

ONE YEAR LATER

Death Toll in Nandigram

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How many lives were lost in the year-long violence in Nandigram in 2007? The answer cannot but be a plain 'we do not know'. In fact nobody knows—knows for certain.

It is not only that controversy surrounds the number of 'officially confirmed' 14—stated to be killed in the 14th March 'police' firing. In fact, a civil war-like situation prevailed in Nandigram in the past one year and the exact number of people killed in firing or bombing has yet to be recorded. And most importantly, what happened in Nandigram since the last week of October till November 10—how many people lost their lives—still remains largely unknown. Nandigram practically remained closed to the media persons, particularly during 6-10 November '07. The bits of the news that gradually trickled in, therefore, formed only a small paragraph of a long, gory chapter.

In the bizzare circumstances facing the people, one can, at best, attempt a countdown to try to make a tentative estimate of the number of people (regardless of their political indentities) who were shot down by the police, done to death by the CPI(M) cadres and hired goons or killed in clashes and exchange of bombs and bullets between the two rival camps in Nandigram and Khejuri throughout the year 2007.

It is now too well known that Nandigram first flared up on 3 January last year over a notice issued by Haldia Development Authority, a semi-official outfit, announcing the state government's plan to acquire fertile agricultural land in Nandigram, and some parts of Khejuri too, for the purpose of setting up a chemical hub and a SEZ. The strong reaction vented by the Nandigram people to the govt's plan snowballed into a cataclysm on 6-7 January. Three youths—Biswajit Maiti, Bharat Mondal and Sheikh Salim—were killed in police firing on that day. Shankar Samanta, a notorious local CPI(M) leader, however culpable his role might be, also lost his life, allegedly by being burnt alive by a violent mob.

The notice which sparked off the Nandigram upsurge was later invalidated by no other than the Chief Minister who also declared that the govt had scrapped its plan to acquire farmland in Nandigram. But the Nandigram people remained apprehensive of the govt's plan and battle lines were sharply drawn between the loyal Khejuri and the revolting Nandigram. While Khejuri proved to be a bastion of the ruling CPI(M), Nandigram remained under the control of the rebels who had meanwhile formed an outfit *Bhumi Ucched Pratirodh Committee* (BUPC) on 6 January.

Members of BUPC represented the Trinamul Congress, SUCI, Jamait-e-ulema Hind and a large section of Nandigram villagers who had been loyal to the CPI(M) till the other day. Now they were all up in arms against the govt; they blocked and dug up roads and broke canal-bridges to prevent the enrtry of the police and the CPI(M) cadres. This imbroglio continued for three months. Meanwhile, largescale violence broke out at Haldia on 7 February over another land issue and Sadhu Chatterjee, a police officer fell victim to mob fury.

Nandigram continued to be an almost liberated zone till 14 March when the govt rose to its feet and sent the force to seize control of the indomitable Nandigram. What happened thereafter has been well documented. It is now an established fact that on 14 March the police pounced upon Nandigram, accompanied by the CPI(M) cadres and thugs who put on uniforms to pose as policemen. Along with the cops, they fired gunshots on the unarmed people of Nandigram, beat up the villagers including women and children ruthlessly, prevented the injured persons from being taken to hospital and indulged in rape and molestation of several women and young girls. The govt has admitted that 14 people were killed on that fateful day and complying with the Kolkata High Court's order has reportedly paid compensation to the kins of 13 victims—one remaining still unknown. Who are these 14 persons?

The fact-finding report published by *Association for Protection of Democratic Rights* (APDR) and *Paschimbanga Khetmajur Samiti* (PBKS) in April mentioned nine names and noted that five dead bodies hadn't yet been identified. Medical Service Centre (MSC), which played a significant role in providing medical relief and treatment to the injured people, published a more comprehensive report in June. This report (p6) gave a list of 13 dead persons and marked one as 'unknown'. The 'martyrs', according to this list, are :

1. Imdadul Khan
2. Gobindo Das
3. Supriya Jana
4. Sk Imadul Khan
5. Ratan Das
6. Basanti Kar
7. Puspendu Mondol
8. Joydeb Das
9. Badal Mondol
10. Proloy Giri
11. Rakhhal Giri
12. Panchanan Das
13. Shambu Pal
14. Unknown.

The Public Tribunal on Nandigram organised by All India Citizens' Initiative (26-28 May) later published its report in August. This report also confirmed 14 deaths. Its list however didn't include the name of Rakhhal Giri but mentioned the name of one Sakila Bibi (probably the 'unknown' one referred to by MSC); it also added that the victim Shambhu Pal was also known as 'Uttam'. The *Dainik Statesman* (DS), a Bengali daily, which made its mark, by publishing blow-by-blow accounts of peasant upsurge and state violence in Nandigram for months together, brought out a detailed list of the casualties occurred in the past one year on January 3, 2008—the first anniversary of the Nandigram revolt. In regard to 14 March, its list more or less conformed to the one presented by MSC—mentioning the names of 13 persons and marking one, as 'unknown'. While all the sources, quoted above, put the death-toll at 14, none of them mentions the name of Shankar Samanta and one Sunita Mondol, who, as the CPI(M) sources allege, was raped and killed by some BUPC cadres. More strangely, none of the

above lists notes that a dead body was found in a bush on April 1. In connection with the violence of 14 March, mention should also be made of Subroto Samanta who still remains 'untraced'; and one witness (name withheld here but recorded in the report) while deposing before the Public Tribunal claimed that she had seen Subroto falling to police bullets and then being dragged away. The account of casualties on 14 March also cannot be complete without mentioning the name of Tapas Manna who had sustained injuries on that day and died months later on 29/30 October at SSKM hospital, Kolkata. Taking all these facts into account, one has therefore reason to maintain that the aftermath of the 14th March violence claimed around 17/18 lives and the death-toll in Nandigram till March, 2007 was no less than 21/22.

But this estimate cannot be called complete and uncontested. What about the horrifying stories of killing children by tearing their legs apart or throwing them into the river, burying down some dead bodies and sending some others off to unknown places? Many groups and individuals including this writer who visited Nandigram immediately after 14 March heard such accounts from the local people. Historian Tanika Sarkar who had also had the same experience referred to such incredible brutalities in her article in the DS (10.4.07). And those who claimed to be eye-witnesses repeated the same stories before the Tribunal.

It is true that no concrete evidence to support these accounts has yet been found. One may therefore dismiss them as fabricated or delirious utterances of a traumatised population. The possibility of such stories being blown up out of proportion also cannot be ruled out. But at the same time one may argue that the stories might not be totally unfounded. As it has already been noted, one dead body was actually recovered two weeks later. On its arrival in Nandigram on 16 March, the CBI enquiry team rescued a badly injured (legs fractured) youth named Gobindo Paik, left in a bush, probably thought to be dead by the marauders. The local people told the CBI that a number of dead bodies had been buried in the holes of dug-up roads and then covered up with gunny bags. They even pointed to a particular place at Bhangabera in Nandigram (D.S. 17.3.07). They raised the same allegation after the November massacre and this time the CBI did dig out a dead body identified as Haren Pramanik in the Mahestala area. The team also found skulls and bones from under the ground at Khejuri. The possibility of covering up more dead bodies, in March and November, therefore calls for a deeper probe.

Before going into the November bloodbath, one must remember that Nandigram witnessed a series of deaths in the intervening period. In the wake of the January violence, hundreds [not 'thousands', as claimed by the CPI(M)] of families who supported the ruling party fled their homes and moved to Khejuri for fear of being attacked by BUPC. As the APDR team found, initially they were not provided with adequate relief. Later, though protected by their 'comrades', they lived in insecurity bred by homelessness and loss of livelihood. The plight of these people, mostly peasants, formed a part of the sordid saga of Nandigram. On 25 May, *the Anandabazar Patrika* (ABP) reported the death of one Sumati Jana whose family had left Nandigram and was staying at Khejuri. Sumati, suffering from depression, committed suicide. Her tragic death cannot be viewed in isolation of the Nandigram context.

On the other side, attacks from the Khejuri front on Nandigram continued unabated and violence frequently erupted in Nandigram and later in Khejuri too throughout the year (2007). This resulted in the deaths of several people on both sides. The media based record can be summarised as follows :

APRIL-OCTOBER

Dilip Mondol of Gokulnagar and Mahitosh Karan of Jambari, both in Nandigram, were killed, allegedly by the CPI(M) goons of Khejuri on 29 April. Bapan Patra, a peasant fell to bullets while tilling the land at Sherkhanchak on 29 July. Again on 24 August, Madhav Mondol of Khejuri who was staying at Nandigram was killed at Sonachura in the firing opened by the CPI(M) men of Khejuri. Parbati Mitra, a 65-year-old resident of Nandigram, met with the same fate on 6 October by falling to gunshots fired from the Khejuri front.

These deaths were reported mostly in the DS and *The Statesman*. The DS also reported the death of Manas Mondol, a CPI(M) cadre killed in clashes between the two rival camps on 7 October. In a similar way, Kayum Kaji of BUPC and Gangadhar Bose, a Nandigram resident lost their lives during 29-30 October, Mir Murshed, a BUPC member, was reportedly abducted and later killed at Khejuri, according to a report published in the ABP on November 1. On the basis of the newspaper reports, it is clear that death-toll in Nandigram went up to around 30 till the end of October.

But the figure is likely to be higher because from the last week of October, Nandigram, in fact, turned out to be a virtual battle field and conflicting claims of casualties poured in from different sections of the media. With the BUPC now launching retaliatory offensive against Khejuri, clashes claimed lives on both sides. While on 27 October the DS reported four deaths, the local evening news (Bangla) on All India Radio (AIR) announced on 30 October that seven people had been killed in the last few days. Confusion loomed large in the first several days of November. As for example on 8 November, the AIR sources (Bangla news) announced that 12 persons had lost their lives between 26 October and 7 November. The news didn't mention the names of victims. Newspaper reports however gave three names : Rabin Das (BUPC) of Sonachura and two CPI(M) cadres—Tushar Sau and Nirapada Khatua of Sahebganj and Bhupatinagar respectively—who were killed in armed clashes on 6 November. Confounding figuring made matters worse during 7-10 November.

According to the official version, the November (7-10) catastrophe claimed four lives, of them, the name of Sk Rezaul appeared in the DS on 10.11.07. On the 14th, the same paper mentioned two other names—Bimal Mondol and Jagannath Bera and added that Bera's wife had also died in the aforesaid period. In addition to this it reported the tragic death of Major (retd.) Aditya Basak who was said to be dragged to Khejuri and then done to death. On the same day, the ABP came up with the report of a dead body found floating in the adjacent river.

BLOODBATH : NOVEMBER 10

These reports clearly reveal that the number of casualties during 7-10 November was far higher than the officially admitted four only. Reported widely by the media across the country, it is a known fact that on 10 November while the police remained passive, the CPI(M) thugs opened fire on an unarmed procession of Nandigram villagers resulting in 'bloodbath' as termed by *The Times of India*.

'Nandigram Bleeds' was the banner headline of the *Hindustan Times* on 11-11. It was the day the CPI(M) claimed to have finished their much-vaunted 'operation recapture' of Nandigram which would witness, as one leader observed, a 'new sunrise' on the following morning.

How many lives did this 'operation' claim? While *The Statesman* put the number at 30/35, a message over cellphone from Nandigram on the night of 10 December shuddered the protest rally at Esplanade, Kolkata with the chilling news that no less than 45 people had been killed in the course of the said operation. It was announced by Medha Patkar who was then on a hungerstrike to let the world know that the revolting Nandigram was being systematically smothered. The exact number of casualties however still remains unrecorded and may be the new-sunrise will never allow it to come to light. But does one have the number of lives lost even before the November (7-10) mayhem? Bijoy Choudhury in an article in *The Statesman* (2.12.07) refers to 34 as officially confirmed to be dead. Sukumar Mitra of the DS (31.12.07) quotes BUPC sources which claim that they have lost 29 of their supporters in the continuing violence since January. Mitra has also given a list of 12 missing persons, indicating that the death toll may go up in course of time.

It has, in fact, already begun to rise. As already noted, the decomposed dead body of Haren Pramanik, supposed to be a victim of the November violence, has been dug out. Sk Suleman, admitted to SSKM hospital after 6 November, succumbed to his injuries on the 27th instant of the same month. Bidyutbala Maiti, another victim died at Kolkata Medical College & Hospital in late November. On 4 January 2008, the DS mentioned names of two CPI(M) cadres—Madan Das and Nirapada Ghata (Khatua?)—killed in a landmine blast in Nandigram in the turbulent days of November. This paper also referred to one Satyen Gol who was seriously injured on 10 November and remains untraced till date. Conflicting claims and unauthenticated names appearing in various newspapers however continue to add to the confusion.

The most detailed list published in the DS on 3 January this year gave the names of 27 persons as dead. The list included the names of Lalu Giri and Shyamli Manna killed on 8/10 and 10/11 respectively but did not mention the names of several other persons reported to have been killed at different times in the same paper. The list is not complete because it includes only those killed by the CPI(M) cadres and goons. But a number of CPI(M) men also did die in October-November. The list is not authentic either. First, there is a possibility of referring to one individual victim more than once. As for example, Nirapada Ghata and Nirapada Khatua seem to be the same person. Gangaram Das, mentioned in this list might be Gangadhar Bose whose death had earlier been reported in the same paper. And most strangely, some persons, earlier reported to have been done to death, did not figure in the list of January 3. For example, it didn't include Aditya Basak, Madan Das, Bimal Mondol and some others.

The list based on newspaper reports, fact-finding reports and some other sources, therefore, remains incomplete and inaccurate. Excluding the number of deaths occurred during 7-10 November—which is still unknown and unrecorded—and taking into account what is there on record, it can be said that

around 45, or at least over 40 people lost their lives in the aftermath of the violence that raged in Nandigram throughout the past one year.

And what sparked off the violence? Reportedly, a controversial notice which the Chief Minister later asked the people to just 'tear up'. Is it an instance of callousness on the part of the government? No, in view of the catastrophe, it led to, the two incidents of calamitous massacre that Nandigram witnessed, callousness, if it be so, certainly assumes criminal proportions, to say the least.

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