

Another Mandela?

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led government of Chattisgarh is notoriously shutting out dissenters while the opposition Congress is helping its political adversary in every possible way to silence the voice of the voiceless. It's a caricature of democracy that the government can boast of in this backward state predominantly inhabited by tribals. Social activists who try to serve the poor of the poorest in this hapless state predominantly inhabited by tribals, against all kinds of odds, official and un-official, always face the prospects of being harassed and arrested under any number of draconian laws. So Dr Binayak Sen is still behind bars.

Dr Sen has been in prison for about two years, arrested under one of India's most draconian laws, the Chattisgarh Special Public Security Act. This Act has such a vague, diffused definition of 'Unlawful Activity' that it renders every person guilty unless he or she can prove their innocence. Dr Sen's bail application was dismissed twice, both times at the very outset, by the High Court of Chattisgarh and by the Supreme Court of India. On neither occasion was there a discussion on the merits of the case.

But there has been a change in circumstances. To begin with, the charge-sheet has been filed. 64 witnesses have been examined by the prosecution. Not one of them has provided legally admissible evidence to support the accusations in the charge-sheet. Even the jail officials, the Superintendent and the Jailer, who were called as witnesses by the Prosecution, have reportedly ruled out the possibility of Dr Sen being a carrier of letters given to him by Narayan Sanyal (said to be a senior Maoist leader) who is a high security prisoner in Raipur Jail.

For all practical purposes there is a civil war in the state of Chattisgarh. Hundreds are being killed and imprisoned. Hundreds of thousands of the poorest of the poor are hiding in the forests, fearing for their lives. They have no access to food, to markets, to schools or healthcare. The thousands who have been moved into the camps of the government-backed people's militia, the *Salwa Judum*, are also trapped in sordid encampments, which have to be guarded by armed police. Hatred, violence and brutality is being cynically spread, pitting the poor against the poorest.

Undoubtedly Dr Sen spoke out against this policy of the State Government, because he opposed the formation of the *Salwa Judum*. His incarceration is meant to silence dissent, and criminalise democratic space. It is meant to create a wall of silence around the on-going civil war in Chattisgarh. It is meant to absorb all civic attention so that the stories of the hundreds of other nameless, faceless people –those without lawyers, without the attention of journalists—who are starving and dying in the forests, go unnoticed and unrecorded.

Dr Sen has saved thousands from certain death from malaria, diarrhoea, and other easily treatable illnesses. And yet, he is the one in jail, while those who boast openly about mass murder are free to go about their business, and even stand for elections.

Dr Binayak Sen may be another Nelson Mandela in this biggest showpiece of democracy! □□□

