

Statement (India): On Caste Atrocities in Punjab

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On June 6th, a scuffle broke out between Rajvir Singh and a group of Dalit youths near Bhai Gurdas College in Sangrur district. Rajvir, the son of Manjit Singh Gharachon, member of the State Committee of Bhartiya Kisan Union (Ugrahan), claimed that he was hit by a Dalit youth. In response, accompanied by members of his organization, Manjit Singh Gharachon brutally attacked the Dalit youths causing several fractured limbs.

Shortly after this a joint fact-finding committee of labour organizations (mostly left-leaning) was established. Apparently, the Ugrahan group along with fraternal labour organizations set up their own fact finding committee which concluded that caste had played no role in the violence inflicted on the Dalit youths, who were arrested by the police under IPC 370 (intention to murder). Some members of the committee declined to sign the final report, which they saw as made under the pressure of the state's largest farmer organization—Ugrahan.

It is telling, too, that Joginder Ugrahan, president of the union, has since demanded that the case registered as part of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against his activists be immediately withdrawn. Under public pressure, they handed over the culprit to the police while publicly declaring with great public fanfare that they would continue their struggle for the withdrawal of the SC/ST act and suspension of the SHO who filed the charges.

Visiting the injured youths in the hospital, members of BKU (Ugrahan) tried to pressure them to reach a "compromise", apparently with help from the administration. The families of these Dalit youths have been severely traumatized suspecting every other stranger to be a member of a farmers' union.

The upper caste character of these farmers groups, otherwise considered to be on the left, reflects a much deeper divide within the peasant struggles of Punjab. This caste attitude and behaviour enables the BJP to benefit and help it create a Dalit vote bank. In the recent elections the BJP's vote share in Punjab actually increased especially among Dalits.

The two victims are still in the hospital's prisoner ward, with impending arrest in the next couple of days. One of them is a civil engineering student and the other one works as a barber in the village.

Left in limbo by casteist politics by leftist groups on the one hand, and opportunistic Dalits organizations on the other, they have no option other than to hold the hand of the BJP. We appeal to the left parties, activists and intellectuals to stand by the victims until the cases on them are withdrawn and make sure that the culprit is kept behind bars.

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