

## PhD Research Summary - Thom Herzmark, Anthropology Department, LSE

My doctoral research is focused on the Koya adivasi community in South East India where I spent two years researching the language, livelihoods, kinship and household economics of a spectrum of Koya families. I gathered data about the complex family dynamics of agricultural change and uneven access to Affirmative Action across the Koya community. In a number of these families I witnessed first-hand and documented the transition from livelihoods based on small-scale shifting cultivation to more precarious migrant labour and greater dependency on the state – a change that was often accompanied in a single generation by a complete shift in religious beliefs, ideas of a proper household, correct etiquette, hospitality and diet, and for young women and men, a dramatic shift in their expectations of potential marriage partners. For a few young Koyas, this is a temporary rejection of patriarchal social values and parentally approved marriage, but for some this break with their family becomes permanent and irreversible. For some families a particularly bad harvest or an unexpected bereavement made the cycle of shifting cultivation suddenly unsustainable and they became dependent on the network of care and support provided by relations in nearby villages. Yet increasingly, moments of crisis result in greater dependency on a completely different type of network of care and social security – that of the state, tribal welfare schools, government hospitals.

For the majority of Koya families however, everyday life involves drawing strategically both on government support such as education and hostel accommodation for students, and on the resources of their kinship network in terms of sharing agricultural labour and organising funerals or weddings. The fact that many families actually oscillate between these two networks of resources means that completely opposing attitudes, religious beliefs and cultural references end up co-existing within a single family as typically younger members adjust towards dominant regional cultural norms of religious practice and vernacular language, which the older generation, who remain emplaced in the village, often view with ambivalence or suspicion.

Alongside these emerging generational divisions within villages, my ethnography also explores the world of Koyas who have had access education, and highlights the internal differentiation within the Koya community. I discuss how recent history, affirmative action policies and impending state development projects are experienced very differently by those in more powerful positions in the community as compared to their kin in more isolated villages. Interestingly, those Koyas who have reached positions of influence and power – as local lawyers, teachers or politicians – tend to romanticize the care and community values that they believe were in abundance in more isolated villages that are less dependent on economic markets and state support. Conversely, for many of the villages still practicing shifting-cultivation, and dependent on forests for their livelihood, the promise of state-sponsored development projects is desired and sought out, particularly in terms of access to health care and to roads. The capacity of the Koya community to build community resources to negotiate these paradoxes is not helped by poor standards of education or by the decline of their indigenous Koya language.

Though my work is empirically driven, I aim to contribute to analytical questions regarding the social relations that are established and reproduced within seasonal shifting cultivation, and the development of cash crops such as cashew and palm wine, as well as the social relations generated through transitions away from this form of agriculture. In doing so I explore the ways that larger social, cultural and historical processes are visible within the households, villages, and kinship networks of my Koya adivasi interlocutors. I believe this research will help to nuance the narrative we have around shifting cultivators, and I hope to make a contribution to academic debates on Affirmative Action, cultural identity and indigeneity, and to the ethnography of South Asia.