

Of Prize and Prisoner

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[Physician and activist Dr Binayak Sen—currently behind bars for alleged links with Naxalites—last month became the first South Asian to get the prestigious Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health and Human Rights in recognition of his work in the remotest areas of Chhattisgarh. This award has been given to him by public health organisations and professionals working in more than 140 countries on six continents. On this occasion, Dr P Zachariah, the retired Head of Physiology at the Christian Medical College, Vellore examines the life of his former student — a life that's led to widespread admiration, international accolades and accusations of sedition by the state.]

Binayak Sen was an exceptionally bright student. He got into Christian Medical College, Vellore, through the open category, a task as difficult as getting into the IITS. From the beginning, it was apparent to all that he was a great questioner; he wanted to know why everything was the way it was. Even while in college he wrote an award-winning essay proposing changes in medical education.

A Christian students group in CMC was very active in social work and Binayak became one of their most active members. CMC certainly had a tradition of charity but he was unusual in that he wanted to know why people were not healthy. He won a gold medal in paediatrics, then the most coveted post-graduate programme, and studied malnutrition as part of his dissertation. Visiting the slums of Vellore, he realised that malnutrition wasn't just a medical issue; it had social and political roots. This was in 1966-71, way before the World Health Organisation's 1978 Alma Ata Declaration stating that health is a human right.

Binayak went from Vellore to JNU to explore the notion of health as a human right. For a while he worked in a hospital in rural Hoshangabad that was run by a Quaker group known for their commitment to non-violence: this is relevant, considering the allegations against him now. Working on their anti-tuberculosis programme, he grew acquainted with mining communities. He then moved to Dallirajhara in Chhattisgarh. It was a moment of intensive union activity among mine workers. Permanently disenfranchised as casual labourers, these miners were beginning to fight their abysmal conditions, led by the iconic leader Shankar Guha Niyogi. Healthcare was non-existent. Sanitary arrangements were primitive. One of the most active people in their movement died while giving birth. It then became clear to them that the community needed to push for medical care.

Binayak set up a clinic with the help of the community that later became the Shaheed Hospital. Miners volunteered and he trained them in nursing, laboratory work, accounts and management. Binayak believed that medical science needed to be demystified and at the same time he broke down the walls between intellectual activity and manual labour. Everyone in the hospital, including Binayak, did sanitary work. He empowered them so that they were able to take major policy decisions. They began with ten beds and in the seven years that Binayak was there it became a 90-bed hospital.

He left when Shankar Guha Niyogi was assassinated by the mining mafia. Niyogi had thought of Binayak as his successor and he, in turn, thought of Niyogi as an elder brother. But the assassination changed things and the movement took a violent direction. Binayak left Chhattisgarh and was depressed for a while. He

even came to stay with his friends in Vellore. Niyogi's death was, perhaps, the only point at which he could have walked away from the life he'd chosen. In the years that followed, his life became too entwined with that of the rural poor of Chhattisgarh for him to ever leave.

He later moved to a place outside Raipur to serve the families displaced by the Gangrail dam. Binayak was very interested in the question of food security. He saw children die from malnutrition and saw that families below the poverty line had no access to ration cards. Through his organisation, *Roopantar*, he initiated programmes to promote food security. He encouraged villagers to create and preserve food banks as a community.

His interest in civil activism also grew out of witnessing malnutrition deaths among children. The lack of governance worried him deeply. Chhattisgarh is a complicated state with a complicated history. The government did not meet the people's needs and it was easy for Naxalites to exploit that. The government found it difficult to deal with militants who operated out of dense forests and took a very repressive stance. In the end, it led to the creation of the *Salwa Judum*, the civilian militia drawn mostly from local villages. The police machinery too was getting large funds to fight the Naxalites. In the dark days that followed, people began to disappear. As a member of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Binayak couldn't help getting involved. PUCL was constantly approached by villagers saying that their relatives had disappeared. The police had to be approached, FIRs had to be filed, and Binayak began to help.

It was against this background that he met with Naxalite ideologue Narayan Sanyal. During his time in jail in Andhra Pradesh, Sanyal had developed a contracture of the hand, a painful condition which required surgery. Sanyal's brother wrote to Binayak requesting medical attention, and he took up the case, meeting Sanyal each time only with official permission. It was to eventually lead to his arrest for alleged 'sedition'.

In truth the government finds Chhattisgarh difficult to govern. They think they can manage the Naxalite problem if they come down hard. At the same time, policemen are being killed everyday; so there are strong emotions against Naxalites too. Besides, there are rich mineral resources that can be turned over to extractive industries only when the tribals are removed from the forests. So there are high stakes for the government to say: "If you are not with us, you are against us."

Binayak is a very rare doctor—a man with a deep understanding of the social and political dimensions of health. The governments of the world, the World Bank and other organisations are now worrying about food security and alternative food policies; Binayak was decades ahead of them all. When the government makes such a man's life impossible, what message is it sending out? A recent graduate from CMC said, "On the one hand I have Binayak Sen's example and on the other hand, I have corporates waiting with open arms." A group of doctors at AIIMS, inspired by Binayak, have set up a hospital in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh.

The news of Binayak winning the award should be a source of national pride, but how can his friends celebrate this when he is in prison for his belief that

health and human rights cannot be separated? When the state makes a scapegoat of a man like Binayak Sen, it destroys all the idealism in the world. □□