

TWO YEARS LATER

Why is Binayak in Prison?

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A few days to go and India will again show that the cost of dissent a peaceful man pays in this country is a detention for two years on fictitious grounds. Almost a year ago, twenty two Nobel winners had come forward demanding Binayak Sen's release so that he could go and receive the 2008 Jonathan Mann Award for Health and Human Rights in Washington. Sen is the first Indian, nay the first South Asian to be selected for the award. Hundreds of people around the globe staged demonstrations, held vigils and organized public meetings demanding his immediate release on May 14, 2008, first anniversary of Sen's arrest. Another year has passed since and this time almost a hundred and fifty UK academics came forward appealing for his release. Does it penetrate the State's long ears, which usually has no difficulty in hearing inaudible whispers of 'Terror' everywhere, especially in areas called human rights and activism.

So it is terror everywhere. A public health professional who has tirelessly worked for issues of health services, social justice and basic livelihood suddenly finds himself as the object of the State's terrified fascination. Of course, in an era when rising GDP (never mind recession) is pinned against sliding basic necessities, the odds like Sen who still do not forget to care for human causes are indeed fascinating objects for the State. Sen's detention is and has been putting a series of question marks beside the Constitution's Preamble. Is this then, the quality of democracy? Nearing the second year of the mockery of democracy, the questions will only get bolder and stronger.

In Binayak's determination to stand up against State atrocities on tribals, in his courage to establish sustainable health care services when none existed, in his dogged resolve to inject idealism at the grassroots and create a practical grassroots language of struggle and collective sharing, that he was made the perfect catch, almost flawless. The dubious case framed against Sen is nothing short of hilarious, and it doesn't take a genius to figure out the true reason of his arrest. The Chhattisgarh State Public Security Act is not something which corroborates with international human rights standards and charges framed against Sen have no basis or evidence. The other purpose served by Sen's arrest is that it validates BJP's consistent effort at deleting the line between Maoists and activists, the latter believing that legal process should always be followed even when dealing with violators of law. Binayak, a strong critic of the notorious *Salwa Judum*, the inhuman anti-Maoist policy of the state had to be silenced so that the systematic process of eliminating voices of dissent could continue.

Strangely, those who belong to the rarified brand of Sen have found a louder and stronger voice this time to the utter dismay of Indian democracy. This dismay ought to be converted to horror to force the State to release Sen from languishing in the jail. While with the second year of his imprisonment now coming to a close, the UK academics group has urged that Dr Sen be released, and be treated in the spirit of India's own constitution. At a time when the global economic situation has made the poor even more vulnerable, governments must support and work with, not incarcerate and abuse, those

like Dr Sen and other human rights activists who work for positive change, a number of organizations from different parts of India, including the PUCL, have launched the Raipur Satyagraha to step up the campaign for his release.

The Satyagraha—echoing Mahatma Gandhi's belief in nonviolent resistance—is going to be a sustained movement, where human rights activists, civil society organizations, lawyers, women's groups and other supporters will walk every Monday to the Raipur Central jail, where Sen is being held, and court arrest. On 30th March, the third batch of 90 protestors courted arrest, including spirited individuals from APDR, Bandi Mukti Committee, Sanjukta Paribahan Shramik Union, Shilpi Sena and others to name a few.

The Raipur Satyagraha has an enormous potential to achieve greater heights. It is time that the movement should spread from Raipur to other parts of this country. Collective responsibility is required to ensure that the institution called Binayak Sen doesn't fail, for the greater good of Democracy.
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