

A Strange Democracy

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India has become a strange democracy where Binayak Sen gets life in jail and dacoits get a life in luxury. It takes years of pressure for government to move against those looting the nation's treasury; and when the majestic forces of enforcement do go on a "raid" they give their quarry enough time to remove every trace of evidence. You have to be exceptionally stupid to store evidence of your own culpability in a telecom scandal where deals were made and money paid three years before. Or, for that matter, even six months ago, as in some instances of the highly lubricated Commonwealth Games. By this time the money has either been spent, converted into assets, or sent to a convenient haven abroad. The political-industrial nexus is above the law, because it controls enforcement. But if the ruling class of India could have hanged Binayak Sen instead of merely trying to send him to jail for the rest of his life, it would have done so.

Binayak made a fundamental, mortal mistake. He was on the side of the poor. That is a non-negotiable error in this oilgarchic democracy. Christmas must be truly merry in the homes of Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, P Chidambaram and of course Raman Singh this year. The Congress and BJP dislike each other with a passion that only a thirst for power can generate; they disagree on just about anything and everything. But there is perfect harmony between them over Naxalite policy. End the Naxalite problem by elimination of the messenger; and the poor will not have the courage to ask for more than the trickle allotted to them by a gluttonous government.

Media is obedient doorman of this nexus, protecting its interests with a zeal that should surprise even the benefactors. The arrest of Binayak was converted into instant accusatory headlines. His trial was ignored by the press, which is why people do not know that there was virtually no substantive evidence. Suffice it to say that two of Binayak's jailors, during his detention without bail, were declared hostile by the prosecution. Prosecuting lawyers are in the pay of government, as are the jailors. And yet two policemen refused to back the prosecution. A fabricated unsigned letter, apparently cooked up on a computer printout, seems to have been sufficient to convince the honourable guardians of the judicial system that Binayak Sen deserved a sentence reserved for only the most hardened murderer.

It is another matter that Binayak Sen, who was senior to this writer in school, was and remains the gentlest of people, distinguished only by a fierce commitment to his cause of choice. Well, this writer doesn't agree with his political views or inclinations; nor does the political system. But it is only in a dictatorship that disagreement is sufficient reason for incarceration. India seems to be developing a two-tier democracy : generosity of the law for the privileged and vindictive, distorted application on the underprivileged.

It is ironic that the Binayak judgement appeared on the front pages of the Christmas day newspapers. Everybody knows that Jesus was not born on 25 December; it was only in the fourth century that Pope Liberius declared this date to be a birthday because mystery and miracle has been associated with the winter solstice from time beyond memory. Christmas has become an international festival because it represents the most important values that give life some meaning and hold the complex social web together: peace, and goodwill towards all men, without which there cannot be peace.

This goodwill is not sectarian; it is easy to have goodwill towards some men, friends or benefactors. Christmas is the festival of the Other. It is the embrace of the dissident, or even

the enemy. The most famous display of the Christmas spirit was the pause on the frontline in the First World War, when a few British and German soldiers announced an impromptu truce, played football, shared a drink and became human for a day before their superiors ordered them to return to the savagery of a terrible war that wrecked Europe.

If Binayak Sen is guilty of sedition on the basis of fictitious evidence, then, as was famously said during the great Gandhian movement against the British between 1919 and 1922, there are not enough jails in India to hold those equally guilty. The reference is not accidental. Governments have begun to opt for a colonial approach towards Naxalism and its myriad manifestations. The reason? Fear, perhaps terror. The corrupt can recognise their nemesis. □□□

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