



Dr S. Natarajan handing over the memorandum to Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan

## Ordinance to Protect Doctors Issued After Ophthalmologists Spearhead Protests

**O**n February 25, the Maharashtra government finally acknowledged the demand of doctors to issue an ordinance for protection of medical practitioners in the state. The regulation follows strong lobbying by doctors, who have been battling increasing incidents of violence by angry relatives and friends of patients.

**“The ordinance for protection of doctors is definitely a step in the right direction in preventing such gruesome attacks on a noble profession.”**

Dr S. Natarajan

According to the Maharashtra Medical Services Persons and Medical Institutions (Prevention of Violence and Damages or Loss of Property) ordinance, offenders will have to pay Rs 50,000 or face imprisonment for three years, or both, and pay double in compensation for damages.

“It had been more than three years since a special legislation had been

promised by the government against assault on doctors and medical establishments,” said Dr S. Natarajan, President of the Maharashtra Ophthalmological Society and the Bombay Ophthalmological Society, who spearheaded the protests along with Dr T.P. Lahane and Dr Preetam Samant. “In fact, the assault cases have become more frequent and intense. Vandals are now operating with an absolute sense of impunity, drawing comfort from the fact that present sections are not punitive at all.”

In the most recent case, doctors at the government-run KEM Hospital were allegedly assaulted over an autopsy issue by relatives of a patient in the casualty ward.

It was the MOS that started the campaign to lobby for the ordinance after its former president, Dr Prakash Kankaria, was “manhandled” by miscreants in Ahmednagar in December 2008. The society decided to “offer the government their version of *ahimsa* (non-violence) by deciding to observe a No Practice Day every month

to press for stringent legislation. On January 24, ophthalmologists across Mumbai shut their practices.

Subsequently, 35 other medical organizations—including, the Indian Medical Association, Indian Academy of Pediatricians, and Association of General Practitioners—joined in the protests led by the ophthalmologists, and observe another No Practice Day on February 24. In Mumbai alone, over 12,000 doctors joined the campaign.

This united front of medical organizations met Chief Minister Ashok Chavan and members of the health department on February 21. “The chief minister listened to our grievances and agreed to pass the legislation. After his reassurance, we called off the strike,” says Dr Natarajan. “He kept his word and the ordinance for protection of doctors was introduced. This was definitely a step in the right direction in preventing such gruesome attacks on a noble profession.”

Maharashtra follows states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Goa where such a legislation exists. **WR**