

NRIs on FAST

Many concerned Indians in the USA joined a global fast by hundreds of activists in Raipur, Chhattisgarh as well as in other parts of India and the world, demanding the annulment of the draconian Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act 2005, and the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1967) amended in 2004 and the release of Dr Binayak Sen (medical doctor and recipient of the prestigious Jonathan Mann award for Health and Human Rights), Ajay T G (independent film-maker) and many other activists belonging to the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), detained under the above acts.

Rashim Singh, a PhD student at University of Houston, USA, a volunteer and an Executive Board member of Association for India's Development (AID) was on the 8th day of her 10-day fast, which started on June 16th 2005. Along with her several other NRIs were also fasting in solidarity, from 1 to 4 days.

Speaking on the incarceration of Dr Binayak Sen, Rashim Singh said, "A man who for 30 years has dedicated his life to the service of the poor cannot be branded as a threat to the country". On being asked what made her undertake the 10-day fast, she said, "If Gandhiji could have successfully used satyagraha to make the British listen to us, then we expect our own government in Chhattisgarh and Delhi to listen to the voices of thousands of Indian citizens from all over the world demanding the abrogation of the draconian laws. If every voice raised against the government atrocities are curbed, then what is the use of a democracy?"

AID Houston volunteers Anand Chandolu and Shekhar Gosavi who were with Rashim when she began her fast said: "We must do more to raise awareness about this cause. We pray for the people in India and USA, from various groups such as Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha, Asha Parivar, National Alliance of People's Movement, AID that are fasting for the release of Dr Binayak Sen, a noted doctor and human rights activist working with PUCL."

Those fasting in Raipur, India included Dr Sandeep Pandey (Magsaysay Award Winner & Social Worker), Prem Narain Verma (Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha), Prem Prakash & Faizal (from Asha Parivar) and several other activists from various organizations in India.

Dr Binayak Sen's case represents an alarming trend where human rights defenders that oppose state repression, including extra-judicial killings, are being held under draconian laws such the CSPSA (Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act) and the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act). Ajay T G, an independent film maker and social activist from Chhattisgarh; Lachit Bordoloi, a human rights activist from Assam; Prashant Rahi, journalist from Uttarakhand; Govindan Kutty, editor of People's March in Kerala; Praful Jha, a journalist from Chhattisgarh; Vernon Gonsalves, an activist from Nasik; Arun Ferreira, Ashok Reddy, Dhanendra Bhurule, Naresh Bansode, activists from Vidarbha, have all been charged under the UAPA and kept under prolonged detention without bail. These draconian laws sanction the violation of due process by the state, and thus contravene internationally accepted norms of jurisprudence as well as democratic governance. As Mr Kannabiran, National President of PUCL, India, argues in his letter to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the CSPSA and UAPA operate by criminalizing the very performance of civil liberties activities, and culpability is decided upon not by

direct proof, but through guilt by association. This is the context in which many activists are questioning the charges of sedition brought against Dr Sen—for example, Ms Shalini Gera, an activist from Friends of South Asia, points out that the "evidence" presented by the state about Dr Sen's "Maoist connections" actually refers to Binayak Sen's meetings with Narayan Sanyal, (a jailed 70-year-old Maoist leader) that took place with the permission of the jail authorities, and under their close supervision, when Dr Sen, as the vice-president of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), visited Sanyal in the Raipur Central Jail to provide medical and legal assistance.

Association for India's Development

(AID), Houston, US