

CAMPAIGN BEYOND THE HORIZON

"We Are All Binayak Sen"

Satya Sagar

There is a spectre haunting the Indian security establishment. A spectre called the national and global campaign for Dr Binayak Sen's release.

Speaking at a function organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry in Calcutta recently M K Narayan, Governor of Bengal, claimed that supporting Maoists had become a 'fad' among students, youth and a section of the intelligentsia.

"Civil society is spreading the message of the Maoists by campaigning for Dr Binayak Sen's release" said a rueful Narayan, who prior to his new avatar, was the Indian government's National Security Adviser (NSA).

The thought that a man who presided over national security for so long cannot distinguish between peaceful, democratic protests and 'Maoism' should be enough to send shivers down the spine of every Indian citizen. Here is the perverted mindset, so dominant among those who run this country, that confuses compassion with conspiracy and innocence with insurrectionary motives.

Even if Narayan's imaginary spreading of 'disaffection' against the Indian State through the 'Free Binayak Sen Campaign' is true, it is ultimately a ghost manufactured entirely by dark characters who run the country's police and 'intelligence' services.

In May 2007 when the venal BJP regime of Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh, encouraged by security hawks like Narayan, decided to prosecute Dr Sen they had obviously thought they would 'teach a lesson' to not just this good doctor but all human rights activists everywhere.

Dr Sen was being punished for daring to criticize the brutal Chhattisgarh government backed militia operation called 'Salwa Judum' against Maoist insurgents that ended up killing dozens of innocent adivasis. He was an easy prey, a doctor with no major political party or money or muscle power of any kind behind him.

Charged with 'sedition', 'criminal conspiracy' and 'waging war against the Indian State' Dr Sen was arrested, put away in prison for two years without bail. And finally when he did get bail from the Supreme Court in 2009 the freedom was short lived and on Christmas Eve in 2010, he was sentenced to a drastic life imprisonment by a Sessions Court in Raipur.

By blatantly cooking up charges, fabricating evidence and handing out an outrageous 'life sentence' verdict to someone with an impeccable record of public service though the Indian security establishment has essentially shot the Indian State in the foot (if not elsewhere too). Worries about the implications of the Binayak Sen case for the future of the Indian State's ability to command any respect within the country are now rife among security experts.

"This case is, indeed, an index of the incompetence of the State and its agencies. Once again we are brought back to a consciousness of the tremendous infirmity of the Indian State; its inability to secure its objectives by due process; its consequent desire for and resort to short-cuts and quick fixes. In this sense, what we have here is the judicial equivalent of a fake encounter - a paper-thin plotline; dodgy witnesses; incoherent, internally contradictory testimonies from tainted, partisan, sources; and the visible neglect or suppression of convincing evidence that undermines the State's case" wrote an angry Ajay

Sahni, Executive Director of the Institute for Conflict Management in a recent article in the *Hindustan Times*. Sahni should know, as one of the country's most sought after security advisors on terrorism in South Asia.

Binayak's mother, in an interview recently, recounted how as a young boy he would be troubled by why poor children his own age in the neighbourhood went to sleep without eating food. The Indian State is now afraid that every child in this country might start asking the same question and get the right answer too. It is the State, its politicians, police, bureaucrats and business partners who are stealing food from the mouths of its own hungry citizens.

That is a 'seditious' thought of course and might lead to 'seditious' consequences and hence Dr Binayak Sen has to be locked up in a high security prison on charges of 'sedition'!

Three years ago, when he was first arrested, Dr Sen was a low profile health and human rights worker known only to a small circle of friends and activists. Though an annoying critic to the government in Chhattisgarh, where he worked for over three decades, in the overall scheme of things nationally he was at worst a minor thorn in the side of the establishment.

Today, thanks to the outrage provoked by his brazen and senseless persecution, Dr Binayak Sen has become a household name. Being played on almost daily basis in the big metros, in the capitals of Western nations, on the front pages of global media and even in remote little towns across the country today is the legend of Binayak Sen, the brave doctor battling the crumbling idea of India as the 'world's largest democracy'. The Binayak Sen case has made India today the laughing stock of the world with comparisons being made internationally to authoritarian dictatorships like China and Burma, something unthinkable just a few years ago.

It was fellows like Narayan and E S L Narasimhan—another 'intelligence' bigwig who was governor of Chhattisgarh till recently—who gave the Raman Singh regime the idea that they were on the right track by making an 'example' of Dr Sen, despite zero evidence of any kind.

Narayan and other hawks in the Indian security agencies seriously believed that Dr Sen was part of some shadowy operation by the Maoists to set up a 'urban network' to supplement their activities in the forest and rural areas. There was no such thing of course, with the good doctor's only motivation being the pursuit of truth and justice as dictated by his conscience.

If at one time his conscience required him to fight the widespread prevalence of falciparum malaria he did so. Another time when it called upon him to oppose Salwa Judum he did that too, unmindful of personal consequences. It has always been impossible to slot him as 'Marxist' or 'Maoist' or for that matter even entirely as a 'Gandhian' and therein lies his widespread appeal. He was and remains simply a man of conscience and courage.

Having never encountered, perhaps, even a single honest character like this in their entire professional careers, for people like Narayan or Narasimhan the only explanation possible for Dr Sen's 'bizarre' behavior was his being part of an elaborate subversive plot somewhere. Why should someone who could have made a lucrative career as an urban doctor potter around among adivasis trying to solve their myriad problems- must be a bloody Maoist! It is this kind of lousy logic and the stupid actions flowing from it that are coming back to haunt the security agencies.

In an age where true power rests not just in economic or military might but in the projection of public credibility and when a good image means in security terms much more than all the police at one's command, the persecution of this good doctor has seriously damaged Indian State's legitimacy. True, for a majority of the Indian population, living in sub-

human conditions of poverty and disease- the term 'government' itself has always evoked nothing but bitter cynicism while the very idea of India being a 'democracy' is dismissed with laughter.

In Dr Sen's case though, the subversion of democratic institutions and processes by the government, has provoked outrage amidst those sections of the Indian population who were not so disillusioned till recently. Many of them have long believed that the Indian Republic- for all its many shortcomings- is still a functioning democracy and that governments can be trusted with ensuring the rule of law. That belief has been severely shaken now.

From doctors and university professors to students and professionals of different kinds all over India and abroad have protested vehemently against the murder of democratic norms in broad daylight by the Chhattisgarh government together with the lower judiciary.

The outrage among these sections is arising also not just out of a sense of bonding with Dr Sen because of his similar middle-class origins but out of a deep anger at the state of this nation. The very idea that someone with such a stellar record of public service among the poor should be punished wrongly while scamsters, mobsters and murderers occupy high positions in authority all around is revolting. And the people are now revolting.

The question on everybody's lips is why are the masterminds of the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, the 2002 Gujarat massacre of Muslims, the politicians stealing national wealth through the CWG, 2G and other scams not in jail for 'sedition'? Why are Sajjan Kumar, Jagdish Tytler, Bal Thackeray, Narendra Modi, Sharad Pawar, Suresh Kalmadi, A Raja not in jail while Dr Binayak Sen sits in a cold prison?

In that sense the growing campaign for Dr Binayak Sen's release is today not just about freeing this good doctor from his unjust incarceration. It is now on its way to becoming a movement for the freedom of all ordinary citizens who are trapped in the prison house that India has become.

A prison that is currently run by people who have no respect for the Indian Constitution, rule of law, judicial procedures or democratic norms. An oligarchy that protects its own from punishment but mercilessly hounds those who show compassion or solidarity with its victims. A kleptocracy worse than the colonial regime that was kicked out of this country over six decades ago.

Dr Sen today has become a symbol of quiet resistance and inspiration to many now willing to challenge the authoritarian ways of the Indian State as well as its misplaced policies of putting the greed of a few above the needs of the majority. He has become a spearhead for a campaign that seeks to reclaim the just and democratic India that was promised by the founding fathers (and mothers) but which has been hijacked by an entire class and characters no child would trust his lollipop with leave alone an entire country.

That is why the emerging slogan of the campaign today is not just 'Free Binayak Sen' but together with that 'Free Us All!' □□□

[source : countercurrents.org]