

Homeless Wanderers in Their Own Country

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Internally displaced persons from Chhattisgarh's Kistaram Panchayat before their shack of sticks and palmyra leaf in Andhra Pradesh's Khammam. As Operation Green Hunt gathers steam in Chhattisgarh, state violence is also going up steadily. The result is that more people, mostly tribals, in the state's Maoist-dominated areas are crossing the border to find sanctuary in Khammam district of Andhra Pradesh as Internally Displaced Persons.

Each of them fled their homes either after a raid or because they feared for their lives. The stories these people tell of their ordeals are also beginning to provide a picture of the true extent of the destruction.



Internally displaced persons from Chhattisgarh's Kistaram Panchayat before their shack of sticks and palmyra leaf in Andhra Pradesh's Khammam.

Gachanpalli is a small village some 30 km from the town of Konta in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh. According to witnesses, the security forces raided Gachanpalli sometime in late October. They allegedly killed Madvi Admaya, Madkam Sulaya, Madvi Joga, Kovasi Gangaya, Madkam Moiyi. Witnesses say four of the five men were past 60 and too old to escape into the jungle. Madkam Moiyi was apparently crippled and incapable of walking.

They were said to have been bayoneted and shot to death in the middle of the village. Nineteen homes were also burnt down. This was the second attack on Gachanpalli. In 2005, the [Salwa Judum](#) burnt down 65 homes in the village. "I have so much land at Gachanpalli, but no one to work on it now." Kovasi Jogi, 60, lived in Gachanpalli. Now she inhabits an Internally Displaced Persons settlement in Khammam. Her village is almost empty now, peopled by ghosts and memories.

Most of the people have scattered. Some have retreated further into the jungle, while others are in Khammam. Sodi Rani (real name withheld) left her village of Pallesharma with her two children for Andhra Pradesh. She relies on the charity of her relatives. According to her, three people were killed from her village of Pallesharma by the security forces. Sodi Sanausi, Tunki Chinnay and Dodhi Adma were killed sometime in late October. The police apprehended them in the morning as suspected Maoists and shot them dead the same evening.

The people of Pallesharma were unaware of the killings for some time. But when the news of the deaths reached them, they fled to Khammam district. On the same day as the attack on Pallesharma, the security forces arrested Vaika Madvi (name withheld). He was held captive along with an unidentified Pallesharma villager. Vaika Madvi managed to escape, leaving behind the villager. He has no idea what happened to the man. Vaika Madvi now lives in Khammam district. Near Pallesharma is the village of Batiguda where Sodi Venka (name withheld) was regularly harassed by Special Police Officers as well as Maoists. He was detained over a year ago by security forces and asked to relocate to the Maraiguda Salwa Judum camp, abandoning his five acres of land.

At the same time, the Maoists threatened him with dire consequences if he left the land. Drinking water is a big problem in Batiguda where four hand pumps were installed about 12 years ago. Three of them don't work anymore. So the villagers approached the authorities at Konta for help to fix the pumps. But their appeal was turned down flat. "Go ask your Naxalites to fix your hand pumps," the officials jeered at them.

The dejected villagers could only repeat this piece of advice every time anyone asked them whether they had got any assistance from Konta. "And what do the Naxalites say?" Venka asks with a fatalistic chuckle. "They say, 'go to Bhadrachalam and buy the materials and we shall fix it'. But the problem is we don't have any money!"

Sodi Venka also lives in Khammam district now. He earns around Rs 60 a day working as a landless labourer — for about 10 to 20 days a month. Back at his village, he used to sell a kilogram of tamarind for five rupees, each mango for two to three rupees. He also sold mahua for twelve to fourteen rupees a kg. He left his village soon after he heard about the killings in Pallesharma.

Muchki Deva, 65, was picked up by Gondi-speaking SPOs from his village of Oonderpad near Bhejji and taken to jail. He says he was repeatedly beaten and given electric shocks. He was incorrectly reported as being burnt with oil by some publications — in fact, he had no idea what they were doing to him. He was released after four days, when a superior police officer found him in the company of young Special Police Officers who were beating him.

The officer chastised the SPOs and ordered them to release the old man. He was neither booked nor asked to give a statement. He soon left his village for Khammam district. The stories seem never-ending and each one is harrowing.

Take, for instance, the case of Maroodbacka village in Usur Block of Bijapur district in Chhattisgarh. On October 24, the security forces raided the place. They picked up Katam Kistaya (20) and Bhandavi Bhimaya (18). Bhimaya was suffering from a high fever and hence incapable of escaping. Both of them are now reportedly languishing in Dantewada jail. Soon after, some 15 families of Maroodbacka left for Khammam district. Others, like Madkam Mooti from Bijjamariaguda, did not bother to wait for the raids. They left their villages for Andhra Pradesh with their families well before that.

When news of the attacks on Tatemargu, Pallodi, Doghpar and Pallearma spread across the tehsil [township], villagers from Paytalguta, Ampeta and Dormangum from Kistaram panchayat also left their villages, afraid of what the authorities might do to them. They are all now living in Khammam district. They have survived but in Khammam they have no land, no ration cards, no schools, no anganbadi [childcare]. They also suffer the risk of being branded as Maoists or sympathisers by the Andhra Pradesh authorities.

Their difficulties are compounded by inter-tribal conflicts. For instance, the Gotti Koya from Chhattisgarh and the local Koya villagers find themselves at odds at times, fighting over meagre forest resources. Despite the tensions, many settlements have been built with permission from the local gram sabhas [village councils] and there is no confrontation as the IDPs [internally displaced persons] also work as landless labour for them. Many more IDPs are living with their relatives.

There are disturbing reports that party members from New Democracy (CPI-ML) have been demanding that the local Koya villagers evict the Gotti Koya and send them back to Chhattisgarh.

The Andhra Pradesh police and forest officials are also considering a similar proposal and have reportedly approached the Collector's office for provisions to 'pack off' the IDPs back to Chhattisgarh. There are some dissenters from this view, however. Gandhibabu of the Agricultural and Social Development Society, who has been interacting with government officials and the IDPs is against any forced repatriation. "First, it is their constitutional right, freedom of movement. Secondly, how can you send them back to Chhattisgarh where they'd end up in Salwa Judum camps and thus be in danger of being killed by the Naxalites, or to their villages where they're in danger of being killed by the security forces? They really have no place to go back to at the moment."

The Solidarity Committee for Internally Displaced Tribals, Andhra Pradesh has raised similar concerns. After meeting IDP families in Khammam district, the committee held a press conference in Hyderabad earlier in the week. It demanded that the Union government and state governments concerned be responsible for the safety of the tribals. Also, the refugees should be provided with rehabilitation packages.

The committee also demanded that IDPs be given NREGAS job cards, temporary ration cards, with pensions for senior citizens and disabled people; and that the government should help set up schools and mini-anganbadi centres as a majority of the fleeing tribals are children. They are safe now, but what happens next is anybody's guess.

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