

At the end of a dirt track running through a dense sal and mahua forest in the heart of India - a 90-minute flight and two-hour road journey northeast of Mumbai where the hold of the state is waning, stands a spare building, its grey walls ringed with marigold flowers.

Out of a modest room here in southeast Chhattisgarh, paediatrician Binayak Sen, 58 ran a weekly clinic that drew villagers from impoverished, dimly-lit hamlets as far as 30 km away. For most of Sen's patients, mostly undernourished tribals plagued by life-threatening illnesses like malaria or tuberculosis, that could mean a two-day trudge through dense forests.

Snotty children with swollen bellies look on as school teacher Pilko Ram in Selbahara village 85 km south of the capital Raipur - explains the popularity of the tall, bearded doctor who was thrown into jail in May. He has been charged with aiding a Maoist insurgency that takes a life every day in Chattisgarh: soldier, terrorist, sympathiser or bystander.

More than 1,200 have died since the state government began a controversial anti-insurgency operation in January 2005 (see box) to regain control of an area where swathes of land are now part of a so-called 'liberated zone' controlled by Maoists, known to the rest of India as Naxalites.

"Doctors care about us," explains Pilko Ram. "And he did not charge any fees. Once, during a food crisis, he distributed grain in the village for two weeks."

Lalita (she uses no surname), a government community health worker, takes up the tale of the charismatic doctor. "He would patiently explain illnesses with drawings to those of us who could not read or write," she says.

Lalita is one among hundreds of workers trained under a rural healthcare programme crafted by Sen. Called Mitandin, it works like this:

a village elects one of its women to be trained as a provider of primary healthcare. It was implemented so successfully in more than 200 villages in the district in 2003-04 that the state turned it into official policy, calling it the Indira Mitandin Swastha Yojana (Indira Volunteer Health Program).

Sen's colleague Prahlad Sahu explains that the doctor, who often toured villages to probe deaths by possible starvation, wanted the public health system to speak to people's needs. "He was passionate about villagers having access to affordable, effective healthcare," says Sahu.

Sen's name evokes similar reverence in the state's mining town of Dhalli Rajahara. It was here, over 25 years ago, that the doctor arrived after abandoning a promising faculty career in Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University. He helped set up the Shaheed Hospital with - and still running on - contributions from miners. "We used to donate our mining allowance of Rs 17 every month then," recalls former miner Shatrughan Yadav.

A tuberculosis patient, Yadav is among 140 patients currently being treated in a hospital meant for 100. "I moved here because I know I will get the right treatment here," he says. "I spent a month in the government hospital near my village, and have already given Rs 3,500 to the

(government) doctor but he is more interested in his private clinic."

At his office in Raipur, protected by armed guards, Director General of Police Vishwaranjan offers a profile of Sen that isn't quite as flattering.

"Sen may not be a Naxalite who would take up arms," says Vishwaranjan. "But he was lending logistic support to an insurgent movement he strongly believed in."

As evidence, the police chief says they have secured three letters from Calcutta-based businessman Piyush Guha; letters that Sen passed on from jailed Maoist leader Narayan Sanyal. The police say Guha is a suspected Maoist who was arrested in Raipur days before Sen, and named the doctor in his statement.

Other investigators, requesting anonymity, told HT they found the names of Sen and his wife Iina, who heads the Women Studies department in Wardha's Mahatma Gandhi University, featuring in literature seized in raids on Naxalites. Sen could face up to seven years in jail if convicted under the Indian Penal Code, and the harsher Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act, which became law last year. It bans groups like the Communist Party of India (Maoist), and anyone proven to have links with it can be jailed.

The police have stopped bringing Sen to the trial court, which is less than two kilometres from Raipur Central Jail. "If he gets killed by Naxalites en route, it will backfire on us," says Vishwaranjan. "It is not as if he is being denied a trial." The trial is now conducted over a videoconference link. Sen's family says he's being denied a fair trial, since he can only talk to the judge on the screen during the hearing with no access to his lawyers.

The jail authorities allowed HT access to Sen, but on the strict condition that nothing he said would be published. As we talk, under an official's close gaze, Sen, thin and dressed in a pale yellow khadi kurta, seemed calm but worried about the Supreme Court denying him bail on December 10. Iina remarks, "Since being put into jail, he says he feels like he is looking at the world through a thick glass, like his consciousness has been dulled."

Sen has steadily countered allegations of Maoist links. Sen's family and colleagues point out that all his meetings with Maoist leader Sanyal were cleared by senior police officials, to allow him to help secure a surgery needed by Sanyal, and that this was done as part of his work with prisoners, as secretary of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) organisation.

Others who have rallied around Sen include Amnesty International, whose statement calling Sen's arrest arbitrary was backed by 10 British Members of Parliament in the House of Commons. Says Amnesty International's India Director Mukul Sharma: "We believe anti-terror laws like Chhattisgarh's security act are being misused to frame civil rights activists like Sen."

Iina says Sen is being targeted for bringing to light state violence against civilians, and urging a political solution to counter the insurgency. "As a civil rights activist, he condemned violence from both sides," she says, as her teenage daughter listens on. "But in his work, he only had access to the state's institutions like courts."

It is the treatment of villagers ensnared in the conflict that Sen was most vocal about, says colleague and PUCL state president Rajendra Sail. The two worked to document what they believed to be fake police encounters, petitioning courts to take note.

Awarding Sen its Paul Harrison award in 2004 for having "redefined the possible role of the doctor in a broken and unjust society," his alma mater, Vellore's Christian Medical College, observed that his human rights work was "a thankless and dangerous job, but he does it undaunted." Sail says, "Sen was the poster boy of the civil rights movement here. By arresting him, the state is sending out a message that it will not tolerate dissent."

Sen himself believed the stakes were getting higher. In various statements over the months preceding his arrest, he alleged that the state had pushed thousands of villagers in the mineral-rich region of Bastar into camps, in order to ease in big-ticket industrialisation projects by Tata Steel Ltd and Essar Steel Ltd. He was especially critical of the move to arm villagers and minors against Naxalites in South Chhattisgarh through what is called the Salwa Judum movement, or 'purification hunt', in the dialect of the local Gond tribe.

Sen is not alone in this belief. Two public interest litigations, including one by the area's former legislators with a list of over 500 villagers killed in the area, challenging the state's Salwa Judum policy are now in the Supreme Court.

Vishwaranjan says that such criticism is strengthening the hand of insurgents, and making even more difficult the work of his besieged teams, deployed in the Liberated Zone's bloodiest battleground. Maoists have killed 113 policemen this year in Chhattisgarh, more than in any other state. But, protests the police chief, "To claim that we have fabricated a case against Sen simply because he criticised us is untrue."

chitrangada.choudhury@hindustantimes.com CAUGHT IN A DEADLY FEUD THE TOLL (January 2005 to December 2007) 261 Naxalites: Security men: 278 Special Officers (villagers working for the state): 111 Civilians: 596 'People like my father are cannon fodder' ON THE night of December 12, over 50 armed Naxalites stormed a police station in south Chhattisgarh, killing three policemen, including Sobha Ram Sahu. The 49-year-old Assistant Sub-Inspector, just promoted from Head Constable, is among the 200 police personnel killed by insurgents in the last three years. In his village Dokla, son Jitendra, 23, a paramilitary soldier posted in Srinagar, is bitter. "There seems to be no proper plan to counter the Naxals' guerilla warfare ...people like my father are dying like cannon fodder." Sahu's widow Umadevi, mother to three collegegoing teenagers, angrily asks: "I am left alone now. How do I run my family and pay my children's fees?" 'My son wasn't a Naxal, but police shot him' This November, after a three-year legal battle, 80-year-old Man Sai Ram had murder charges ordered against eight policemen accused of shooting dead his 35-year-old son, woodcarver Giriwar, in Lakra-kona in March 2004. Lawyer Amarnath Pan-dey and Binayak Sen probed what they claimed was an extra-judicial police assassination. The police insist Ram died in an "encounter", in which five Naxals were killed. "The entry and exit wounds suggest the police made Giriwar kneel down, then shot him dead," counters Pandey. "Villagers are witnesses." "My son had no arms and was not a Naxal, yet the police shot him," says Man Sai Ram. He claims the police threatened his family and asked them to retract the charges. "I want to see them punished before I die," he says.



DREAMER, DOCTOR: Binayak Sen at a public meeting before his arrest.



**BY THE PEOPLE:** The Shaheed Hospital that Sen helped set up 25 years ago with contributions by mineworkers.

PHOTOS BY HEMANT PADALKAR



**FOR THE PEOPLE:** The rural clinic where Binayak Sen treated villagers. Many came from hamlets as far as 30 km away.



Man Sai Ram



**IN THE EYE OF THE STORM:** Slain police official Sobha Ram Sahu's son Jitendra and widow Umadevi



**THE WIFE:** College professor Ilina Sen says her husband Binayak is being victimised by the state.



**THE WORKER:** Lalita (centre) is among hundreds of health volunteers trained under a healthcare programme created by Sen.

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