

Nendra held captive by State Forces

In what seemed to be a chilling reminder of the violence witnessed in the interior villages in Bastar between the years 2005 and 2007, the village of Bellam Lendra (Nendra, as it is commonly known), a village in the Usur Block of Bijapur District became a site of loot and plunder, sexual violence, rapes, and physical assault between the 11th and 14th of January 2016. People were thrown out of their homes as troops assumed control over property and belongings. They were threatened, beaten, raped and terrorized.

This time, in Nendra, the perpetrators were a combination of various units of the police and paramilitary forces: a composite team of members of CoBRA (Commando Battalion for Resolute Action), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), District Reserve Group (DRG) and the local police.

A combined fact-finding team of activists from the Co-ordination of Democratic Rights Organizations (CDRO) and Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) was in South Chattisgarh to look into issues of recent encounters that had appeared in the news and to conduct a follow-up investigation into incidents of sexual violence reported to have taken place in Peddagelur and surrounding villages in October 2015, when information of this village was received from local people. Hence a smaller group of this team went to Nendra on January 17, 2016, and then with 16 people from the village, was in the district headquarters from January 18th to 22nd for filing of an FIR.

About the village

Bellam Lendra (Nendra) is one of the interior villages of the Hirapur Panchayat in Usur Block. Traveling from the district headquarters of Bijapur to Basaguda, there are seven security camps and two police stations (Aawapalli and Basaguda) that one would cross on this 42 kilometer stretch, in addition to the *kotwali* in the district headquarters. This road, which slices through the dense red-soiled forests of Bastar, now extends to Sarkeguda, where a CRPF camp is stationed. The camp was set up one week after 17 innocent villagers (including 7 minors) were shot at and killed by security forces in 2012. Just 5 kilometers before you reach the Basaguda Police station, lies the village of Timapura, which also has a CRPF camp. The camp marks the point where the road turns towards Nendra. In essence then, every person going towards Nendra is under observation.

Nendra is located about 5 kilometres off the main road, and the road there is best traversed by tractor or foot – any other vehicle would find the journey more challenging. There is one rivulet that becomes difficult to cross in the monsoon.

Nendra is a small village of approximately 98 households spread over four *paras* (neighbourhoods). The village does not have electricity. People survive on subsistence farming and also breed livestock, selling chickens and goats in the weekly market. Between February and March each year, nearly half the population of Nendra temporarily migrates to border villages and towns in the neighbouring state of Telangana for the chilly-plucking season, leaving some of the children and older people behind at home. By the time they return, in April, it is time for the *mahua* trees to flower. The *mahua* flower is collected laboriously from dawn till noon and then sold at the local market in exchange for money.

There is no school in Nendra, and many families send their children away to study in the residential *ashrams* and POTA cabins by the main roads. The nearest such school is located at a walking distance of 5 kilometres. Others are further away on the main highway. The 2011 Census reported that Nendra had a literacy rate of 0%. A young girl who is currently studying in Class 8 – and is also the most highly-educated person in the village – is an exception to this startling statistic.

Depending on the urgency and nature of the problem, the people of Nendra have to travel to Aawapalli (a bigger village on the main highway), Bijapur (the district headquarters), or Warangal

(in Andhra Pradesh) in order to receive health care. But, more often than not, restricted by financial constraints, they must depend on local healers. Children are severely malnourished and child mortality is high. There didn't seem to be too many elderly people in the village. Three children (of five) accompanying their mothers to the district headquarters with the team, were running fevers and tested positive for Malaria Falciparum.



A History of Violence

The village of Nendra is no stranger to violence. Having consistently resisted the Salwa Judum, Nendra has been a focal point of continuous suspicion and attack by state forces.

Illegal detention, arrests and long jail periods

Between 2004 and 2008, about 20 men have been arrested at different points under false charges. After days of being tortured in camps, they were presented in courts only once their injuries had healed, so proof of the violence they had been subjected to no longer remained. Several men spent about a month in the camp before being presented in court. Others have been forced to spend several years, sometimes even their entire youth in jails, while their families on the outside spent thousands of rupees attempting to secure their release. The men have now been acquitted, one by one.

- In June 2015, Irpa Narayanan was one of the last men to be acquitted after spending 6 years and 5 months in jail. His family was forced to put their lives on hold during this time, and only after his release was he able to enroll his son at one of the residential schools near the village to begin his education. Irpa had been picked up from home.
- Kosa was picked up from a bazaar in Bhopalpatnam in 2008, and was in jail for nearly seven years before being acquitted in February 2015.
- Rega Pandu was picked up from the local market at Aawapalli while he was shopping during

the Rakhi festival. He was acquitted in September 2014, wasting 37 months of his young life in jail.

Most of the men were charged under various sections of Indian Penal Code (section 307, 147, 148, 149), Arms Act (Section 25, 27) and Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act.

Burning of the village

Nendra was burnt down twice during the days of the Salwa Judum operations. As our team went from Patel Para to Gotum Para, we were shown patches of empty fields where people's homes had once existed. Amidst grass that had grown wild at one such site, was a single burnt log – once a pillar, presumably – the only reminder of the houses that once stood there. Some of these families who fled during the time of the Judum continue to live in Andhra and have not returned since.

Sexual violence and Physical Assault

During the time of the Judum – as has been widely documented – there were several instances of sexual violence reported from the various *paras* of Nendra. Women shared their experiences of deep pain and torture, and the sense of violation and abuse they had been forced to endure at the hands of the militia. Karam Mangli¹, now in her mid 20s, described how she had been brutally raped nearly a decade ago, when she couldn't have been older than 15, while older women described how they had tried to run and save themselves before being caught and gang-raped. Other women reported having been beaten brutally.

January 6, 2016

Even as recently as January 6, 2016, as the forces were returning from their operations beyond Nendra, they took two goats and other poultry item from this village. The forces were carrying a girl's corpse: the girl had gunshot wounds on her forehead. The villagers said that this encounter had taken place beyond Gotum Para.

January 11 to 14, 2016

The villagers shared with the fact-finding team their experiences of the violence that was meted out to them between the 11th and the 14th of January, 2016. Security forces and police entered the village on January 11th (Monday) and stayed until January 14th (Thursday). Fearing arrests and



1 Name changed

death, the men of the village fled into the forests and surrounding villages once the troops fired blindly into the hills that surround Nendra. Women, children and older people were left behind in the village.

Plunder and Loot in the villages

“Take good care of the chicks and make them plump; we’ll come back and eat them the next time.”

Not a single house in the village which was spared. Women who rushed out of their homes in an attempt to prevent the forceful seizure of their livestock and poultry, were beaten brutally. They pleaded with the security personnel to spare the cocks, hens, goats and pigeons – which are their main source of food and income – but were told in return “We won’t give you money for your hens and cocks, but can definitely give you some blows”.

A tentative list records a loss of over 200 birds and 40 goats. Some of the loss that the team was able to record in the limited time we had is listed below:

- Karam Aaeti - two cans of oil (one mustard oil and one of *koyna*) worth Rs. 1200; Rs. 10,000 cash; Two quintals of rice, *moong dal*, 40 chickens; one gold necklace and some silver jewelry; 4 urns for water; 1 goat.
- Markam Ungi – An oil can
- Kakkem Mangli – 4 chickens, goats and 8 sacks of rice;
- Kosa– one pant; 50 Kg. rice and 4 chickens; one goat; garlic and onions
- Choma Umra – 2 chickens
- Rahme Uikey – 4 chickens, some rice and spices
- Akin Bheeme – 2 chickens
- Karam Ungi – 4 chickens and 35 kg rice
- Kawasi Ungi – cash Rs. 5000 and rice and chickens
- Kuwasi Hunga – 10 chickens and masalas; Rice
- Markam Nandi – 2 goats
- Kalmu Lakhme w/o Bheema – 3 chickens and sheets
- Marvi Ungi – chickens and rations including rice
- Kosa Masi w/o – 10 chickens, rice, masalas, onions and chillies, oil
- Marwi Yoga – 14 chickens, 10 kilos rice, moong dal, tomatoes and other vegetables
- Karam Pandey – 5 chickens

Others from whom food rations, poultry and other things were looted were:

- Kowa Sidme
- Uika Bundi
- Oika Boodu
- Madwi Jogi

The sound system for the tractor that was bought by several villagers collectively, by pooling in their resources, was removed by the forces and taken away as well.

One woman reported that she was saving two of the goats she had raised in order to sell them in exchange for money for her son's wedding. Another had hoped to sell her chickens to buy a blanket.



In aching disbelief, a widow in her early 50s wondered out loud –“How can we be expected to survive under such conditions?” One of the other middle-aged women pointed towards her hollow

stomach and said, “*We’ve not been able to eat a morsel these past few days.*”

Then there were those who had spent a full day walking to the market and back to buy vegetables and other rations, lost all of it in the looting. Several households had stocked up on rations in anticipation of their departure to the chilly fields of Telangana – to ensure there would be enough food for the children and elders they left behind, and some to carry along with them.

Any other durable items that were found in the houses – such as torches, sheets, and clothes – were either taken, or torn, by the troops. It is particularly disturbing that not only did the troops loot rations and poultry for consumption – they killed goats that they did not eat and spilled rations that they did not take. They tore up lungis and blankets – acts that clearly reflect a malicious intent to make survival even more difficult for people.

The forces stayed on in the village until each house had been looted or damaged. It has been estimated that the villagers have suffered a material loss of Rs. 10 lakhs during these four days.



Sexual Violence

The systematic use of sexual violence as a means to humiliate and terrorize seems to have become a part of the modus operandi of search and combing operations carried out by the police and security forces. From what we were told, it seems that the infliction of sexual violence has been routine over the last many years – Ever since the time of the Judum, every few months, troops come and go, and each time, the use and threat of sexual violence is rampant.

Incidents of sexual violence have been reported in all *paras* of the village. Nearly all confrontations between women and members of the security forces appear to have involved sinister and menacing sexual undertones. Women in the villages were taunted, jeered at and mockingly called upon to come and sleep with the troops while their houses were occupied. They were subject to several grave sexual threats. Some were told that they would be torn apart from the centre, their vaginas slashed with knives and stuffed with chilly powder. Several were stripped and their bodies

leered at. In one instance, Uika Podi², a woman of about 50 years, described how a young girl's nipples were pinched and she was being dragged when others intervened.

Many women shared their own experiences of violence with the team, while others described what they had seen or how they had helped the others. During the first three days of the occupation, over sixteen women were raped in the village, of whom thirteen were willing to testify. Others preferred not to speak of it publicly, and did not want to register a complaint or give official testimonies. *(All names, including those who testified, are being withheld in this public report.)*

It is evident that the security forces believed themselves to be operating with impunity, without any fear of repercussion. Several women reported hearing cries of distress, so it must be assumed that the crimes did not happen quietly, and the identities of the perpetrators could not have been easily concealed from other members of the forces. From the women's testimonies, it is clear that several incidents of sexual violence occurred simultaneously over a widespread area, implying that it was not the same group of a select few jawans who participated in the rapes. At any given point in time, the women reported, there may have been four people in one house, three in another, and five in the third, so the acts of sexual abuse occurred simultaneously – even perhaps, in synchronicity. This effectively discredits the notion that a specific group of four or five men may be the culprits.

The women's testimonies and descriptions reveal that all the rapes were instances of gang-rape, where 4 to 5 persons were involved in the act. One or two people would pin the woman down by her shoulders and/or stand on her feet, while another would force himself on her. Sometimes, there would be another standing at the door to keep away either the wailing children or other members of the household and village who might seek to help the woman being raped.

Many women reported being thrown down on the floor while their children were in the room, holding on to them, crying. In a few instances, some women of the household were thrust out of their homes with a lathi, and one of them would be kept inside, cornered, and raped.

Many incidents of rape also took place when women pleaded with the troops not to take their livestock. Any woman who tried to save her chickens or goats from forceful seizure was subjected to harsh abuse in retaliation.

The squeezing of breasts to the point of causing physical pain was a part of many descriptions. A young 22-year-old was in extreme physical pain even on the sixth day after her violent rape when the team met with her; her nipples had been squeezed brutally and, her vaginal region was sore and hurting.

Most of the perpetrators covered the woman's face while raping her – with a mosquito net or a black cloth taken from her headband, or even threw a towel over the eyes.

Many elderly women helped rape survivors by covering their bodies and escorting them to a safe place away from their assailants. In many instances, these middle-aged and older women have themselves become targets. In one house, a woman and her young daughter were raped in the same room.

A young woman was asleep at home with her children when the forces entered her house and pushed her off the *khat*. They stripped her off her lungi, tore her petticoat and two men raped her. They tried to stifle her when she started calling out for help. Her grandfather came in and started hitting the men with a stick to get off her.

In another instance, a woman recounted how a group of security forces had grabbed her chickens and rations from inside the house, and once they were finished raiding the house, she thought they had left her in peace. After putting her youngest child to sleep, she stepped out to pluck brinjals from her vegetable patch when two men from the forces came out at her from the hedge. They

2 Name changed

caught her from behind and covered her face and raped her right there. Hearing her screams, an older lady who walks with a permanent limp, went to help her, and hurled her walking stick at the men. There are other women who corroborated the account as they saw the incident unfolding from a distance.

Another young woman who tried to save her chickens and demanded to be paid for the rations taken was gagged with a fish net and raped. One of the men held her shoulders down, another her legs and a third raped her. This continued until her mother-in-law arrived and began hitting the men with a stick.

On hearing the screams from a neighbouring house where a young woman was being raped, an older lady rushed to help her. The two rapists hurriedly put on their clothes and ran out when she arrived and began to shout at them. The older woman covered the young girl as she had been stripped of her clothes and brought her to her house.

Women have received open threats that if they try to make any complaints, the next time the forces come into the village, they will be shot. One of the women recounted that she was told: 'you're lucky it was daytime - because if it was night, we would kill you.' Other threats were directed at the safety of the men and children.

Beating and Physical Violence

Women were turned out of their houses and anyone getting in the way or attempting to save their belongings would be met with *lathis*, fists and waving rifles wielded menacingly in the air. Some women following the troops in an effort to save their rations and livestock were dragged and beaten. Even the older people were not spared in the violence.

Below is a list of some of the people who have been beaten –

- Madva Hungi w/o Joga
- Karam Bheeme w/o Korsa
- Karam Hidme w/o Masa
- Kalmu Bheeme w/o Budhru
- Karam Aeti w/o Sukku – was slapped on her face and back
- Markam Nandi w/o – Kosa – was attacked with *lathis* on both her legs with violent and persistent force. She said her legs had extensive swelling the initial few days and she couldn't walk. Even ten days after the incident, her right leg had an inflammation with a visible wound.
- Muiya, a 60 year old man – was beaten excessively.





Spreading terror in the village

“Your men lay out bombs on the road; we will kill your men and what will you all do?”

Local residents have complained that they are held accountable by the forces and police for any incident involving Naxal violence, without any evidence whatsoever.

Threats to burn homes with children inside, of killing the men and 'doing what was done' during the Judum were repeatedly issued by members of the forces.

As was revealed in one of the women's testimonies, one of men from the security forces even issued a warning: *“Once we get our orders from Narendra Modi, we will come back and wipe out everything; we will put you and your children inside the houses and burn you all down”* When she was asked who Narendra Modi is, she said she didn't know.

Access to water is one of the only basic amenities in Nendra – as we have already mentioned there are no schools, primary health centres or *anganwadis*. But the police and security forces threatened to take this away too: *“We will uproot the hand-pumps; where would you get your water from?”* they said.

“Like the mahua tree sheds its leaves, all your men will fade away. And then we'll burn the houses down after locking you and your children in.”

Demand for justice at the village level

A group of 8-10 women from Gotum Para took one of the rape survivors with them to the house where a larger group of forces had stayed the night (Kowa Sidme's house) and demanded that *Bada Sahab* be called to meet them. They wanted that the perpetrators of this specific incident be identified and punished right away. But they were driven away by the security forces, who said that *Bada Sahab* wasn't there, and hollered at them not to create a ruckus unless they wanted to be

beaten more. Once again, they threatened the women that they would burn their houses in the same way as the Salwa Judum had done.

While demanding justice, or even while trying to save the younger women from the clutches of the rapists, the women showed exceptional courage in confronting their attackers. *'Why don't you have your wives travel with you if you want to have sex', 'Why are you committing these atrocities against us if you have come here on a combing operation?', 'Why don't you stick to doing your work?'* they demanded.

Another group of women also approached the troops to request payment for the chickens they had taken, as some of the villagers had been mockingly told to come to the *dera* to collect the money in exchange for their poultry. Upon arriving at the '*dera*', they were scoffed at, beaten with *lathis* and sent away.

A Recognizable Pattern of Functioning

From the various accounts of the villagers, it seemed that as the security forces and police enter an area, they terrorise the residents with the threat and use of brute force.

On the 11th of January in Nendra, several houses were taken over by the troops. Houses located near source of water, or those with large courtyards tend to be the ones more likely to be taken over. Seven fires were lit in Karam Aaite's house in one *para* and at Kowa Sidme's at another. Smaller groups also took over other houses such as Kowasi Maase's and Kowasi Ungi's. Duties seemed to be divided between the mixed-group troops – some cook, others search and loot the village for rations, and some taunt, threaten and rape the women. Local alcohol found in some houses (Sulfi) was also consumed, revealing the fearlessness with which they took over the village. Troops would head out into the surrounding forested hills on search operations during the day and return by sun set. Most of the rapes took place either late in the evening or early in the morning.

In response to the reports of such violence, senior police functionaries have often claimed that , the troops are always on guard – afraid that they might step on a landmine or be attacked. This is used as an explanation to say that they are therefore unable to rape. The fact-finding team noted that troops tended to take over homes which had a definite, protective hedge, or built protective log-hedges themselves. It is also a well known fact that they cook and sleep in villages – this has not been denied by the authorities. Thus, if they are able to cook and sleep – albeit with fear –how can their fear of land mines be used as justification to say they cannot spread terror, beat or rape? This logic is obviously flawed – and as the very raw testimonies of the villagers reveal, the fear of being attacked is obviously not enough to stop them from committing brutal atrocities and violations. In fact, the insults they hurl reveal in stead the extreme sense of power they wield over people while carrying out these search and combing operations. Their



malice, is accompanied with a deep sense of impunity.

Once Nendra was completely vandalized with nothing left to offer, the forces are reported to have moved on to villages across the hills from Nendra – such as Surnar, Dalla and Malipad. We can only expect that the pattern of violence unleashed in Nendra, which was strikingly similar to what was done in Peddagellur and around in October 2015, and in Kunna, Sukma on the exact same dates – would have been repeated here.

Identifying the perpetrators

On recognizing the perpetrators, the women said that

- Both Hindi and Gondi were widely used, reflective of the fact that the troops were a mix of the local police, DRG and CRPF. “The first group that came to my house spoke in Gondi. Later, another group that was cooking in the evening spoke in Hindi”. Even within the group of rapists, there were Hindi and Gondi speakers together.
- Most members of the police and security forces would keep their faces covered when with villagers. But the women still recognized some of the men – they had earlier worked for the Naxals but had now surrendered and joined the police. Some names that frequently came up were – Yogesh, Pandu, Mangesh, Rahul and Motu. Rahul was even identified as the son of Markam Muikya who lived in Gotum, a *para* of Nendra itself.
- In her testimony given to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), one woman even recognized one of her rapists as being one of the men named above.

Given the fact that there was such widespread use of sexual violence, it cannot be hard for the perpetrators to be identified from within the group, by the troops themselves. It is up to the investigation agency then to probe the matter seriously and ensure that culprits are identified.

Spreading terror in District Headquarters

A group of 16 villagers, including 12 women, 2 young girls, and 2 men – with 5 infants in tow traveled to the district headquarters of Bijapur on January 18th to file an FIR. They stayed on in Bijapur until the 22nd, giving testimonies and desperately negotiating with authorities to get an FIR registered. Over the course of the first two days, testimonies were recorded by the SDM (on an enquiry ordered by the Collector) and the ASI (Bijapur Kotwali). After much negotiation, the police agreed to file an FIR on January 21st, the fourth day of their stay in Bijapur.



However on January 21st and 22nd (when the medical examinations were scheduled to be conducted), a local mob led by ex-Salwa Judum leaders and victims of Naxal violence, tried to intimidate the women and team members with a combination of threats and false allegations - the women were accused of being Naxals, and the mob demanded they leave Bijapur immediately or “face the consequences”. They also derided the women for 'daring' to file an FIR against 'their police'. The group warned them against the human rights groups alleging that the fact-finding team was misguiding them. Members of the mob went on to say that since they were adivasis themselves, they would have supported the women and trusted their complaints if they had come with their husbands, but since they hadn't, they felt the allegations being made against the police were suspect.

The mob seemed to have the complete support of the police. They followed the team in what appeared to be police vehicles. Their sudden appearance and the ease with which they were let

into the fortified *thana* which is otherwise inaccessible without prior permission also raises serious questions. Their unrestricted access to the team at all times, without any sort of intervention on the part of the police, indicates prior knowledge of the presence and objectives of the complainants.

The mob succeeded in shaking the confidence and determination of many women who had bravely trudged through these five days. Many began to feel intimidated and unsafe in the hostile environment of the district headquarters.

A week after the FIR was filed, the group even staged a rally in Bijapur (on January 29th), targeting individual members of the fact-finding team, and shouting slogans against Arundhati Roy, who had nothing to do with recent visits to Bijapur.

Interim report drafted by Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (wssnet.org)

The team had visited the village on January 17th along with CDRO members.

For information, contact againstsexualviolence@gmail.com