

Arrests made in India over screening of film on the Manjulai massacre

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Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) state government, a coalition partner in the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in New Delhi, arrested two men in October for holding a preview of the documentary *Death of a River*. The film deals with the police massacre of striking Manjulai tea estate workers at the Thamiraparani River and includes footage of the police attack on the demonstrators and their supporters.

Tamil Nadu police arrested T. S. S. Mani, convenor of the Tamil Nadu Human Rights Organisation (TNHRO) and Thirunavukarasu, a cinema manager, on October 11 after screening the film to writers, journalists and intellectuals.

Mani was held by police and then brought him before a magistrate where they obtained permission to detain him for "interrogation". Police did not file a mandatory First Information Report, which is required within 24 hours. The human rights activist was then shifted from one city police station to another for 10 days in order to prevent him meeting with his lawyers, supporters and relatives.

On October 21, he was released on the condition that he reported to the local police station every Saturday. Police targeted Mani because he was an important witness to the massacre and helped the Kanchenai Film Movement produce the film. Thirunavukarasu, the cinema manager, was released after questioning on the day of his arrest. R. R. Srinivasan, the film's director had to obtain anticipatory bail from the courts in order to avoid arrest.

Two days after his arrest Mani's mother was told that he had been charged with screening the film without government permission and for instigating caste tensions (most of the estate workers belong to the oppressed castes). The charges have been framed

against him under the Indian Penal Code and under section 31/w 15(2) of the Tamil Nadu Exhibition of Films on Television Networks (Regular) Act of 1984 and section 7(a)(I) of the Cinematography Act of 1952.

Demonstrations by intellectuals, professionals and women activists have been held to protest Mani's arrest, and while no further action has been taken against the film's makers since October, the police have not withdrawn the charges and can act against those arrested at any time in the future.

Death of a River is a documentary about the Manjulai massacre, which took place when Tamil Nadu police attacked a procession of striking tea estate workers, their families and supporters on July 23. The demonstrating workers were demanding that they be paid the half-day wages illegally deducted from their pay packets since February and the release of 652 fellow workers previously arrested by police. Seventeen people, including two women and a two-year-old boy, were killed and 500 injured in the police attack.

The documentary exposes the provocative nature of the police attack, which involved the Rapid Action Force, a special police unit, and shows police throwing bricks and stones at the demonstrators. It also includes footage of police firing tear gas, rubber bullets and rifles at the terror-stricken and unarmed men, women and children. The demonstrators were subjected to a baton-charge and forced into the river; a waiting column of police beat those able to make their way to the other side of the river.

The film opens with a Brahmin standing in the river in prayer with a holy thread across his shoulders. The holy man is worshipping the river, "the goddess Ganga—the goddess of life". The film later shows the bodies of those killed by police strewn on the banks of

the river. Thus the Manjulai massacre represented the *Death of a River*, the Thamiraparani, which had sustained the life of many people over centuries.

The first part of the documentary graphically exposes the police brutality and includes interviews with tea estate workers, the injured and leaders of the demonstration. The 60-minute film, which denounces the Tamil Nadu government's judicial inquiry into the massacre, concludes with the words, "It is only the people who will and are eligible to give justice."

Although some television channels have previously broadcast news footage on the incident, *Death of a River* is the first film to provide a detailed examination of the massacre. The response of the Tamil Nadu government to the film reveals its extreme nervousness over any exposure of the Manjulai massacre. The film has been screened in Bangalore and New Delhi.



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