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Indian Tribunal Pushes for Sexual-Violence Inquiry

A citizens' report in India highlights the sexual violence suffered last March by villagers in Nandigram and calls for a special trial of local authorities. Despite media coverage of the report the government has not responded.

By Aparna Pallavi, WeNews correspondent

CALCUTTA, India (WOMENSENEWS) – The testimony of 25-year-old Gouri Pradhan, a resident of the village Gokul Nagar, is typical in its description of the type of sexual assault that women say they suffered at the hands of police during violent land disputes that began last March in Nandigram, a rural area in the eastern state of West Bengal.



Women from Sonachura village in Nandigram, India.

Credit: Aparna Pallavi.

“I went to attend the rally when the police started firing teargas and bullets simultaneously,” Pradhan testified from her hospital bed after the attack.

“I tried to flee, when three policemen caught me and dragged me by the hand and into an empty house. I was beaten so badly that I was in no condition to resist. One of the policemen held my arms while two of them forcefully raped me. Then I lost consciousness and I don't know if the third policeman also forced himself on me or not. I don't know how I came here. I regained my consciousness in the hospital.”

Kajal Gharai, from the village of Shonachura, also testified: “I got shot on my right shoulder. When I tried to flee the police chased me, caught me and ripped all my clothes off. They stripped me naked, kicked me and threw me in a corner. Close to evening someone found me and took me to the hospital. While I was lying there I saw in front of my own eyes two young girls being dragged by the police and taken away.”

The stories are a sampling of testimonies drawn from villagers who on March 14 clashed with police acting on the orders of officials in the West Bengal state government, controlled by the Communist Party of India-Marxist.

The stories were published in August by the All India Citizen's Initiative, a network of citizen activists across India. Authors condemned the violence as a "pre-planned, state-sponsored massacre" and delivered the report to West Bengal's governor, Gopal Krishna Gandhi.

When police opened fire the villagers were resisting a seizure of thousands of acres of land, which the state planned to turn over to developers to build an industrial zone, including a proposed chemical plant.

Official sources said 14 people were killed but activists say the death toll was higher and that large-scale methodical sexual assault was also carried out by the police.

Insisting that the state government has tried to cover up the extent of the violence, activists formed a People's Tribunal and began to collect depositions from villagers.

In the August report, they found "a disturbingly large number of incidents of sexual violence by both police and armed ruling party cadre against women, many of them carried out in the most cruel, degrading and inhuman manner."

Land Pressures Spur Clashes

The clashes in Nandigram have mirrored incidents in several other villages over the past year as farmers are increasingly resisting government efforts to seize their land for industrial uses. As India's economy rapidly develops, companies – often headquartered outside India – are turning to the government to secure land. In turn, they say new industry will generate local jobs and stimulate the economy. Activists say the deals provide few benefits, if any, to local communities.

Following the clash in March, which drew international media coverage and resulted in hundreds of arrests of villagers, the state government announced that it would no longer pursue the land deal in Nandigram. But tensions remain: On Oct. 7 one woman was killed and two other people injured as violence erupted between two citizens' groups, one supporting the resistance and the other supporting the state government, Indian news agency PTI reported.

Ninety percent of employed women in India work in agriculture or related businesses, according to the United Nations.

While activists continue to oppose land seizures, the People's Tribunal report is attempting to bring the claims of sexual assault to light. It has received plenty of local and national media coverage in India but the state government has not responded. The national government has also been silent.

The tribunal demands that a special court headed by a female judge be established to hear the cases of sexual violence against the women of Nandigram and examine cases of tampering of evidence by government hospital staff.

Calling for Assistance

Authors of the report call upon civil society organizations to help the victims file their cases and seek justice.

Tribunal members are citizens from all over India. Some are activists; others are professionals from fields such as media and medicine. The tribunal was headed by S.N. Bhargava, former chief justice of the highest court in the state of Sikkim.

The report's authors visited the site of police firings and other places in the Nandigram area and recorded depositions from victims, witnesses, social activists, intellectuals, doctors, human rights groups and other concerned organizations.

One woman accuses police officers of having slashed her breasts. Several accuse police of forcing rods, sticks and gun barrels into sex organs and in some cases also turning the weapon while it was inside them.

A separate 150-page report submitted to the Calcutta High Court by a medical team of the All India Medical Service Center records 16 cases of rape and the findings are incorporated in the people's tribunal report.

Dr. Debapriya Mallick of the Nandigram Swasthya Udyog, a voluntary organization providing medical aid to the injured, told the tribunal that he found a large number of women with injuries in the pelvic region, back, breasts and vagina in the medical camps set up in Nandigram after the March 14 attacks.

Tampering With Reports

The tribunal report raises questions about the extent to which officials at the Nandigram and Tamluk government hospitals – where the injured were taken – tampered with records to destroy evidence of sexual assault.

Dr. Subrata Sarkar, another witness, said she met two injured women at the Nandigram hospital who told her that they had been raped. But their records did not mention rape, nor were they examined or treated for rape. When Sarkar made inquiries, the hospital staff told her that since they had not received complaints of rape, the question of testing women for rape, or recording their rape accounts, had not arisen.

Sarkar said separate facilities were not made at the hospitals for men and women in clear violation of a law passed in 2004. This, she said, also made it difficult for women to raise the topic of sexual assault.

Activist Rajashri Dasgupta told the tribunal that “women were traumatized and unwilling to talk due to shame.”

Even as details of the Nandigram violence continues to emerge, the tensions between rural farmers and governments hoping to use their land to entice new developments

show no signs of easing. On Oct. 28, a crowd of 25,000 farmers from 15 states across India marched on the capital in New Delhi but police blocked them from reaching the national parliament building, wire services reported.

The marchers were demanding new legislation to protect their land ownership rights and prevent government-backed deals that allow the rich and powerful to take over their land.

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For more information:

People's Tribunal Report on Nandigram 26-28 May 2007 – [PDF format]:
http://www.counterviews.org/Web_Doc/tribunal_report.pdf

“Farm Widows in India Fear Crop of Creditors”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/3033/>

“Women's Union in India Battles State Charges”:
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2610/>

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