

Gautam Navlakha, nearly 70, is one of the oldest of the Bhima Koregaon arrestees, who was shifted to the “Anda Circle” (high security) from the barracks on October 12, 2021. Additionally, his telephone calls to me and his lawyers, his lifeline to the outside world, have been discontinued on the pretext that physical mulaquats have resumed in jail.

I, his partner, Sahba Husain, am over 70, and I live in Delhi. Travelling to Taloja Jail in Navi Mumbai frequently to meet him for the allotted ten minutes is difficult and Gautam’s only contact with me is through the two calls he was allowed every week to me that enabled me to send him articles of need, including medicines, books etc. With discontinuance of phone calls, all this will now depend on letters that take a minimum of two weeks to reach me.

Apart from the calls to me, regular access to lawyers through phone calls is an essential facility for undertrial prisoners. To deprive any undertrial prisoner of this effective and efficient mode of securing legal advice and help, or access to family, is the height of unfairness.

Gautam’s fragile health and well being will be further jeopardised by this withdrawal of the phone call facility to his family and lawyers. Already, in the Anda Circle, he is deprived of daily walks in the jail’s non-concreted greener areas and fresh air, and his health has deteriorated further, making specialised medical care an absolute necessity, if he is to live to fight this unjust and false case foisted on him. Without the weekly calls to me in Delhi, and to his lawyers, his life and his defence will be severely compromised.

Gautam writes, “confinement in Anda Circle means denial of fresh air/oxygen as there is not a single tree or plant in the open space of the Circle. And we are forbidden to step outside of the Anda Circle.... In other words, we spend 16 hours out of 24 cooped inside our cell and the 8 hours we are let out we are confined to a corridor 71/2’ x 72’ for our daily walk on cemented floor surrounded by high walls all around.”

Not long ago, Stan Swamy passed away in tragic circumstances. Stan, severely debilitated by Parkinson’s Disease, had to fight for such basic needs as a straw to drink, help to move to the toilet, and medical attention. His simple desire was that in his declining state of health he should be allowed to die at home in Ranchi. Even as his prayer before the court was pending,

Stan Swamy passed away in a Mumbai hospital, indeed after once telling the court that he would rather be simply left to die in jail than be taken to the hospital.

These are prisoners of conscience, who have had to face indignities and humiliation for the smallest needs, and wage court battles for basic dignities in prison. In the past, when Navlakha's original pair of spectacles went missing, it was difficult for the replacement spectacles to reach him in time.

It is not too much to ask for these simple facilities, phone access to his lawyers and family, and some fresh air to walk in once or twice a day.

Gautam has faced his unjustified incarceration with courage and spirit. How much longer is he going to be persecuted for his views, and to what extent will the authorities go to break his spirit?

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