

Nandigram Nightmare

[A fact-finding team comprising members from Association for Protection of Democratic Rights (APDR), Paschim Banga Kheth Majdoor Samity (PBKMS) and Manabadhikar Suraksha Manch (MASUM) visited Nandigram, a day after the police firing on March 14, 2007. After talking to the victims of March 14 carnage in the affected villages and in different hospitals, the team filed a report detailing the sequence of events on March 14, the role of police and the major ruling party. We publish below their observations and recommendations :]

The events of 14th March 2007 in Nandigram were pre-planned and were executed after plenty of preparation by officials and party functionaries who are very high up in the Government. They probably also required a sanction from the Chief Minister, who also controls the Home Department.

The timing of the police action in Nandigram and the events that preceded the 14th, took place on the 14th and afterwards point clearly to a nexus between the CPM party, the police and the administration.

The crowd of protesters was in a religious gathering and was unarmed and peaceful. It was not an illegal assembly as no ban on assembly was in force in the area. Nor was the crowd obstructing any one's passage or creating a problem for anyone. They did not also obstruct to the filling up of the trench near Bhangabera Bridge. This is obvious from the testimonies from 62 people that the team members gathered and over 200 people they spoke to. It is also obvious that the number of police injured were only 4 in Tamluk hospital and they had minor injuries. The police action was therefore unprovoked.

The police and party goons were heavily armed. The minimum guidelines for use of force by the police were not followed, people were not warned sufficiently before ordering firing or given sufficient time to disperse. The number of people who reported to hospital in injured condition were as many as 85 with 4 brought dead. Also, huge numbers of people were dislocated and had fled their homes. Houses and shops were looted, at least 2 women were raped, many more were sexually assaulted, people were lathi-charged while rescuing the injured. All of these point to the use of unnecessary force by the administration. It also implies that the violence by the police and party goons was not a momentary one. Instead it took about an hour and a half and could have been stopped by senior officials on the spot when it was becoming excessive.

Gender violence had been part of the operations. No women police were deployed though the gathering was largely that of women. Men police and cadres acted with brutality, with reports of rape and sexual assault.

Even when the team visited the area 36 hours after the firing it was obvious that many people were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Children had stopped eating because they had seen the wounded. Many people were hiding in jungles away from their homes. Everywhere people seemed angry but also very frightened that the events of the 14th might recur.

The events of the 14th have created a huge number of internally displaced people, people who have fled their homes in terror. Entire villages have been emptied and many people have gone to live with relatives or friends far away. Quite a few have taken shelter

in the Nandigram BPHC. People who had fled Khejuri earlier in the period January to March to take shelter in Sonachura and neighbouring villages, who had been scattered a second time on the 14th.

The team did not come across even a single child who was amongst the injured or the dead. This makes one suspect the worst—that the children who were wounded or died were disposed off on the quiet.

The people (of Nandigram) have developed distrust for the administration. The police especially is being viewed with great suspicion and there is a great deal of resentment about their presence in the village camps. The people feel that their presence will only encourage and protect party goons to loot, kill and terrorise the people.

Till the 16th, there was very little state response to the woes of the people. The facilities and staff at Nandigram hospital were severely stretched and little attempt had been made to augment these facilities. The district administration especially the DM seemed happy to leave people to their fate. No attempt had been made to help people to file cases against those who had committed atrocities. No efforts were being put in to help people return to their homes. Little was done (except at Tamluk hospital) to trace families or missing people. Even food was becoming a crisis in some places. Women who were in hospitals were not questioned or counselled about sexual violence.

The distrust for the administration on the one hand and the great need for medical , food and legal aid by the people on the other hand creates a paradoxical situation and calls for the intervention of agencies other than the Government in the area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Medical facilities must be augmented at the Nandigram BPHC. Janka PHC in Khejuri PS should be accessible to NGOs and other activists from other areas and facilities must be augmented there also.

The people are in need of medical aid, food, psychological counselling and legal aid. Providing these is the statutory obligation of the State Government. However, as there is tremendous distrust and anger towards the administration, it will be impossible for them to enter the affected area and provide such services to the people. It is therefore suggested that the Government should, from outside the area, assist the petitioner organisations, local people's organisation like the Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee and other civil society organisations that are already intervening there to identify the affected and give aid to them. Police camps within the village must be immediately withdrawn in order to build up the confidence of the people.

Compensation must be paid by the State to all those who have been killed and injured as well to all those who have had to face the trauma of internal displacement. The State must also take responsibility for restoring people to their homes immediately and for their rehabilitation, no matter what their political affiliation.

While the Court has ordered a CBI enquiry, the terms of reference so far have limited their enquiries to the events of the 14th March 2007. It is therefore suggested that a larger enquiry be conducted by a committee of eminent citizens appointed by the Court. Identification and punishment of all those guilty of the actions of the (black) 14 must be done. All police and civil administration personnel who have acted in collusion with

party goons or under the extra- legal orders of party leaders must be identified and punished. The State Government should immediately declare unambiguously that it is opposed to all coercive means of acquiring land. This declaration must include Singur and return of land to unwilling farmers in Singur. The Government must also spell out clearly its land acquisition policy for the future and must allow open public debate on this before finalising such a policy. In particular it must declare its rehabilitation policy not just with regard to land owners, but also with regard to agricultural workers, sharecroppers and other rural workers who are dependent on the land for their livelihood.

Police reform in West Bengal (and elsewhere) is also urgently required with immediate delinking of the police from political bosses and anti-social elements.

Democratisation of society and introduction of transparency in all matters is also urgently required in West Bengal, where lack of democratic space, highhandedness, suppression of all kinds of dissent and concealment of facts from the people have become the hallmarks of both the Government and the ruling party. In particular, in all decision making the State Government must respect the 73rd amendment and must consult local people on all issues through properly conducted gram sansad meetings. ✍✍✍✍