RAMPANT LOOTING AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE BY SECURITY FORCES IN VILLAGES IN BIJAPUR, SOUTH CHHATTISGARH - October 19/20 – 24, 2015

As the history books told us how the victorious king’s armies plundered after the occupation – Will the state continue to do the same under the garb of naxal operations and road-development?

As an all-India fact-finding team of women, we were visiting Bastar to look at the status of women in conflict areas. When our team reached Jagdalpur and Bijapur, we were informed by the local journalists that there has been talk of rape and encounter killings in the Sarkeguda area but they have not been able to access the areas to get accurate information as the security forces had stopped them.

On Friday, October 30, our team informed the District Collector before setting out so that there would not be any problem in accessing the area. It was market day in Basaguda. We met many people from the villages where the recent incidents had occurred. Not in ones and twos, but in tens and twenties, the women shared their experiences of sexual violence including – molestation and rape physical beating, verbal abuse and threats, destruction and looting of property near Basaguda, Bijapur by the security forces and police who had come in 3 – 4 batches when they patrolled the villages starting from October 19/20 till October 24, 2015. The affected villages are – Chinnagelur, Peddagelur, Gundam, Burgicheru and Pegdapalli.

We returned to Bijapur the same night and spoke to the Collector and the Additional SP about our findings and showed them some video recordings of the testimonies. We were advised that it would be good if we could get some women to speak directly to the administration. On this suggestion, we returned to the area the next day with the intention of visiting the affected villages and getting victims to meet the administration at Basaguda or Bijapur. The following day, we passed through Chinnagelur, on the way to Peddagelur, where we spoke to the people as well as the affected women. Due to paucity of time and these villages being inaccessible by road, we could neither go to all the villages nor could we speak to each and every woman who had her own personal experience of that day. We returned with four women to testify before the District Collector. Since we could reach Basaguda only by 6:30 p.m. in the evening, the SDM had returned and we moved on to district headquarters, Bijapur. Given that it was already quite late in the evening by then, the Collector said he would meet us the following morning. On Sunday, November 1, the women testified in front of the Collector, SP, ASP and SDM in full detail with the help of a translator.

We documented some of the testimonies of the affected people. These videos are of our interviews conducted on 30-31 October, 2015, with the women who were direct victims of violence, or those who had witnessed these acts.
We present here some of the important facts of the situations based on the testimonies of the survivors and our own observations:

**Rape:** On our visit to the villages on the 31st of October, we were able to confirm the rapes of two women of Peddagellur village. One was a fourteen year old girl and the other a pregnant woman. Both of them have been gang-raped. The young girl was grazing cattle with other women when she was chased by the security forces. Overpowered and blindfolded, she was raped by at least three people before she became unconscious. The four-months pregnant woman was stripped by the security forces on the October 21, 2015 and repeatedly dunked in the stream, and then gang-raped. The security forces had also removed their clothing and gotten into the stream while raping her. The fourteen year old rape survivor testified in front of the Collector and the DSP in charge of the investigation when a group of women came to district headquarters, Bijapur to register the FIR. A week later, on the 6th of November, 2015, a member of the team also met with some other women from Gundam and Budgicheru at the local Basaguda market. The SDM and DSP who were also present, recorded testimonies of the pregnant raped survivor and another older woman who was raped as she protested against loot of her poultry and other items from home. Three rapes have thus been confirmed from the villages.

To add to these, there were some other incidents of rape as well which were being recounted but due to the paucity of time these could not be investigated further and they are pending further examination.

**Sexual Assault :** Many women, at least 15 in Chinnagelur and Pedagelur alone, and many others from the other neighbouring villages (Gundam, Burgichheru etc) reported being stripped, beaten on their thighs and buttocks, their lower clothing was lifted up and they were threatened with further sexual violence (e.g. pushing chillies up their vaginas). Their blouses were torn. At least two women who were breast feeding said that their breasts were pinched and squeezed for milk. Other women also mentioned that their breasts were grabbed, pulled and squeezed.
Sexual Harassment: Women were chased out of their homes which were then occupied by the forces for their stay. In some cases, the policemen removed their clothing and invited the women to come and sleep with them if they wanted to sleep in their own homes, as the village men had run away into the jungles.

Physical Assault: Severe beatings were reported by many women. In some cases they were holding their infants when they were hit from behind. Their hair was pulled out, they were dragged, their heads were banged on the ground, and they were poked at with guns and batons (dande). The bruises of this violence were still evident on many women when we met them. Many of them were still unable to walk. They mentioned that they had used hot compresses to relieve the pain in the absence of any medical service in the area. Infants and small children were also brutally beaten by the security forces. While trying to save them, the women got further beaten.
Looting of Property: Food items like rice, oil, salt, masala, chilly etc; life stock such as chicken, pigs; clothes, torches, soap were looted from the houses by the security forces. They cooked and ate many of the food items, took some with them and destroyed the rest. They also took away money wherever they could find it in the houses. Much of these were the life savings of the people which they have collected over time. Some of these are in notes, most are in coins. They keep these with them since they have no other place to deposit these. Some of the bigger amounts that people mentioned ranged from Rs 2800/- to a maximum of Rs. 10000/-. Several of the women indicated their amounts by showing the size of the coin pouch they had.

Destruction of Property: One house in Burgicheru was destroyed and burnt by the security forces. They entered the house and broke all the vessels. The rice was also taken. The women who also returned with us then testified before the Collector, the SP and the ASP of Bijapur. An FIR has been lodged at Kotwali, Bijapur being the base station. Relevant sections from IPC and POCSO act (Protection of Children against Sexual Offences) have been filed including Section 376 (2) (c) of IPC that specifies punishment for a rape by armed forces in the area where they are deployed and Section 6 of POCSO related to aggravated sexual assault. The demand to include Prevention of Atrocities against the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Act was not heeded to on the grounds that while the victims are STs, there is no identification of the perpetrators and to which community they belong to.

Through a fairly ‘detailed’ and ‘sensitive' listening, the Collector and SP and ASP heard out each woman and by all human interaction standards, are fully aware that there is no exaggeration in any of the incidents recounted. At one point, the Collector even asked the women whether money was taken and the SP intervened to say that if such a question is asked, villagers would obviously say yes. But when the question was put forth to the women in Gondi through a translator, one woman replied using her hands that her life’s collections were taken, fistfuls of coins of Re 1 or Re 5. The reticent and shaken-up fourteen year old girl also mustered courage to quietly retell what she had gone through.

But later by not admitting to the incidents and the fact that the women have testified in front of
senior administration and police officers, and saying that the complaints of sexual assault have not been received or these are being put forth by the Maoists to demoralize the forces, the State is repeatedly showing that its first concern is self-preservation and repute. The State has to realize that by admitting to its weaknesses, and taking action against those who have carried out this kind of violence in these areas, it will only help all the people living in these villages and all of us to believe that the State is really interested in the well-being of people. Otherwise, it continues to prove that there is hardly any concern for its own citizens living in these areas and this violence is part of a larger game plan of the State, and it is by chance if and when these atrocities happen to come out then the role is only to deny and show some cover-up effort.

It has been established that during these dates an operation was carried out in the area. It has also been clearly identified that the forces involved COBRA, CRPF, DRG and local police; it can easily be traced which troops had been sent to these areas.

Following the teams visit, there have been other groups that have made their way to Peddagellur and surrounding villages. A team of the local Congress party led by Kawasi Lakhma visited the area on the 6th of November, 2015, met with the victims and submitted a detailed report of the atrocities committed. Taking cognisance of the fact-finding and media reports that covered the incident, a delegation from the State Women's Commission visited Basaguda a few days after this. Later, on the 14th of November, 2015, 56 members of the Sarva Adivasi Samaj also met with the victims, recorded their testimonies and drafted a report on the issue. The Adivasi Mahasabha, supported by the Communist Party of India also traveled to some of the villages. Press releases of all these teams that went confirmed the incidence and show that they were appalled by the rampage and sexual violence executed by the state forces.

However, although the investigating officers who made their way to the villages were not dressed in uniform, they were ironically also accompanied by other members of the police and security forces in the strength of a complete operation, allegedly present for protection. The village was thus, once again surrounded by these Gondi and Hindi speaking uniformed security forces who continued to give threats while the supposed neutral investigation was underway.

It has been over three months since an FIR was filed. Despite the cognizance taken by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and their directions, the police is yet to make any arrests. In the meantime, other such instances of mass sexual violence have come to light, some even within the jurisdiction of the same thana of Basaguda. Additionally field situations are such that investigations are being carried out in a manner that continues to intimidate the victims and their lawyers and fact-finding team members.

Given the gravity of the crimes committed, and the troubling inaction, we demand -

• That strict action be taken against these individuals and they be booked for the crimes committed by them directly and for those who may not have been directly a part of the crimes, action taken against them as abettors to the same.
• That a free and independent enquiry be conducted into these incidents. To ensure that there is no bias and the local police or officer who has been part of or responsible for the operations in any way should not be a part of this investigation.
• That the state works to ensure an atmosphere in which an independent and neutral investigation is possible.
• That the state ensures the safety and security of the women who have come forward to speak out and the people of their village. It should be ensured that no further intimidation or violence is inflicted on them.

Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression