**Jailed in India P-I**

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By Vijay Prashad

On October 3, 2023, the day after MK Gandhi’s birthday, over five hundred officers of the Delhi Police fanned out across India to detain either at their Special Cell station or at their homes over a hundred journalists and researchers. They held them for interrogation for the entire day – an average of eight hours per person – and asked them if they had covered the epochal farmers’ revolt of 2020-21, the anti-Muslim violence in East Delhi in February 2020, and the disastrous government response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These three events are part of the great processes of our time, and not covering them would have been a dereliction of duty for a journalist and a researcher. The journalists in the government’s dragnet came largely from Newsclick, a web-based news site that began in 2009; the researchers came from Tricontinental Research Services, which provides materials to Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. After an entire day of harassment and intimidation, including violence against some of the people detained, the Delhi Police arrested two men – Prabir Purkayastha and Amit Chakravarty, the founder and chief editor of Newsclick, and the portal’s human relations chief respectively.

Prabir: Both Prabir and Amit have been my friends for years. I first met Prabir about thirty years ago, when I was a young journalist and researcher in Delhi, and he was one of the key figures in the Delhi Science Forum (DSF). Sitting on one of the little desks in the DSF office in Saket (it was in J block, I think), I met with Dr. Amit Sengupta (who died tragically in 2018) and Prabir. Amit was a leading advocate for better public health systems, having edited Drug Industry and the Indian People, 1986, and Prabir is an engineer who had led the fight for building public energy systems that would place people before profit. We talked about the 1986 General Agreement of Trade and Tariffs round, which seemed to change the rules for intellectual property rights; the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, TRIPS, would be established as international law in 1995. I remember being dazzled by their intellect, by their great love for people, and by their sense of humor (Amit and Prabir both have distinctive laughs).

Prabir, Amit, and others like them in the Delhi Science Forum built a research agenda to favor the 1948 Charter of the UN Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), whose Article 27 says, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” The charter was signed by 194 countries, that’s all the countries in the world, which obliges them to follow its mandate. Restrictive intellectual property laws go against the UNESCO Charter, which is often ignored. But not by people like Prabir, who played a part in the first All-India Peoples Science Congress in 1988 that established the All-India Peoples Science Network, and later who played a part in building and then leading (as President) the Free Software Movement of India.

In 2002, Prabir and I published a book on the scam led by the Enron Corporation to build a liquified natural gas plant in India – Enron Blowout: Corporate Capitalism and the Theft of the Global Commons. A few years later, at the Mumbai World Social Forum, which Prabir helped organize, we were able to share our ideas on this kind of tech-led scam before thousands of people. Prabir, who built a professional life as an engineer, remains nonetheless one of the fiercest advocates for the democratization of science and technology. His new book from LeftWord Books – Knowledge as Commons: Towards Inclusive Science and Technology (2023) – builds on a lifetime of battle to make sure that the gains of science and technology are not held by a few but are owned by everyone.

Newsclick: As the US war on Iraq steadily destabilized West Asia, and as the hybrid war on Iran began to escalate, a group of us (Prabir, Aijaz Ahmad, D Raghunandan, myself, and others) discussed the need to create a media outlet in India that focused on these issues. In the basement of a house, with the books of Aijaz as the backdrop, with a camera bought by Prabir and another by Aijaz, Newsclick was born. Here, we would gather in the evening – when everybody left their actual places of employment – and we would interview each other about West Asia and about science.

“Hello and welcome to Newsclick. Today we have with us Professor Aijaz Ahmad,” I can hear that opening in my head, and heard it today as I watched Prabir being taken to prison, tears in my eyes. Newsclick was one of the few outlets in India to seriously cover the events in West Asia and North Africa, particularly in Iraq and in Iran (around the US pressure campaign over nuclear energy from 2006). Raghu, Satyajit Rath, and Prabir – along with a host of others – introduced us to current debates in the world of science and technology, wondrous ideas about tremendous possibilities.

Over the years, Newsclick grew to become one of the most important voices that covered people-centered news. It was well-known that the main people involved in Newsclick were from the Left, and it was well-known that the coverage from Newsclick took seriously the views of people’s movements and of people’s lives. As Newsclick began to cover India more seriously, the website became one of the few places that paid attention to the struggles of workers, peasants, women, Dalits, Adivasis, and others who were fighting to make the country a better place.

Over the past three years, journalists across India working for mainstream publications would go to Newsclick to read up on the strikes of workers and the struggles of caregivers, on the waves of farmers’ protests and the uprisings of Dalits and Adivasis, as well as of the severe attack on Muslims in general and on Kashmiris in particular. The site built a remarkable body of work, a catalogue of protests inside India to deepen democracy against a democracy that the writer Arundhati Roy recently said is being “systematically disassembled.” When the journalists whose heart beats with the people are silenced, then it becomes impossible to even know if the people are struggling to brighten their country.

To be continued

This article was originally published in www.counterpunch.org as: ‘My Friends Prabir and Amit Are In Jail in India For Their Work in the Media’.