

'You know, we are Indians too!'



Inset: A family of Gottekoya refugees in front of their burned down house in a forest in Andhra Pradesh. Photograph by Sheikh Haneef.

Main: A Gottekoya refugee in a forest in Andhra Pradesh. Photograph by Bert Suykens.

As a consequence of a violent conflict between Maoist insurgents and the Salwa Judum, a vigilante group, in Chhattisgarh, thousands of people belonging to 'tribal' communities fled to the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. Based on his fieldwork in the area, Bert Suykens sheds light on the complicities and logics of these 'tribal' people's encounter with the state.

Bert Suykens

Persecuted by forest officials, the refugees receive little consideration from the rural administrative and welfare authorities. This even though local officials are well aware of the existence and problems of the IDP. They argue: 'Since we can no longer deport them (a high court order had ruled against this –BS), our policy is just to ignore them.' As a consequence, they do not receive ration cards. Without ration cards, people are unable to obtain inexpensive rice at heavily subsidised government rates. Since their villages are deemed illegal settlements, they also miss out on governmental development work in support of village infrastructure and, for example, have to rely on dingy ponds to obtain drinking water. Children do not attend school, either because the government refuses to build schools in the vicinity of the forest hamlets, or out of fear of detection if the refugees were to send their children to a regular school. Staying under the radar of the state, rather than claiming rights and support, has become the preferred tactic of these people.² Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in the state of Andhra Pradesh, the Gottekoya are not classified as a 'Scheduled Tribe'. The Gottekoya are a Gondi/Chhattisgarhi speaking branch of the Koya 'tribe' and are not considered indigenous to Andhra Pradesh. However, just five kilometres north, in Chhattisgarh, they are registered as a 'Scheduled Tribe'. (Other Telugu speaking Koya, such as the Dora Koya, do have this status as indigenous Scheduled Tribe in Andhra Pradesh).³ Being classified as non-indigenous, the Gottekoya are also excluded from any entitlements meant for members of 'Scheduled Tribes' in Andhra Pradesh. Moreover, although they could technically still benefit from some of the government welfare programmes that operate area-wise, the officers in charge refused them access to this sort of aid since the refugees did not qualify as locals.

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This quotation stems from one of my interviews with two Gottekoya who recently fled the violence in Chhattisgarh. This statement was directed against the forest department, the revenue department and the Integrated Tribal Development Agency, the triumvirate of government agencies in the area. It must be understood in the light of their day-to-day interactions with these local representatives of the Andhra Pradesh state that are all too often framed by violence rather than support. A comparable view on 'authority' was voiced by one of my interviewees about the situation in his home state of Chhattisgarh: 'At home we had two governments: the Naxalites and the Judum. They both wanted to arrest us. If you support the one government, the other one will burn your house or kill you. That is why we went away'.

Most of my interviewees agreed that their situation had slightly improved with the move to Andhra Pradesh, as they were confronted with less violence there than in Chhattisgarh. But members of these 'tribal' communities are still caught in a desperate 'catch-22': (1) They receive no protection from the state, indeed their huts and belongings have been repeatedly burned by state agents. (2) The Naxalites, although they have lost some of their former hold on the area, use the dense forest for bases and come to the forest villages for shelter and food. The fear they incite in the forest and among police department officials means the Naxalites are able to offer some, although not complete, protection to the IDP 'encroachers'. (3) By the simple fact that the idea exists among the local government officials that there is support for the Naxalites with the IDP, the state can/will not supply welfare or protection. They are, as a group, considered 'anti-social elements... killers and thieves' (interview with police officer). (4) As a state revenue official logically concluded: 'We cannot give help to people who support the Naxals'.

It is very unfortunate that those who took refuge because of being under the double threat of 'two governments' at home, are now considered avid supporters of the rebel government by the state in which they sought refuge. As a consequence, members of the Gottekoya 'tribe' are now confronted with state violence, while at the same time they are ignored by state welfare agencies.

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Notes:

1. In 2008 civilian casualties dropped sharply in Chhattisgarh, probably due to pressure from both the Supreme Court and the centre against the Salwa Judum movement. As far as our information goes, the return of the IDPs has not yet been initiated.
2. See also Shah, Alp. 2007. "Keeping the state away": Democracy, politics and the state in India's Jharkhand'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N. S.)* 13: 129-45.
3. Kornel, Das 2006. *Tribals and their culture: Koya tribe in transition*. New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation.

ONE EARLY MORNING, in November 2007, I reached the house of a journalist in a small town in northern Khammam (Andhra Pradesh). We planned to visit an IDP (Internally Displaced Person) settlement of the Gottekoya 'tribe' that was located in the forest, 20 kilometres from his home. I told him of rumours that, over the last weeks, there had been a build up of Naxalite presence (a Maoist insurgent group) in the forest area. To my astonishment, the journalist reacted to this news with panic, and refused to accompany me. He told me that it would be impossible to go to the forest, at least for a week or two. As it turned out, the night before two people –allegedly taken from neighbouring Chhattisgarh –had been executed in the woods near to the Gottekoya settlement. They had been sentenced in the forest by a *Jan Adalat*, a Naxalite People's Court. The evidence that led to the execution had been presented by a Naxalite prosecutor. The trial was referred to by most of the people I met that day as a 'gathering of the Gottekoya'. I had previously conducted interviews with some members of this 'tribe'.

In June 2005, a violent conflict broke out between Naxalite insurgents and the vigilante Salwa Judum in Dantewara, in the south of the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. The Salwa Judum is a (non-state) law enforcement group under the leadership of the Congress politician Mahendra Karma, that was initially supported by the BJP, the ruling party in Chhattisgarh. Casualties due to the conflict in Chhattisgarh have quadrupled, from 98 in 2004 to 200 in 2005 and 462 in 2006¹ (see figure 1). As a consequence of the violence many members of 'tribal' communities have fled their homes. Some of them are still staying –not always of their own volition –in Salwa Judum camps, while others have sought refuge in Maoist controlled areas. A third group, estimated to comprise between 20,000 and 30,000 people, many of them from the 'Gottekoya' community, fled the violent encounters in Chhattisgarh to the bordering state of Andhra Pradesh, where I visited their makeshift hamlets.

The Naxalites are an insurgent movement named after Naxalbari, a village in the Darjeeling district of West-Bengal. In 1967 a group of marginalised peasants started a protest movement against landlords and moneylenders. Under the leadership of Charu Mazumdar –and inspired by the Chinese revolution and Maoist thought –guerrilla squads were formed to wage war against the rural oppressors. By 1972, the movement was largely suppressed, following the death in jail of the movement's chief leader and tactician Mazumdar. However, insurgent activity continued, and in 2004 the current main Naxalite group, the Communist Party of India –Maoist, came into being with a merger of the Maoist Communist Centre and the People's War Group. With more than 7000 cadres, the Naxalites are presently active in what is known as the Red Corridor. This zone ranges from Andhra Pradesh in the South to Bihar in the North, encompassing almost the whole of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, as well as parts of Orissa, Maharashtra and West Bengal. In June 2009 the Naxalites were proscribed as a terrorist organisation under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act by the Indian government.

Confrontation with the state

My interviews with members of the Gottekoya 'tribe' who had fled the conflict took place in villages located inside forests in northern Andhra Pradesh. As usual, on that morning we took a ride on a motorbike, followed by a longish walk to reach the forest settlements, inhabited by the IDP. The paths we walked were difficult to find. It was a maze: there were many twists, turns and forks. Without a guide it would have been impossible to remain on the right track. Once we arrived, there was not much to see besides small, bleak hamlets with a few slash-and-burn fields located nearby. Often, inhabitants would disappear when we arrived in a village for the first time. Strangers are viewed with suspicion, as they can pose a threat to the villagers. When we reached one of the settlements, our attention was immediately drawn to charred wooden poles, which were used as a construction material for the huts. I was told: 'Our homes have been set on fire by officials of the forest department. Only recently, we could build them up again... This has been the third time that they destroyed our houses'. It is illegal to stay and cultivate forest land (which is controlled by the Indian Forest Service –IFS), and these IDP are considered as encroachers (illegal occupants) by the forest authorities. Consequently, officers of the forest department removed, and in this case repeatedly burned down their houses.

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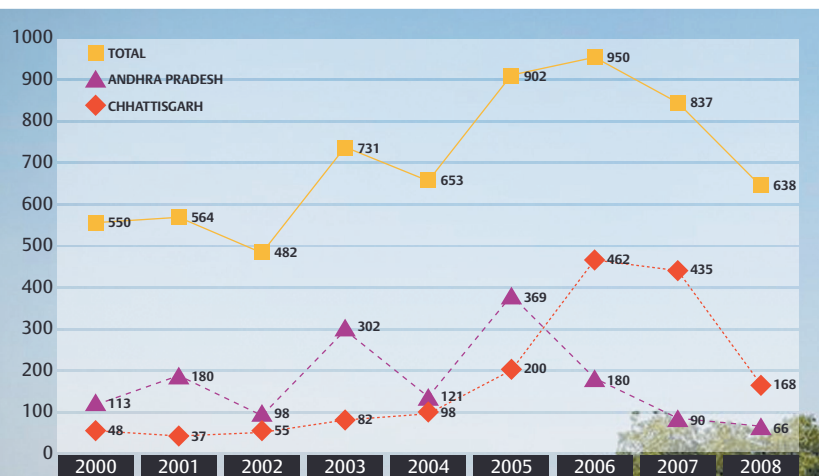


Figure 1: Casualties Naxalite conflict (2000-2008). Source (data): Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs (2001-2009).