

## **Free Binayak Sen!**

**The arrest of a doctor who works with poor communities in central India, on trumped-up charges of associating with ‘terrorist’ Naxalites, has sparked worldwide protest. Mari Marcel Thekaekara appeals for support.**

Doctor Binayak Sen is an unusual 58-year-old. He inspires people as a doctor, a kind, gentle human being and passionate human rights defender, a fighter for the rights of the poverty stricken tribal people to whom he has dedicated his life. Yet, after 30 years of committed work for the poor, he is currently languishing in a filthy jail in Chattisgarh, central India. The story is a long one.

Binayak graduated from the Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, one of India’s premier institutions. Even as a student he was something of a legend - charismatic, caring, concerned about every last patient. Stories are being exchanged on the web about him.

Dr Sara Bhattacharji, one of his contemporaries, writes: ‘As a new intern, in CMC Vellore, at the end of a gruelling day he realized he had written a prescription for Lasix (a diuretic) for a patient, without also including the required potassium supplement. The patient had of course left by this time. Binayak went to the medical records department and looked up the patient’s address, then to the pharmacy where he bought the potassium, then sallied forth taking various bone-rattling village buses (remember this is a Bengali floundering without the local language, in rural Tamilnadu) to the patient’s village, where he delivered the medicine to the patient.’ That was early Binayak.

### **Mine workers**

He became a paediatrician, then focussed on community health, which was his passion. Binayak met, wooed and married Ilina. He was fortunate to have found a soul-mate as committed to eradicating poverty as himself. Ilina - warm, caring, compassionate - is one of those rare individuals adored by everyone who knows her.

The doctor’s heart was always with the poor, so he joined an organization run by the Quakers in Hosangabad. Here, in addition to the general work, he was involved in the care of tuberculosis patients. He began to visit some of the mine areas in South Madhya Pradesh (now Chhattisgarh). Contact with the extreme poverty and the plight of the unorganized mine workers moved him. He was invited to join them by their leaders and was primarily responsible for developing a low-cost clinic in Dalli Rajahara.

The mine workers had employment - the hospital was run on their modest donations. The trade union was strong. Volunteers from the union helped to organize the people and work for education, and better social and environmental conditions. They also conducted anti-alcohol

and anti-tobacco campaigns. This helped to keep costs down and left the doctors free to provide low-cost, good-quality clinical care. The hospital has now grown to a 90-bed facility.

## **New models**

When he felt it could run without his help, Binayak moved on. He worked for some time in a mission hospital, nearby in Tilda. He treated patients and trained village health workers. Though he was happy doing this, he felt the necessity to do more than just treat the few who were able to access services.

So they moved to Raipur and started a trust called Rupantar to explore models of development that reflect the people's aspirations. The new place was totally different from Dalli Rajahara. The people lived in scattered villages. Most of them had a long history of being displaced by the damming of the Mahanadi river, especially the Hirakud Dam.

Even as a student he was something of a legend - charismatic, caring, concerned about every last patient

After a significant struggle, 12 of 18 villages were recognized and given amenities. The other six were destroyed, causing further displacement of people. Regular work was a problem. So getting people organized was hard. The issues needing attention were livelihood, education and health. As Binayak started to set up clinics and train health workers he also realized that the main problems were malaria, TB, high mother and child mortality. He experienced the slowly dawning realization that the people were chronically undernourished. This underlying malnutrition became an important focus for them, leading them to look at food security. An agricultural programme grew out of this.

Another issue identified was violence against women. Ilina worked with the community to address this problem. As the health work grew, the problem of access to healthcare became evident. So it was logical to train local people in health. From the health centre they began satellite clinics for surrounding areas. Yet there were many people who still had to travel long distances to access care. Slowly malaria mortality began to decrease; antenatal care and immunization improved. Deaths from diarrhoea and dehydration came down and respiratory illnesses in children were treated.

TB and malaria were still huge problems, both in terms of diagnosis and treatment. Health workers learned to take blood and sputum smears, give antenatal care, health education, to diagnose and treat common illnesses. A trained lab-tech added greatly to the quality of the care.

## **Recognition**

The state recognized their work. Both Binayak and Ilina were part of the planning and setting up of the government health resource centre in the new state of Chhattisgarh. They greatly influenced the health worker programme, called the Mitandin model. Binayak was also asked to be part of the process of the planning for the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and was responsible for the training of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs).

In 2004 his alma mater, CMC Vellore, gave him the prestigious Paul Harrison award for his work. The citation read:

‘Dr Binayak Sen has been true to the spirit and vision of his alma mater and has carried his dedication to truth and service to the very frontline of the battle. He has broken the mould, redefined the possible role of the doctor in a broken and unjust society, holding the cause much more precious than personal safety. CMC is proud to be associated with Binayak and Illina Sen.’

## **The Naxalites**

Meanwhile, in Chattisgarh, a different kind of drama was unfolding. The state had a problem with the Naxalites (a Maoist-Leninist revolutionary army that believes in violence to achieve justice). The Naxalites had approached the very poor villagers and organized them to demand better wages. However, the Naxalites had their own agendas, and often used brutal violence. The state, in retaliation, started the Salwa Judum movement - supposedly a spontaneous response of the people to the violence. The government armed the tribal people - those who refused to fight were branded Naxalites. Many tribal people were trapped between the Salwa Judum and the Naxalites.

The government brought in a draconian special security act. Binayak, with his long experience of the oppression and injustice meted out to the simple people in the area, found himself in the middle of a state-versus-terrorist war. Innocent tribal people were being tortured and beaten up mercilessly, women were gang raped, families were massacred, men killed in fake ‘encounter’ deaths and villages razed to the ground. All this was documented and reported by several newspapers.

## **Human rights**

Binayak began to investigate and make public the human rights violations, through the Peoples’ Union for Civil Liberty. He called for the violence to stop.

‘For the past several years,’ he said, ‘we are seeing all over India – and, as part of that, in the state of Chhattisgarh as well - a concerted programme to expropriate from the poorest people in the Indian nation their access to essentials, common property resources and to natural resources, including land and water... The campaign called the Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh is a part of this process, in which hundreds of villages have been denuded of the people living in them and hundreds of people - men and women - have been killed. Government-armed vigilantes have been deployed and the people who have been protesting against such moves and trying to bring before the world the reality of these campaigns - human rights workers like myself - have also been targetted through state action against them.’

At the present moment the workers of the Chhattisgarh PUCL (People's Union for Civil Liberties), of which I am General Secretary, have particularly become the target of such state action; and I, along with several of my colleagues, am being targetted by the Chhattisgarh state in the form of punitive action, illegal imprisonment. And all these measures are being taken especially under the aegis of the Chhattisgarh Public Security Act.’

This infuriated the local police. They filed trumped up charges against him, branding him a Naxalite and accusing him of smuggling letters for a jailed prisoner he was treating medically. He was arrested and jailed on 14 May 2007.

## **The campaign**

Wikipedia informs us that on 12 June , in an interview with ABC Radio National (Australia), the noted Indian commentator [P Sainath](#) said: ‘You have a number of studies, reports and investigations done by the People's Union for Civil Liberties, of which Binayak is a leading member, on "fake encounters". The word "encounter" has a very special meaning in India. It means the police kill someone, he may be unarmed, he may be tied to a chair. Then he posthumously becomes a Maoist. That's immediately conferred on you in death. [There have been] a number of studies on these “encounters”, and on fake killings, and on a vigilante war that the government is waging on the Maoists... That's what got Binayak Sen into trouble... The charges brought against him - it's very interesting. The police now have sort of outsourced the smear campaign to the media. So the media bring incredible charges against him which the police then do not repeat in the court.' [\[1\]](#)

Noam Chomsky and several other prominent figures issued a Press Statement dated 16 June 2007 alleging that: ‘The fake encounters, rapes, burning of villages and displacement of adivasis [indigenous tribals] in tens of thousands and consequent loss of livelihoods have been extensively chronicled by several independent investigations. Dr Sen's arrest is clearly an attempt to intimidate PUCL and other democratic voices that have been speaking out against human rights violations in the state.’ [\[2\]](#)

‘The word "encounter" has a very special meaning in India. It means the police kill someone, he may be unarmed, he may be tied to a chair. Then he posthumously becomes a Maoist. That's immediately conferred on you in death.’ - P Sainath

On 31 August the Supreme Court of India issued notice to the Chhattisgarh Government on a petition seeking Dr Sen's release from alleged illegal detention. The bench of Justices sought response from the Chhattisgarh Government after senior counsel Soli Sorabjee claimed that Dr Sen had been illegally detained since 14 May on fabricated charges of supporting Naxalites. [\[3\]](#)

Other protests against Dr Sen's arrest have come from Nobel Prize winner [Amartya Sen](#), Magsaysay Prize winner [Aruna Roy](#), Booker Prize winner Arundathi Roy, retired judge Rajinder Sachar of the Delhi High Court, film maker [Shyam Benegal](#) and many eminent medical professors and scientists in India, the US, Britain, Australia and beyond.

Irina Sen, friends and colleagues who have been inspired by Binayak, urge like- minded people from all over the world to join the protest to fight for justice both for Binayak Sen and the thousands of adivasi people suffering oppression in Chhattisgarh.

To join the protest see :

[Amnesty International's Public Statement](#)

[Savebinayak.org website](#)

**Mari Marcel Thekaekara** is a regular contributor to the **NI** who works with adivasis in southern India.