

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan pays Tribute to Comrade Iina Sen

On August 09, the International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples, Prof. Iina Sen passed away – concluding a memorable journey of life, much of which was traversed with and for tribal communities in India, and more specifically in the Chhattisgarh region.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan pays heartfelt tribute to the Comrade who tirelessly worked among the people on issues of health, education, gender and agrobiodiversity, and fought fearlessly for human rights.

Starting her journey during the 1980s as an activist for civil liberties, she arrived in Chhattisgarh to investigate the arrest of activists under National Security Act. These activists were working with the iron-ore mine workers in the Dalli-Rajhara area. During this, she came in contact with the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangathan (CMSS) and the 'swasthya ke liye sangharsh karo' (struggle for health) campaign and wrote her first Hindi article in *Mitan*, a Union magazine, about the adverse effects of mechanisation on the employment of women workers. She was also the editor of *Mitan* for a brief while and then helped bring out an audio book – *Mitan ki Awaz* as most people could not read. She thus began organising camps for workers' education.

Her lifelong engagement with women's issues began at Dalli-Rajhara with the women of the CMSS and the Mahila Mukti Morcha (MMM). She then helped set up Rupantar, an organisation doing research studies on issues of women and children in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. She published *A Space within the Struggle: Women's Participation in People's Movement* (Kali for Women, 1990) an edited volume on the women's question in peoples' movements. She wrote on women's involvement in the trade union struggles, associated with many grass-roots women's struggles and undertook research studies on out-migration and issues that women faced in this process. She continued her involvement with education among adults and children.

Iina Sen also played a role in drafting the Women's Policy for the new State of Chhattisgarh and was a member of an advisory group at the State level (SHRC) to assist the government in its efforts to improve the abysmal public health services of Chhattisgarh. She was among the founder members of the Coalition for Nuclear Development and Peace (CNDP) a group that had come together in reaction to the nuclear blasts. She contributed as a nominated member of the national executive committee of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and as a member of the national resource group of the Mahila Samakhya programme.

With tendencies of a fascist state developing gradually, rampant and gross violations of human rights took on a new shape. Her fight for civil liberties as a member of the PUCL engulfed her in the fight against state terror, especially after her partner paediatrician Dr. Binayak Sen was charged with sedition and incarcerated under the draconian UAPA. However, taking the fight head-on, Iina Sen spearheaded the "free Binayak" campaign and subsequently also campaigned against many wrongful arrests of people from the Adivasi communities as well as of human rights activists. Dr. Binayak Sen is a founder member of the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan.

Ilina Sen was a leading campaigner against the state-led vigilante violence, especially against Adivasi women, by the Salwa Judum in the mineral rich forests of central India, to facilitate corporate take over of land belonging to the indigenous people of these areas.

Working closely on the issues of development choices that a state can make and grappling with the discourse on different models of development, Ilina Sen wrote in her book *Inside Chhattisgarh: A Political Memoir* (Penguin, 2014) that “It is up to the future generations to work out viable structures of individual and collective freedom through a process of engagement which will include the state, communities and individuals as partners. One can only hope that this will happen without further death, destruction and bloodshed.”

Ilina Sen taught women’s studies first at Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya in Wardha, and later at TISS, Mumbai. Her academic engagement was firmly rooted in her experiences as a grass roots worker in India and in that sense did not derive primarily from an engagement with Western texts, a remarkable marriage of theory and practice. She was an inspiring teacher with a profound passion for what she taught. She was an inspiring leader in the Indian Association for Women’s Studies (IAWS), singing songs of freedom and equality between academic sessions.

Ilina Sen’s passing, after a brave struggle with cancer, is a huge loss to the people’s movements at large, especially today when the state is becoming all the more authoritarian and when human rights are being violated unabashedly. She will be sorely missed.