

# International Conspiracy Promotes Sustainability Along With Equity

**L**ast February 13, the Indian government arrested in the southern city of Bengaluru (Bangalore) an apparently highly dangerous young woman. Security forces extradited her immediately to Delhi to appear before a court the very next day. Police alleged that 21-year-old Disha Ravi contributed to a coordinated international conspiracy “to wage economic, social, cultural, and regional war against India.”

Ravi co-founded in 2019 the Indian branch of Greta Thunberg’s climate protest movement, Fridays for Future. Over the past three years Ravi has been involved in campaigns to protect the endangered lion-tailed macaque, delay a dubiously planned hydroelectric dam, and protest the proposed weakening of India’s environmental assessment law.

Early in February Thunberg tweeted

her support for hundreds of thousands of Indian farmers protesting since last year recent market liberalization laws for agriculture. The tweet included a toolkit that explained the farmers’ protest, listing various typical civil society nonviolent tactics, such as tweeting, email alerts, pressure on parliamentarians in the home countries of activists to raise questions with the Indian government, etc. Ravi edited several sentences in Thunberg’s draft of the toolkit, to clarify the farmers’ issues. Obviously a dangerous international conspiracy.

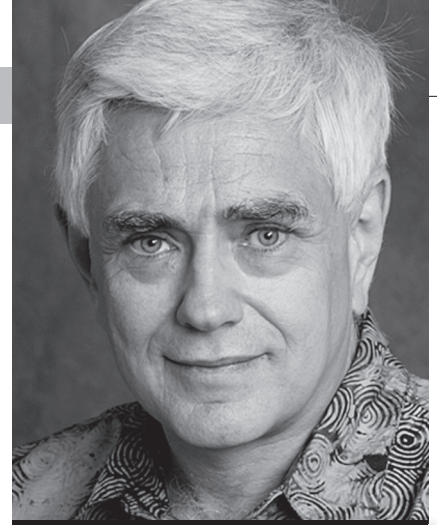
India is one of several major democratic countries, such as Turkey and Brazil, where nationalistic strongmen have come to power, all claiming to make their countries great (again). Attacking journalists, suppressing non-governmental environmental, human rights, and social justice organizations, weakening and non-enforcement of laws ensuring public participation and transparency (such as environmental assessment) are all part of their toolkit.

Ravi was arrested under a British colonial 1870s seditious act (still on the books!) that provides up to life imprisonment for any “words, signs, or representations” that “attempt to incite disaffection towards the government.” She is in good company. The British Raj arrested Gandhi under the same law, which the Mahatma, who was also a lawyer, said “was designed to suppress the liberty of the citizen.”

In summer 2020, Ravi was one of the leaders of a nationwide protest against a draft revision of India’s environmental assessment law. The leading English language daily *The Hindu* condemned the draft for going “to great lengths to reduce or even remove public participation, and by extension expert opinion,” from the environmental approval process.

The draft includes a list of projects that would no longer require environmental clearance, including coal mining and seismic surveys for oil, methane, and gas on some lands. It limits public participation in reviewing pipeline infrastructure in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, as well as relaxing environmental rules for roads and highways. During the public comment period three environmental groups — Fridays for Future, Let India Breathe, and There is No Earth B — helped mobilize over two million protest emails from Indian citizens to the environment ministry. In response the government shut down the web sites of the organizations for weeks and threatened to arrest environmentalists under anti-terrorism laws.

Ravi recounts that her family and many others in India are already suffering from the effects of climate change. The granddaughter of farmers, she sympathizes with their plight. Farmers account for 58 percent of India’s 1.3 billion people. They suffer from increased



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climate extremes of drought and flooding, as well as from the economic threat of rapid market liberalization of agriculture, which they maintain will dispossess them and benefit large agribusinesses. “Instead of being supported to become self-reliant and prosperous,” Thunberg wrote, “a majority . . . are increasingly being subjected to the control of large corporations and international institutions whose sole focus is profits, and necessarily involves increased exploitation of nature.”

Thunberg’s and Ravi’s message links environmental sustainability, climate action, and broadened political and economic democracy. It appears to be a threat for some nationalistic governments. Yet India needs these activists for a sustainable future. The 2020 Yale-Columbia Environmental Performance Index, which examines 180 nations on environmental health and ecosystem vitality according to 32 performance indicators, ranked India at 168, near the bottom. India’s air quality ranks 179 (only Pakistan’s is lower), and 42 of its major rivers are so contaminated with heavy metals that they threaten human health.

Ravi was released on bail following a deluge of protests from prominent Indian academics and political figures, including diplomats, former finance and environment ministers, and the economist and author Mihir Sharma, who tweeted “Ok now we’re arresting 21-year old climate activists. Well done India, you big superpower you.”

**India has arrested an environmental activist whose crime was to speak out**