

DO THEY DESERVE TO BE HANGED?

*(Written for a Dharna at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, 6 October 1997
Joint Action Committee for the Commutation of Death Sentence of
Chalpathi Rao and Vijayavardhana Rao, Andhra Pradesh.)*

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Dear friends,

This is an appeal to residents of the nation's capital to join us in the campaign to persuade the Government of India to commute to life sentence the sentence of death passed on S. Chalpathi Rao and G. Vijayavardhana Rao, two dalit youth of Andhra Pradesh.

The two young men were self-employed labourers of Guntur district in Andhra Pradesh. The former was a painter and the latter a rod-bender in building construction. They had no previous crime record, and indeed had never stepped into a police station in their lives.

Unable to make both ends meet with their honest toil, and unwilling to resign themselves to the life of distress imposed by their birth in a property-less dalit family upon them and their dependents, they decided one day in 1993 to rob a bus. Taking the cue from a news item they read in a paper, they decided to buy a can of petrol, board a bus, sprinkle the petrol on the floor of the bus, threaten the passengers that they would set the bus on fire, and rob them. It was not their intention to kill anyone, but only use the threat to rob the passengers.

It was no doubt an irresponsible plan. Petrol being highly combustible, there was always the possibility that it would catch fire and cause unintended damage. That is what in fact happened when the two young men put their plan into effect. The overnight express bus in which they tried their robbery caught fire before they could rob anyone, and twenty three passengers, half asleep, were burnt to death. One of the two would-be-robbers was also partly burnt before the two of them could jump out and escape.

The Sessions Court of the district sentenced them to death, and both the High Court and the Supreme Court have confirmed the death sentence. Now a plea for commutation of the death sentence to a sentence of life imprisonment is pending with the President of India. On behalf of the Joint Action Committee

for Commutation of the Death Sentence, consisting of a number of dalit, workers', women's and civil rights organisations of Andhra Pradesh, we request you to join us in asking the President of India to exercise his discretion in favour of the plea.

Why?

The two young men have committed a crime, a horrible crime. They undoubtedly deserve to be punished. But do they deserve to be hanged? To hang them is to hold them alone and exclusively responsible for the offence they have committed and to absolve the rest of us of our responsibility for driving them to crime.

Fifty years after Independence, the life of unemployed, semi-employed or self-employed slum dwellers continues to be an unrelieved tale of misery and suffering. The government, which under the Constitution of India is supposed to build a society based on social, economic and political justice, has failed miserably in taking the country forward one inch in that direction.

For those among the poor who are dalits by birth, the possibility of moving up in life are further closed by the accident of their birth. No helping hand is offered to them by society. A life of endless misery, toil and eternally belied hope is their lot.

It is no surprise that young men brought up in this milieu seek desperate remedies. What, in any case, is the role model offered to them by our society's elite, whether political or economic? Is it not a model of selfishness, plunder, scams and *hawalas*? What is the message sent out by the indifference that all of us exhibit towards the misery of the poor and the deprived? Is it not a message of each for himself, and the devil take the hindmost? Does society spend even one-hundredth of the time in worrying about the misery of slum-dwellers that it does worrying about the crimes committed by slum-dwellers? If we did, would it be necessary for poor semi-employed dalits such as these two boys to take to crime?

To allow these two young men to be hanged is to allow our country's rulers to get away once more with their crime of indifference towards their Constitutional obligation to build a welfare State in India. It is to allow the rest of society -- that includes all of us -- get away once more with our crime of indifference to the lot of the poor and the deprived except when they turn to crime.

We hope, therefore, that you will join us in putting pressure upon the President of India to commute their death sentence to a sentence of life imprisonment.

**Dharna For Commutation Of Death Sentence Passed On Two Dalit Youth
Of Andhra Pradesh.**

Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, 6 October 1997