

'GRAVE IMPLICATIONS FOR FREE SPEECH'

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Huge protest: People shouting slogans demanding the release of Disha Ravi, in Bengaluru. AP

Political leaders opposed to the ruling BJP have condemned the arrest of 22-year-old climate change activist Disha Ravi, saying it has grave implications for free speech and democracy.

"Arrest of 21 yr old Disha Ravi is an unprecedented attack on Democracy. Supporting our farmers is not a crime," said Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in a tweet on Monday morning.

DMK MP Kanimozhi tweeted with the hashtags #FreeDishaRavi and #IndiaBeingSilenced. "Arresting a young woman for retweeting a tweet supporting the farmers is undemocratic. I stand with Disha Ravi against this onslaught on freedom of expression," she said.

Posting news articles on Ms. Ravi's arrest, as well as threats against journalists and Twitter employees, Congress leader and MP Rahul Gandhi tweeted a couplet in Hindi. "Your lips are free to speak/Say that the truth is still alive!" it said. "They are scared, not the country! India won't be silenced."

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also tweeted a Hindi couplet. "Those with arms are scared of an unarmed girl/The light of courage has been spread by this unarmed girl," she said.

Rajya Sabha member and former Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh tweeted a news report on the non-bailable warrant issued against another activist as well. "Delhi Police on the rampage. After Disha Ravi, it is now the turn of another young woman, Nikita Jacob. More will no doubt follow...This is Tanashaahi [which means, dictatorship] in New India called Amit Shahi!" he said.

The CPI(M) Polit Bureau issued an official statement condemning the arrest as an "atrocious action". It noted that the charges of sedition and criminal conspiracy were made on the "absurd grounds" of forwarding a toolkit. "The paranoid Modi government has to forthwith end this persecution of young activists. The charges against Disha Ravi should be withdrawn and she has to be released from custody," it said.

Late on Sunday, Congress MP Shashi Tharoor tweeted a British newspaper's article on Ms. Ravi's arrest and warned of the international fallout. "DishaRavi's arrest is the latest escalation in India's crackdown on free expression & political dissent as it seeks [to] stifle the farmers' mass protests, says the @dailytelegraph UK. Doesn't Gol care about the damage it's doing to its own global image?" he tweeted.

'Act of suppression'

British MP Claudia Webbe was one of the first international figures to comment on the arrest. "A climate activist from India, she campaigns for clean air, clean water and a liveable planet. She is now facing state sanctioned violence for peacefully supporting farmers. Silence is not an option we must all condemn this act of suppression," she tweeted.

American lawyer Meena Harris, who is the niece of U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris, tweeted in support of both Ms. Ravi, and Nodeep Kaur, a 23-year-old labour rights activist, who was arrested last month. She urged her followers to "ask why activists are being targeted and

silenced by the government.”

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