243ZD of the Constitution of India, and other laws governing environmental and social impacts and participatory democratic planning.

(*Coalition for Environmental Justice in India – CEJI* is comprised of progressive organisations and individuals from across India working every day in advancing environmental and social justice for all and securing and expanding fundamental freedoms.)

1. See, *Farmers, environmentalists up in arms against Tamil Nadu highway project*, 14th June 2018, Live Mint, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/lJktXdIBPZs3jN1yRTbQ9K/Farmers-environmentalists-up-in-arms-against-Tamil-Nadu-hig.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, “*Chennai-Salem expressway hits 'green' block”,* The New Indian Express, 19th June 2018, <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2018/may/19/chennai-salem-expressway-hits-green-block-1816663.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 73% of India’s wealth is held by the top 1% income earners. See, *See*, *India's richest 1% corner 73% of wealth generation: Survey,* Times of India, (Jan. 22, 2018), accessible at:<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/indias-richest-1-corner-73-of-wealth-generation-survey/articleshow/62598222.cms>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)