

Power panels talk Binayak, inequality and UPA failures

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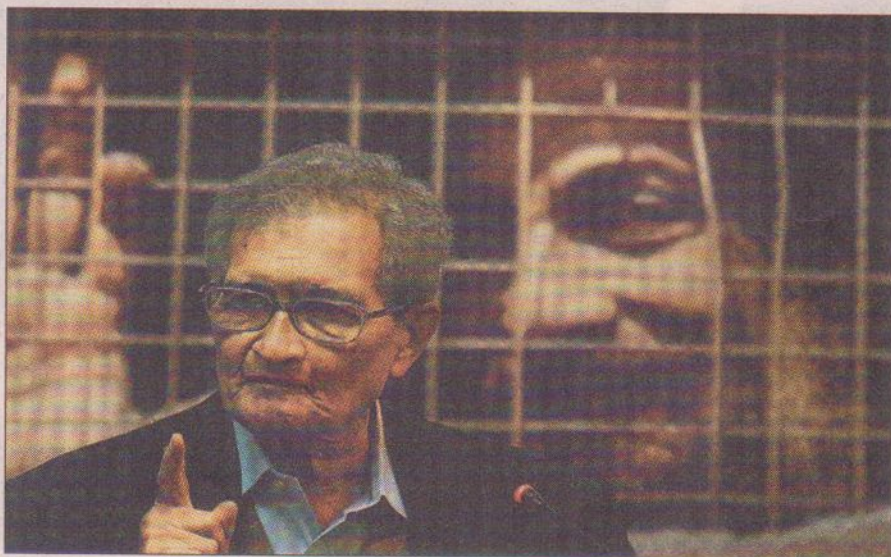
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IN THIS winter of Delhi's discontent, two issues have divided seminar rooms and auditoriums: the thought-battle for control of the Congress' and the government's future, and the sentencing, last month, of doctor-activist and Naxal sympathiser Binayak Sen to life imprisonment for sedition.

At two events on Saturday — both featuring Nobel laureate Amartya Sen — the faultlines of disagreement were laid starkly bare.

Sen, whose economics is considered one of the ideological foundations of the UPA's big centrally-sponsored schemes, has long advocated greater scrutiny of Binayak Sen's treatment by Chhattisgarh's police and judicial system.

In the morning, Sen released journalist and documentary filmmaker Minnie Vaid's book on Binayak Sen — *A Doctor to Defend* — at the India Habitat Centre. Binayak Sen was "unjustly convicted", Sen said at the release. Respect for the judicial process does not mean one should not "exercise one's own judgement", he said. "Even the charge that he (Binayak) passed on communication is not established. Evidence is almost third-hand. How the court believed it is



Nobel laureate Amartya Sen speaks during the event.

PRAVEEN KHANNA

surprising. Nor is passing on communication the material of sedition."

The legal process, Sen said, "is not divorced from human reasoning." Indeed, "even if higher courts quash it, as they should, we will raise the question, because of what this tells us about our legal system." The fact is, he said, "the judiciary acted very peculiarly. How they came to have the powers to do this is questionable. How could very petty thinking become so dominant in the Chhattisgarh legal system?"

Asked if he wasn't skating close to contempt, Sen said "we have a duty to interpret judgments."

Binayak Sen — and

whether India was turning illiberal — came up again later today, at the Nehru Memorial Library auditorium, where the memoirs of the Gandhian social activist, Lakshmi Chand Jain — *Civil Disobedience, Two Freedom Struggles, One Life* — were being released. Amartya Sen was on the panel with Aruna Roy, member of the National Advisory Council, Congress general secretary Digvijaya Singh, and journalist P Sainath.

"Another civil war" is brewing, threatened Roy, if "peripheral issues" and the "self-interest of the rulers" are allowed to challenge poverty-oriented reform. She was speaking in the

context of the dispute between the Prime Minister's Office and the NAC about whether the NREGS should be linked to the minimum wage in each state.

Indeed, Singh said, continuing the civil-war theme, "there has been a systematic struggle between the people and the establishment since Independence. He added that "dissent is the essence of democracy."

Sen said it wouldn't be right to say there has been a decline in democracy in India — at both events he had attended, the message was the same: "we have enormously more power to make society better than we are led to assume."