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India: False allegations against Degree Prasad Chouhan

Following the arrest of human rights defender Sudha Bharadwaj and four others on 26 October 2018, there is an imminent threat of false charges being brought against Dalit activist and human rights defender, **Degree Prasad Chouhan**. The police have already implicated the defender by name in a fake letter produced by them on 31 August 2018, which they claim was written by advocate Sudha Bharadwaj. There is a clear attempt by the police to smear the human rights defender as a Maoist militant and draw a false link between Degree Prasad Chouhan and the Bhima Koregaon violence which took place in January 2018.

[Degree Prasad Chouhan](#) is a human rights defender and a law graduate in Chhattisgarh's Raigarh District. He is the convenor of **Adivasi Dalit Majdoor Kisan Sangharsh**, a community group set up by Adivasi villagers to respond to the alleged unlawful dispossession of their land by two companies. He also serves as Vice President of the Chhattisgarh chapter of the **People's Union for Civil Liberties**, one of India's oldest human rights organisations. Over the past 15 years, Degree Prasad Chouhan has advocated for justice for the human rights violations committed against Dalits and the Adivasi community, including illegal land grabbing and forced displacement of indigenous people by state agents, security forces and corporate business interests. He has also worked on extra judicial killings, illegal detention, torture and attacks on minorities.

At a press conference on 31 August 2018, the Maharashtra police read out a fake letter allegedly written by [Sudha Baradhvaj](#). The letter purports *inter alia* that "Comrade Degree Prasad Chouhan, who was sent into the interiors by me, has returned on successfully completing the said operation. As promised, he has to be paid his reward now". This is a clear attempt to smear and implicate the defender, paving the way for his possible arrest under the regressive Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Sudha Baradhvaj through her lawyer has refuted the claims of the Maharashtra Police and expressly stated that the allegations against Degree Prasad Chouhan are baseless.

Sudha Baradhvaj and four other activists have been [in police custody](#) under the UAPA since 26 October 2018, when a Pune Sessions Court denied bail to the activists and also refused to extend their house arrest. On 6 November 2018 they were sent to jail..

Degree Prasad Chouhan believes that he faces an imminent threat of being falsely implicated as a Maoist militant or of instigating in some way the Bhima Koregaon violence, which occurred on 1 January 2018 during the commemoration of the 200 year anniversary of a battle the Dalits had won against the Peshwas (upper caste rulers). The current spate of persecution of human rights defenders through surveillance, threats, arrests and judicial harassment, is an attempt to curb the growing movement for Dalit and Adivasi rights, which has over the years achieved some successes in their fight to preserve their land and rights.

Front Line Defenders expresses grave concern regarding the smear campaign and attempts to falsely imply Degree Prasad Chouhan is a Maoist militant or terrorist, as it strongly believes that they are directly linked to his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:

1. Immediately cease any harassment against Degree Prasad Chouhan, including attempts to smear his name through the media and to criminalise him.

2. Ensure that Degree Prasad Chouhan is protected within India and the Chhattisgarh state and permitted to continue his human rights work without hindrance or harassment.
3. Immediately and unconditionally release the five human rights defenders, including lawyer Sudha Baradhvaj, as their arrest is directly linked to their peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights.
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders in India are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.