

COVERING DEPRIVATION

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Bollworms feast on 'Bollgard'

NEHAL CHALIAWALA

Nagpur: "I lost half of my produce," said Sunil Lodhe, a farmer from Sakhara Khurd village in this

district. "I got 100 quintals of cotton after sowing 20 bags of seeds last year. This year, I sowed 22 bags and got only 60 quintals of cotton." While the extent of da-

mage varies between 50 and 80 per cent, the lament is uniform in the entire Yavatmal region that the crop is a failure.

The crop in Maharashtra was severely hit by pink bollworm this season. "Once infected, the entire boll of cotton has to be discarded. We cannot pick even the good part," said Leelabai Rathod, a cotton picker. Coupled with this year's below average rainfall in the district, farmers here say they are the worst hit considering that the entire region practices dry farming.

The cotton crop in the State is almost exclusively of a transgenic variety called Bollgard II (BG II). Developed by Monsanto, it contains a Bt toxin that makes it immune to bollworm attacks, hence the name Bollgard.

This year's widespread bollworm attack, however, wasn't a total surprise. According to a report in The Hindu, the former Di-

rector of the Central Institute for Cotton Research (CICR), K.R. Kranthi, had warned the Maharashtra government from as early as December 2015 that pink bollworm developed resistance to the toxins in BG II.

Bollworm attacked small quantities of standing crop towards the end of the 2016 season and experts predicted a widespread outbreak this year. However, no significant steps were taken by the government in anticipation, farmers alleged.

To make the situation worse, the generally four-to-five-foot tall crop grew unusually high to almost seven feet this year. "When the crop has more offshoots then all the nutrients are used up just by that, reducing the cotton output," explains Harsingh Chavan, a cultivator.

Why a genetically engineered crop grew unexpectedly like this

remains unexplained though.

A probable reason for bollworm to develop resistance could be the farmers' reluctance to sow 'refugee' seeds that come along with BG II.

These seeds, when planted in between rows of BG II, act as a sacrificial buffer against bollworm attacks. "A bag of BG II seeds contains a 120-gram sachet of refugee cotton seeds. The refugee crops have low yield and hence farmers don't sow them and after years of this negligence, bollworms have now managed to infect the main crop," said Bhavesh Gandecha, owner of a Krishi Seva Kendra at Ghatanji.

The only question now is: will the farmers earn enough to manage until the next season? When they are struggling to break even, the answer in all likelihood is a 'no'.



Leelabai picks cotton from plants which are upto 7 feet tall. (Inset) A pink bollworm. | NEHAL & TANISHAA

Ploughing lonely furrow, in forests

PURNIMA S DAS

Paderu: The 45-year-old woman collects firewood, weighing more than 50 kg, walks down a rocky region, crosses a swamp around a small water body, and then continues for 7 km to reach the main road where she could sell the fuel. That's her daily drudgery barefoot.

"But if the weather is sunny, I have to walk just 3 km", Beso Vanthala says in the Kuvi language, spoken by Khonds, the indigenous tribal people.

Sometimes, she has to make two rounds as she is running out of money. At times, she feels uncomfortable about going to the forest alone.

"I feel scared after sunset, therefore, I prefer to go in the afternoon, not that it makes me less vulnerable, it just makes me 'feel' comparatively safe."

Beso, who lives in a mud house at the en-



Beso Vanthala, on her way to work, braving all odds. | PURNIMA

trance of the village, cherishes two pairs of sarees, gifted by her husband who died two months ago of a "sudden" stomach pain.

Mobile network is an issue in the village but she managed to call for medical help. She, along with other villagers, carried him for 500 metres, when he stopped breathing.

"The ambulance cannot come closer than 7 km. The government assured us that roads will be constructed in two months but the work hasn't started yet," she said.

I feel scared after sunset, therefore, I prefer to go in the afternoon, not that it makes me less vulnerable, it just makes me 'feel' comparatively safe

The woman also shoulders the burden of her grown-up sons, Srino Vanthala and Kalyan Vanthala, both agricultural workers who grow ragi and beans but are of little help to their mother. "After all, they are my sons," she said effortlessly picking up a firewood bundle, as if it weighed just 5 kg, and went on her journey to work.

Beso's neighbour, Korra China, 25, working under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), also complained of transport problems in the village. He said water would reach high level following heavy rain and it was difficult for him to go for work on a bike.

Like Beso, there's another family, earning its livelihood by selling firewood, in the Mulagaruvu hamlet under the Chintapalle mandal, where, according to the Census of India 2011, there are 45 households with 86 women and 116 men.

Loopholes mar NREGA

SHRUTI AGRAWAL

H. D. Kote: A few families in Beerambali village have cards that entitle them to jobs under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). But they lend the cards to others and earn the wages without doing any work.

Savarnamma, 42, says almost all families have job cards in Beerambali. Her husband Uma-

who actually do the work are paid paltry sums by them.

Workers are paid 30 per cent for the work done by machines, adds Umapathi.

However, in Donnemadan Hadi village in N. Begur of Mysuru district, people say they are unaware of the MGNREGA Scheme. Those who have heard of the scheme say the wages are insufficient.

Kala, a 50-year-old farmer who owns a small field does not hold an MGNREGA job card.



Labour work provides paltry wages to workers. | SHRUTI

pathi, who works in the Gram Panchayat, has lent his job card.

"It is profitable for me. I have two sources of earning. I don't think it is wrong," says Umapathi.

Contractors employ people with borrowed cards for constructing roads, houses, drain, and cow sheds. But the wages are transferred to the original cardholders' bank accounts. People

ling to do public work-related unskilled manual labour at a minimum wage of Rs. 236 (for Karnataka).

Manjula, 35, who works in households says she is illiterate. Even if she wishes to get work or apply for a job card, she cannot as the application for registration has to be submitted on a plain paper to the local Gram Panchayat.

The application form for work, form number 1A, is to be filled.

A panchayat officer did not deny that there were irregularities in the scheme.

Mannu B.K., Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) says "I won't deny that illegal activity is taking place, but job cards are given to 98 per cent of people.

The fact that people don't have cards is hard to swallow."

Harshid Narayan Rao, probationary IAS officer, says "NREGA is running successfully in many states.

I find it hard to believe that people are still unaware of the Scheme."

Although funds are allocated, timely payment is not done. In Telangana and Gujarat, people receive more than the total allocation. However, in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, people receive less than the total allocation.

Despite facilities like e-muster rolls (an official list that includes names of cardholders), monitoring, and 150 days of employment in drought-hit areas, NREGA is replete with loopholes because of mismanagement.

"We are monitoring 50-60 gram panchayats. Sometimes we are required to do other departments' work, or go for election work and that adds to the pressure," says Mannu.

Nomadic lives

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Warangal: All the houses in Devudugutta hamlet near Pasra village, settled by Muria, Gotti Koya, and Kondi adivasis who have migrated from the war-affected Sukma district of Chhattisgarh, are new. However, the land has been dug up and numerous trenches now dot the village.

Devudugutta, 5 km into the Pasra forest off the Warangal-Etunagar road, is home to 31 households of 120 people from the Gotti Koya tribe who had migrated from Chhattisgarh, covering a distance of around 300 km on foot, according to Md. Rafi, a member of the Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI), an



Barseva, a migrant from Sukma. | SIMRAN

NGO which works for the residents there.

The NGO works with the tribe, providing informal education to the children in the Child Friendly Learning Space (CFLS) in the hamlet.

Md. Rafi said that the tribals fell trees and cleared lands for agriculture, both illegal under the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Therefore, the forest department officials visit the village periodically, dismantling their huts and destroying their crops.

Barseva, a migrant from the Sukma district of Chhattisgarh said, "The forest official asks us to go back. We were cultivating here, but they came and dug trenches on the land."

The Internally Displaced People (IDPs) live in very poor conditions with neither electricity nor borewells. They are isolated with no schools or hospitals close to the hamlet. However, some have ration cards, and some even have Aadhaar Cards.

Sangeeta Barsh, a migrant, said, "The forest officials beat us up. They dig holes so that we can't build anything. They even bulldoze our house."

The land in the hamlet has several trenches; Munindra, of Indian Forest Service (IFS) said, "The officials dug the land to store rainwater, so that it percolates into the earth and raises the groundwater level."

However, District Rural Development Officer Shekhar Reddy said, "The trenches were dug to curb illegal encroachment."

According to Markam Jyoti, another migrant, the tribe members say that they will live and die here. This makes any relocation efforts by the State difficult.

Oppressed, even when dead



Arunthathiyar funeral processions are restricted from passing through the Poondi village. | VIGNESSH

VIGNESSH

Thiruvallur: Even the final journey of an Arunthathiyar villager is not peaceful. The bodies topple into the fields as men carry them on their shoulders en route to crematorium for last rites. Arunthathiyar funeral processions are restricted from passing through the Poondi village.

The restriction has been imposed on the people from the Arunthathiyar community (a Dalit sub-group) here for over 300 years. Negotiations for passage right through the village, dominated by Backward and Most Backward Communities, inevitably fail.

"Our grandfathers have told us that the bodies of our ancestors had been allowed to pass through the village. Around 300 years ago, villagers from dominant communities objected to carrying the bodies of persons from our community along the road fronting Ponniyammam Temple," says S. Paranthaman, a resident of Arunthathiyar. "As they were the landlords, our forefathers agreed to carry the bodies through fields. The practice continues even today."

The Arunthathiyar villagers have to walk for more than 2 km, out of which three-quarters of the distance constitutes agricultural lands. They often get into trouble with the landlords as the crops are destroyed on their way to the crematorium. "If we are allowed to pass through the village, which is shorter in distance, we would not

face any of these difficulties," says R. Govindhan, another resident.

After the Arunthathiyar villagers petitioned the Panchayat and Block Development Offices, former Panchayat president Ambrose helped them by setting up a proper cremation ground, but it was impossible even for him to settle the dispute.

Seeing eye-to-eye on this issue, villagers from the Backward and Most Backward Communities say that the age-old custom cannot be changed. "It has been practised for over five generations. How can a reform come in a single day?" asks E. Lakshmanan, a resident of Poondi village. Many other villagers accept that the custom is still followed, but refuse to comment on it.

♥♥ Our forefathers agreed to carry the bodies through fields. The practice continues even today

However, V. Durai, Secretary, Poondi Panchayat, viewed the claims of Arunthathiyar villagers as conditioned fear. "They are afraid of taking the body through the street fronting the temple as they believe that it would lead to continuous deaths in the colony," he says.

If the Panchayat lays proper roads, the villagers are ready to use the same route. But Durai says that they have to occupy lands of around 20 farmers to lay a road over the agricultural fields.

SINGLE, READY TO MINGLE



Anjalakshmi (51) is unmarried. Her friends say she is a "young, fifteen-year-old maiden looking for a fair, handsome and well-placed man". Though she seemed embarrassed at her friends' jesting, she said that she "wanted a husband badly", drawing a fake thali on her neck. Every afternoon, she plays dayakattai, a South Indian dice game, at Devanapattinam in Cuddalore. | ROCHANA

Vellore SHGs bring hope to transgendered & people living with HIV

DEBANGANA GHOSH

Vellore: Over the past year, Vellore district witnessed the emergence of new Self Help Groups (SHGs) under the Tamil Nadu State Rural Livelihoods Mission (TNSRLM) and the Tamil Nadu Urban Livi-

hood Mission (TNULM). The effort was to focus on uplifting the most vulnerable sections like transgendered and people living with HIV/AIDS.

The first ever SHG run by the transgendered in Vellore with nine members was formed with an in-

vestment of Rs.40 lakh. A power laundry was proposed, which will start functioning from April.

P. Thirumeni, Assistant Project Director, TNSRLM said, "The idea to start a power laundry seemed profitable as Vellore does not have many such laundries but it has

many colleges, hospitals and hotels which will provide them (transgendered people) with ready clients."

Thirumeni added, "Most of these groups are given a three-month training on whatever they plan to start. We further invest money and look for tie-ups with other compa-

nies apart from paying each group a seed fund of Rs.15,000."

Giving a new lease of life to a group of 20 HIV positive women, a garment unit was started in December with a Rs.10 lakh investment. They have a contract of two years with Sairam Garments, Chen-

nai, which provides them with raw material.

M. Vesanthi, 42, a member of the Velma Garment unit, said, "We work eight hours a day and stitch 150 pieces of clothing daily. We did not go through the training period as most of us already knew stit-

ching. We stitch nightdresses, tops, full and half pants."

"We have requested 10 new machines as more members will be joining us soon," Vesanthi added, while she and her teammates showed some of their finished work.



DRY SPELL FOR FARMERS IN CHIDAMBARAM WITH WATER OF VEERANAM LAKE BEING DIVERTED TO CHENNAI | P 5

ARIYALUR

STRUGGLES OF A TRANSGENDER WORKER AT THE KADAMPULIYUR CASHEW NUT FACTORY | P 3



Anitha - A dream before the nightmare

It was not only Anitha who dared to dream, her father's tacit support was there in a way she never knew

DEBOLINA BISWAS & NITHIN KUMAR

Kuzhumur: Dalit dominated Kuzhumur village of Ariyalur district is popular for all the wrong reasons. It has one of the lowest sex ratios in the country (800 women for every 1000 men). It hit the headlines after the suicide of S.Anitha (17), who couldn't get admission in a medical college despite high scores. Born on March 5, 2000, Anitha seemed fine when her father left for his work in the morning. "She was dead when I came back," said her father, T. Shanmugam. Anitha committed suicide by hanging herself on September 1, 2017. She scored 1176 out of 1200 on her state board exams but was denied admission in a medical college for her poor scores in NEET, a medical entrance exam based on the CBSE syllabus.

Affectionately referred to as 'Papa', Anitha was the favourite of everyone in the family. "Our eldest son got everything for Papa. Let it be food or dress, he always kept her in mind", said Shanmugam.

The rest of her siblings are still studying. The eldest son has completed his MBA and is now studying to become an IAS officer. The other sons pursue Bachelors in Engineering at the Trichy Engineering College and at the Ariyalur Engineering College.

Shanmugam couldn't afford money to meet the demands of his four sons but always managed to buy Anitha whatever she needed. Even though he could never afford new clothes for all of his sons during festivals, he did not fail to buy



A father yet to come to terms with the loss. | PRAKASH G.

them for Anitha.

"Two of my sons received new clothes for one festival and the other two got them for the next one," he said.

"I never wanted my daughter to feel that I am financially suffering for her education," he added.

Till the end, she didn't have an interest in shopping or demanding something from her father. She did not have an interest in wearing jewels as well. "Chains and rings were not something she wore. She had a simple Krishna dollar on her neck," said her father.

Anitha's family lived a simple life. They bought rice from the ration shops and cooked simple meals, usually vegetables. Anitha's father explained how his children never complained and they

After giving birth to four son, we went to temples and prayed for a daughter. Soon after Anitha was born. -SHANMUGAM

enjoyed every meal they cooked. Anitha always told her father, "Don't worry Appa, I will become a doctor and serve the poor."

She hardly had any friends in the village and did not leave the house often.

"We would insist that she went to study with the neighbour's daughter, but she was always shy and never did so",

Shanmugam said. Anitha lived with her father and her grandmother after her mother passed away in 2007.



A memorial inside Anitha's house. | DEBOLINA BISWAS

problem of peer pressure. "I had a few backups for Papa. We had confirmed seats for BSc Agriculture at Coimbatore and at the Veterinary College in Chennai for her score," said her father. But he said she insisted on studying medical, hence he was forced to drop all his back up plans for Anitha.

"Teachers used to pat me on my back and say that she was brilliant and would certainly become a doctor," said Shanmugam.

On being asked if they face any discrimination for belonging to the Dalit society Anitha's father said, "My daughter broke all caste barriers. We got sympathy from every caste."

After Anitha's death the children in the village, which comprises 3,500 households, have stopped wanting to study medicine.

"Tamil Nadu has a number of medical colleges but there are not enough coaching classes," said Shanmugam.

The Government provided Anitha's family with a compensation of

Rs. seven lakh and two job opportunities. He has taken one job in Chennai and the other one he wants for his son.

"Anitha was a quiet girl and she didn't talk to everybody," said one of her neighbours. Finally, Shanmugam explained that Anitha was the daughter his family always expected. After giving birth to four sons, his family visited temples and prayed for a daughter, after which Anitha was born. Now, after the unfortunate incident, Shanmugam is kept awake at night with a broken heart that can never be mended.

Vimala's fight for education



A happy Vimala, before she starts her homework. LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

Kadampuliyur: The women of Kadampuliyur village in Panruti have never attended school. Most of the girls grow up illiterate, trained only to work at the Visudira cashew factory nearby or settle for a life within their homes.

The disparity in education levels between boys and girls is striking as some families are hesitant to send their daughters to study.

The village has a primary school but no high school, hence the children have to walk three kilometres every day for higher studies.

Twelve-year-old R.Vimala however, has other plans. She is in the 7th standard. She refused to sit at home and help her mother with chores.

"Is that a notebook?" she asks in clear well-spoken English. Her mother Birsa, aged 35 stands by her daughter, with a proud smile on her face.

"The teacher told us that she is very bright and that we should not stop her from higher studies; but her father has reservations. We want her to start earning for the family as quickly as possible," Birsa says. Vimala is full of ideas, stories,

and insight. The chirpy 12-year old says "I know about mathematics and history and I can even write stories like you!"

The school's distance from the village adds to the problem as parents feel it is unsafe for girls to travel the distance. Their complaints over the lack of educational facilities have fallen on deaf ears as no representative has approached the village for years now.

Illiteracy narrows their employment options to working as a labourer for a minimum wage and often the women are dependent on their husbands for money and other necessities.

"I fought with my husband to send her to school. We don't want this life for her," her mother Birsa says. Education is expensive for families that earn no more than Rs 300 a week. "Books and stationery are often too expensive for most families. Even if the family pays for the education, people do not get a job elsewhere. Employment opportunities are not there and the government does nothing about it," says, Vimala's father V.Kiran, 48.

Vimala and her family continue to fight against the odds in their battle for education every single day.



The Chidambaram temple is owned by a class of Brahmins known as 'Dikshithars'. They marry early by the age of 16 to 18, as it is compulsory for young boys to attain priesthood. Venkatesha Dikshitar, 48, the spokesperson of the temple said, "Only after marriage, we get the rights to perform the sacramental service to the Lord and take part in the temple administration." Almost all the girls are only allowed to study till 12th standard and denied further education. Perhaps due to the prevalence of such traditions, child marriage prevails even today in religious communities. | KANIMOZHI SUDHAKAR

Swachh Bharat Mission still a fantasy

LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

Kuzhumur: Private bathing spaces remain a distant dream for women at Kuzhumur village near Sendurai in Ariyalur district, often forcing them to bathe in the open.

Severe water shortage and lack of sanitation and cleanliness are common in the village which is situated around 300 km from Chennai. The government had built two bathrooms over eight years ago, but now they are in disuse due to negligence by the authorities and lack of water supply.

Government incentives such as Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) have not offered much to these villagers as they maintain and clean

the common toilets themselves. The women of the village are left with few options but to bathe with clothes on to ensure that they are not victims of harassment and eve teasing. Water is scarce and is often

What is the use of this toilet? It's only for show -S.ARUNA

stored, forcing the villagers to compromise on hygiene in order to wash their clothes and utensils.

P. Selvi, 32 a resident said, "There have been times when I have used the same water to drink, feed my child and wash my utensils

with. The doctor told us this can lead to contamination and health problems and I have tried to avoid it but we are left with no option." The village suffers from a lack of clean spaces for young women and the villagers have consistently complained that the government does not pay much attention to sanitation.

The lack of facilities in the village is alarming as girls and women find it increasingly hard to keep themselves clean and maintain personal hygiene. Even their dignity is at stake.

S.Aruna, 44 confessed, "Most of the times my family and our neighbours defecate in the fields. What is the use of this toilet? It is only for show. We want it restored but the

government does not send any officials for a check-up."

Dengue and malaria are common as cleanliness and sanitation take a back-seat in these rural surround-

ings. The women in the village have decided to request the sarpanch to look into the matter. Hopefully, this time their pleas will not go unheard.



Open public bathing spaces for all women residents. LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

'40 is the new 80' for men in Thiruppair

A mother living in fear for her children

SRIJA PODDER

Viluppuram: Sangeetha (27) moved to Thiruppair village here in 2009, after she got married to a farmer. Due to the unavailability of clean drinking water, she lives in perpetual fear of her children, Vairabhi (7), Jailakshmi (5) and Vignesh(3) contracting kidney, liver and intestinal problems. Jailakshmi is already unable to speak.

In 2007, chronic kidney failure cases were reported. In 2012 there were 40 to 45 deaths.

Bottled water is an option but people's financial status does not permit them to drink bottled water for too long.

"People who earn well can afford to buy mineral water. So those who cannot afford that, have to drink this ground water," Sangeetha pointed out.

As soon as she switched to mineral water only to feed her children, the villagers warned her saying that the minerals would cause bone diseases. Groundwater seemed to be the only option left for the villagers.

According to the villagers, the groundwater has large concentration of calcium salts. On some days even this water is in acute scarcity.

Sundaravelli(39), a mother of three, complained, "Now they have announced water supply from the bore only by next Tuesday. Come here in the morning to catch the chaos that people create while fetching water. It is difficult to fill our buckets. For the last two days we didn't get water."

A bore well was dug to provide drinking water to the villagers. However, the villagers were alarmed when they realized that a drain adjacent to it could contaminate this water.

A well was dug after the villagers sent a plea to the District Collector. The well was supposed to



Sangeetha doing household chores with contaminated well water. | **SRIJA PODDER**

meet their demand for clean water. However, traces of red soil remained in the water, making it unfit for drinking.

Animal carcasses also fell inside the well, as it was not covered. Most villagers suffer from kidney stones, diarrhoea and vomiting.

Sangeetha's father-in-law passed away due to kidney failure. Her brother-in-law too, passed away at the age of 35. "He died due to kidney failure. And that is not an age to die," Sangeetha cried.

Water samples from only two temples were tested and marked as clean and potable with less salt content. However, in order to fetch clean water the villagers have to walk almost 3 kilometers.

Renganathan(49), a farmer said, "How can we walk 6 kms twice every day? It's not possible for people who own don't vehicles." Hence, the elderly and the underprivileged who cannot afford transport are forced to drink the filthy water.

The bore well water leaves salt

sediments when boiled. Sticky salt layers are found inside cooking vessels. Milk reacts with the salt, making it difficult for people to drink it.

Sangeetha added that the well water turns yellow during monsoons and she lives in the fear of the impending doom striking her children and family members.

"Sadly nobody bothers to consider these issues. This is our plight. The doctors are not helping us. We are suffering with our children. If we plead to the officials to look into these issues, they come and speak on stage," Sangeetha cried.



Sangeetha's daughter Jayalakshmi | **SRIJA PODDER**

Ground water full of hidden dangers

Thiruppair: What started out as fever for Saraswati turned out to be life threatening in a span of 24 hours.

56-year-old Saraswati who lives with her two sons here in Cuddalore district was admitted to the Ulundurpet Government Hospital immediately in the middle of the night. When her condition worsened rapidly with acute stomach ache, she was transferred to another hospital.

On conducting tests, doctors diagnosed her with 'acute' renal failure (a medical condition in which both the kidneys suddenly lose the ability to eliminate excess salts, fluids, and waste materials from the blood.)

On further examination, the doctors said that treatment was not an option since her condition kept deteriorating and recovery was impossible. "Nothing can be done, she hardly has two days to live," said the doctors, to her eldest son Murugan who then brought her back home.

Murugan had taken samples of this water to the Villupuram Government Hospital to get them tested. Despite doctors not finding anything wrong with the water, Murugan holds it responsible for his mother's condition.

"We are fighting a lost battle here. We have spoken to leaders on numerous occasions but they have disappointed us," he added.

Doctors blame lifestyle for kidney failure

NITHIN KUMAR

Thiruppair: Doctors from hospitals in Ulundurpet and at the Villupuram Medical College have ruled out the possibility that the ground water in the area is the primary cause for the numerous cases of renal disease in the Thiruppair village in Villupuram district. Close to about ten people have died over the past eight months and residents have expressed their concern with the ground water.

Close to ten people are currently under treatment for renal failures at the government hospital at Ulundurpet and few go to the Villupuram Medical College for treatment.

"The water we get through the pipes comes from a tank connected to a bore that was set up by the government," said Kannan, a resident of the village. "We can see white sediments in the water when we store it", he added.

Though the residents complain that the pipe water is the primary reason for renal diseases, government medical officials and private hospital doctors in Villupuram and Ulundurpet disagree.

At the Asanur Police Station, an official who didn't want to be named said that water was exactly the same in the surrounding districts.

"The ground water is exactly the same in the nearby Ariyalur, Perambalur and even few parts of the Cuddalore district", said the official. "The water is a bit salty, but that is never the reason for the high levels of renal failure", he added. Dr. J. Ezhalarasi at the Mahalakshmi Hospital in Ulundurpet town,



however, a medical report of a deceased person from the village indicated that the person was not an alcoholic.

"Alcoholism is not the reason for the renal failure here", said the medical official who reviewed the report and chose not to be named.

"In this village it may be the eating habits of the residents or it may be Autosomal Dominant Polycystic kidney disease, which is

15 km from the village, said that it was the eating habits of the residents. She explained that often most of the villagers visit the town and eat street food and in local restaurants.

"These places are usually on the side of the road and the oil used to fry food is kept in the open. Dust falls on the food and on top of that colors are added", she said. "Water may not be the primary reason for kidney failure", she added.

Eating habits and lifestyle are causes for kidney failure.

- MEDICAL OFFICIALS

According to the residents of the Thiruppair village, men were affected more than women and children.

The police officials at the Asanur Police station hinted that alcoholism could be major reason. Ho-

hereditary", he added. The dean of the hospital at the Villupuram Medical College explained that most of the cases of renal failure from villages surrounding Ulundurpet get transferred to them.

"The ground water in some locations contain salt and calcium, however that is not the primary reason for the renal diseases in Thiruppair", she added. The dean also said that the causes maybe the eating habits the lifestyle.

The residents of the village demanded a test of the drinking water which was undertaken by the Ulundurpet Government Hospital. The test showed that the water was clean and drinkable.

"The doctors came and took the tests twice and they have cleared the water to be healthy and clean", mentioned Murugan, a resident.

There are neither factories nor quarries close by which will allow the dust to settle in the wells and ground water storage tank. Hence, water may not be the major reason for renal disease.

Handloom weaving, a dying art in Cuddalore's Bhuvanagiri town

DEBOLINA BISWAS

Bhuvanagiri: Handloom weaving is a dying art with only ten weavers remaining here, in Cuddalore district, which is known for handloom products including silk sarees. These days machine-made sarees which are comparatively cheaper and quicker to weave are gradually pushing handmade silk sarees out of business.

M.R. Mohan (60), who has been weaving silk sarees since he was ten-years-old, says, "I am retiring next year and I cannot do anything anymore. My life as a weaver is over and for good or bad, weaving is dying."

Mohan who was taught weaving by his father, in turn, has taught to many. A few of his students have prospered while many, including his own sons, got into other businesses.

His youngest son, M. Keshavan is the owner of Meenakshi Silks in Bhuvanagiri and has been selling silk sarees since the last 25 years.

Keshavan says, "Handmade sarees take ten to 25 days to weave and they range from Rs.4000 to Rs.20,000. While 30 machine made sarees are made in a day and cost Rs.1,500 to Rs.6,000."

Keshavan added, "Machine made sarees come from Salem. The maximum sale is made during Deepavali and Pongal."

Selling these sarees, he makes an average annual profit of Rs.2,00,000.

When asked why he didn't follow his father's footsteps, he said, "If a saree is sold for Rs.20,000, weavers only get Rs.3,000 to Rs.4,000. Gradually the number of weavers involved in the business is decreasing."

In the entire family, only Keshavan's father and uncle have been continuing with handlooms. His uncle, M.R. Nandakumar, has been weaving since he was 17 years of age.

"Although the income is low, I am happy with my job," says 43-

year-old Nandakumar.

Mohan uses the traditional 'thari' or the hand loom to weave fine silk sarees. These tharis, made by carpenters cost around Rs.50,000.

"700 grams of silk go into the making of one saree," said Mohan. The raw materials, including the silk and the golden or silver zaari is provided by the Bhuvanagiri Silk



M. R. Nandakumar (43) weaves silk sarees using the traditional 'thari' and every ordinary saree takes him 8 days to weave. | **DEBOLINA BISWAS**

Society.

When asked about the income made by the handloom weavers, Nandakumar said, "Two years back we were paid Rs.2000 per saree, now I make Rs.3000 for every silk saree I weave."

For every ordinary saree Nandakumar takes eight days to weave and fifteen days for a saree with designs all over.

"Day by day machines are increasing but I will have to continue hand weaving to feed my family," he says making an average monthly income of Rs.6,000.

Despite being more expensive, handloom silk sarees are of better

quality. What's making handloom weaving difficult to survive is the variety of designs that machine made sarees offer.

"Machine made sarees have new designs that we cannot weave with our hands," Nandakumar said. "Nobody in my family want to learn weaving and continue the tradition," he added. Silk threads and

saree is ready, it is returned to the society where the selling prices are decided," said K. Gopalram, President of the society.

The society which was formed in 1942, now provides raw materials to 60 weavers in Bhuvanagiri which includes both handloom weavers and machine weavers.

"The minimum wage is Rs.1,600 and maximum is Rs.4,000," said Gopalram. The maximum is paid to the best weaver every month.

Even the power looms depend on Government support.

According to the Vice President of the society, K. R. Paneerselvam, "Compensation like 500 units of electricity every two months" is provided to the weavers.

"An annual benefit of Rs.15,000 was provided for health, which has now been stopped by the Government," said D. Magendran, Manager of the society.

However, shopkeeper Keshvan said "We don't get any benefits. Only one out of 10 receive the benefits provided by the government. We only get 100 units of electricity free."

His mother, who helps his father, Mohan for weaving the sarees receive "Rs.1,000 every month as senior citizen pension."

Bhuvanagiri has 54 shops selling silk sarees and sarees are also sent to different shops in Chennai to be sold there. A handloom silk saree costs Rs.6,000 - Rs.20,000.

If a saree is sold for Rs.20,000, we only get Rs.3,000-4,000.

-KESHVAN

Bhuvanagiri Cotton cum Silk Weavers Co-op. Productions & Sale Society Ltd., No. E. 1500. "The society hands over the raw materials to the weavers and once the

"I was born Rajendra, but you can call me Maina"

LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

Kadampuliyur: Born and brought up here as Rajendra, 40-year-old Maina fled the village for Mumbai as soon as she came to terms with her sexuality. She has been working at the Visudira cashew factory in Panruti for more than six years now. Her work is restricted to menial jobs like washing and cleaning.

"I realized I was different when I was only eight years old. I was told that people like me can earn much more in a big city like Mumbai," she recalled.

Maina managed in Mumbai without the slightest knowledge of Hindi but she had to come back to the village very soon to take care of her 60-year-old ailing mother. "My father passed away fifteen years back. There is no one to look after amma, I want to keep working and earning to take care of her," she stated.

Maina earns a meager wage after a long day at the factory. But the everlasting smile on her face says otherwise. She seems grateful for all she has.

"There is no alternative, I have no relatives and I know that I have very few job opportunities as a transgender person. I am poor and if I leave this job I would probably have to beg. I can't leave my amma like this, I need to keep working and bear this suffering. I will always be grateful to the factory for accepting me," Maina explains.

It is easy to detect the hesitation in her voice as she describes her relationship with the villagers. Maina prefers to lead a quiet life with minimum interaction.

"Initially, the villagers would look at me with suspicion. They called me vulgar names and I would run away from them but now I let them do what they want, how many people can I fight with?" she asks.

Maina has accepted that she will probably never have the chance to lead a married life and her mother is all that she truly cares for. "The house next to ours treats us like dogs, they think I am abnormal, some kind of beast, but I never voluntarily pick fights or reply to their abuses because I have a mother at home and we need to survive here," Maina said.

Despite being fully aware of her rights as a transgender, Maina remains helpless because the government never helped. She went on to state, "They help families with kids but we are left to fate's mercy".

The taunting and disrespect trouble her immensely but the resolve to fight it out motivates her to keep at it every single day.

Her hands appear coarse after a day's work at the cashew factory but Maina remains hopeful to fight all

I was told people like me can earn much more in a big city like Mumbai.

- MAINA



Maina starts her day early at the Visudira cashew factory. | **SOHAM SEN**

the odds.

"I am not in touch with other transgenders, I see them every year at the Koovagam festival and then we go our own way," she said.

Believing that it is safer to be a transgender in a small village than a city, Maina spends her days looking forward to a day when society will accept her for who she is and treat her with the respect she deserves.

Maina continues to live with fear in the village of Kadampuliyur. According to a source who doesn't want to be named. Maina was attacked by her neighbours the very next day for interacting with the journalists of 'The Word'. She was verbally abused and accused of bringing 'bad omen' to the village. She has also been asked to leave the village on several occasions.

The brown coal that turns nearby villages grey

ADITHYA NARAYAN

Chidambaram: People living in villages surrounding the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) say they are facing problems caused by fly ash and dust particles from the power plant.

The wind carries the dust particles and disperses them on the trees, houses and water sources. The people say they are suffering from asthma, eosinophilia and skin related problems.

NLC, which started in 1956, generates power for almost the whole of South India using Lignite (brown coal) that is found in abundance in Neyveli, Mannargudi and Ramnad.

R.Ravi(47), who hails from Kokkankuppam and works under a contractor for the company says "I had to shift to my ancestral land when the company acquired my land between 1957 and 1962. Some people were offered jobs but not me."

Ravi says he gets paid a meagre Rs.390 per day with which he has to feed his wife and two sons.

However, according to him this is the least of his concerns.

"When the ash pond within the company premises where ash is deposited dries up, the wind disperses the ash in our villages" says Ravi pointing to the dust on the walls of his house. He can't leave his clothes out to dry in the open and is forced to keep his food and water constantly covered. The water in the vessels of the locality has a layer of ash floating over it.

Ranganathan, who lives adjacent to Ravi had filed a case against NLC forcing them to sit up and take notice.

"But all that the NLC authorities did was come here and conduct some tests. Nothing happened afterwards and people have given up ever since then" says Ravi.

In his village, that has 350 houses and 1350 adults, asthma is the most prevalent problem. Ravi's kids suffer from coughing and wheezing while he experiences itching and rashes.

The Neyveli government hospital is 5km away. Contract labourers like Ravi cannot avail benefits at the NLC hospital that is closer.

R.Rayar(82), who worked at NLC for 32 years, says, "The



R.Ravi shows the flyash on the walls of the temple and his house at Kokkankuppam village, which is near the Neyveli Lignite Plant.

| ADITHYA NARAYAN

particles can fly up to a distance of 80km. People who knew better back then sold their land and migrated to cities like Cuddalore, Ulundurpettai and Virudhachalam. People like me had to shift to our ancestral land after the company acquired my land in 1952 in return for a meagre Rs.4."

Rayar claims that animals are affected too when they drink the water containing these dust particles. Pazhaniamma(30), a housewife who has been having chest pains for the past 3 months adds "Two of my goats died in the last month alone." She blames the sorry state of the water for the death of her goats.

The agriculture in the village has also taken a hit due to the fly-ash problem.

R. Manoharan(50) from Akhilandagangapuram who owns four acres of land and cultivates maize and groundnut claims that the soil is good but fly-ash seeps into the groundwater.

"The seeds are affected at the flowering stage itself. The groundnut flower that is otherwise yellow in colour is not even visible these days because it blooms only

up to forty percent." His yield has come down to one third of what it used to be. Also the weight of the crop has reduced thus bringing down his income. While he got Rs.50000 per acre last year, he expects only Rs.20000 per acre this time.

He says that the taste and quality of the crop along with the water is deteriorating.

"Rice cooked using the paddy cultivated between Cuddalore and Paravanur regions is non-edible."

Earlier he used to get good quality groundwater at a depth of 5 feet. Ever since the mines stretching up to 600 feet have come up, he has been forced to dig bores 650 feet deep into the earth.

However, NLC says it purifies and supplies water to Cuddalore district for agriculture and drinking purposes. It also promises to revert the mine land spread over 27 sq.km back to its cultivable state once it runs out of lignite.

Quizzed about the pollution caused by the plant, T.Shanmugam, the PR officer in NLC said "If at all anything, there can only be thermal pollution. The question of dust and ash doesn't even arise."

SRIJA PODDER & KANIMOZHI SUDHAKAR

Kokkankuppam: The small dingy room where Tamarasi (48) lives with her husband and two children looks grey due to a thick layer of coal dust deposited on the furniture and the walls.

Tamarasi, a resident of Kokkankuppam village near Neyveli, has been breathing that coal dust since her childhood. All efforts to get rid of the ash go in vain.

Despite repeated complaints to the Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Limited nothing has been done to ease the misery, she said.

"Our repeated complaints and demands that the fly ash problem be dealt with have fallen on deaf ears," she added.

"I have severe chest pain now and then. For the past five years, I am suffering from body ache and nerve disorder. Now it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to carry on day-to-day activities," she added.

"I don't have a choice since I cannot afford routine checkups in private hospitals," she said.

Against all odds: the women who refused to capitulate

NITHIN KUMAR

Virudhachalam: The outskirts of Virudhachalam town in Cuddalore district are home to many factories producing ceramic or porcelain ware such as tiles for flooring, toys and sculptures. Working in one of the dimly lit factory is 27 year old Savithri, who quit her job as a nurse to be an artist.



Savithri painting the rows of dolls. | NITHIN KUMAR

Savithri, the only artist present in the factory, paints a minimum of 200 dolls a day and sometimes even 400 pieces, when there is an order from buyers in towns and cities. She earns Rs 500 everyday for her work and has been working in the ceramic factory for a year.

"I finally found this place, where I could paint. Plus it allows me to visit my family once a week.." - SAVITHRI

Hailing from Kallakuruchi town in the nearby Villupuram district, Savithri completed her high school and then a three year diploma course in nursing at Virudhachalam town. But from childhood, she always had an interest in art and painting.

"As a child, I used to paint and draw pictures often. My father recognized my talent and always said I would become an artist", she said as she painted a Meera Bhairav doll.

"But after I completed school, they (family) strongly suggested that I join the nursing course", she added.

So she moved in with her sister and her family in

Virudhachalam. Soon after completing her diploma, she worked at the Coimbatore Government Hospital for six months and at the Virudhachalam GH for a year, where she assisted deliveries in maternity wards, administered injections and did night shifts.

"It was very difficult to visit my family when I was a nurse. My mother needed medical attention at home, but work was very unpredictable", she said. "Plus I never enjoyed what I did, I always sketched in my free time."

So Savithri quit her job and found this place to work as an artist. Here she could do what she is passionate about and assist her family as well.

"I finally found this place, where I could paint. Plus it allows me to visit my family once a week when it is a holiday", she said.

Now she has a house on rent and a family of her own. Rows of dolls were stacked around her, while Savithri slowly painted the eyes, the jewels, the hair and other miniature details. She only used a brush and water colors and it took her a minimum of three to five minutes per doll.

After the dolls are painted, Savithri again stacked them on a plate and places them inside a heater or a 'Kiln' for a whole day. The dolls with a glossy finish are then sold for more than Rs 800 or Rs 1000 per piece.

However, the work comes with its health hazards. The smell of chemicals and paint is heavy as there is inadequate ventilation.

"The workers get fresh air when they exit the factory. The heat from the kiln makes it hard for a person to stay inside for more than an hour. And Savithri works a 10 hour shift from 8:00 AM till 6:00 PM.

She said that the heat and the chemicals affected the skin, but washing it regularly and applying coconut oil helped. For a few elders working in the factory, the chemicals and the heat affected their hair and damaged their lungs.

When asked why they do not use safety equipment, one of the workers said, "They are very uncomfortable to work with. The masks which the owners give, makes it hard for us to breathe."

The masks were standard issue which is also used in construction sites. But the people working here are not used to wearing such masks and are comfortable working without them. "Even though at times I think of going back to nursing, I cannot. Even if the conditions here are poor, I like what I do here and I look forward to staying in a job like this", said Savithri.

Savithri has two children, Mercy and Shyam, who are 3 and half and 1 and half respectively. She was very happy to show me their pictures on her phone.

Even as she struggles to run her family, she strongly believes in doing what she is passionate about. Her husband is also supportive and works alongside her in the same factory, pouring the ceramic into the moulds.

"I'm happy to see her working here. We are able to run our family, so that's enough", he said.

Kadampuliur: Kadampuliur village is famous for its cashew nuts. Located 20 kilometers from Vadalur in Cuddalore district, every household in the village has been hereditarily engaged in either growing or selling cashews.

Sixty year old Jayalakshmi is a daily wage earner who breaks open cashew nuts freshly plucked from the trees. Ten years ago when her husband Moorthy lost his leg in a road accident, Jayalakshmi took over as the bread winner for the family. Her work requires her to break open about six kilograms of cashew nuts manually, using a rock. She is paid Rs 120 for her work every day.

"We break open the cashew nuts and give it back to the farmers who sell them", she said, while she carried on with



Jayalakshmi breaking open the cashew nuts

NITHIN KUMAR

breaking open the cashew nuts.

Even though a cashew nut opening machine is available for households, Jayalakshmi preferred to do the work with her hands. "I tried working with the machine once, I felt more comfortable and satisfying to work with my hands", she said.

She explained that the residents of the village did not do any other type of work. "Working in paddy fields and planting sugar cane are very rare here", said Jayalakshmi.

Even her neighbor, Kumaran and his family returned to the

village after helping the children find work in Chennai, to restart the cashew nut business.

"This is our traditional business. We have been doing this for generations", said Kumaran.

"Before this, I was a housewife and I did not do much work.

"I hated working on the machines. I felt that the cashew nuts must be broken by hand and packed." - JAYALAKSHMI

But 10 years later, I can say that I am enjoying my work. Plus my family needs the money", Jayalakshmi said.

She sat in the corner of the sit-out of her house. There, she had a bag of ash by her right and the huge jute bag of cashew to her left. She first applied the ash on her palm and fingers, to deal with the stickiness of the cashew seeds.

Then using a rock, she tapped the nuts and carefully peeled them open. The cashew nuts went into a bowl and the skin was piled over on a jute mat in front of her.

Jayalakshmi explained that it took four years for the cashew trees to produce the fruit. "We water the sapling and protect it from the animals eating them. Then years later, we start getting the cashew from them", she said.

She hails from the same village and currently resides with her husband and her grandson, Dinesh, who is in class 11.

Jayalakshmi said she hoped that her grandson did not get into the cashew nut business in the village. "The pay is very less, so I want him to find better work elsewhere", she said.

When asked about how she felt if the family business die with her, she simply said, "Yes, the business will end with my generation and students will find better work."

"There are kids who are very poor in academics. We are sure they will have no other option but carry on with the cashew nut production", she added.

Jayalakshmi along with her husband saved money and had their two sons and daughter married. All of them live in different districts and do not carry on the cashew nut business.

Another factor that threatens the traditional cashew business is the factory in the village. Visudira Impex Pvt Ltd was set up six years ago and it has started to take over the business using machines.

The factory has put a number of households out of work. "The factory produced more cashew nuts per day than we ever could. We were not able to sell our cashews to the farmers, as they linked themselves with the factory for a better pay", she said.

Jayalakshmi said she had tried working in the factory, but never liked it. "I hated working on the machines. I felt that the cashew nuts must be broken by hand and packed", she said.

Jayalakshmi is now part of a slowly fading tradition, who is satisfied by doing the work her way and refusing to work with machines, even if the pay is higher. She continues to break open the cashew nuts from her jute bag using her rock and looks forward to the season to begin by January and February.

Cashew factory labourers remain underpaid and overworked

ADITHYA NARAYAN

Kadampuliur village in Cuddalore district is famous for its cashew industry that employs its women independently as well as under private firms. However famous its cashews may be, it is not only the industry that is equally infamous for the meagre salary it pays its workers but also the village for the alcoholism that persists among its male members.

It's been only two years since Janaki (38) moved to this village and started working with a group of women that primarily breaks open cashew shells. Sitting on her haunches with only a brick to occasionally rest her bottom, Janaki breaks open the cashew shells by striking it with a stone. She has just



K.Parameswari and R. Selvi

| ADITHYA NARAYAN

a tarpaulin sheet over her head to prevent the sun and only a pair of gloves for protection. Once the glove is worn out, she uses the ash in the nearby container to prevent the liquid emanating out of the cashew from burning her fingers.

However Kalachelvi (20) who quit her studies after 9th standard when she lost interest does the same work mechanically. Along with two other women, she works from inside a shed made of asbestos. Her work requires her to

stand up since the machine has to be operated with her leg.

Janaki says "I am originally from Keezhmambettu and had to move to this place because of some troubles there." She wants to stop there. But upon being pressed Janaki reveals that it was her oldest son who after fighting with their neighbours over land that persuaded them to shift.

Of late, life hasn't been easy for Janaki who's been doing this work since she was 18. "I get Rs.200 a day for breaking 25-30kg of cashews. I can't buy clothes for my kids even during festivals with this money" says Janaki while also admitting to acute food shortage.

Janaki's work starts at 10 in the morning and goes up till 6 in the evening. At home she has a daughter who studies in 9th

standard, a son in 2nd standard and a husband who roasts cashews and earns around Rs.300 a day.

Doing this job for such a long time has already taken a toll on her body.

"I have severe hand and back pain and my employers don't care either. All they are bothered about is whether we finish the work or not" she says. She goes to the local government hospital in case of a fever and her employers might pay a small amount during the course of an injury.

Ten metres away is where K.Parameswari and R. Selvi works. These are people who don't even have an idea about their ages. "I just say 45 and that too when I'm asked" says Parameswari when asked for details.

Both of them work for Visudira

Impex Pvt Ltd., a company in the village that processes cashews. Their work happens almost half a kilometre away from the factory. They work on the remnants of the cashew that would be used to add flavour to tea.

When asked why the company puts effort into processing these remains of the cashew, Selvi says "This fetches them good money." Theirs and Janaki's lives have a lot in common such as the working conditions and their situations at home. Back home both Selvi and Parameswari have four and three kids respectively and unemployed husbands who drink.

But what sets them apart from Janaki is the manner in which they approach their problems. Parameswari and Janaki have almost made peace with their

situations at home. With a headband tied on their heads, both sit on plastic cartons and sift through the cashew remains. They earn only Rs.200 a day doing this.

Asked whether this would be enough to sustain in the future, they say "Only if I wake up tomorrow after going to bed today will there be a future."

Their situations at home are equally bad if not worse compared to Janaki's. Parameswari's eldest son had to drop out of college after his first year since she couldn't provide him the Rs.10,000 tuition fee. Her second kid failed 12th by a mark.

But they don't let these situations bog them down. Selvi blushes and covers her face upon hearing that her face has come out beautifully in her photograph.

Alcohol - A bane to family and health

The youngest husband to die was 22 years old

ADITHYA NARAYAN & LAHOMA

Cuddalore: Every morning the men and women of Kadampuliyur leave their village and head to the Visudira cashew factory to earn their daily wages. At night, some men stagger back home after consuming a strong locally-brewed alcohol.

The women often become helpless victims of their husband's alcoholism, suffering domestic abuse and violence. Some become widows.

Four-year-old Gopi lost his father due to alcoholism and his 37-year-old mother Chitra was left with the responsibility of providing for the family.

Chitra had been working at the Visudira cashew factory for the last few years but their wages were not enough to feed the family and send the boy to school. It was then that she left the village and went to Thanjavur in search of a new livelihood.

Gopi was left with his grandmother K. Jayanti an eighty-year-old, who stays at home and takes care of the child with the money



Four-year-old Gopi is left with his grandmother |LAHOMA BHATTACHARYA

her daughter-in-law sends back home.

"I lost my son and he (Gopi) is all I am left with. God has been unkind. The factory workers are not paid as much anymore, with the machines doing their work. But we have no food to eat. Chitra has not seen her son for months and he cries for his mother every night",

Jayanti said. This is not the only family that has suffered due to the alcoholism prevalent in the area. "As many as 36 women with families in the village have been widowed. The youngest husband to pass away was 22 years old," Jayanti stated.

Janaki, a cashew worker, said her husband too drank regularly. "If I question his drinking habit, he beats me," said Janaki wiping the sweat off her forehead.

Some women denied the prevalence of alcoholism.

Deepa, 32, said, "We are very

happy here. My husband works every day and feeds us. He has never touched alcohol in his life. What more could we ask for?"

However, Jayanti believes that more often than not, these women were ashamed to admit the truth.

Another worker Parameswari's husband drinks when some acquaintances of his buy him alcohol.

"I don't give him a chance to scold me. I scold him before he even attempts to take it out on me," says Parameswari. These are women who take the bull by the horns.

Women are not the sole victims in the area. There have been cases of violence towards men as they return home intoxicated and get a thrashing from their wives.

Selvam V, 55, a worker at the factory said, "Women are the ones with the power here because they are working and earning the money. The husbands are left at their mercy and they are ill-treated and beaten black and blue if they ever return drunk."

Lack of family planning ups pregnancy rates

DEBOLINA BISWAS

Cuddalore: Sita (24) of Kadampuliyur village in Panruti taluk of Cuddalore district has become pregnant for the third time in her five years of married life.

Sita's husband, Shivakumar (27) is a barber and the couple already has a two-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. Sita is now three months pregnant with an unwanted third child.

"I went to the hospital to get an abortion done but the doctor said it is risky," she added. Sita's last two pregnancies were caesareans which makes abortion difficult and risky.

"My husband uses protection only when I am menstruating," she says.

The lack of a village clinic makes Sita travel 50 kms every month to the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research Hospital (JIPMER) in Puducherry.

"My husband gives me Rs.300 every month for the medical check-up. I travel alone in a bus to Puducherry," she said. Shivakumar is a regular drinker and often borrows money from his friends to buy alcohol.

"Sita's husband returns drunk from work every night and misbe-



This is Sita's third pregnancy in five years |DEBOLINA BISWAS

haves with his family members,"

Sita said, "He doesn't provide enough money for the household supplies and beats me if I ask him to stop drinking."

Sita lives in a thatched mud house along with her husband, two children and her in-laws. The father-in-law is a barber as well and consumes alcohol occasionally.

There is a Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation liquor shop within 5 kms of the village from where the men get their supply of alcohol.

The expenditure for Sita's last two pregnancies amounted to Rs.10,000 for which she had to take loan from her neighbours and her relatives in the village. Due to lack of enough time between the two pregnancies she and her child had respiratory problems during the second caesarean delivery.

My husband uses protection only when I'm menstruating

- SITA

As many as 36 women with families in the village have been widowed

- Jayanti

Underpaid nut-crackers



Radha's hands badly affected by powerful chemicals sent in cashew shells.

SRIJA PODDER

Panruti: The rhythmic cracking of cashew kernels by four women sends ash flying everywhere, giving a remote corner in Muthandhpukkam village, a murky appearance. Their faces are covered in ash but they don't take a moment off to wipe it away.

Four pairs of focused eyes and four hands bandaged by a thin piece of cloth, tap stones on the cashew shells to break them one after another, without a pause.

These women running a small scale cashew business are more adept than machines at removing 25-30 kilograms of cashew nut shells per day with their bare hands.

The locally grown nuts come from Cuddalore and Panruti areas. Another variety of nuts is bought from Rajahmundry and imported varieties from Tanzania.

The selling price is Rs. 20 for 3 kilograms for locally cultivated cashews. Other factors like rainfall and irri-

gation result in lower yields.

Before the nuts are sold to Visudira Impex. Pvt. Ltd. in Kadampuliyur village to be processed, the preliminary steps include handling the shell containing powerful chemical irritants known as anacardic acids to which the women are exposed.

"There is an itchy sensation in my hands all the time. Sometimes it enters my eyes and it burns," said Radha (58), who works to support her son's education. "My husband used to spend the money he earned for himself. I started working here last year to support me and my son."

The government has not given gloves to protect these women from coming into contact with the acid cashew shells ooze.

Although only women do the manual labour in smaller sections of the cashew industry, they are underpaid, earning Rs.250 per day for breaking 30 kilograms of cashew kernels.

However, in bigger factories like Visudira, where 150 women work in the packaging and segregation department, the task of operating heavy Borma machines is usually assigned for men, with 90 of them working there.

The second floor of the factory is occupied by almost fifty women skillfully peeling mountains of cashews, then sieving the huge piles of skins post peeling to check for cashews to be retained.

In the cashew industry, soft work means less payment for women, because their job is perceived of as moral support towards their husbands. They get paid Rs.100-150 per day for any type of work they do. It took Thanmayi (35) ten years of dedication to rise to the position of supervisor. "My wages are same as my co-workers. We do all sorts of work except handling the heavy machinery. My husband is unable to work now, because alcohol has damaged his liver."

The man with 25 years of experience, Babu (45) is the cost and production manager. He said that oil is extracted from the peels and sold at Rs.30-35 per kg to paint companies.

However, the women do not have any knowledge of any such business deals nor are they paid more than their minimum daily wages.

Quenching Chennai's thirst at the cost of Chidambaram

KANIMOZHI SUDHAKAR

Veeranam: Farmers in Veeranam village do not get enough water for irrigation even when there is a lake nearby. The water from the Veeranam lake is diverted to Chennai for drinking purposes whenever the city faces shortage, they say.

R. Ramesh, 42, a farmer at Alcondanatham said, "We cultivate chilli, black gram and Bengal gram in this one acre of land. We have dug a 220 feet borewell since there is water scarcity in this area."

Ramesh has invested Rs.150,000 for three to four months on irrigation. The Veeranam tank was the next best option. However the tank is 6 kilometres away and is not sufficient to cultivate the entire cropland.

Only 20 to 30 per cent of the lands in Kattumannargudi and Chidambaram are cultivated due to lower rate of rainfall. Only those who have bore-wells can cultivate their lands. Most of the farmers have migrated to cities like Chennai, Tirupur, Salem and Coimbatore in search of jobs because agriculture is not a profitable activity.

"The agricultural yield during the past four to five years has been substandard. Back then the minimum yield was 40 to 50 sacks of the produce per acre.

However nowadays it is even difficult to obtain 20 to 25 sacks. We are struggling to get back what we invested," laments Ramesh.

Insurance policy is not applica-



Farmers like R.Ramesh suffer when water is diverted to Chennai |PRAKASH GHIMIREY

ble to farmers who are not land owners. So those who cultivate on rented land cannot claim damages for crops lost in floods or because of no rain.

G. Suresh, 40, a farmer from Veeranam village said, "I own 10 acres of land. Last year was a complete washout. So we fixed three bore-wells and were

able to cultivate 5 acres this time."

The farmers hire pumpsets for Rs.5000 per acre.

Mansoor Ali, a farmer from Veeranam village spent nearly Rs.100,000 on his 20 acres of land. "The cost per acre in terms of labour, pesticides and pumpsets ranges from Rs.30,000 to Rs.35,000.

Ultimately when we sell our produced items, we incur a loss of Rs.8000. The maximum yield per acre is 30 to 35 sacks."

"The BPT paddy variety that we cultivate is susceptible to disease at the ripening stage. So we also incur unforeseeable losses," said Mansoor Ali, who plans to migrate to the Gulf.

The ripple effects of a mine shutdown

SRIJA PODDER

Vriduchalam: Sree Renga Refractories in Vridhachalam has managed to survive despite most of the mines supplying ball clay, a raw material, having been closed down.

Renganathan (37), its owner, claims that it is the only functioning large scale manufacturer cum supplier in Tamil Nadu now.

There are some 25 small-scale industries functioning all over India. As many as 135 big industries were shut down, putting 1500-2500 people out of jobs.

Ball Clay from Neyveli had set the highest standard in quality. However, Neyveli Lignite Corporation closed down mines in 2014 leading to a shortage of raw materials, making it harder for manufacturers to meet the demands of the



Thenmozhi's face smeared in dust |PRAKASH GHIMIREY

bigger industries. "The workers who were laid off were given replacement jobs in small scale industries instead of compensation," Renganathan said. Sree Renga is getting its raw

material from China and Germany which are the only countries apart from India where good quality ball clay is found.

"I am able to continue the business because of the exports that I

am doing to Indonesia, Mauritius, America and Germany," Renganathan added.

Ball Clay is a very rare mineral found 300 feet below the ground. It is bought by exporters as raw material and converted into green granules, which is used for kiln insulation.

There are many who depend on ball clay factories for their livelihood.

Thenmozhi (43) working in Sree Renga Refractory said "My limbs are weak but I work here now because I live here and my son is unable to send me money. He made Rs. 25000 per month when he was working in Gujarat, but the industry shut down. Now he is making a minimum daily wage of Rs. 50 per day in a smaller factory in Tamil Nadu for sieving."

'Gods? I make them!'

Thangamani of Iruppukicchi carves idols of dieties out of ceramic. She is paid a meagre amount of Rs.200 per day for doing this from 9 a.m to 5.30 p.m.



ADITHYA NARAYAN



FAMILIES OF OCKHI MISSING PERSONS LEFT WITHOUT HOPE, CLOSURE OR COMPENSATION | P 8

CUDDALORE

ALCOHOLISM IN DEVANAMPATTINAM A THREAT TO CHILDRENS EDUCATION | P 9



Safety codes pose problems

High-risk work and living conditions demoralize NLC workers



Makeshift houses line the migrant worker colony in Neyveli. Around 11 workers live in each room. | ROCHANA MOHAN

AASHA SRIRAM

Neyveli: Contract workers at Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Limited face daily health hazards and spend out of their pockets for medical care despite the management's claim that hospital facilities are provided.

The workers say they seldom get any safety equipment. "We don't get masks. If we go and ask, they give us, but that mask is good only for a day. We use our handkerchiefs. If we demand them, they will spend us," says N. Shanmugam, working in the housekeeping department at NLCIL.

Medical checkups are conducted once in five years," says T. Amruthalingam, Trade Union Leader for Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

"For non mining contract workers, ESI (Employees' State Insurance) is given and hospital facilities are provided to mining

workers. We give shoes, masks, helmets, and earplugs for the safety of workers," says Mr. C. Durai-kannu, Managing Director of NLCIL Indcoserve.

Accidents are a frequent occurrence, and the management tries to cover it up to evade responsibility. "I lost my eyesight for a month and suffered severe skin burns after a boiler burst. The company paid for half the medical expenses. I'm still waiting for the other half," he says.

The unit was closed down soon after the incident, and Shanmugam later found out that the unit was operating without a license.

Sources say that several deaths occurring inside the plants go unreported. After two workers died of asphyxiation two years ago in a drainage, workers became aware of the situation.

"I sweep and clean the general hospital. I don't get soaps. Only if I'm clean, I can go back home and make sure my children are clean as well," says Shanmugam.

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Land and costs pull back solar power

MOHAMMAD EYAMIN

Neyveli: Land and high maintenance cost are the main obstacles to installing solar power in Cuddalore district.

As per the Union Government's instructions, Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Limited (NLCIL), a public company decided to increase solar power in Cuddalore but deterred due to lack of land.

A recent report says NLCIL has 140MW solar capacity of the States 1,995 MW. The Ministry of Power estimates that 1MW solar power plant requires about two and half acres of land.

'Solar power plant is effective in dry land like Rajasthan. But in Cuddalore almost 90 percent of the land is cultivable. So installation of solar power to meet the renewable energy target would be big burden on agriculture,' said C. Durai-kannu, Managing Di-

rector of NLC Indcoserve.

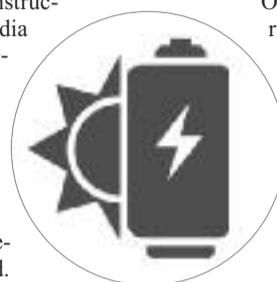
Moreover, Cuddalore is a coastal area and natural disaster-prone zone. If there is another tsunami or flood like in 2004 and 2015, the plant will be destroyed.

On the other hand the prices of other materials and maintenance of solar power plant is still very high. A solar power plant is only economically viable for about 10 years while a thermal power plant is for 25 to 30 years.

'Because of the high price of construction materials, tariff gets raised and affects consumers,' added C. Durai-kannu.

Available data say that the current tariff of per unit coal based power plant is Rs.3.20 while that of the solar project is at Rs.5.10 per unit.

NLC is now focusing more on thermal than solar power in Neyveli with five thermal power stations that has an aggregate capacity of 3240 MW.



Basic utilities held from NLC workers

DEBDUTTA MITRA

Neyveli: Labourers in the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) consisting of the Neyveli Coal and Lignite Mines and the Neyveli Thermal Power plant in Neyveli town work day and night to make sure that the entire plant functions smoothly.

However, all labourers in the plant do not enjoy the privilege of living in a dwelling with basic necessities.

Local contract labourers receive no electricity from the company that provides 3000 MW of power per annum. "It was not until 2-3 years ago that we installed a solar panel from a private vendor," said K. Subhasaraswathi (14), daughter of G. Kupusamy, a contract worker in the Horticulture Department of the Neyveli Township.

Sanitation and water supply are an issue for 2000 such households since they were built 40 years ago.

"We have a toilet built separately for gents and ladies but there is no latrine built inside it and we defecate in it," said Subhasaraswathi.

However, the conditions of the 2000 migrant workers (most of them coming from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab and Orissa) is worse both in terms of living and wages.

According to the labourers, sanitation and water supply are neglected by the responding authorities. "The toilet has been left so unclean and dirty that nobody can use it. The same water is used for drinking, bathing and all other purposes as well."

The labourers' complaints were ignored. "They said that if we can't stay like this, we need not work here and we could return to our villages," said Bamdev.

Protest over daily wages

TENZIN KHANDO

Neyveli: The contract workers of Neyveli Lignite Corporation India Limited (NLCIL) receive threats of suspension from the management if they "demand too much."

They are not provided with basic amenities such as electricity and medical treatments even though they do the same work as any other permanent/regular worker in their township.

The minimum wage differs at NLCIL Township in terms of their working tag, with the permanent workers earning Rs.2000 to 3000 a day, the contract workers earning Rs.526 a day and the migrant workers earning Rs.250 a day for the same workload but harsher conditions. The 7th Pay Commission sets the minimum wage at Rs 18,000.

On July 12, contract workers of

According to C. Durai-kannu, Management Director/NLCIL Indcoserve, there are equal number of permanent workers and contract workers, amounting to 16,000 workers.

Last year, "where massive production activity took place", there were 22,000 permanent and 24,000 contract workers.

He explained that permanent workers are recruited based on their education qualifications and work experience, whereas the contract workers are recruited based on their physical fitness.

Even though some people have worked as contract workers for more than 30 years at NLCIL, they are not made permanent workers, although the law that states 'any individual who works 240 days continuously should be made permanent workers.'

"Earlier, the public sector was

of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), there are 5000 vacancies for permanent workers but the management will neither recruit nor make the senior contract workers permanent because they will have to pay more wages.

"The people who gave up their land signed an agreement saying that 50 per cent of the permanent jobs would be given to them by the government," he added. This was additionally offered to these farmers after the government purchased their land.

When Durai-kannu was asked about the workers' health facilities, he said, "Workers are protected, even contract workers." And those miners have direct medical facilities and permanent workers get 50 per cent Employees' State Insurance (ESI).

N. Shanmugam, who is a contract worker in a mine, said that they do not get NLCIL current in their households and have to get current from private companies.

Contract workers do not receive subsidized food from the NLCIL canteen where a meal costs only four rupees. They have to bring food from their home.

Stressing the 'unskilled tag' on contract workers, Amruthalingam said, "If you are unskilled, you are unskilled for all your life here, which is against the law."

K. Venkateshwara, Trade Union Leader for The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), was a contract worker since 1994. He was suspended in 2009 and lived with no electricity for 25 years. He said, "Only thermal sector get ESI and not mining sector. And if one has no insurance, then one cannot get ESI as well."

The feud between the management and contract workers goes on while the migrant workers suffer a double layer of discrimination.



T Amruthalingam, CITU Leader, and T. A. Shanmugam, a contract labourer, receive threats of suspension due to their involvement in protests. | TENZIN KHANDO

Mine 1A went on a strike and protested against the decrease of shifts from 26 to 19.

The management responded by adding two extra shifts. The contract workers of NLCIL are currently paid Rs.11,046 a month.

for the public. Now it's also for profit. Therefore, government works for profit and the conditions naturally change" said Durai-kannu.

According to T. Amruthalingam, Trade Union Leader for Cen-



2000 migrant workers live in cramped, shabby rooms with roofing made out of cheap aluminium sheets and no basic amenities like a kitchen or bathroom. | TENZIN KHANDO

SUSMITHA SURESH

Neyveli: The sun fell to the ground and darkness slowly set in. The migrant workers colony within the Neyveli Lignite Corporation comes alive at twilight.

The labourers return from a hard day of toil, effort, risks and unfairness to their sheds, a cramped space that they share with at least eight others.

The labour colony at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) has over 2000 migrant workers from Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and other States.

For the last three months, many of the migrant workers living in the colony were not paid by the NLC. "A lot of us are on strike now" said Sanat Paswan, a 27-year-old from Bihar, "But none of the newspapers has enquired about it, nor has anyone come to help us." He refused to speak more since the contractors henchmen might be nearby.

There are mainly four colonies in the enclosure, one for each contractor. The walls are not painted, and the roof of the houses are made of sheets. A cable line runs dangerously close to the sheet roofs one after another, providing

electricity to the colony.

The workers are not allowed to talk to strangers about their lives. The contractors keep them on a strict leash.

How the labourers live in these circumstances seems a question on its own.

"We didn't have electricity until recently," said Mahendra Kumar, a 25-year-old worker from Jharkhand.

The contractors are mostly Tamil-speaking people who recruit workers from other States.

Most migrant workers are promised permanent employment but they never get it. The clash between the contract workers and the NLC take on a different turn when it comes to them.

"The reason why they're hiring more migrant workers than locals for contract labour is because the migrant workers don't ask for much, and are ready to do extremely dangerous work at less pay, without proper safety precautions. They aren't provided with health-care either," said T Amruthalingam, CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) leader for contract workers. "Currently, about 90 per cent of contract workers are migrant workers."

Coming from extremely deprived backgrounds, they are stuck here as they don't have enough money to go back to their native lands. "Even if we do, there's nothing better awaiting us there" says Mahendra.

Satrujna Murry is a B. Comm graduate from CJ Patel College in Maharashtra. He is an electrician here and gets paid Rs.20,000 per month, which is considerably more than what most workers get. But he too is a contract worker exempt from the privileges given to permanent employees. "They promised to make me permanent." A promise that was made three years ago, yet to be fulfilled.

Workers are also faced with the drab living conditions provided to them by the contractors. Even basic amenities are scarce.

The workers here are afraid to go beyond the safety of the colony during late hours.

"They harass us", says Nirmal Singh who got here a just a week ago. "When we go out at night, the local people here tease us and try to have fights as well. Sometimes they even take away our things, including our mobile phones." No actions has been taken on the issue yet.

13 years later: Cheated death for a life not worth living

TENZIN KHANDO

Devanampattinam: "Our son goes back every night into that ocean which brought the Tsunami", the squeaky voice of K. Ganapathy, 68, narrates the experiences of a December 2004 Tsunami which took thousands of lives.

Ganapathy is a former fisherman. His family consists of his wife K. Samadavali, 60, and their son K. Pulendran, his daughter-in-law and three sons. They live in the fishermen's village in Devanampattinam, which is a kilometre away from the Silver beach which was destroyed by the tsunami.

Thinking back to that day, Ganapathy said, "We were unloading fish from our boat that morning when the Tsunami hit the shore."

Pulendran was helping Ganapathy with the work while Samadavali was taking a stroll nearby.

They all drowned when the water hit the shore. However, their daughter-in-law escaped because she was at a safer area.

Pulendran pulled out his mother from water and got hold of his father as well. They found out that Samadavali was severely injured. "The metal bench knocked on my knees really hard when I was forced into the water", she said.

Samadavali still has to bear the pinching pain every night.

Resurfacing from the water, Pulendran took his parents to the nearest dry area and left them near the police jeep, which acted as an ambulance to help the victims, and went back to rescue others.

"They thought we were dead, and piled us up with other dead bodies" Ganapathy said.

Ganapathy managed to tell people that they were alive and they were immediately rushed to the



K Samadavali and K Ganapathy live in a single-bedroom house provided to them after the 2004 tsunami, with five family members. There is only one bed. | TENZIN KHANDO

hospital. Samadavali got fifteen stitches on her knees and they were on IVs for 14 days.

Their daughter-in-law took care of them and Pulendran had to go to Nagore to check on his father-in-law, who was later found dead.

When they finally returned home from the hospital, they witnessed the complete destruction of their village.

A Christian Missionary help group built 648 houses on government issued land to accommodate the whole village.

The government provided 300 boats and fishing nets as compensation, but Ganapathy did not get any since his son wasn't present.

"We didn't know who to approach and how to go about it" Ganapathy said regretfully. Since then, he had to work as a fishing coolie to earn for the family. His job was to do the auxiliary works

on someone else's boat.

He left fishing in October 2010 due to old age.

Pulendran, a fishing coolie, is now the sole earner of the family. At times he cannot pay his sons' school fee and they are thrown out of the school. This upsets Ganapathy a lot, who has big hopes for them.

"I won't be alive by the time they start working but as long as they get a good job, I will be happy," he said.

Even though Samadavali gets Rs.1000 per month from the government as medical insurance, she cannot contribute much to her family because of her medical bills.

Ganapathy and Samadavali still not gotten over their fear of the ocean. They could barely sleep at night when their son goes out into the ocean. They stay worried till they see his face next morning.

Kalpakkam nuclear power plant puts lives of children and workers at risk

High radiation from the plant causes birth defects and possibly cancer

AASHA SRIRAM

Devanampattinam: Sounds of wild cats and deer filled the room, and on the television appeared his reflection and the words 'Discovery channel'.

At first, he froze, emotionless. Perhaps, he knew we were strangers.

"He's scared," explained Ananya, his mother. He scanned me for a few moments, and I sat down and said hello. Lying down with his hands facing away from his body and his legs bent, Ashwin Janardhanan smiled at me and squealed.

"He doesn't go to school anymore," said Ananya.

Ashwin is a 16-year-old resident of Kalpakkam township and lives within 2 km radius of the Madras Atomic Power Station at Kalpakkam. He is one of three children in the area who has mental disabilities. His father, Janardhanan is a

speaks. He can't express anything, I have to guess what he wants. If there is any pain, he cries. But, if someone new comes home, he's friendly and he squeals to say hi. When the pages of a book flutter because of the wind, it makes him very happy" she said.

Ashwin extended his hand to me and squealed once again.

Ashwin suffered seizures right after his birth and was in the Intensive Care Unit for 14 days. He opened his eyes for the first time one day later. "When he was born, he was bleeding from his forehead. Doctors say his mental disability might be because I married my cousin or due to the radiation," she says.

"Radiation is a problem. It has always been an issue, and it will continue to be an issue. There is no safe limit when it comes to radiation," said Dr. V. Pugazhendi, who



Ashwin Janardhanan (right) laughs in excitement as his mother and brother helps him stay upright | MD. EYAMIN

blished about over exposure to radiation in Kalpakkam Township, and Dr. Pugazhendi says that despite claims that there are no cancer cases, he has personally treated more than four patients this year. Ananya says that she experiences the daily effects of radiation.

"Since we are exposed to radiation here, we get tired and dull much quicker than people living in other cities," she says.

Yoganandhan, Ashwin's younger brother has not had any major health problems despite living near the power plant.

Ashwin spends most of his time with his family, especially after discontinuing his psychotherapy sessions. While his friendly nature appeals to people, it worries Ananya.

"He always wants to be with his friends and family. If someone leaves after playing with him, he

starts crying," she said.

Yoganandhan's relationship with Ashwin is stronger than anything she has ever seen, says Ananya. Whenever Yoganandhan gets a chocolate to eat, he feeds his brother one before he eats his, she said.

Yoganandhan has stood up to bullies to defend his brother many times.

"We play every day. He sits in his wheelchair and I spin him around on the street. If anyone bullies him, I hit them. After I come back from school, I spend my whole day with him and hug him and sleep," he said.

Even though Ashwin cannot verbally communicate, Ananya understands when he is upset, without him having to cry or signal to her for comfort. "There are times when he is dull and just lying down and looking outside and seeing kids playing on the street. I think he feels really bad that he can't do that, and I feel just so sad because I can't do anything about that," she said.

"Whenever somebody asks for something, he gives it to them and immediately shakes their hand. It's like a symbol of pride for him because they smile and that makes him happy."

Victims blame govt for pollution

MOHAMMAD EYAMIN

Devanampattinam: Madras Atomic Nuclear Power Station (MAPS) here has been polluting the surrounding areas of Kancheepuram district for last three decades. Victims think that the plant is a government sponsored pollution and death hole for them.

The first reactor of the 440 MW plant was installed by Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd in 1984. And some units with a combine a capacity of 500MW is under

BIOHAZARD

Nuclear power plants are cleaner than the fossil fuel power plants. But their radioactive is harmful to human body.

"Radioactive radiation aiodin131 mixed with grass and vegetables and through cattle, it spreads among humans," said Dr. V. Pugazhendi, a 62-year-old physician who has been practising medicine there for 27 years.

He said there is no safe limitation of radioactive radiation. And the cost of radiation higher than atomic bomb blast because blast brings sudden death but radiation kills human gradually.

Radioactive radiation is responsible for cancer, thyroid, diabetes and children born with an undeveloped brain. And people who are working near reactor are suffering most. A survey study, showed that

people living near-by nuclear power plant have five times more thyroid problems and 10 times more cancer problem than who are living far.

Dr. Pugazhendi said that now the United States is the super-power of the world and they have space nuclear project too. This is the outcome of their citizen's life.

Knowing the negative impact of nuclear power plant they formed Nuclear Power Plant Compensation Act for the victims.

"But in India, we don't have any compensation act, people surrounding the plant surviving and dying while government acting as a reluctant authority," he adds.

"Angaly, a 43-year-old woman, who died last month from acute molar liguria. And the number of affected people is increasing day by day," said Pugazhendi.

A median nuclear plant consumes more than 600 gallons of water per megawatt-hour. Heavy water is needed for cooling the reactor. That's why nuclear power plants are usually built near water bodies. After cooling the reactor water is sent to the canal, river or in the sea.

The MAPS has been polluting the water bodies of Kalpakkam since its commissioning. And this water is destroying the marine organisms, such as fish, seals, shellfish, and turtles, essential to the food chain.

☛ **Radiation is a problem. It has always been an issue, and it will continue to be an issue. There is no safe limit when it comes to radiation**

- Dr V. PUGAZHENDI

welder and has been working in the plant since before his marriage.

"He is paralysed and cannot

treats residents of the area in his clinic at Kalpakkam.

Several articles have been pu-

Reckless bikers jeopardise children

SUSMITHA SURESH

Devanampattinam: "Vroom!", a bike whizzes past in a flash through the narrow road barely missing the children walking back from school by an inch. Some jump out of the way; some stand still to take in the sight that has become a norm for the villagers at Devanampattinam.

"They are from well off families", said S Meena, whose 5-year-old son S Jai Vishnu had his foot run over by a bike a year ago. "If we were well off like them, then the police would've registered a case. Now at most, they get a warning."

Meena was talking about the many youngsters on bikes that ride

RASH DRIVING

through the streets at odd intervals throughout the day. The roads in the village are narrow; the concrete box houses are built one after another with no space in between.

The residents of Devanampattinam village rebuilt their lives from scratch with help from the government and private organizations after the 2004 tsunami.

Thirteen years have passed after the disaster; the narrow roads of Devanampattinam have become a hub for bike accidents that revolve mainly around children of four to 10 years of age.

"It doesn't matter if you're young or old, one cannot take a step out of their houses" said K Ganapathy, a resident of the village.

Jai Vishnu was four when the accident happened to him. He was playing in his home and he ran out to the street (basically, stepped out of the door of his home). Out of nowhere a bike speeds past, leaving him injured.

"I was crying while carrying my baby asking for help. My neighbours took us to the hospital" added Meena, "My husband had gone out for fishing. He went to beat up youth, but he was taken into custody"

A lot of the youth in the village has taken up fishing as an occupation even after the Tsunami. Most are done for the day by 11 a.m., after which they take their bikes and roam around the streets for leisure.

"They ask bikes as dowry," said K Sundar, Jai Vishnu's father, "It gets worse in the evening when the drinking starts."

"We're just riding," said one of the riders, "children should not be allowed out if they are afraid of getting hurt.", he said turning the key to his bike and revving the engine.

Kanchipuram

No safety equipment for TN salt pan workers

ROCHANA MOHAN

Chunampet: Salt pan workers working in the Kancheepuram district are not provided adequate safety equipment despite working long hours at less than minimum wage. Union Leaders have attempted to approach companies to fix this issue but to no avail.

K Sankaran (50) is a worker in the Chunampet salt pan. He climbs up a salt heap two storeys high wearing a lungi and a tattered shirt, but no shoes or gloves to water down a heap of unrefined salt that had trace amounts of magnesium.

"My feet burn," explains Sankaran. "I climb up and down this pile all day." Sankaran works from 6 a.m. to 12 p.m. for Rs.300 per day. The burning heat beats down on

the seawater and salt heaps. Sankaran does not wear a cap nor is he provided one.

"We complained to the factories," said K. Umanath, President of the Tamil Nadu Salt Trade Marine Welfare Worker Association. "They said they would give shoes and IDs. They made huge promises, but they came and spoke to pollution control and left." The labour-intensive salt industry hires 15,000 labourers in Tamil Nadu alone.

"The shoes that the company gave lasted for two or three days before it tore," said Sankaran. "After a while, you get used to it. I have to make money after all."

The unrefined salt crystals are large and cubic. It scratches the skin, causing redness and even tearing.



Rubbing salt into wounds: A barefoot worker waters down the salt heap under the scorching noon sun despite the fact that his feet are raw and burning. | TENZIN KHANDO

This salt is used to make caustic soda and other chemicals.

"I never studied," said Sankaran. "My parents never gave me

that opportunity. But my children all went to school and college.

Equal work, unequal pay

JAGDISHOR PANDAY

Chunampet: More than 900 workers toil in the salt firms outside Puducheri. But they are not getting the minimum wages.

In Kanchipuram district, 500 acres lands leased for salt production from the Central Government for salt. Around 1223 acres of lands have been leased for salt

male was Rs.400 per day. But, they received maximum Rs.290 per day.

A large plot of land is divided in blocs. Some of the blocs were full of water, while some had sand and some were filled with mud and sand. In hot and humid weather, workers were continuously working in the field. Some of them were continuously pushing the

burnt.

All the salt producing land was leased by the Union and State government. Tamil Nadu started to produce salt from the 19th century during the British Raj. Kanchipuram district started to produce salt even before India got Independence.

Currently, people are facing a problem in the field. Low wages make it hard to run their household. Salt producers do not recognize their right to demand fair wages. If a worker joined the union, they will immediately lose their job.

"Many workers face such problems," Umanath said. "Government's district surveillance officer came here, but they didn't supervise. The Company gives them a bribe and they make false reports."

Salt production unit, the inequality between male and female workers was stark. Umanath said, "They work the same eight hours as the male worker in the same field but they are paid less." He said that they were trying to revolt against it inequality but there was no result.

Salt workers in Kanchipuram have to work hard and were paid less money. "We went to court and protested for workers. But nothing much has changed on the ground." He added, "As a trade union leader, I am not afraid of threats; we will always fight for the workers."

mud with their foot. Some of them were carrying load of salt on their head. Some were pressing on the sand and mud.

The workers are not given proper drinking water, nor are there any latrines. They were not provided with gloves or shoes while working either. Their hands, feet, and eyes and other body part were



The female labourers work on the salt pans with no safety equipment on their feet. | TENZIN KHANDO

from TN revenue land department. However, both the central and State governments are not looking after the welfare of workers.

K. Umanath, the president of Tamil Nadu Salt Trader and Marine Welfare Worker Association, said that workers were let down by the salt producers. The State's minimum wages for a female worker is Rs.290 a day. "But women here are getting around Rs.140 to 200 per day," he said. Umanath said that even minimum wage for a

☛ **They work the same eight hours as the male worker in the same field but they are paid less** - K. UMANATH

Craft prioritised over safety

TENZIN KHANDO

Mahabalipuram: The sculptors of Mahabalipuram refuse to wear face a mask even when they spread awareness about the dangerous side effects of the dust that is produced during the process of sculpting.

According to M. Chandrashekar, Chief Designer, majority of the sculptors in Mahabalipuram are uneducated and they learn the art of sculpting either by taking part in workshops or as apprentices.

Chandrashekar is a graduate from the Mahabalipuram College of Arts where he studied sculpting. He has been a sculptor for 25 years and owns a shop where he sells medium-sized sculptures. Despite the irregular business pattern, where sales fluctuate every now and then, Chandrashekar is still willing to continue with this profession because he feels like he is doing service to his gods by carving their statues while keeping in touch with the temple tradition of Tamil Nadu..

M. Loganathan, 32, is a sculptor who has set up his own business from scratch. He dropped out of school when he was 14 years old, and since then, he has been into sculpting.

His family consists of his wife and two children. When he was asked if his children were interested in taking up this profession, he said, "I won't let them do all this work because the dust gets into your nose and it's dangerous.

I had to do this because I had no option, I hated school. But they go to school and enjoy their classes."

Loganathan admitted that sculpting is a dangerous job. He suffered two accidents while he was working. First, a block fell on his hands. Second, a machinery hit him near the left eye. Both these incidents have left scars on his body.

He earns Rs.800 a day and hires around three artisans to help in his shop. They work for 20 days a month and their salary is highly dependent on the season. The sales are more during religious months in South India.

According to Chandrashekar, the prices of the statues depends on the sculptor; his own sell for Rs.4 lakhs while others sell for upto Rs.7 lakhs.

Most of the customers are Indians and the sculptures sold to

them are carved out of granite. However, for foreign customers, they use a special soft stone to make small statues. They carve statues of Buddha, Ganapati and different animals.

"Masks bother me when I am working. It itches my nose and blurs my vision," said Loganathan.

According to Chandrashekar, 80 per cent of the sculptors choose not to wear mask because they do not want disturbances during their work, and therefore continue to breathe in all the dusts.

At the age of 40, people have to retire from this profession due to the unhealthy and laborious work conditions and are replaced with young artisans.

This early retirement becomes hard to earn any living for some people as they only know this job well.



M. Loganathan, 32 is a sculptor who has been working for 20 years without mask and gloves. | TENZIN KHANDO

“I haven’t eaten in three days. I don’t know why I’m alive.”

AASHA SRIRAM

Devanapattinam: “Everyone says it will be alright, but every day is difficult. I visit the temple hoping they will come back, hoping that they are not dead,” says Indumathi Bhaskaran, a resident of Cuddalore.

Illavarasan (24), Indumathi’s son, is one of 10 people who went missing on November 27, 2016, after his boat capsized in the ocean in Kanyakumari district following the Ockhi cyclone that hit parts of Kerala and Kanyakumari.

“Nobody told us, we watched it on TV. There is no income here, so they went to Kerala. We went to Kerala twice and investigated. The boat-owner has promised us that he will search for my son,” she says.

According to news reports, the death toll crossed 50 in Kerala and bodies of many fishermen were found in the ocean.

“The government hasn’t given me compensation,” says B. Bhaskaran, Illavarasan’s father.

“If the government gives us the right information at the right time, we can be prepared to face the storm,” says M. Mani, a fisherman.

Since they have to bear the travel expenses, the villagers try to es-



B Inbavani and her mother Indumathi wait for news about Illavarasan, who has been missing since 27 November. | AASHA SRIRAM

establish contact through phone.

“Nine out of the 10 missing persons have children who keep asking where their father is. We lie and say they will come soon,” says Indumathi.

Bhaskaran and Indumathi recently deposited their blood samples for DNA testing of bodies recovered from the ocean.

Another resident, S. Bhuvaneshwari’s husband left to Thengapattinam in Kerala on November 25

and has been missing ever since.

“The owner didn’t tell us that his boat capsized. His body has not been found yet. I don’t believe he will come back. The seven boats that went from that village have not returned,” she says.

Bhuvaneshwari is currently living with her mother and is struggling between to take care of her two children after her husband’s disappearance, the sole earning member.

“We don’t have a house. I have no money to pay their school fees and teachers are asking for his (husband’s) death certificate.

The thought of my husband dying alone without anyone is unbearable. I don’t have a house to even sit and cry,” she says.

Bhuvaneshwari’s husband had gone to Kerala to make money so he could pay for his 10-year-old son’s throat surgery.

“Nobody is helping us. I haven’t eaten in three days. My heart is broken and I don’t know why I’m alive.”

Sitting with Indumathi outside her house, as she paused between words to cry, I asked her to tell me a memory about Illavarasan. For a moment, she stopped crying.

“I would have told you so many,” she smiled, “but, right now, every interaction I had with him seems like a distant memory.” She awaits news about him anxiously.

Fishermen tangled in a net of livelihood issues

MOHAMMAD EYAMIN

Devanapattinam: Fishermen of “Tsunami Nagar” in Cuddalore District have survived with minimum livelihood since they were affected by the natural disaster in 2004.

Before the tsunami, most of them had their own fishing boat or a small shop and they sustained themselves. But an eight minute long sudden tsunami swept their property and belongings.

“Around 70 per cent of the total loss took place in the sea,” said K. Paridhidam (67), a fisherman, “Those who died escaped the bitterness of life but those who are alive are suffering most.”

Very few have their own fishing boat and sources of earning. Most are depended on day labour in other parts of the city or sharing other boats for livelihood.

If one shares a boat, fish stock will be divided into 60 and 40 ratios. Boat owner will get 40 per cent of the fish and 60 per cent will be divided for the others and they have to pay the fuel cost as well.

“But disposal of industrial waste of Cuddalore Zone into the sea water and Government’s tight rule



Fishermen rest on their nets in the afternoon. The material for their nets cost Rs.200 and have to be made manually before every trip. | TENZIN KHANDO

to use big spanning net have made our life more miserable,” said A. Sankar (49).

Water pollution has decreased availability of fish. Some days fishermen come back without fish after a whole day at sea.

They cannot use their small spanning net to catch fish because the government’s direction. “But Government recommended net is not enough to hold fish,” added Sankar.

Their previous net was able to hold fish, but if they use it now the

police will seize them and burn their stuff.

“Usually, they go fishing at 5 o’clock and come back at 7 or 8 o’clock. After that they are doing nothing, which is a waste of time” said V. Vaskaram (48), a fisherman. Some people are trying to do extra work like farming by leasing land and starting a small shop. But most cannot because of shortage of money.

Fishermen migrate to other cities for work, with over 100 moving to Kerala after the tsunami.

Stories from Bahour, rice bowl of Puducherry

Locals attempt to revive lakes after a series of failures

Poor decisions led to the withdrawal of a Rs.28 crore EU project while farmers struggle

ROCHANA MOHAN

Bahour: Bad policy and environmentally unsound decisions surrounding the 84 tanks in Puducherry has led to water shortage and saltwater intrusion, affecting the farmers in the Bahour Commune.

The first blow was after the construction of the Sathanur Dam in 1953. This restricted the entry of water via tributaries and canals into the Bahour Lake, forcing the farmers to wholly rely on the South-East monsoon to replenish the lake.

“Before the dam was built, the sowing would start in July and the farmers could grow paddy easily,” says R Pavadai, a local organic farmer. “There would then be enough water for a February crop as well, but that stopped. So Puducherry farmers protested against the

dam.” The Puducherry and Chennai officials and engineers promised Mr. Pavadai and the other farmers in the area that they would provide water for irrigation purposes even after the construction of the dam. According to Pavadai, this was provided to them until 1977.

In 1977, the Puducherry municipalities took over the distribution of water from Bahour Lake. It was previously handled by the Central Public Works Department. To provide water to the farmers, the municipality dug a 60 feet deep borewell near the Bahour Lake.

“Borewells are not allowed for 6 km near the sea,” explained R Dakshinamoorthy, Vice President of the Puducherry Science Forum (PSF). The PSF has been closely working with the farmers and civic officials to protect the 84 tanks in Puducherry. “Because of the bore-



The 1000-foot deep borewell is an environmental hazard and has violated EU guidelines. | ROCHANA MOHAN

well, the water level of the Bahour Lake decreased.”

“Until 1997, around 15 kgs of rice was harvested per acre for each farmer,” explained Pavadai. “After that, we got only 5-8 kgs

per acre. It was also difficult to harvest twice a year due to water shortage. Even if there is water in the eri, it is not regulated and distributed, so farmers stuck to borewells.”

Farmers go organic with no returns

SUSMITHA SURESH

Bahour: Even after 20 years of preaching the benefits of Organic Farming in the village of Bahour, the Centre for Ecology & Rural Development (CERD) under the Puducherry Science Forum has yet to see the concept taking off on a larger scale within the farming community here.

“We need more money to farm organically; the raw materials are costlier and so the upkeep takes up more labour”, says R. Pavadai, a 67-year-old paddy farmer from Bahour. “The Science Forum tells us that organic farming is healthier, and we understand the concept. But we need to take care of

our livelihood too”

The Puducherry Science Forum (PSF) was formed in 1985 by a group of scientists, teachers, and other professionals. They have initiated a lot of schemes for the betterment and well being of the community.

The CERD began pushing for better and more eco-friendly farming practices such as making pesticides from neem leaves from scratch, making organic fertilizers like ‘pancha gavya’ (mix of jaggery, cow dung, cow urine, banana and local liquor) and not using chemical fertilizers.

The PSF members claim that they are pioneers in organic farming, but the brutal truth remains

that most farmers in Bahour that practice organic farming do it out of moral obligation more than to receive profit.

Iyarkai Vivasayigal Sangam, a group formed for the organic farmers of Bahour, has been working for the last couple of years to explore the possibilities and scope of going organic.

One of the main drawbacks of organic farming stated by them is that it does not fetch enough profit for the amount of money they put in. The PSF says that the main reason why this happens is because middlemen buy the organic vegetables from the farmers at the same price as normal vegetables, and then sell it at urban markets

and to bigger companies at a much higher rate.

Yet another problem is that the yield is not much compared to when chemical fertilizers and genetically enhanced seeds are used. “We know that being organic is healthier for the soil and it’s also more sustainable in the longer run. The produce is also healthier” added Pavadai, who has ten acres of land, out of which he does organic farming on one acre. “But if we were to solely depend on the profit we get from organic farming, we wouldn’t be able to survive.”

“The village has about 100 farmers”, says R. Dakshinamurthy, a PSF founding members of the Science Forum, “Currently ten are doing organic Farming. Earlier it was more, but more and more people opted out as they couldn’t sustain the fields due to high costs”

The CERD does regular workshops and classes to spread awareness of the need for organic farming. They even recruit students studying agriculture from colleges like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru College of Agriculture and Research Institute, Puducherry, to further improve upon the techniques used in farming.

“We have been trying our best to propagate organic farming, but we can’t do anything more unless the government intervenes and addresses the problems faced by the organic farmers”, adds Dakshinamurthy.



Organic produce is in demand in cities, but farmers are forced to sell them at regular price despite their added benefits and eventual retail price. | ROCHANA MOHAN

One Last Farmer

JAGDISHOR PANDAY

Bahour: R. Pavadi, 67, unlike others in his village, introduced himself as a farmer. He is engaged in farming since 1972, and he does not have any plan to quit this profession, which is not call as a profession in his society. “My dad was the farmer. I chased the same profession. But I can’t say whether where my children will work or not in the field,” Pavadi said.

He has eight children, four sons and daughters each. However, all of them are in different professions. They are working as a teacher, tourist guide and in other corporate fields.

Pavadi has nine hectares of land. There he cultivates paddy as well as produces organic vegetables, which he sells in the market. He works in the whole dry field. There are many people in the village who sold their land for real estate development. People who sold the land earned more money than working as a farmer. “I am going to work on my land until I die,” he said.

For seven decades as a farmer, he had witnessed many changes. He saw a pre-machinery age to the machinery age. However, respect for farmers reducing. “Nobody likes to work as the farmer. Everyone wants a corporate job,” he said. “You can earn money as a farmer even if you work more hours. But the preference is for shirt and pant job.”

He said that in 1977 machinery

entering it. The EU provided Rs.28.13 crore and the Puducherry Government gave Rs.4.4 crore for the project. Through this project, 64 tanks were restored.

Community groups were initiated in each village to help and they contributed Rs.2.2 crore to the project.

“These groups consisted of Dalits, land owners and the landless,” said Dakshinamoorthy. “There was a one-third women representation too. The groups wanted the distribution of the water to go to the farmers again.”

The community group oversaw fishing and tree-plantation near the lake.

In 2004, the EU came to Bahour for a review of the project. Due to the borewell affecting the water levels of the Bahour Lake and putting it at the risk of disappearing, they withdrew funding.



R Pavadi says the unfeasibility of farming has discouraged youngsters in Bahour. | TENZIN KHANDO

was introduced and there was reliable irrigation through the Bahour lake. But government changed the policies and asked the lake workers to leave.

“We are facing same irrigation problem,” he said. “Both governments (Union and State) should look after it. We want to go back to how it was in the early 1970s.” He also lamented the use of pesticides. “So, I chose an organic farming,” he said.

He says that government has to come up with the plan where new generation also can work in farming. “I am worried what will happen to my family after I die. There is no one to continue farming,” he said. He wished the government would offer incentives and rescue agriculture.

Alcohol abuse ruins families and futures

ROCHANA MOHAN

Devanapattinam: Kala Iyappan pulled the shawl draped over her shoulders tighter. Her eyes follow the movements of her two daughters. Kanishka had climbed a tree and Anushka was on her pink bicycle, the training wheels scratching the gravel noisily.

It was okay to talk out here, explained Kala. Her husband was indoors, taking a nap after lunch. The atmosphere in the village of Devanapattinam in the Cuddalore district was calm. Men and women sat in the shade and played dayakkattai leisurely.

Kala's husband works as a fishing hand in a boat. His earnings

are sporadic and seasonal, based on the catch of the day. "Some days he earns Rs.500, some days more, some days less," explains Kala. "He still drinks around Rs.1000 worth of alcohol, sometimes for Rs.2000 a day."

"He used to hit the children," said Kala softly. "Now he doesn't. I told him that if he hits them, I'll leave him."

Her family is one of many affected by alcohol abuse in India. A World Health Organization publication stated that 4.5 per cent of male alcohol consumers suffer from alcohol dependence and alcohol-use disorders in India. The National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16) states that 40.6 per cent

of married women in Tamil Nadu face spousal abuse.

"After he drinks, he'll hit me and knock things over in the house," explains Kala. "He bites my hand sometimes. He picks up sticks and coal and tries to hit me with that."

Kala has been hospitalized due to her husband's abuse.

"He doesn't know what he does when he's drunk," said Kala. "Once he's sober, he'll be very sweet and apologize."

Kala has complained to the police only to be told that this was how most households operated. In Kala's opinion a significant portion of people in Devanapattinam face the same problems as she does.

"The children cry when he gets

angry," she said. Her daughters Anushka (6) and Kanishka (5) have a clear understanding of what happens in the house. "They tell me that they'll call the Collector or the policemen for me. I'm afraid that we might ruin their lives."

"At first, alcoholism presents itself as a shock to the child," said N S Venkataraman from Nandini Voice of the Deprived, a non-governmental organization that works closely with families affected by alcohol in Tamil Nadu.

"Then, after the child sees his parents drink so much, he accepts it as the norm and more often than not also becomes an alcoholic like his parents," Venkataraman stated that children are highly resentful towards their alcoholic parent. Their mental health and education are at risk.

"I came to

the village after the tsunami," explained Kala. The 2004 Tsunami devastated the village of Devanapattinam and left many people without homes or families. "I saw the hardship of children growing up in this village without parents. I couldn't have the same fate for my children."

Due to difficulties between her brother and herself, Kala cannot return to her family in Tiruchy. She was forced to quit her job once she got married at her hus-

band's request. She explains that she sends the children to the neighbour's house when the abuse gets out of hand.

"He went to a doctor in Pudukcherry," explained Kala. "He received medication from them. He would drink because work would stress him, and have the pills too, so he would behave strangely." Kala explained that the abuse got worse during this time.

Around 3.3 million of all global deaths were attributed to alcohol abuse

2012. India received a 4 in the 5-point Years of Life Lost scale due to alcoholism.

"Many alcoholics die by the age of 40-45," said Venkataraman. "Healthcare is mostly private and very expensive. People in rural areas cannot afford to go there, so they continue drinking."

A study published in the International Journal of World Research analysed the patterns of alcoholics in Cuddalore and found a direct correlation between education and health status. The authors urged the government to introduce an effective educational policy.

Availability of liquor is high in States such as Tamil Nadu. The Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation or TASMAR controls all sale of liquor in Tamil Nadu. The revenue from sale of liquor in 2016-2017 in Tamil Nadu was Rs.26,995 crore.

"The reason why alcoholism is spreading so widely is because it has the sanction of the law," explained Venkataraman. "Unless there is a restriction of access to alcohol, there will be no change in alcohol consumption in Tamil Nadu."

Kanishka ran toward her mother from her house, exclaiming that her father had woken up. Kala stood up and held her daughter's hand. "He'll change. I'll see. If not, I'll leave him and take the children."



Thamizamutham was 11 when the 2004 tsunami changed her life.

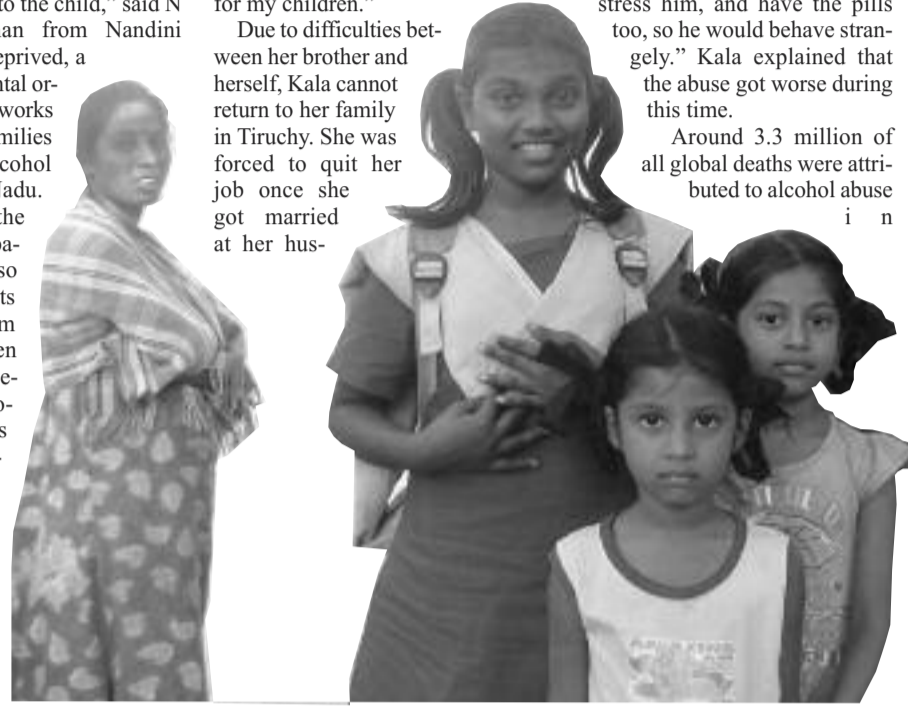
DEBDUTTA MITRA

Lived to tell a tale

Thamizamutham (22) was 11 years old when the tsunami of December 26, 2004 devastated the coastal districts of Chennai, Cuddalore, and Pudukcherry and killed thousands.

"When I was on the rock with brother, my brother suddenly fell down from the rock where we were. But our neighbour saved us," the post graduate student said.

Thamizamutham and her family were shifted to a rehabilitation centre consisting of 648 households. Even though they live in concrete houses, there is no warning system to help the residents in the case of another tragedy.



Kala (L) fears that her husband's addiction might ruin their daughters' lives, despite their high aspirations.

TENZIN KHANDO

Stories from Kuruvinnatham, a village that paves its own way

Villages receive aid from local self-help groups

MEYAMIN

Kuruvinnatham: M. Gayatri, a 40-year-old woman and mother of two children, who lives at Kuruvinnatham village of Bahour Taluk in Pudukcherry, remembers days of food scarcity and living with hunger. Her husband's meagre earnings could not meet their daily intake. They were suffering from the basic human rights.

But now she is leading a happy life after 8X8 ft tailor shop. She came out of the poverty trap by taking microfinance credit from Self Help Groups (SHG). Her dream was to make her children literate.

Gayatri's older son is doing his graduation at Pudukcherry University. All impossible dreams and plans have become possible once she enrolled herself in the SHGs programme.

Like Gayatri, many women from Kuruvinnatham village have improved their financial condition of their family.

SHGs started its functioning in Kuruvinnatham in 1990. The SHG model followed the tenets of the microcredit programme of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. Professor Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, started the first

community-based microfinance model in the world.

Yunus began to expand microcredit as a research project together with the Rural Economics Project at the Bangladesh's University of Chittagong to test his method for providing credit and banking services to the rural poor.

In 1976, the village of Jobra and other villages near the University of Chittagong became the first areas eligible for service from Grameen Bank. This program won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

The theme of this program is to alleviate poverty from society and empowerment of women. And the strategy of the finance is giving a certain amount of money with the assurance of repayment on the basis of installment with interest.

According to the Grameen Bank's method, Self-help groups first raised funds from its members. Then they distributed a small amount of loan among its members in Pudukcherry with the repayment of Rs.20 as monthly installment.

The major portion of the loan was went to start a new business, lease land for farming and create a job for jobless people. Some SHGs also gave soft housing loans.

After getting a loan some started



The women from Kuruvinnatham explain that their husbands envy the economic freedom they enjoy after joining the local self-help group.

TENZIN KHANDO

farming, some opened a new shop and others started weaving handloom. SHG have been arranging different training programmes to develop skills.

"With the SHG loan we started selling washing powder, bath soaps and home appliances," said P. Shivakami, president of the Kuruvinnatham SHG.

Shivakami said that the SHG has changed their life by creating employment. It reduced the child labour and made them educated.

Now the SHGs have been trained in manufacturing toys, making artificial jewellery, vermicomposting, incense sticks, woolen and jute products, screen printing, candle-making, tailoring and pickles. Women are becoming confident to come out of the poverty trap and lead lives with hope and dignity.

"Earlier we never had been to any bank branch, but SHGs have made us confident, now we have a bank account," added Shivakami. The SHG programme encoura-

ges women's empowerment and gender equality. The women of Kuruvinnatham village are playing a vital role in household decisions.

The village is a model of hundred percent employment and poverty has been relegated to the museum. Man woman do their respective jobs. Nobody wastes their working hours.

Before the launch of the SHG, most of the families at Kuruvinnatham village used to live in a small hut. They suffered most in the rainy season. But now they have safe shelters because of a SGH loan. Now everyone has built a medium house like same concrete or concrete building.

Earlier, open defecation was a major problem. Surface water of the surrounding area had been contaminated by human waste. But in 2000, after 10 years of the SHG programme launch; they started using the separate toilet.

"Open defecation is one kind of harassment for women, now every house has its own toilet," said Shivakami.

Though this microfinance programme has played an important role to alleviate poverty, there is some negative impact in households. Men think that because of fi-

nancial solvency women are getting arrogant and they are not respecting them. Most men suffer from insecurity. But there is no domestic violence as now women have money and when men need money they are bound to take help from women.

Loan repayment, however, remains a challenge. If someone fails to submit repayment on time, the money lender will charge double interest for each day of delay including holidays.

"I think this is an injustice and the SHG programme must address this," said D. Kalai, General Secretary of Kuruvinnatham SHG.

Moreover, if someone fails to repay the loan; other members will not get a loan next time because the SHG believes in 99 per cent of repayment with interest.

"So if anybody falls into this situation, we support them to get rid of the danger," added Kalai.

However, Kuruvinnatham village is a success story of the SHG programme. People of this village proved that the unity is the apex power to combat any problem. They are moving forward holding their neighbor's hand. Now they are being emulated by other villages in Pudukcherry.

After RTE, retention drops for HSSE

ROCHANA MOHAN

Kuruvinnatham: Despite high literacy rates and accessible education, Pudukcherry suffered a 3 per cent decrease in retention rates at the secondary level.

According to a 2017 Ministry of Human Resource Development report, retention rates fell from 92.6 per cent in 2015-16 to 89.9 per cent in 2016-17. Extreme poverty and employment of children for additional economic support are the major causes for this.

EDUCATION

"Most of our students are from below poverty line families," explains A Sivakumar, Headmaster of Government Highschool, Kuruvinnatham. "The parents would require the child to go to work. If the parents are educated, they can teach them."

According to the 71st Round of the National Sample Survey, around 29 per cent of children dropped out of school to engage in economic activities. Students are only promoted to class IX if certain minimum requirements are met after the Right to Education Act introduced a no-fail policy up to class VIII.

B Adhiaman, a student of class IX-A in the Kuruvinnatham Government Highschool, wishes to become a mathematics teacher. "It is fun," he said, looking up from his notebook. "I will make mathematics interesting and exciting. I will teach mathematics to all classes." Adhiaman's father passed away a few years ago. His mother works as a nurse in a Government hospital nearby to sustain Adhiaman, his younger brother and herself.

To become a teacher, Adhiaman will have to receive a degree in education and write the Teacher's Eligibility Test or an equivalent examination.

However, according to the 2011 Census, only around 16 per cent of Pudukcherry's rural population between the ages of 20 and 29 are graduates.

"The children pass classes IX to XII, but the continuation of their education is a problem," said Hemavathi, Head Teacher at Savaroyalu Nayagar Government Girls High School. "They are lured by employment and little money, so they don't study further."

The Pudukcherry Government tried to recapture dropouts by conducting Back to School campaigns, night schools and alternative schools as part of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan.

Perspectives

Unequal wages, no subsidies deter female and male farmers

AASHA SRIRAM

Kuruvinnatham: Equal pay is a fantasy for female farmers in Kuruvinnatham, where women working in farms are paid less than men despite performing the same duties. Lack of government initiatives, subsidies and low income from produce has led these women to find part-time jobs after the harvest season.

"We have many problems, right from not being able to pay the fees for our children's education to facing losses during extreme weather conditions," says D. Bhuvaneshwari, a 41-year-old paddy farmer, who works in her 1.5 acre land.

Since agriculture cannot be seen as a daily paying job, the income farmers receive after harvest has to sustain them for at least three months.

"Women on our farm have begun asking us why they are not paid the same as men," says B. Malathi, a 39-year-old farmer, laughing nervously. Men are paid Rs.400 for 3 hours while women are paid Rs.300. "I feel like paying them equally, but equal pay for

both men and women labourers seems unthinkable."

Born into a farming family, Bhuvaneshwari goes to her farm every morning at 7 and works until noon. Her income is barely sufficient to support her family.

She has to pay the labourers Rs.130 every day, and pay Rs.100 to the men who spray the pesticides. She purchases one sack of fodder for Rs.50 and the man who delivers the seeds and fodder is paid Rs.4,000. Towards the end of cultivation, farmers need trays, which cost Rs.30 each. Bhuvaneshwari purchases 200 for her land, costing her Rs.6,000. The paddy cutting machine is charged Rs.2,000 by the hour and she spends Rs.6,000 for three hours. The total cost of cultivation is around Rs.30,000.

"We rarely get back the amount we invest, so there is no chance of profits. Whatever we get, we invest it in the next season. All the money that we should get goes to the middlemen. Since we don't have enough money to pay salaries to labourers, most of us sell our plots to real estate agents," she says.

There are few demands the farmers of Kuruvinnatham are making, all of which were requests, now forgotten. Years of neglect have left these farmers without hope, and farms with dwindling labourers.

"The government should not approve buildings on plots meant for farming. Subsidies for fodder and other items must be provided, and the produce we harvest should be sold by us at the price fixed by us," says Malathi. "What else can I do? Farming is all I know."

TENZIN KHANDO

Kuruvinnatham: "I'll have to kill myself if I am not able to pay the debt" uttered D. Muthulingam without the slightest hesitation.

Muthulingam, 61, a farmer from Soriyankuppam village, says the present government does not give importance to the agricultural sector. He complained about how they filed so many petitions to the Pudukcherry Agricultural Department for not receiving the subsidy money to no avail. "Pudukcherry

government claims that they don't get the money and even if they do get for subsidies, they spend it for something else," he added.

Muthulingam has been a farmer for 40 years and has cultivated sugarcane, paddy and spinach on two acres of land. "I was born into it and I am happy with it," he said, bringing his hands together and looking up briefly.

He took part in the biggest farmers' protest which took place in Delhi in November last year. "But thank god my family looked after the farm in my absence, otherwise I would have faced more loss," added Muthulingam, with relief.

He has two daughters. His older daughter is married, but he agonizes about his younger daughter's marriage to the extent that he has considered suicide. His helplessness rose from the realization that he did not have the collateral required for loans. Even if he borrowed money from a private lender, a bad harvest would double his debts with no way out.

"One tonne of sugarcane should get Rs.4000 but we only get Rs.2650 when we sell it to sugarmills," explained Muthulingam.



Women farmers have to balance work in the fields and at home and earn lower wages.

TENZIN KHANDO



NARGUND FARMERS CONTINUE 900 DAY PROTEST DEMANDING WATER FROM MAHADAYI RIVER | P 12

GADAG

RAVIKANT ANGADI SPEAKS ON FARMERS' LEGAL BATTLE AGAINST ILLEGAL OCCUPATION OF THEIR LAND | P 13



Mustikoppa: A History with Fluorosis

A majority of Mustikoppa's population is still reeling under the effects of the debilitating disease - fluorosis.

APOORV PERTI

Mustikoppa: The village of Mustikoppa in the Mundaragi taluk of Gadag district, Karnataka, has been plagued by fluorosis for the past several decades, reducing the average life expectancy of the people to about 60 years. The village's large underground aquifer is poisoned by high levels of fluoride, a naturally

occurring element in the earth's crust toxic for human consumption. According to the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), the acceptable level of fluoride in groundwater is 1 mg/litre. But a survey by the World Bank-assisted Jal Nirmal Project found that villages within the Mundaragi taluk have an excess fluoride level of up to 9 mg/l. Fluorosis is caused due to the long-term

ingestion of fluoride and can be dental and skeletal. Dental fluorosis is common and is characterised by degrading browning enamel. Skeletal fluorosis is caused by prolonged consumption and is characterised by twisted limbs and lesions on the patient's legs and back with chronic recurring pain in the joints. Other than Mustikoppa, the other affected villages include Kalkeri,

Virupapura, Tippapura and Virupapuratanda. Kashinath Bilimaggad, a reporter from the Kannada daily *Prajavani*, said, "The issue went unnoticed for decades and it was only after a survey conducted 20 years ago that it came to the government's attention." He added that the government took various steps to tackle the

issue including failed attempts to treat the underground reserves. The government provides water diverted from the Tungabhadra River through underground pipes and also set up a RO (reverse osmosis) water unit. Various NGOs have also contributed to solving the fluorosis issue. The hospital is a government Public Health Centre (PHC). Dr. San-

tosh Patil, the only doctor there, said that about 60 per cent of the village's population is living with fluorosis. "The diet of the people is poor and more green vegetables and vitamins need to be incorporated into it," adding that the disease is more severe for men than women as more physical strain, like working in the fields, leads to further wea-

kening of the bones and joints. High consumption of alcohol and tobacco among the villagers also leads to faster deterioration. "Fluoride attacks the calcium deposits in the body. As breast milk is rich in calcium, fluorosis can be transmitted from the mother to the child through breastfeeding," said Dr. Ajai Perti, chief radiologist at Vita Diagnostics in Kerala.

A better alternative remains forgotten

AVANISH C.

Mustikoppa: Basanagouda Patil, 63, has been the headman of Mustikoppa village for the past 25 years. He was also not spared of the effects of the fluorosis rampant through most villages in Gadag district.



Only the headman of the village has a functioning harvesting unit. | PRATIBHA

"The groundwater here is rich in fluoride but we used it regularly. As a result, I developed severe joint pains and indigestion," he said.

15 years ago, the Bharat Agri Industries Federation (BAIF) installed rainwater harvesting units in nearly 80 households in the village. Typically, these units are 10 feet deep, and 5 feet wide, and can store water up to 1,000 litres.

Basanagouda's house is one of only five which uses rainwater for drinking purposes.

The other villagers say, "We can't do much to influence others to drink rainwater, as it is their choice. They have conditioned

themselves to drink water from the borewells," said his brother, Sangnagouda Patil.

"We regularly send samples of water for testing, and conduct frequent programmes to spread awareness," said H.B. Gadigareshwar,

Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Officer. He said that all measures are being taken under the aegis of the National Program for Control of Fluorosis, which has been in place since 2008-09. "We conduct programmes in all schools, till class VII. It is then up to the people to take the right decisions," he added.

"I don't have a rainwater harvesting unit in my house, said 35-year-old Shankar, adding, "The water from the RO unit does not taste good. It becomes hot and is far from my place. Instead, I use the pump outside my house." A farmer, Shankar said "My hip hurts very badly, especially when I'm working too hard."

Doctors unaware of infantile fluorosis

BHAGYASRI CHAUDHURY

Mustikoppa: Around ten in 50 children are affected by fluorosis in the village of Mustikoppa. Doctors in the village are unaware of the situation.

"About 20-30 per cent of my patients have joint pain," said Dr. Shankar Bhavimani (BMS), medical representative at the Bhagyawadi Panchayat, "...as old age approaches, most can't walk straight anymore. This is a problem in the villages."

Fluorosis is more common among middle-aged men and women and Dr Bhavimani denied having any knowledge on whether or not the disease is hereditary.

When asked about any work that NGO awareness programmes have done in this regard, Dr Bhavimani said that Accredited Social Health

Activists (ASHA) are responsible for child and maternal health awareness in the area, but they are not competent.

"Most of them are class 7 dropouts. How will they even know about these things?" he added.

However, neighbours Bharathi and Jayashree denied having knowledge of any such awareness programmes.

"We go to the doctor at the Kalkeri PHC, who does not know of this. Even the Mundaragi Government Hospital, where the women-folk go for deliveries, has no idea."

Nine-year-old Venkatesh Avalur stands with knees bent inwards. He is usually tired, has yellow teeth which pain while eating, an aching breastbone and weak knees.

"He has one brother and one sister," said his teacher Ms. Shilpa, "...both have the same problem."

PRATIBHA SHARMA

Mustikoppa: Sitting outside her house basking in the sun, Shantawa Devi, 68, justified drinking fluoride contaminated water and her reluctance to switch to purified water provided by the RO (Reverse Osmosis) plant.

"I am used to drinking groundwater. We have been drinking it for generations," she said.

Shantwa started drinking RO water but stopped later as she considered purified water to be the reason for her joint pain and tooth allergy. She also added that the RO

water gets hot in summers and so she prefers to drink groundwater.

Such is the story of Mustikoppa village in Gadag district, where despite knowing the noxious effects of fluoride contaminated water, villagers continue to drink it.

Some villagers find BAIF's rainwater harvesting procedure difficult, while others complain that the RO plant is located too far from their houses. The plant remains functional only for two hours in the morning and evening, and had remained dysfunctional for days.

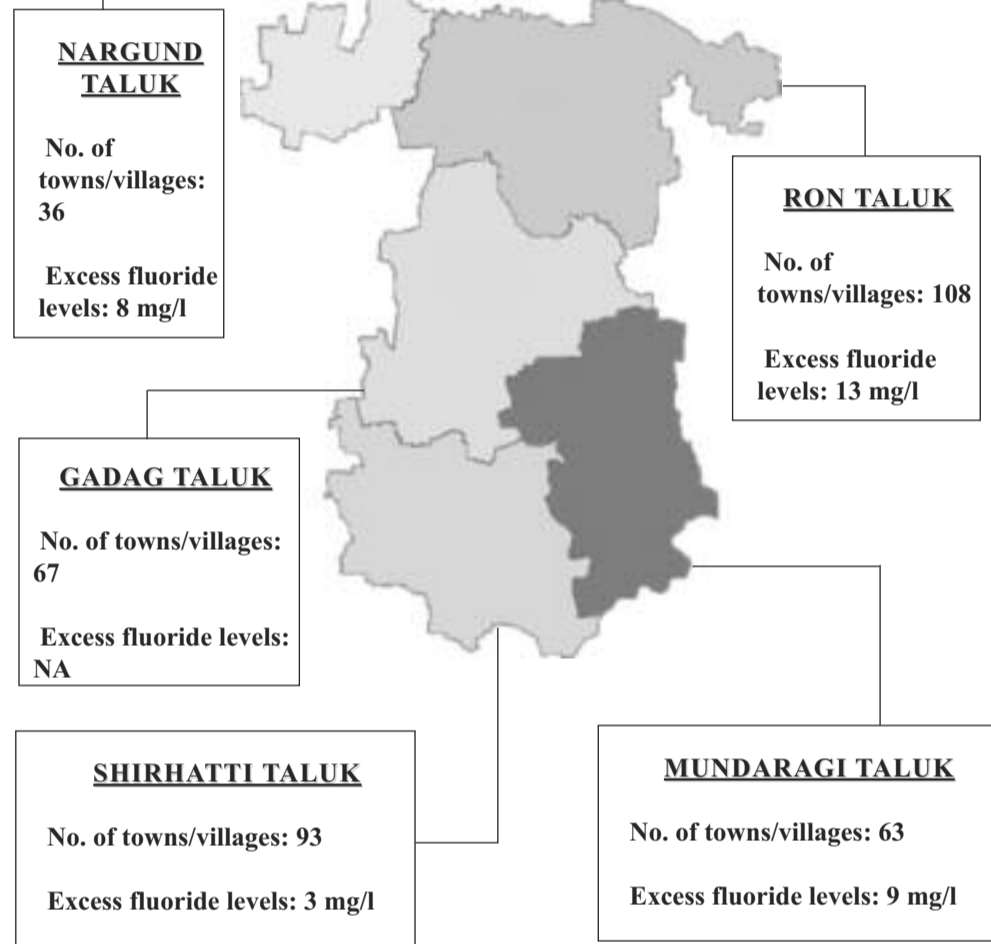
Installed two years ago, the RO water and rainwater are used by the

villagers for washing and cleaning, while contaminated water is used for drinking.

Shilpa Goud, a school teacher, said that out of 50 children in her school, ten were affected by fluorosis as their families continue to use fluoride water. These children frequently skip school because of ill health. They also seem to be slow learners.

"I made many attempts to talk to their families but they go back to drinking contami-

GADAG DISTRICT
Total no. of villages: 367
Excess fluoride levels: 33 mg/l, as against the permissible level of 1 mg/l.



Left: Lingamma Siddappa (56), a primary school teacher in Mustikoppa, shows off her teeth which have been severely affected after years of consuming fluoridated water.



Right: A lamb with a deformed leg and lesions on its knees proves the fact that animals are also affected the same way humans are. | APOORV

Crumbling walls behind fluorosis

NIKITA PRASAD

Mustikoppa: Surrounded with dilapidated walls in its interiors and its peripheries, the walls of Mustikoppa are made up of rocks which have decomposed and mixed with the groundwater. The decayed rocks flow in the green, algae-stricken water pits and streams. According to a research study conducted in Mundaragi taluk for checking the



The villagers do not know that the walls cause the pollution of groundwater. | NIKITA

fluoride level in water and prevalence of fluorosis in 2006, it was found that, the composition of rocks has a major control over fluoride contamination. Fluorine is widely dispersed in nature and is a common constituent of most rocks and soils. Chemically, these rocks are composed of minerals like calcium as a fluorite or fluorosper. They are found mostly by virtue of dissolution of rocks, decomposition and long residence of time which are the responsible factors for fluoride leaching.

Mr Basanagoud, the village leader, who has a rainwater harvesting unit in his house for drinking purposes, was unaware about the tattered walls being a threat to the livelihood of the residents. "The village was always surrounded by these walls. We didn't know that

the groundwater contamination can happen due to rocks and walls. We assumed that the supply is naturally contaminated," he says. The villagers too, exhibit a sorry state of response as they still utilize the water from bore wells which is rich in fluoride, just because they are used to its taste and find it sweeter. Even though the effects of fluorosis are visible across the village there is little awareness of the danger lurking in its walls.

"The effects of fluorosis are such that it increases the density of bones, but decreases the strength leading to deformed bones. This results in skeletal fluorosis. The rocks are a major reason for fluorosis outbreak in Mustikoppa," says Dr RR Hosamani, District Fluorosis Consultant of Gadag. Dr Hosamani plans to conduct awareness programs in schools and Panchayats to educate people to not use fluoride-contaminated water under the National Program for Prevention and Control of Fluorosis across all 333 villages in the district of Gadag. But until a permanent solution is found, the yellow-tinted walls and the degraded fragments of its rocks would continue to contaminate the village's water sources.

Fluorosis and cattle

APOORV PERTI

Mustikoppa: While the villagers of Mustikoppa are provided with various measures to counter fluorosis, the cattle are left at the mercy of their owners.

Almost every household has cows, oxen and even goats to aid them in farming or to sell in the markets. But Sangnagouda Patil, 41, history teacher and brother of the village leader, said "the cattle are given mostly groundwater and sometimes rainwater, depending on the amount of rain the village receives".

Dr. Santosh Patil said that he had no knowledge on the matter while the nearby Kalkeri Veterinary Hospital was shut for the day. Research conducted by A.H. Ulemale, M.D.Kulkarni and others at the Krantisinha Nana Patil College of Veterinary Science in Shirval District, Maharashtra, shows that cattle is affected the same as humans in terms of eroding teeth and weaker bones, but suffer gastrointestinal problems, such as constipation and constant stomach irritation and nervous problems, like muscle tremors, weakened pupils and constant chewing.

Aware of ill effects, villagers still drink borewell water

Lack of government and NGO programmes, to educate Mustikoppa about fluorosis, worsens the situation

PRATIBHA SHARMA

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The RO water plant lies unutilised, in a corner of the Mustikoppa village. | PRATIBHA

Shilpa. Sangnagouda Patil, a history teacher in a private school started drinking purified water two years ago, and can see his health improving. "NGOs come and go, people carry on with their lives the same way," he said.

The district information officer, Venkatesh Navale state announced a

multi-village drinking water project, worth Rs.1049 crores two years ago. Under the project, water will be drawn from river sources and channelled to villages for drinking. "Reversal is a never-ending process. These things take time," he added. He also promised to bring the issue of lack of awareness among villagers to the district magistrate's notice.

According to Bhramarambha Gopiseti, Mundaragi Tehsildar, Mustikoppa, an awareness programme was conducted in the village six months ago, and the village is in dire need of such programmes

as people are addicted to borewell water.

Speaking on the financial constraints borne by the villagers in purchasing RO water for Rs. 2 per 20 litre she said, "If people can spend on tobacco and alcohol daily, why can't they spend Rs. 2 a day for the sake of their health?"

Awareness programmes are held once or twice a year by various NGOs which involve talking to people and distributing pamphlets informing them about the harmful effects of drinking fluoride water. However, no such programme have been conducted in schools till now.

Death in the afternoon as the grim reaper comes calling

APOORV PERTI

Shirol: Sannaveerappa Ishappa Changali, a farmer who lived in the village of Shirol in Nargund Taluk, Gadag committed suicide in July 2017. Farmer suicides have become commonplace in India though the numbers have come down in recent years partly because of various policy interventions.

Sannaveerappa was originally a weaver by profession but owned seven acres of land which had been left uncultivated. Financial burdens forced him to take up farming and, in the 1990s, he and his son, Mallick Arjun Changali, started working on the land. As his two children grew up, the responsibilities of supporting them started to pile up; especially that of his daughter's wedding.

The death of his wife in 2000 was a huge blow and it greatly affected him; as a result, he went into depression. The depression drove him to ingest over 20 sleeping pills in a bid to commit suicide. Mallick said "Papa stayed in bed the entire day, he didn't wake up even once. We did not know if he was dead or alive". Following the attempted suicide, things did not go well as profits dried up. "We neither made a profit nor a loss. I remember we used to work all day but, at the end of the month, we would have almost nothing to spend" explained



Mallick Arjun Changali, Sannaveerappa's son, who is still awaiting Rs. 5 Lakh from the state government. | APOORV

Mallick. Sannaveerappa had a mental breakdown in 2003, and Mallick admitted him to an institution in Gadag.

For four years, while his father was in the institution, Mallick toiled on the land. He had to hire labourers and this further reduced his chances of a profit. He worked as a driver during the nights and weekends and got into as many odd jobs as he could in order to support himself. Sannaveerappa returned home in 2007 and continued to work on the farms with Mallick.

For the next decade, the family struggled as input costs climbed

and farm prices collapsed. In 2012, following the birth of his granddaughter, Sannaveerappa's daughter also attempted suicide by ingesting sleeping pills. "He was heartbroken and was never the same after" said Mallick.

In 2014, Sannaveerappa took a loan of Rs. 95,000 from Vijaya Bank and another loan of Rs. 85,000 from his brother in the army.

Mallick said, "The price of crops kept falling and also a huge portion of our cotton crop caught some sort of disease, it would eat away at the plant's shoot itself."

Sannaveerappa found it impossible to repay the loans due to failing rains and various price cuts for crops. By 2017, the repayable amount to the bank had burgeoned to over Rs. 1, 30,000.

In July 2017, Sannaveerappa ingested a bottle of pesticide, left the house around lunchtime, went for a walk in his village and eventually collapsed under the noonday sun, never to wake up again.

Mallick said that his uncle cancelled the loan which was to be repaid to him and that the bank has not contacted him since his father's suicide.

He is still awaiting the Rs. 5 lakh compensation which is to be provided to the families of farmers who have committed suicide.

He said "all my slippers have worn out going up and down to the Assistant Commissioner's office in Gadag asking about the compensation."

While Mallick eagerly awaits the compensation due to him, experts who have studied farmers' suicides, say that the authorities could use his father's past mental instability and institutionalisation as the reason for the suicide rather than agricultural pressures. This argument is commonly used to deny compensation to families of farmers who commit suicide because of agricultural distress. Mallick's trips to Gadag may well end up futile.

A long tale of migration from struggle to survival

AVANISH C.

Attikatti/Mahalingpur: Shivaji Chavan, a 26-year-old father of four is to leave for Goa by the end of January. He is among the many farmers who seasonally migrate from Attikatti village to look for work. Shivaji has given up any hope of decent employment in his village. "It's been 10 years since we've had good rains. The harvests are deficient, and the borewell water is insufficient," he said.

In Goa, he has worked odd jobs for the last eight years, ranging from selling fish to driving taxis. "I earn better there, but most of my wages go in paying the rent," he added.

30-year-old Vishnu Pawar cultivated peanuts and pulses, before rainfall became infrequent at Mahalingpur. He would migrate to Goa during winter and spring. He has worked as a mason for 15 years but has been back for the past 5-6 years and is essentially unemployed.

"I occasionally work as a small-time help in someone's field, but other than that I have no work," he said. Permanently back to look after his son's education, Vishnu reminisces about life in Goa. "We earned nearly Rs. 12,000-15,000 per month, although most of it went in paying rent and other expenses. Here, such figures are only a dream - people sometimes earn



Srinivas, 18, finds better work prospects in Goa, than at home. | AVANISH C.

only in hundreds a month." He added, "there has been no response from the side of the Government or the Zilla Parishad. They come here only to seek votes."

However, Kumar Rathod, a Mahalingpur native who works as a Physics lecturer disagrees. "Most of the villagers here are illiterate, and 70-80% of them migrate to Goa every year, because they are unaware of modern farming techniques," he said. He believes that the villagers mismanage the resources the government provides them. "The government regularly provides microfinance, and it installed borewells as part of the Ganga Kalyan scheme. But the farmers do not invest wisely, and waste it in drinking."

Rathod however added, "The Government should revamp the farming system in villages. They

should not lure farmers with schemes they are unable to execute- its all an eyewash to gain votes."

"Farmers here look at agriculture from a business perspective," said S.H. Adapur, Subject Matter Specialist in Agricultural Extension from K.H. Patil Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Hulkoti. "The mentality of young farmers here is especially unhealthy, as they are lured by a glamorous life in Goa," he said. "Nobody has clarity in their vision, so they make unwise choices in investing capital."

Migrations to Goa, however, are also triggered by desperation. Srinivas Persappa Lamane received a new job offer in Panaji and cannot wait to return later in January. "Four years ago, my father met with an accident and badly injured his leg. He has four rods inserted into them, and cannot walk without crutches," said the 18 year-old.

The new job, Srinivas hopes, would adequately pay for his stone-polisher father's treatment. "Motor boat operators are well paid in Goa. I hope by the end of six months, I'll have Rs. 40,000 in my hand," he said. He is eager to set aside some money for his elder sister's wedding, which he sees as his topmost priority. "I'll have to work hard. I also want to contribute for clearing off the Rs. 2.5 lakh loan that we took for buying a tractor," he said.

Dreams burning in the brick kilns

PRATIBHA SHARMA

Hosa Dombala: In spite of the perpetual presence of smoke and dust in the air and a blazing sun shining on the top of their heads, women and children workers employed at the brick kiln located at Gadag-Betgeri road say that they are satisfied and healthy in such deplorable working conditions.

The kiln employs 30 workers, ten of them female. The workers live in the shanties built near the brick kiln and do not have an electricity connection. A hand pump nearby was the only source of water for both drinking and domestic use.



Nelamma works at the brick kiln with great risk to her own health. | PRATIBHA

For their hard labour from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the male workers are paid Rs 500 per thousand bricks. The Labour of women who worked along with their husband to produce 1000 bricks does not have a monetary value.

Nelamma Ganappa, 31, has been working in this kiln with her husband for the past five years and has a 3-year-old son Siddhu. She denied that her health has been affected by working in the kiln. "These people get used to it, they have no health issues," the kiln owner Fayaz Hospiti said. In spite of claims to the contrary, it was obvious that Siddhu and the other children who were playing in the vicinity never went to school. Nelamma said that she was not interested in studies and left school after the 5th Grade, even though her family wanted her to study further. She regrets it now. "I want my son to be a teacher so that he can teach us and also the other children like him. I want a bright future for him", she said.

Carrying bricks from one place to another was a 14-year-old boy named Basavaraj. Smiling and shying away from questions, he was quick to avoid a conversation. With the kiln owner standing right next to him, Basavaraj would look at his owner for an answer every time he was posed a question. The owner added that Basavaraj goes to school regularly. However, he couldn't attend school that day because of a strike in Mundaragi. Basavaraj did not have an ID card or notebook and there was no government order shutting down schools that day. "He does not come here regularly. It is only when he needs some pocket money he comes here to work", the owner said. Basavaraj is paid Rs. 200 per day for his labour and wants to be an entrepreneur in future.

Most of the claims made by the kiln owner did not have enough evidence to back them up. The working conditions of the kiln worker seemed hazardous. Yet, none of the workers or the children who worked there complained. The 'Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act' enacted by the parliament in August 2009 as the 86th amendment to the Constitution remains securely under Article 21 (A).



A windmill unit in Gadag which caters to power requirement of villagers. | BHAGYASRI

The answer to power cut is blowing in the wind

Gadag's windmills generate 1050 MW/year

NIKITA PRASAD

Gadag: Windmills and solar panels have become the primary sources for electricity in the district of Gadag. Both, the hills and the plains are dotted with a series of wind turbines. Their blades, while turning in the wind, serve as the forefront of alternative power generation.

The Karnataka Electricity Board licensed companies like GE, GWL, Bharoti, Enercon India and Bhorkar Power Corporation to install windmills, so that their functional power generation capacity could be used by the Electrical Power Station of Gadag.

According to the Regional Meteorological Centre, Gadag has a geographical advantage over other districts in this sector. Wind farms can function optimally at places with strong wind speeds.

It is situated at 659.8 metre

above sea level where wind speed remains 6.4-7 metre per second. Gadag contributes around 1,067 mw through 57 wind farms.

"The varying temperature in the region creates variation in air pressure, which is important for wind generation. High wind speed, which is important to harness the power, is found in locations at higher elevations. The mountains in the district serve as a principle location for great wind power production", said Mr Maragadavvel, regional meteorologist.

Mr Pariswaran, L & D Section Manager (Land and Development) of the Gadag District Office said, "The conversion of land for solar power is important. Renewable energy is cost-effective and is beneficial for many of the farmers who live here and cultivate their lands."

The topography of Gadag is almost dry and drought-prone, due

to which, farmers face difficulties in growing their crops on farmlands. But, with solar power they can make use of many agricultural procedures and technical practices to continue the farming methods effectively.

Subject Matter Specialist in Agricultural Extension, S.H Adapur from Krishi Vigyan Kendra said, "Earlier the private multinationals started acquiring lands from farmers at the cost of Rs. 2-3 lakhs per acre, but, today it has increased to Rs. 20 lakhs per acre. The lands converted for wind farms have not been misused as due permission was given by the Karnataka Electrical Board before installing windmills. It hasn't affected the farmers in cultivation."

Wind power has also increased the adaptability of people to depend more on renewable energy, which will make the district sustainable in the long run.

Rowing against inequality's tide

BHAGYASRI CHAUDHURY

Mahalingpur: The children of Mahalingpur do not complain about school. The lone government school in the middle of the marketplace may only go up to class V, but most children in the village study for long after.

The Lambani people of Mahalingpur seem aware of the importance of education, but even though parents ensure the education of their daughters, there are more boys than girls in the classroom.

Most girls are married off by the age of 18 or 20. After losing her mother, twelve-year-old Anjali lives with her father and grandmother, not very far from the school. They travel a lot with her 'new mother' from Haveri, whom she is fond of.

"We frequent Goa together," she says. "I like Goa best, followed by Mundaragi." Her favourite aunt lives there. Three of Anjali's sisters are married. Her elder brother is studying in Gadag. After class V, she wishes to go to Shirahatti and study further.

"Nowadays, women too have to work in the fields. Girls often have to stay back and help with all the housework," said Gangu bai, vegetable vendor. Anjali has to work extra hard at home too, as compared to the boys her age. But from helping mother in the kitchen to fetching buckets of water from the RO filter unit, she works with an innocent smile on her face, with a demeanour, that is always plea-

sant. Someday, she confesses, she would like to be a teacher at the primary school in her village, and answer difficult questions. "My class teacher doesn't know too many things," she pondered, adding "I want to be a teacher who has an answer for each other students' questions. For that I know I have to study hard and study further."

Referring to Goa, her favourite place, "We have water for drinking, we have water for washing things, but unlike Goa, we have no seaside!"

23-year-old Netravati Nayak's wedding is fixed, but she has decided to keep studying. Her husband and in-laws are supportive of her decision.

"Parents here always encourage their children to study further," she said. "I am looking for jobs too, but the pay is quite poor."

Many men of Netravati's age are being favoured for better and well-paying jobs. "Even if we get those jobs, we are paid less compared to the men. Though it is not much, it will amount to something substantial to sustain us," she said.

She remains hopeful, saying, "I want to stand on my own feet, and rid my family of financial burdens."

While Anjali has amenities in the village to fulfil her needs, she still longs for Goa and its beautiful seaside.



Water crisis in Mahalingpur continues to trouble villagers

NIKITA PRASAD

Mahalingpur: Shortage of water for drinking and domestic use has been a major concern for the residents of Mahalingpur. "Water is the biggest problem in our village as there is no water for irrigation. This has dried our farmlands and wasted our harvest," said Laxman, a worried farmer from the village.

Chandru H Karware, village Sarpanch and member of the Gram Panchayat said, "Around 200 families of our village work in the fields, but we receive very little rainfall because of which crops like jowar cannot be cultivated anymore." The problem becomes grave during peak of summer when water supply dwindles. "During May-June-July, we hardly have

water to drink or even to cook, and have to walk down to the other villages to borrow water", said Laxman.

Water supply for domestic purposes comes from a bore well in the village and the need for drinking water is catered by a filter tap. Additionally, there are a few hand pumps but they hardly ever work, since the

groundwater level has receded over the years. "We get water supply in our houses once every three days and the borewell isn't always filled", said Bas-

waraj, a young shopkeeper in the village. Similarly, the filter water supply is limited as the villagers have to pay Rs. 2 per 20 litres of water. The filter tap supplies water

only from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

"During the supply hours, we have to stand in long queues to store water and this creates a ruckus at times because of heavy crowd around the tap and some of them take more than what they require", said Baswaraj, villager.

The two major causes of water crisis in the village are absence of

rainfall, and falling groundwater level. "There has been no rainfall during the last three years in the village", said another farmer.

Due to water scarcity, many farmers migrate to Goa for six months in a year in search of work.

"The RDPR (Rural Development and Panchayati Raj) is responsible for providing water tankers in Mahalingpur to help the

villagers survive better, as the groundwater has depleted and it is the responsibility of the authorities to look into the matter," said Mr HB Gadigareswar, District Program Manager, National Health Mission, Gadag. Adding to the crisis, many old age residents here live with joint pains and discoloration of teeth due to higher fluoride content in the groundwater.

900 day protest goes on

KANISHKA SARKAR

Nargund: "It is better to sell land and do some other work," said Mallikarjuna, 27, whose father committed suicide five months ago because of the stress of being unable to repay an agricultural loan of Rs. 95,000 from the Agriculture Development Bank.

Agriculture is the primary occupation of approximately 89 per cent of the population in North Karnataka, and since it is solely dependent on rainfall, the sector has failed to support farmers in subsisting their livelihood.

The Belgaum, Dharwad, Bagalkot, and Gadag districts are facing a major water crisis, especially in terms of irrigation because of low rainfall in the region. It is also majorly owing to the unresolved Mahadayi river dispute, which has been going on since 2002.

The Mahadayi river, of which two-third flows in Goa, starts in Karnataka and the Karnataka state government wants to construct dams across two of its tributaries - Kalasa and Banduri, so as to facilitate irrigation and drinking needs of the villages in the region.

However, Goa and Maharashtra (also a party to water sharing) have been opposing the construction of



Agitation in unison: Raitha Sena farmers in protest for over 900 days now. | KANISHKA

dams, claiming that the project shall affect their water requirements adversely.

The Mahadayi Water Dispute Tribunal (MWDT), which was set up in 2010, has not been able to resolve the issue yet. The matter has been taken up before the Supreme Court. The hearing has been scheduled for the end of January.

For over 900 days now, farmers in Nargund have been protesting for the issue to be resolved in their favour. However, no conclusion has been arrived at yet.

"In order to survive, we need at least 7mcf of drinking water and 38mcf for irrigating the fields," said Virish Surethmath, prominent leader of the Raitha Sena protest group. If the government fails to resolve the issue, they will oppose the upcoming elections and take their protest to Delhi, before the Central government, he added.

"It's high time. The Centre must interfere in the matter along with the three states," said Prakash Gouda, President of Taluk Pan-chayat in Nargund.

Mallikarjuna, who owns seven acres of land, started farming five years ago. "Most people here, including me grow commercial crops like cotton, groundnut, and corn. However, there is no water to irrigate the fields," he said. He also claimed, "The failure of the agriculture sector has caused a survival crisis in the region. Therefore I have now taken up the job of a driver as an alternate profession."

After agriculture, the handloom industry was known to be a major employer. However, since this sector is also experiencing a gradual decline, many people have migrated to cities like Bangalore in search of other jobs or to Goa to become fish sellers.

Owing to low repaying capacity, the Agriculture Development Bank has also minimized the number of loans it gives out, said Prakash Gouda.

The failure of two major sectors that constituted for the economic growth in North Karnataka has resulted in an extremely slow pace of development in the region.

For now, a speedy resolution of the Mahadayi River dispute serves as the only ray of hope for the helpless farmers who are barely able to earn a living and support their families.

Waiting for the sunrise

BHAGYASRI CHAUDHURY

Nargund: Farmers in the region have invested in solar panels, but are at a loss as the renewable energy company refuses to send technicians to get the solar power units running.

"Tamil Nadu based SunEdison said they will provide a discount of two lakhs," said Basanagouda H. Chikkangowdaru, one of the better-off farmers who spent 10 lakh rupees without paperwork on the company's solar power panels. The panels were installed three years ago, and have been lying idle since. There was no discount either.



Basanagouda with his solar panels. | BHAGYASRI

"They promised they'd look after maintenance," he said, "But this is the fourth year, and they



Ineffective solar panels under the sun. | BHAGYASRI

aren't answering a single phone call."

Basanagouda said that he was born poor, but had toiled hard for years for his 70 acres of land. "I had no other business except this," he said, "All governments and NGOs are frauds and are cheating us. If my voice were heard, I'd request them to stop this." "A man by the name of Kamlesh told us that he had seen the panels and that he would repair them if I gave him 1 lakh rupees," he further recounted, "He was working in HESCO (Hubli Electricity Supply Company Limited), and has been caught and suspended from duty." Referring to the recent river

water joining protest, he said that the parties work only for the benefit of their party, not for the farmers.

"The two governments should join and work together for the benefit of farmers," he said, "For all the worst things happen due to politicians. In the entire State of Karnataka, farmers are dying because of politicians."

The Principal of the SMC ITC School in Nargund, Basavraj Salimath said, "The same issue is being faced by many villagers. When water is available in the river, there is no power supply. Many farmers are being cheated this way."

Hospital far, ASHA workers bring hope

PRATIBHA SHARMA

Mahalingpur: In villages like Attikatti and Mahalingpur where there is no rural medical healthcare facility and the hospital is situated 10 km away from the village, ASHA workers bring hope for women during pregnancy or any medical emergency.

Gauramma Krishnappa Namani, 32, said that her husband died in an accident a few months back. She is now four months pregnant. "ASHA didi helps me a lot. She takes me to the hospital for regular check-ups. Not only this, whenever I face slightest of discomfort, she comes to my house to help me", she added.

Sakobai Shankar Powar, 32, has been an ASHA worker in Mahalingpur village for the past two years.

"I am not only trained in helping women during pregnancy, I also advise them on family planning. I teach them about birth control and many women are now willing to use Copper-T" [an intra-uterine contraceptive device], she said.

Sakobai has been provided with a free sim by the government to contact hospitals and other healthcare services in case of a medical emergency or for advice. She goes for training in Gadag district once every month and says that her husband is very supportive of her.

"It is difficult to persuade women who insist on home delivery during labour pain. They have to be lured by the government through maternity benefit schemes where they are provided with Rs. 700 during the 4th month of their pregnancy and Rs. 300 and a baby care kit on institutional delivery", she said.

Lakshmi Avalur, 36, has been an

ASHA worker in Attikatti Village for the last four years. Is one ASHA worker enough for the whole village? "This village is like a family and people know one another. Villagers also help me a lot," she said.

"Getting an ambulance on time is sometimes an issue here. Sometimes it takes as long as 40 to 45 mins for it to reach. Till then the

Accredited social health activists (ASHAs) are health workers for communities instituted by the government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as part of the National Rural Health Mission.

women in labour are in pain. In those cases, we take the help of the rikhshawallas in the village," she added.

"Whenever we call her she comes. We are grateful for what they do for us. She even brings our medicines whenever she goes to the city for training," said Krishnappa a villager.

Lakshmi said that there are some women in the village who refuse to take her help and do not inform her about their pregnancy, "but they come running to me when they face any health complication or a problem in hospital regarding official documents. I feel we need to be trusted more," she said.

They are also active in instructing women in postnatal care and vaccination of children. They hold talks for women on gender equality and importance of education.

Weaving- an art form in its twilight

KANISHKA SARKAR & NISCHAI VATS

Betgeri: "The weaver's son does not want to become a weaver, he wishes to work in a more decent profession," said Bhawani Singh Jamadar, the owner of Krishna Textiles in Betgeri. Pondering over the possibility of the traditional North Karnataka handloom industry disappearing in 4-5 years, Bhawani said, "Of the 45 handlooms and power looms in my factory, only 22 are running, because there isn't anyone to operate them."

The famous Ilkal sarees of North Karnataka, that require over 2800 threads to style intricate patterns, have almost no makers in Gadag now. Apart from producing pure silk sarees and silk by cotton sarees, these handloom units also make bed sheets and towels. Back in 1995, there were over 40,000 handlooms across Karnataka; now, they are down to 10,000 when the industry began declining in 2000, said Chandrashekhara Bhavikatti, Assistant Technical Officer and in charge of Project Head Administration, Karnataka Handloom Development Corporation.

"I earn Rs. 250 per day. My wife Sangeeta gets Rs. 15 for two hours. Almost 10 hours of hard work earns us two square meals for a family of five", said Ganesh Laxman Gangapati, a cloth weaver at Krishna Textiles. Skilled only at handloom, Ganesh, 23, continues the same job despite the low wages. Unlike Ganesh, most of the youngsters have chosen to become construction workers, or have moved to Bangalore to work as security guards. Others have migrated to Goa to sell fish or do other jobs, because of better

wages.

"When there is no electricity in the factory, I use the handloom at home to weave so that my family does not have to go hungry that night. My husband then takes the cloth to a unit in Narsapur, 10 km away," said Lakshmi Ramana Jodi, aged 50.

According to Anil Gaddi, the president of Betgeri Javadi Utpadan Sangha, factors like limited demand for such sarees, increased cost of raw material coming from cities like Bangalore and Surat, and the high rate of GST on various materials has resulted in the industry's collapse. "The government must provide subsidy on cotton and silk for this sector to bloom again, as the livelihood of 30,000-40,000 people still depends on this industry", he added.

Previously, the cost of a silk saree ranged between Rs.1200-3000, however, it is above Rs.



Weavers in the handloom industry earn low wages and are adversely affected by policy changes. | GAURAV MEHTA

wages.

"5000 now. Since not all buyers can afford to buy such expensive sarees, now silk is mixed with polyester to reduce both the cost and the selling price."

"It is a period of crisis survival for this art," said Bhawani, who wishes to preserve this age-old

"I have never seen the new 2000 rupee notes. Our wages are much lower than that." -GANESH.

cultural practice of making Ilkal sarees, but finds no workers. Due to high manufacturing cost and low demand, he had to reduce the wages of workers from Rs. 300-400 per day in 2003 to Rs. 200-250 now. He added, "Earlier there were 80 workers in my factory, now only 35. However, only a few of them turn up every day."

Back in 1925, the state government had established a "Weaver's

Colony" in Narsapur for the handloom sector to bloom and for skilled weavers to practice their art as an occupation.

However, now striving to save this industry from extinction, the Karnataka State Government facilitates loans, helps weavers to buy raw material and later purchases final products from them as well, said Chandrashekhara. Also, as per the Vidya Vikas Scheme, State Government schools purchase uniform cloth only from these handloom units.

Demonitisation/GST does not over for weavers

The textile and handlooms industry, India's second largest employer, seems to be in a dire state.

In the Betgeri and Gadag districts of Karnataka, around 2500 handlooms were initially working. Now only a 1000 remain- on the state government's mercy. Bhawani Singh, owner of Krishna Textiles in Gadag feels that "It is a diminishing sector and today new labourers are not taking up the job."

Krishna Textiles produces silk sarees but it is a tedious job and requires 4-5 hours to produce 1 saree. "It is a quality oriented work with a lot of cultural and traditional values etched on it," said Bhawani Singh. Workforces of big strength have been cut down by more than a half, owing to several economic and political factors.

The demonitisation of notes hurt the sector badly. Labourers came under debt as market demand dropped drastically. "Wages became irregular due to demonitization. We had to take ration on

credit," said Lakshmi Singh Gangapathy, a 23-year-old weaver. "Around 600 industries got closed due to demonitization. 1000-1500 workers left the textile industry as demands were falling and losses were rising." On the profit and loss scenario, he commented "There is no need for advertisement. If the increased prices of raw materials are decreased, things will fall into place." said Anil Gaddi, President of Betgeri Javadi Utpadan Sangha.

Elaborating on the GST effect, Gaddi said, "Post GST, the excise duty has been increased on silk which is imported from China and hence exports have fallen in Karnataka."

Lelawati, a 45-year-old weaver resides in Gadag's Weavers Colony. With her husband paralysed, she has been working from home for the last 20 years. She prepares the cloth and gives it to the Karnataka Handloom Development Corporation (KHDC). For every 22m, she gets Rs. 600 and prepares around 5-6m everyday. She is paid in cash, but the bonus gets transferred in her Jan-Dhan account in 3 months. "We don't have hospitals nearby and the garbage van doesn't come regularly" said Lelawati, adding that "if the prices of raw materials fall, we might get higher returns for our hard-work."

"Handloom industry is in a depressing state, 5% GST has been imposed upon textile and silk. So, people are leaving this profession," said Chandrashekhara Bhavikatti, Assistant Technical Officer at KHDC.

Chandrasekhara recounts that "Around 40,000 looms were working during 1995 in Karnataka but now only 10,000 are left"

He added, "A minimum wage must be set by the government."

Krishi Vigyan Kendra- a farmer's temple of learning

AVANISH C. & NIKITA PRASAD

Hulkoti: The K.H. Patil Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Hulkoti (KHPVK) is one of 86 KVK's in the rural districts of Karnataka. They were established in 1974 as per the Dr. Mohan Singh Mehta Committee Report as "poly-technic like scientific institutes."

Established in 1985, the KHPVK's main objectives are to conduct research into technical and scientific farming problems, holding training and awareness programmes for farmers and youth, and to provide quality inputs to farmers. The KVK has also adopted villages to conduct awareness programmes and lend technical sup-

port. Affiliated to the Agricultural Science Foundation, it also receives financial support from other agricultural universities and the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR).

"Since 1985, we have reached 336 villages, which is 80-90% of the district. We received the 'Best KVK Award' for the year 1994-95," said S.H. Adapur, Subject Matter Specialist in Agricultural Extension. The KVK sees an influx of nearly 5000 farmers and about 800-1000 students every year, enrolling in programs ranging from 3 days to 3 months.

The programs are free, though only recently; a fee has been required for the dairy programs. Trainees



The KHPVK technically trains 5000 farmers and 1000 students every year in agricultural processes. | AVANISH C.

are given practical training in specially designed dairy, vermicom-

post and cattle-feed units. They are trained to tackle drought issues. "There's drought for 70% of the year in Gadag," said Adapur. "Since 90% of the crops are rainfed, we train farmers in soil conservation and crop diversification." This is done by identifying "thrust areas" and organizing instructional farms in these areas.

The trainees, Adapur adds, are also taught rainwater harvesting and planting short term variety crops. "There is no loss, as in a farming period of 100 days, these crops take only 60-70 days to grow. We also train them in organic farming," he said.

In typical agricultural practices, profit for farmers is almost negli-

ble. They started dry land mango cultivation and covered almost 3000 hectares in the district, in the last 15 years. The farmers are now able to earn with this unconventional option for farming growth. "With our dry mango cultivation programme, farmers have formed their own mango growing areas. They now earn almost Rs. 80,000-1 lakh per year for 1 acre, once the mangos ripen", said Adapur.

"We now communicate with the farmers one-on-one via Whatsapp groups through which they send their problems through queries or pictures of their crops and we help them with solutions on phone itself", he said with contentment.

However, Adapur explained that

there are a few challenges which the organization faces together with the farmers. Agriculture is a dynamic process as it is dependent on climate. Climate change poses adjustment problems for the farmers. Sunshine and rainfall decide crop growth but with irregular rainfall, the farmers are clueless as to what to do.

They are also unhappy with the price policy of the government as the input prices (seeds, fertilizers) are very high and are increasing every year.

But, the market prices for selling these commodities are lesser. The producer (farmer) should be the one to fix the prices, not the government.

Farmers awaiting end to stay order



Dinesh standing in front of the abandoned gold mine on the disputed land. | APOORV NISCHAI VATS

NISCHAI VATS

Attikatti: "We want our land back and not the compensation, these big people should not con us off the only asset we have," said Dinesh, a farmer in Attikatti village of Gadag district.

The story dates back to 2008-09 when the Mining & Minerals Private Limited (MSPL) purchased a total of 42 acres of land from five families of Attikatti village at Rs. 1.8 lakhs per acre.

During the British era, the land around Attikatti village was a forest but in 1937 the villagers staged a protest demanding land for agricultural purposes. In 1945, the British government accepted the demands and allotted 42 acres to five families in the village.

The problem began when MSPL approached the farmers and lured them with false promises.

Earlier, the deed at the time of purchase was to keep the land for agriculture with the company employing the same farmers to grow peanuts, sunflowers, groundnuts and pulses on it, but by 2012-13 they started mining work thereby defying all the rules. This came as the company, with the help of geologist Mr. Ramkrishna Sahukar, had surveyed the 15 km area of Gadag and confirmed the presence of gold.

Keshavappa, 48, a farmer from Mahalingapur village, lost his left hand while working in MSPL's gold mine in Attikatti, he received zero compensation and has been working at a water supply center in Mahalingapur for the last seven years.

Chandrashekar, 47, a farmer from the same village also got injured while working in the same mine; he too lost one of his hands in the incident. The accident took place eight years ago and it took him at least two years to recover, no compensation has been provi-

ded till now. Currently, he works in his own field in Mahalingapur village and cultivates jowar, green gram and sunflowers.

Dinesh and other aggrieved farmers from Attikatti approached the Civil Court after filing for a partition suit in the case and the judgement came in their favour.

The MSPL then moved to the Assistant Commissioner Court but the judgement ordered the company to return the land to the farmers. In the hierarchy, the company went ahead to Deputy Commissioner Court but the judgement remained the same.

Finally, the MSPL knocked the doors of the Karnataka High Court and appealed for the permission to mine for gold. But the court stayed all the activities including mining and agriculture and declared it as government land.

"The government is delaying in handing over the land, the only relief is that it's an SC/ST land and as per the status quo, it has been converted into a Conserve Reserve Forest," said Ravikant R. Angadi, the lawyer who is fighting the case in his own capacity.

"12 fake criminal cases have been filed against the farmers, lawyers and activists involved with the case; Rahul Baldota, the co-owner of MSPL is a very influential man in Gadag district. But the farmers won't give in, and will do whatever it takes to ensure that they win back the land that rightfully belongs to them," he added.

The Farmers' Legal Crusader

Advocate-activist Ravikant Angadi speaks on the farmers' struggle to save Kapatagudda hills from corporate greed



Advocate-activist Ravikant Angadi in his office at the Innovative Law Forum in Gadag. | AVANISH C.

AVANISH C.

Gadag: The office of Innovative Law Forum situated in front of the Old Court Complex in Gadag town, has the spare look of a rural clinic. However, the fate of entire communities depends upon the tireless work carried out in this office by one man - Ravikant Angadi, a lawyer-activist.

Short, well-built and 40 years old, Angadi has had a penchant for social service from a young age. Aside from having both graduate and postgraduate degrees in social work, he completed his LLB in 2003, and began practicing in 2007. "I wanted to actively fight for the rights of deprived farmers in Gadag, and that is why I joined the legal profession. I could have joined a law firm in Bengaluru, but nobody was taking up cases that concerned pertinent issues," said Angadi. He is also the District Head of the Karnataka Lambani Ban-

jara Sangathana, and was one among ten plaintiffs in the landmark triple talaq ruling in August 2017.

The issue he is presently battling in court is a land dispute near Attikatti village, between a group of Lambani farmers and Mining & Minerals Private Limited (MSPL), owned by the Baldota Group of Companies. The disputed land lies in the lap of the 80 km long Kapatagudda hills, which is rich in gold, among other minerals. "Via third parties, the Baldota Group misrepresented to the farmers that they would not conduct mining operations. Believing their lie, the farmers sold them their land for a price below the market rate," said Angadi. "When the sale was made in 2008-09, Baldota started gold mining operations. The farmers felt betrayed and approached me," he added.

In response, the company filed criminal complaints against the farmers. Even Angadi was not

spared - 12 criminal cases are currently pending against him.

However, the law is favouring Angadi and the farmers. The farmers filed a petition before the Mundaragi Civil Court, and obtained a permanent stay of the mining operations. An unintentional error committed by the farmers worked to their benefit - they had not sought permission from the State government before selling the land, which was granted to them way back in 1937. As per Section 5 of the Prohibition of Transfer of SC/ST Lands Act, 1978, any land granted before or after 1978 cannot be sold without permission from the concerned State Government. As a result, the Assistant Commissioner's Court deemed it an invalid sale. The ruling was upheld by the District Commissioner's Court in Gadag. The case is currently before the Karnataka High Court.

The many rulings in their favour, however, have not spared

Angadi and the farmers from harassment and intimidation by Baldota and the police. Ignoring life threats, they continue to protest Baldota's exploitation of the Kapatagudda region. Angadi shows a picture of himself being dragged away by the police during a protest in 2013. "The motto was 'Kapatagudda Bachao, Baldota Bhagao' (Save Kapatagudda, Chase Baldota out). The hills are a mother to Gadag's villages. Due to mining, soil and forest cover are being lost, which in turn deprives us of water and moisture," he said.

"The Baldota Group has no case - they did not obtain the necessary environmental clearances," explained Angadi. "I'm confident we'll win. In the end, I want the farmers to win back their rights"

Married when he was 32, Angadi has a five-year-old daughter. "My family insisted I marry before it was too late, as I was too engrossed in my work," he said.

Fish sellers of Attikatti

NIKITA PRASAD

Attikatti: Walking down the narrow lanes of Attikatti village, comes a middle-aged man with an orange colored trunk fixed upon his scooter. He announces his arrival with loud screams of 'Macchi Macchi', disrupting the silence of the afternoon siesta. Children pacing up and down the lanes, in search of a missing marble, gather around his scooter and try to peek into the trunk, with an ineffable curiosity, to know what is in it for them. Responding to the cacophony, the villagers come out of their homes and stand at their gates to meet their daily visitor.

Ramesh Jadhav, 33, a fish seller from Mahalingapur working in and around Attikatti, is an early riser, whose day starts before dawn as he sets off on his scooter to the other end of town. "I go to Hubballi everyday at four in the morning and collect fish, which I sell here in the villages throughout the day. I've been doing this for three years now", said Ramesh with a winsome smile on his face. The varieties of fish which he usually gets from Hubballi are rohu and catla. He stores them in his trunk with ice cubes. He expressed an amusing concern as these fish have bones in them which the residents in these villa-

ges do not identify with. Generally, people across all South-Indian sta-



From the waters to the weighing scale; Ramesh Jadhav sells fish at Attikatti

tes consume warm water fishes which do not have brittle bones. Yet, Ramesh manages to sell his entire trunk by the break of day! "I make sure that I roam around as much as I can and finish selling all

the fishes in my trunk. I make around Rs. 2,500-3,500 per day with which I sustain my family here", he claimed. He has migrated from Goa after working there for 15 years and now lives here with his family.

Thakur, 35, another fish seller from the Indroli village of Shirahatti sells mackerel and bangda varieties of fish in Attikatti which are more popular among the villagers.

There have been times when all my fish have been sold and yet there are people who wish to buy! I promise to bring them the next day", he said with enthusiasm.

The fish sellers have often brought the villagers closer as they gather around to bargain, share a quick chat or buy fish for a big meal or festivity together. "During difficult times of harvest, when we are not able to buy grains and vegetables, fishes always saved us from starving!", said Mr. Kishanmaggad, village leader of Attikatti.

The tattoo messiah of Mahalingapur

BHAGYASRI CHAUDHURY

Mahalingapur: From the rain-starved Lambani village of Mahalingapur, 20 km from Gadag, young Chandu Lamani teaches tattoo art to boys in Goa to ignite hope, even when the fields are unyielding.

"We draw all kinds of tattoos," he said, "Colour tattoos are in, and 'the six-pack-Shiva' is a hot favourite!"

The issues in his village, he explained, are water and schooling. "Rain, mostly, is the cause of many problems here."

The amount of rain the villagers receive is the amount the borewells store. The whole village has only one borewell to drink from. The water filter unit is available every day, but only in the mornings and evenings.

"There has been such a shortage of water for six or seven years now, and you cannot grow anything here anymore. Some fields are just lying there because people have left. The villagers who remain, however, have their own private borewells and manage somehow. The ones who don't are at the mercy of the rains," said

Chandu.

There are about 30 private borewells spanning over 700 acres of farmland, and half of them are non-functional. The lack of rain has rendered them useless.

The people of Mahalingapur are leaving their village and going to nearby Kerala or Goa in search for work. Chandu has stayed in Kerala

Now, the school has just three teachers; two of them are ill-informed and unfit to be teachers.
-CHANDU LAMANI

himself, and is currently working at his 'Blue Bird Tattoo Studios' in Calangute, Goa. The shop has two more outlets in Candolim, and Morjim. There are four boys in the village who are training under him.

"The school here is not very good," said Chandu, "When I was a child, the school had more teachers, and was very strict. Now there are just three; two of them are ill-informed and unfit to be teachers."

Chandu stopped going to school early because his interests clashed with his school work. Very often, he would accompany his family to Goa when the harvest ran dry.

"I went to Goa when I was eight," he said, "At first I was unemployed, then I wandered in search of work and came across some labourers; I helped around with brick-laying. Then I worked at water sports facilities along the beach. But I've always enjoyed drawing as a child, and eventually I found a tattoo artist who taught me his art."

It has been seven years since Chandu has been drawing tattoos, and he intends to keep it this way. The business, he said, is looking good, but the rent is expensive. Moreover, there have not been many customers this year.

"I always try to teach whoever is interested in tattoo art," he said, "But if the rains are good, then there is no need for us Lambanis to travel elsewhere for work. If the rains are good, people from outside come to our village!"

Chandu is a hero to the villagers here. "We call him JCB!" exclaimed a fellow villager, "He is the big shot of our village!"

Acute shortage of doctors plagues Gadag's healthcare sector

Not enough doctors for Gadag's 45 PHCs, says NHM's District Programme Manager, H.B. Gadigareshwar



The lone PHC at Mustikoppa which has only one doctor. | NIKITA

NISCHAI VATS

Gadag: Large scale privatization of the healthcare sector has left many citizens deprived primary care in the rural areas of India. In Gadag district of Karnataka, only one Public Health Center is working and Attikatti village Mundaragi taluk has only one ASHA worker.

Thavarappa, a contract labourer in Attikatti village said, "In November more than 20 people in the village contracted dengue but the district hospital in Gadag had no facility for injecting platelets; so we had to rush to SDM Medical College in Dhadwad."

Dengue, asthma, paralysis and viral fever are some of the major diseases prevalent in these villages.

Dr. Satish, District Surveillance Officer at the Urban Primary Health Center (PHC) of Gadag agreed that "no

arrangements are here in Gadag for additional platelets for the district government hospital in the treatment of severe dengue cases." Though in 2017, the government's budget on health was Rs. 48,878 crore whereas private health care budget crossed Rs. 6,50,000 crore.

Dr. Satish gave a list of several government schemes available through the Urban PHC like Iodine Deficiency Program (NIDPP) in which information is given to shopkeepers not to stock non-iodized salts; NTCP (Tobacco Control Program) wherein educational programs are held

in schools and colleges about the dangers of tobacco use; NPCDCS (National Program for Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardio-Vascular and Stroke) and NPHCE (National Program for Elderly Healthcare) under which counseling is given to elderly about living a better life.

Dinesh, a 24-year-old farmer said "A medical camp is set-up in the village by the government during the spread of any epidemic or disease, the last camp was set-up in October 2017."

He also added that "B.P check, glucose bottles, blood test and medicines are provided in the camp and for eye, dental and ear checkup, ASHA workers

come and take the people from villages to Gadag or Kadampur."

Mr. H.B. Gadigareshwar, District Program Manager of National Health Mission (NHM) asserted that "Infant deaths and maternal deaths were at a peak in Gadag but after NHM, the rate has dropped."

Mr. Gadigareshwar said that ASHA workers are the link between the public and the health department, appointed by Gram Panchayat and Health staff. An ASHA worker gets Rs.300 for every delivery from health department. She is also the secretary of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committee.

"There are 10,22,859 registered allopathic doctors in India, out of which only 1,13,328 doctors work in government hospitals." Mr. Gadigareshwar said "Health department is facing an

acute shortage of doctors. The 45 health institutions in Gadag have 45 doctors are present, but they are from different departments."

In the village of Mustikoppa under Mundaragi taluk, fluorosis has spread because of excessive amounts of fluoride in groundwater and a lot of villagers are suffering from tooth decay, and aching joints as they prefer borewell water for drinking even though alternatives have been installed.

Dr. R.R. Hosamani, District Fluorosis Consultant said "People's attitude has to change, they don't know the complications of fluoride, and will switch to harvested rain water or RO purification only when they are affected."

On the measures being taken, he said that awareness programs in schools and shops are being conducted regularly.



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H. D. KOTE

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Dropouts get a second chance

Vocational training helps transition from unskilled to skilled work

GARIMA BORA

H. D. Kote/Hunsur: The fact that children, especially from tribal families, dropout of schools to tend to household needs or parents' farms is well known. But, there are a few silver linings as vocational training takes in students left behind by mainstream education in Mysuru.

Programmes like tailoring, driving, data entry and hospitality are conducted in NGOs like Development through Education (DEED) in Hunsur. These programmes do not have entry criteria which has enabled to absorb the school dropouts.

"Students who are tailoring will get jobs in Mysuru garment factories, and people in hospitality will get jobs in luxury resorts like Orange County, King's Court and others," says S. Sreekanth, Director of DEED. The courses are only six-month-long, and besides the course of choice, there are other values and skills being imparted to the students. "We teach cleanliness, yoga and basic English as well," he says.

B N Manjunath, former headmaster of Manchegowdana Hamlet Hill School in Hunsur, which recently won a 'green school' tag recently from the Karnataka Government, concurs with the importance of vocational training. "Nowadays, many people are looking up to driving training as drivers earn good money," he says.

Some other NGOs go the extra mile which the formal system fails to reach.

Viveka Tribal Centre for Learning (VTCL), an NGO-run school in Hosahalli village, has been



Viveka Tribal Center for Learning in Hosahalli village.

TRAVELLERSPOINT

pulling out all stops in imparting practical skills training to tribal children.

"Interacting with tribals and convincing them to send their children to school was very difficult," says Serigara, a top official with Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM), the parent organization of VTCL. The fact that the Jenu Kurubas, the most populous of tribals in H.D. Kote, speak Jenu Nudi complicated matters further.

"The volunteers then gained the confidence of the tribals by providing them food and slowly making them understand the importance of education," adds Mr. Serigara. Tackling caste differences was also

difficult for the team.

VTCL, which lies in the middle of the forests of Hosahalli village, has a peculiar design. As the tribals are wary of closed structures, the rooms have no walls. Instead, it has an open hexagonal structure with intermittent pillars, and a clay-tiled roof, keeping the structure open and airy.

The children learn skills like plumbing, carpentry, welding and embroidery from the age of 6 to 14. The school charges a mere Rs. 60 per year from the students. They are also offered pre-university education after high school.

(with inputs from Hariprasad Radhakrishnan)

FORMAL EDUCATION FALLS SHORT

One of the most important reasons for children leaving formal education is the school curriculum lacks practicality.

"The schools do not provide work-oriented education, but the child earns Rs.250 a day working on the cotton farm," says Mr. Serigara. "So, most tribal families prefer to send their children to work on cotton farms rather than sending them to the government schools."

A survey conducted in 2013 found out that there were 5,921 dropouts in the Mysore district and 26 per cent of those belong to the scheduled tribes of the villages of H D Kote, reported The Hindu.

Caste discrimination also leads to dropouts, says Nanjundaiah, founder of Nisarga Foundation in HD Kote. "The tribal children face discrimination in government schools." Also, re-settlement of tribals for forest conservation and development projects in large numbers put a halt to their education, he adds.

The survey identified sibling care, cattle/sheep grazing and migration as the main reasons for children in the age group of 6

to 14 dropping out of school.

ITIs take baby steps

The only Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in H.D. Kote teaches the trades of electrician, fitter, electrical mechanics, refrigeration mechanics, and computer-operated programming assessment (COPA).

The institute has 160 students and six teaching staff. But, the student pool is not representative of the population of the region.

Despite a reservation of three percent for Scheduled Tribes, the institute has only one tribal student.

The picture is not any better in the case of female students. Despite a 30 percent reservation for girls in the ITIs, only six and four girls have enrolled themselves in the ITIs of H.D. Kote and Hunsur respectively. Almost all girls are enrolled in the COPA course.

Students get placed in companies such as Bharat Heavy Electronics, BEML Bangalore, with a minimum salary of Rs. 8000 a month, according to Nagaraj, Junior Officer in the ITI H.D. Kote.

☛ The schools do not provide work-oriented education, but the child earns Rs.250 a day working on the cotton farm. - Mr. Serigara, top official of SVYM

Student journalists harassed by locals

A refugee stands up to them

PRASHASTI SINGH

H. D. KOTE: A 34-year-old Tibetan refugee, Rinchen, stood up against young local men when they tried to harass a group of student journalists here in Camp-J on Sunday. The incident took place when they were standing and interacting with the refugee on the main road of the Camp. A group of around 10 local men came up to us on 6 bikes and hurled abuse at them.

Earlier, the students had gone to a roadside Cafe to interact with its owner and two out of the 10 harassers were present there. They were staring at the students and clicking their photographs and when one of them objected, the men reportedly deleted the photographs. On being asked to show their phones, they said that they were "good men from Karnataka" and would never do such things. They also asked if the students had any proof that they were being harassed. Knowing that the men had deleted the photographs already, they left the Cafe without saying anything else.

A few minutes after the incident, when the students were on the road talking to Rinchen, the two men came with a group of their friends on motorbikes and stopped near the students. "I am sure you all are also outsiders", one of them said, shifting his gaze from Rinchen to the students.

"You must be from Uttar Pradesh, perhaps that is why you are used to receiving this kind of behavior from men in Cafe's and on roads. It is you outsiders who have a dirty mind. All men are good here in Karnataka", said another man, sneering and accelerating his bike all the while.

Rinchen, who was also being targeted by the man for being an 'outsider', was the first to speak. "Bhaiya, how can you call us outsiders? I was born and brought up in Karnataka. I know that I am a refugee but my people were given this land by your Prime Minister. I consider this land mine and so do these people. These girls are also Indians like you and most importantly, we are all human beings."

Pulling her sleeves up, she put her finger on her wrist and spoke loudly even as the men started to ride away one by one, "If you cut any of our wrists, the blood that will come out will be red in color. That is what binds us together. So stop trying to prove that people are better or worse because of the state or country they are born in."

After the encounter, the students talked to some other young women to find out whether they

also felt unaccepted in a foreign land. Tsering, a 29-year-old housewife said, "We do not face material discrimination in this area because all the refugees live together here, but what we do face is difficult to explain as it is based solely on how we look."

On trying to talk to the Camp leader about the incident to find out what he had to say about lo



Tibetan prayer flags signifying peace, compassion, wisdom and strength

PRASHASTI SINGH

calcs wandering around the camps thinking that they are doing a favor to the refugees by 'allowing' them to stay on their land, the Camp leader said that he would talk to only those who had an official permit to ask questions.

The refugees living in Gurupura are well to do. They own land and manage to irrigate it in spite of a water shortage in that area. They also earn well by buying woollens from Punjab and selling them in Karnataka. But socially, they are deprived of recognition and acceptance.

After the Tibet uprising of 1959, more than 150,000 refugees had fled to India following their leader Dalai Lama. The first Tibetan settlement in Karnataka was established in 1960. The Rabgayling settlement, created in the village Gurupura, today has 14 villages with 32 houses in each village, and another smaller village with 16 houses.

Animal footfalls roil H.D. Kote farmers

A four-decade-long abuse of animals' habitat boomerangs on mankind

PRASHASTI SINGH

H. D. Kote: Villagers here are accusing forest officials of rejecting claims for compensation for crops destroyed by animals that intrude into their area. However the officials are denying the charge.

An elephant trampled upon one acre of land sown with millet here in the Jakkahalli village in the first week of January. The 40-year-old farmer Shivalinga Gowda, who owns the land, incurred a loss of about Rs. 4000. Even after producing his bank account details and land ownership documents to the Forest Department on the day of the incident, he was denied compensation for his loss.

"According to the forest officials who came to see the damaged crops and click their photographs yesterday, the damage was not significant enough for them to compensate for. But for me, the loss of Rs. 4000 is a lot since my only source of income is this piece of



Shivalinga G shows animal footprints | PRASHASTI SINGH

land", said Gowda.

Elephants and wild boar intrude into the Gundathur village as well.

Sarsu Mada, a 68-year-old farmer from Gundathur, says she incurred a loss of about Rs. 15,000 last month when an elephant destroyed her crop of maize and a coconut tree. The forest officials came to see the damage done by the animals, clicked photographs of her land and tree, and promised a compensation of at least Rs. 12,000.

"It has been more than 20 days and I have not heard from them. I have no other option than to wait for them to compensate for my loss", the farmer said.

Sarsu Mada's sister Puttamma Mara, who also lives in the Gundathur village, had lost 5 out of the 40 mango trees that she owned because of an elephant that wandered into their village three months back.

The forest officials had rejected her application for compensation

on the basis that the number of trees destroyed was just a small proportion of what she owned and that she could deal with her loss without their help.

However, a forest department official, S. Ranganna, says that the villagers are compensated for their loss if they show land ownership documents and details of their bank accounts to the Forest Department. He says that his department is well equipped to either capture or scare away the animals from the villages.

"We provide the villagers full security. We take the help of the police and even burst crackers near the animals to scare them away from the villages. We have had to tranquilize the animals on several occasions, but never had to shoot any animal down", he adds.

According to an environmentalist Ksheersagar, animals are coming out to the villages because lantana camara, a bush with thorns, has grown in abundance in the forests over the past two decades, co-

vering what used to be grazing land.

"There is no food for the animals inside the forest anymore. Because of lantana camara growing everywhere, there is a shortage of grass and that leads to the elephants wandering off to villages in search of food", he said.

There is also a lot of human intervention in the ecosystem. For example, the Nagarhole forest has more than 200 teak plantations, says Ksheersagar.

"How can the ecosystem be sustained if there is so much human intervention?" he asks.

Along with elephant and wild boar, tiger and cheetah are also increasingly reported to be intruding in the villages looking for food because the number of animals inside the forest is decreasing. "These carnivorous animals come out to hunt for cows and dogs because they are easy targets which are readily available near settlements", the environmentalist adds.

From the birthplace of SHGs

KATHELEENE REENA

H. D. Kote: At the Beechanahalli village of H.D. Kote, around 100 women are under one roof, for a routine meet. But, it is far from boring and monotonous.

The women can be seen hooting and cheering, as one of them is stock-taking on the black board in front of them, jotting down their savings from the previous month.

Everyone is competing with each other to find who saved the most. "It is not all about the money. It is about creating a bond. Women, who wouldn't step out of their house otherwise, are all a family now," says Pushpamani, a 40-year-old woman, who runs a chicken shop. Her business is thriving now. "My store is very popular among the people in the area, and makes at least one lakh a month."

Just two decades ago, when the idea of SHGs was born in the country, not far from here, this was all the people who floated it wan-

ted: a sense of collective-responsibility, and economic independence. How it started

In the early 90s, many of the farmer co-operatives were going broke at the time and their credit systems were failing. "There were many defaulters, and there was not enough money coming in. Farmers growing cash crops had no ready money, they had to turn to private lenders and loan sharks," recalls William D'Souza, who was working with an NGO that pioneered the idea.

Myrada, the NGO based in H.D. Kote, was working with around 300 co-operatives at the time, training and helping them with agenda building.

Each of the co-ops had at least 50 members, which was getting unwieldy for loan recovery. So, Myrada broke these groups into smaller ones, called 'credit management groups.' "The idea that a group would be collectively liable was welcomed by the group mem-

bers. The number of defaulters drastically reduced, after this," says William, who was working as Extension Manager with Myrada, whose role involved mobilizing funds for farmers.

As Myrada went out to promote their model from village to village, they began to notice that women were more curious.

Seeing potential, they reformed their plan highlighting the financial independence that it would give to such women. So, Myrada started focusing on them.

"Rural women really wanted to contribute to household earnings. We began to teach them skills and fund these skills with loans to give it wings," says William. The NGO started imparting skills like basket-weaving, mat-making and knitting to the women.

Myrada's idea also gained from a similar story in Ahmedabad way back in the 70's. Ela Bhatt, an Indian cooperative organiser, had engineered a similar model there with



A federation in Beechanahalli in motion |SUKANYA ROY

her NGO, Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA).

When Ela travelled to Israel, she noticed women in the formal sector had labour laws protecting them but there was nothing of the sort for self-employed women. "Realising that such a gap existed here in India too she tried to bridge it with the idea of 'women and

micro-finance," says Sumukhi R, media manager at SEWA.

Ela, who was then working with a textile labour association in the city, started a self-help group under the patronage of the women's wing of the association. The model was successful, but was limited to a few dozen women.

Taking the baton forward, My-

rada expanded the model by pitching the idea to the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). The project received an amount of Rs. 10 lakh under their R&D project for micro-financing SHGs.

The pilot project became so successful that in 1992-93, NABARD initiated a SHG-Bank Linkage Programme. "When an entire group was held responsible, peer pressure reduced the risk involved in giving loans," says Chikkarangaiyya, Branch Manager at Kaveri Gramene Bank, H.D. Kote taluk.

State Governments were quick to notice and emulate the model - the first being Tamil Nadu. The first State-sponsored programme was initiated in collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development, a United Nations programme that tackles poverty and hunger.

Karnataka and Kerala followed suit, and now all States across the country have picked up the model.

Today, there are more than 8.5 million registered SHGs in India, and both private and nationalised banks lent an amount to the tune of Rs. 38,000 crore in 2016-17.

Two decades later

Kaveri Gramene Bank lends to all federations of more than 200 SHGs in H.D. Kote. "This year, we have lent a sum of over Rs. 6 crore," says Chikkarangaiyya. The money is lent at a rate of 13.75%, but there is a Central Government subsidy of 6%. Women who repay their loans promptly are also eligible for a further deduction of interest by 3%.

"The women use the money for candle-making, arecanut-plate making, dairy farming, and such activities. But, a lion's share of the money goes towards consumption purposes," he says.

Although few women use micro-credits for entrepreneurial ventures, it has led to financial empowerment of women.

Uprooted tribals remain homeless, landless

A Karnataka HC verdict in favour of those displaced from Nagarhole sets precedent for tribal protection

KATHELENE REENA & HARI PRASAD RADHAKRISHNAN

H. D. KOTE: More than four decades ago in September 1972, when the Indira Gandhi government brought about the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), the move was widely hailed as it gave teeth to attempts at forest protection across the country. But, as the protection of flora and fauna took centre stage, the country also saw widespread displacement of tribals, who, with the enactment of the Act, saw extinguishing of all rights of inhabitation within protected areas.

On similar lines is the story of the indigenous tribals of Karnataka: the Jenu and Beta Kurubas, Soligas, Yeravas, Paniyars, Soligas, et al., in and around H.D. Kote taluk.

The Nagarhole forest, which spreads across Mysuru and Kodagu districts of Karnataka, was declared a Game Reserve in 1972 with an area of 130 sq. km, by the Government of Karnataka. Subsequently, thousands of tribals were displaced in a phased manner, over three decades starting 1970's haphazardly.

The area was declared a National Park in 1988 and was subsequently renamed Rajiv Gandhi National Park with the area nearly doubling in size from 363 sq. km to 643 sq. km. The Park was designated a Tiger Reserve in 1999. This led to more displacement and tightening of the rules which limited access of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) that the tribals depended on.

A total of 3,418 families, with a population of 11,568 were displaced from inside the National Park area to the outside, according to an expert committee report submitted to the Karnataka High Court in 2014. The three-member committee, headed by Muzaffar Assadi, a professor with the University of Mysore, was commissioned by the HC while hearing a writ petition filed in 1999 by Development through Education (DEED), a tribal rights NGO, and Budakattu

Krishigara Sangha (BKS), an organization supporting rights of primitive tribes. The BKS helped in mobilizing people for organized resistance since the 1980's for various tribal issues.

The final report, submitted in 2014, was based on the committee's findings spanning nearly a decade, and is considered the most comprehensive study thus far, which is generally accepted by all stakeholders. An interim report was also filed by the committee with the HC in 2006.

According to the final report, the H.D. Kote taluk was the worst hit among the three taluks the report focused on – the other two being SHunsur of Mysuru district, and Virajpet of Kodagu district. A total of 1801 families (accounting for 52 per cent of displaced families), with a population of 5832 (accounting for 50.4 per cent of total displaced people), hail from H.D. Kote.

One of the most important findings of the report is that only 45.87 per cent of those displaced have households, and only 24.54 per cent of the people have lands.

How displacement happened

The tribals, in return for leaving the forests, were given two options: one, receive a monetary compensation of Rs.10 lakh without rehabilitation, while the other, provision of relocation or rehabilitation with house and land worth about the same amount. This scheme has been in place since 2013-14. Many complain that the tribals did not have a say in the decision-making process before relocation.

Earlier, in 1996-97, under the Eco-development project funded by the World Bank in seven sites across the country including Nagarhole, a rehabilitation package worth Rs.1 lakh was given to the tribals. "Before this [project], no rehabilitation was given at all," says Mr. Sreekanth.

The project started antagonizing the Adivasis in the area, as people were again displaced in the thou-



Representational image

| FRONTLINE

Muzaffar Assadi Committee

Members:

Muzaffar Assadi, University of Mysore
Jaji Thimmaiah, tribal activist
C. Srinivasan, Forest Department

Important findings:

H.D. Kote has the most landless, houseless people
3,418 families and 11,568 people displaced
Only 32.33% people were resettled/rehabilitated
Less than 25% have lands (838 families)

Timeline:

Set up in 2004 by Karnataka HC
Submitted an interim report in 2006, which did not include Virajpet taluk.
Final report submitted in 2014

Recommendations:

Tribals should be taken into confidence for resettlement. A Tribal Mission has to be set up
An internal reservation system under the ST quota separately for primitive tribes, nomads and others should be made

sands. Eco-tourism bids from the likes of the Taj Hotels Group were snubbed by local resistance.

No proper rehabilitation policy was available at the time for the tribals, activists say. The Assadi report, however, does not mention the use of force as a means that was employed for removing the tribals out of the forests. "If they are not given proper rehabilitation, then it is nearly the same as driving people out of the forest forcefully," says S. Sreekanth, director of DEED.

Many tribal activists claim that rehabilitation took its time coming, while tribals were swiftly pushed

out of the forests. "They (forest officials) were only interested in sending the people out of the forests. Whether it's about human rights or access to [forest] resources, they were not bothered about at all," says Mr. Sreekanth.

He also claimed that there were a lot of discrepancies in the lands being granted. "Some got two acres; some got three, or more. It was based on the amount of land that was available, and the number of people," says Mr. Sreekanth. Some were displaced more than once from one settlement to another.

Many people who were displa-

ced from the forests were driven into bonded labour with powerful landlords. While the report says that the bonded labour lasted only for a couple of years until the Bonded Labour (Abolition) Act came into force in 1976, activists say that it lasted until much later informally.

People also went as plantation labourers to the Kodagu district in hordes. The plantation labourers live in "estate lines" – accommodation provided by the estate owners. Speaking about the working conditions in the estates, K. Thimmaiah, a former plantation worker, says, "Earlier, there used to be wage problems. We once walked

all the way from Kodagu to H.D. Kote." Now, however, such wage problems don't exist, he said. "We are given one kg of rice every day and accommodation in estate lines," says D. Madevi, another former plantation worker.

Another problem is that most of the plantation workers were not considered displaced from the forests, and often becomes difficult to prove their origin. "There were several unaccounted-for families because they did not have identity proofs at the time," says Somanna, a tribal leader. It is said that the Assadi committee was not allowed into the estate lines. "There was a powerful lobby of the estate owners, and the committee was not allowed to enter the estate lines," says Najundaiah, secretary of Nisarga Foundation, an NGO for tribal rights in H.D. Kote.

However, the report says that the plantation workers who migrated from the forest areas should also be eligible for rehabilitation.

The committee said that 1738 families and 6012 people are still living in the National Park area. A total of 58 tribal hamlets are within Nagarhole National Park, both in the core NP area of 192 sq. km, and the buffer area of 452 sq. km. Some hamlets, like the people of Manemule haadi and Anemule haadi have been moved to the fringes of the forest recently, despite protests.

The HC in its final verdict in 2009 recognised that rehabilitation had not taken place, and ordered implementation of the Assadi committee report. As the government did not challenge it, the case was closed.

Committee's recommendations

The committee report had a total of 35 recommendations to improve the living standards of the tribals, including establishing of separate haadis (tribal hamlets) for estate workers. Establishing of a Tribal Mission for the welfare of the community; having an internal reservation system under the Scheduled

Tribes – separate quotas for primitive tribes, nomads, and others; abolishing of sub-leasing of lands; creating tribal cells, Navodaya schools, healthcare centres are among the important recommendations of the committee.

Three years after the report, there are positive developments on the ground. The Mysuru district administration has taken up the recommendations of the committee. "Now, the recommendations are considered by the [State] Cabinet, and funds are being allocated," says Mr. Sreekanth.

The local administration, however, has removed over 200 duplicate entries from the list of displaced families from the Assadi report, and brought the number down to 3,145 from 3,418 after a survey set up by the Deputy Commissioner of Mysuru. The earmarking of land for rehabilitation close to the forest areas is now being hotly contested. The rehabilitation package also has been raised to Rs. 15 lakh for the tribals.

However, technicalities apart, most are optimistic about the developments. With the enactment of the landmark Scheduled Tribes and Forest Dwellers Act of 2006 (also known as the Forest Rights Act), community rights have been accorded to a number of tribal hamlets in Piriapatna, H.D. Kote and some areas in Virajpet taluk. But, not all have benefited from this. For instance, tribals in the Kakanakote forest area have not been granted community rights, Mr. Sreekanth said.

"We are very happy with the recommendations by the Assadi committee. The State Government will implement it, but, it will take a little time is all," says Mr. Sreekanth. Other rehabilitation issues like those of the nearby Bandipur National Park and many other National Parks might also gain from the High Court verdict. "This is a precedent for all rehabilitation-related cases across India, and will make it much easier for others."

Tribals toil for basic needs



Kamamma, an SHG worker
SHRUTI AGRAWAL

SHRUTI AGRAWAL

H. D. KOTE: Jennu Kurubas, a primitive tribe in Devana Hadi village say they remain deprived of basic necessities like electricity and ration card despite a number of complaints made to the gram panchayat.

"Only street lights work in our village. There is no electricity in our homes. I don't know how many more times I have to complain or submit the documents," says Kamamma, an SHG worker.

She has taken an illegal connection for a tubelight from the electric pole to her house.

Like Kamamma, many villagers have submitted basic documents like caste certificate, and Aadhar card but to no avail. Many people don't hold an aadhar card, or a proper ration card.

Basavraja, a 25-year-old labourer, says "I work for only two-three days a week as there is no good work. The work as a manual labourer pays insufficiently for a family of five."

He earns Rs.350 out of which Rs.200 is spent on household utilities. He cannot take advantage of the Public Distribution System (PDS) as he holds an improper ration card.

C.V. Rajan Prasad, Food Shirastadar in the Department of Food, Civil Supplies, and Consumer Affairs, says, "An improper ration card does not contain information about the cardholder's children below five years. They have to go to the taluk panchayat and get their card updated."

An online application is made for obtaining a ration card that requires either a Below Poverty Line (BPL) or Priority/Non-priority Household Card (PHS/NPHS). The tribals keep on migrating. Hence, they find it difficult to obtain the card, adds Rajan Prasad.

This indigenous tribe is enduring hardships because of the loopholes in the system. Mannu B.K., Panchayat Development Officer (PDO), says "Around 20 elected members are not working in sync. There has been misuse of funds for which an officer was suspended. Members don't have faith in the panchayat office bearers."

The panchayat has Rs. 52 lakh but it cannot spend it because there is no action plan. The general body meetings are not taking place. Hence, water, and electricity cannot be supplied, adds Mannu.

Tribals lock horns with forest dept

SHRUTI AGRAWAL

H. D. KOTE: Members of indigenous communities such as the Beta Kurubas in Jaganakote Hadi village are struggling to get their forest rights. After the Bandipur forest was declared a national park, this primitive tribe finds itself deprived of their traditional right to use forest resources for their livelihood.

The village consists of 60-80 households that rely on casual labour and the sale of handmade bamboo artefacts like baskets, moorahs (a traditional chair), mats, and sculptures for their livelihood. Bamboo was easily procured from the forest. After the tribals were prohibited from entering the national park, they started growing bamboo on their land.

Madhu, a 38-year-old tribal who makes beautiful bamboo artefacts, says, "Our needs are inside the forest. There are no diseases, only nutritious food like roots. We are not even allowed to get firewood."

His artefacts are sold for Rs.1,000 in local markets and Rs.2,000 in Kerala.

Indian forests and surrounding areas are home to over 250 million

tribal people who have been affected by forests being declared as protected areas to conserve animals and plants. In December 2006, Parliament passed the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act to protect the traditional rights of the tribals.

The tribals say the forest officials still depend on them; they are called for extinguishing forest fires. Tribals say without them the forest officials cannot save the forest.

Indian forests and surrounding are home to over 250 million tribal people who have been affected by forests being declared as protected areas

In December 2006, the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act was passed



A Bamboo artefact

| SHRUTI AGRAWAL

Many families don't have gas connections despite the submission of pertinent documents in the forest department.

Ranganna (50), a clerk in the forest department, says, "We have to verify the documents. Also, we don't have sufficient budget. The installation cost per head is Rs. 5,000 including ancillaries like pipeline, lighter, and regulator."

The tribals are paid Rs.310 per day for dousing forest fires, adds Ranganna.

Shivalinga Gowda (40), a farmer from Jakkahali village says that from February end to April they are called to contain forest

fires that are fanned by strong winds. They get paid around Rs.5,000 to 6,000 for the job.

The tribals are also accused of illegal activities like poaching.

"The tribals illegally go inside the forest and hunt for elephants, wild boars, and deer. They use binding wire for this," says Ranganna.

Nanjundaiah, a tribal activist makes a different point. "I want to ask the officials that how many cases have been registered against the tribals? Tribals are not doing anything illegal. Officials have to win their trust if they want their assistance."

Tribals refuse to be removed, for an odd reason

KATHELENE REENA

H. D. KOTE: A good 30-minute ride from the entrance of Nagarhole National Park, well in the midst of the forest, lies a tribal hamlet, Balle haadi. As one walks into the hamlet, mud houses with clay-tile roofs, some 100 of them, can be seen; and some are even fitted with solar panels!

At a time when tribal hamlets are being removed from the forest areas, Balle haadi clearly shows no signs of trepidation. It is business as usual here.

Many nearby hamlets –Manemule haadi, Anemule haadi and several others –have been pushed to the fringes of the jungle by the Forest Department.

The villagers had been offered Rs.10 lakh rehabilitation package from the Government. But, they refuse to budge, thanks to their late hero, Jungle Jackie Rajesh.

Rajesh was the winner of a popular Kannada reality TV show, 'Halli Hyda Pyatege Banda' (Village Man Comes to the City). Along with the title, he was awarded a cash prize of Rs.7 lakh.



Jungle Jackie Rajesh

THE HINDU

TV and a generator to power it, all in a village that had never seen any of it."

We were all so excited to watch TV for the first time. It was all thanks to Rajesh. We even have solar-powered bulbs here after he brought the issue to light," says Puttappa, a villager.

Soon, Rajesh's career in Kannada films took off, and he moved to Mysuru. He would, however, return home often, and offer his people some advice. He would urge them to never leave. "They would listen to anything he said.

Even the village leader didn't have as much influence as he did," says K.C. Subramaniya, a forest official.

However, this sudden exposure to city life is said to have troubled Rajesh. He had to be institutionalised several times for mental breakdowns and violent bouts.

Even the night before his death, he's said to have had big quarrel with his wife.

"He had never seen so much money, and he didn't know how to save anything. He bought a bike

when, a year ago, he didn't even have money for a bicycle, and it probably confounded him," says Subramaniya.

Four years ago, in November 2013, the hamlet got the unfortunate news of Rajesh's death.

He committed suicide by jumping from the terrace of his Mysuru house. He was 25 years old.

Our children go to towns to study or work, but they always return. And to this day, we have held on to our promise.

-PUTTAPPA, VILLAGER

No country for wee ones

Malnourishment, use of tobacco result in low birth weight

GARIMA BORA

Sargur: In October 2017, Chaitra (name changed) 25 of Hosahalli village gave birth to a boy weighing 2.4 kg. The boy's weight reduced to 1.8 kg in two months as Chaitra's breast milk was not enough for the boy. Chaitra herself weighed around 40 kg at that point.

As much as 80 per cent of the children born to tribal women in the villages of H. D. Kote are underweight, says a study done by Vivekananda Memorial Hospital in Sargur taluk.

Only 60 newborns out of 453 weigh more than 2.5 kg, according to the birth weight records of tribal villages in H.D. Kote registered by the hospital in 2016-17.

Chaitra's son is given 30ml of lactogen every three hours as a form of nutrition in the hospital. The boy is Chaitra's third child, her first two children weighed 2.4 and 2 kg at birth.

Low Birth Weight (LBW) has been defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as weight at birth less than 2.5kg (5.5 pounds).

Speaking about reasons for low birth weight in the region, Ramesh M.P., Programme Manager of Community Health (Tribal) at the hos-



Chaitra's two-month-old son weighs just 1.8Kg

GARIMA BORA

pital said, "The main reasons for LBW among tribals are low nutrition levels among women, child marriage, and frequent consumption of alcohol and tobacco."

There are three underlying reasons for LBW, all traceable to the mother: poor nutritional status of the

mother before conception, short stature (mostly due to under-nutrition and infections during childhood) and poor nutrition during pregnancy, Narayan Ramachandran, Chairman, InKlude Labs, which is an incubator for start-ups focusing on key developmental

problems, wrote in the Mint. Low birth weight is also known to cause death of infants. Over 48 per cent of infants suffering from LBW died within 29 days post-birth, according to the Causes of Death Statistics, 2010-13 report by the census office.

According to the UNICEF's latest low birth data, India has the third highest percentage of LBW newborns at 28 per cent, behind only Mauritania (35 per cent), Pakistan and Yemen (32 per cent each). In 2013, as many as 22 million newborns - an estimated 16 per cent of babies born globally had LBW.

Fact File

- Low Birth Weight (LBW) has been defined by the WHO as weight at birth less than 2.5kg
- At 28%, India has the third highest percentage of LBW newborns in the world.
- LBW is known to cause death of infants. Over 48% of infants suffering from LBW died within 29 days post-birth
- In H D Kote, 80% of the children born to tribal women are underweight. Only 60 of 453 newborns in 2016 were above 2.5kg.

Between trials and triumphs

AINDRILA PAUL

H. D. Kote: There is nothing strikingly tragic about 30-year-old Suddha Shekar from Beeramballi village. Clothed in hues of vibrant red with her shiny green bangles and a mangalsutra round her neck, it's impossible to tell that her husband passed away when their daughter was just one year old. Widows in Beeramballi village generally keep up the pretence of being married long after their spouses expire to ward off unwarranted attention from male suitors.

After receiving formal education till just third standard, Suddha worked in her family's cotton and millet farms till she was married off at seventeen. In spite of her limited

education, Suddha was quick to visit the nearest PHC (Primary Health Care) for a breast examination when she found a lump in her chest last year.

Getting diagnosed with Stage I cancer wasn't just a threat to Suddha's life but also to that of her mentally disabled daughter Sindu. Sindu was born with a brain deformity which rendered her eyesight blurry and drove her into occasional violent fits. Incapable of speech, Sindu spends most of her time indoors and rarely steps out in the sun. Under the handicap scheme, Sindu receives a sum of Rs.2200 monthly.

"On finding about Sindu's deformity, my in-laws threw me out. Being uneducated myself, I can't

home-school her either. She only communicates through signals and broken syllables," said Suddha. "But she loves listening to music all day," she added with a broad smile.

Suddha travelled to the Vivekananda Hospital in Sargur village for chemotherapy for a year. Under the Mysore Vajpayee Scheme, the State paid a sum of Rs.2 lakh for her treatment; but she is still paying off the debt for the rest of the hospital bill herself.

"This year's rain flooded the field. We incurred a heavy loss on our crops. My parents who are above 70 years of age work on the fields all day since I am tending to my daughter's needs," said Suddha

General Hospital upgrade

AINDRILA PAUL

H D Kote: In two months, H D Kote General Hospital will be equipped to handle major surgeries. A new Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and two dialysis units have been constructed in collaboration with B R Shetty Health and Research Institute.

Taluk Health Officer Ravikumar Mishra said, "Secondary Healthcare Centres which function as first referral unit can't facilitate major cardiac surgeries; we had to refer our patients to hospitals in Mysore for surgeries. Since we have collaborated with a private institute this time for the first few months we'll charge Rs.500 for Below Poverty Line (BPL) card holders, and Rs.850 for the rest of the facilities."

The ICU which costed Rs. 30 lakh to build is equipped with three beds, a central oxygen supply, a ventilator, a defibrillator, a cardiac monitor, a blood storage unit and an ECG machine.

Under the National Health Scheme, all primary and secondary health care centres will be upgraded. 80 per cent of the funding has been taken up by the Centre and the rest by the State.

Solar power leads way

The installation of solar panels translates to a reduction in the frequent power cuts

AINDRILA PAUL

H. D. Kote: Solar powered streetlights are finally operational in Sagare village here. As many as 150 streetlights have been installed with centralised power delivery system last month. The project which was proposed by the Mysuru Zilla Panchayat under the "Soura Belaku" Scheme took two years to complete.

Gram panchayats and the tribal dominated villages of H D Kote often faced frequent power shortages and lack of revenue to pay electricity bills. The project that cost over Rs.55 lakhs was delayed due to lack of space required to install a three kilowatt power plant.

"We have had petty issues with the community also. It took us some time to convince the local government school to let us set up the solar panels," says project manager Ali Mushafar. "The solar panels need to be cleaned regularly or at least once a week. But there has been irregularity in cleaning the panels," he adds.

The battery bank is designed to power the streetlights independently for two days. The battery runs out in cases when cloudy weather persists. The battery bank was centralized to avoid theft of batte-



Solar panels installed at panchayat office in Sagare |AINDRILA PAUL

ries, common in cases of standalone streetlights.

Only last month numerous households in Sagare lost electricity supply. The villagers claim that it was due to misinformation on the part of the officials.

A resident of the village, Mahadeva Nayaka (31) says, "Under the Kootir Jyoti and Bhagya Jyoti scheme we were promised one bulb free per household but they conveniently forgot to tell us that only 18 unit of power will be free, so by the end of the month everyone received a bill of around Rs.5000. Most of us are daily wage earners. We don't have access to that kind of money so they cut our power."

Following this, free quota of

electricity was raised from 18 to 40 units, but a lot of houses are still in debt.

"Most villages in the taluk face power cut-offs ranging from three to six hours, even nine on a regular basis. Under present circumstances, it would be convenient if we could entirely switch to a renewable, cheap source of energy," adds Mahadeva.

Panchayat Development Officer Nagraju said "It's essentially an experimental project taken up by the centre. As soon as the funds start flowing in, we'll see similar schemes implemented in other districts. We are hoping to save around Rs 1 lakh in terms of electricity bills.

Alcoholism spells trouble for women of Jenu Kuruba tribe

AINDRILA PAUL

H. D. Kote: Women from the Jenu Kuruba community of the Donnemadanahalli village have taken a strong stand against alcoholism amidst frequent instances of domestic abuse and illegal sale of illicit alcohol.

"We have forbidden the men in our house from drinking at home. They go to the alcohol shops in the neighboring village of Bidralli. Our village doesn't have proper access to sanitation or electricity but we don't allow alcohol-induced hooliganism," says Saroja (86) who has been living in the village for more than four decades.

Ironically, just a few kilometers away Bidralli village is the hotbed for illegal preparation and reselling of kalabtti (alcohol prepared from rice).

Mahadevaiah from the Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA) said "It's very common for farmers to stock up alcohol, transfer them to smaller packets and distribute them amongst cotton and millet cultivators at a higher price".

Last year 24 cases of hoarding and unauthorized sale of alcohol were lodged at the Bechanahalli Police Station from Biramballi, Gandatur, Jakerlly and N.Begur villages.

Sub-inspector Zameer Ahmad said "The number

of alcohol related crimes has increased since last year. We have placed both police and public informants in the villages who alert us when someone purchases more than 2.3 litres of alcohol within a short span." Adolescent girls from Beta Kuruba tribe live in constant fear of drunkards who terrorize the streets of Brahmagiri village, especially after sun down.

According to a tribal dancer, Shivanna, "Even extreme cases of marital abuse or rape are dealt by Gram Panchayat. The Kurubas are a tight-knit community and very rarely do they report these crimes to the police".

It's not uncommon for parents to send their daughters to hostels in Mysore to spare them the trauma of eve-teasing "The drunkards specially target widows. They throw stones at our windows and call us names" says Manju(26) who lost her husband last year.

In recent times the Karnataka government has shifted its focus to quality control, after standardising ar-rack (a local alcohol made from rice and coconut extracts which was banned in 2007). It has lowered the cost to as low as Rs 4.

"To avoid the stringent alcohol laws in Kerala, people often cross the Kabini river and come over to D B Kuppe to purchase alcohol," says sub-inspector Zameer Ahmad.



Breast cancer survivor Suddha Shekar (right) with her daughter Sindu. | AINDRILA PAUL

Women worst hit by water scarcity and sanitation problems

PRASHASTI SINGH

H. D. Kote: Devamma Peeyanne Gowda, 55, walks through the Odiga community households to reach Devanahalli, the village of Jenu Kuruba tribe, and then she walks a little more to reach the only borewell which caters to over 100 houses in her vicinity. A water pipeline has been installed in her house by the government, but water seldom comes out of it.

It has been 20 years since her husband left her and their two sons behind for another woman. Now, Devamma's sons work as labourers in Mysuru and she lives with her daughter-in-law.

From fetching water from the far-off borewell to maintaining the pit that she uses for defecating and urinating as she does not have a toilet at home, all work is done by Devamma.

She has collected dried coconut leaves and made a makeshift structure that surrounds the pit.

"I am thankful that I have the land to build this makeshift toilet.

If I didn't, then my daughter-in-law would also have had to go out in the fields to defecate. That would have been a big problem," she says. Jyothi Shivarna of the same village walks a stretch of one kilometer twice everyday with a pot of water balanced on her head and the other on her waist. Women who are older than Jyothi find it difficult to walk so much on a regular basis. "It's a matter of time for me too," she says.

Women face similar problems in Beeramballi village too.

Saroj Prakash and her neighbour Kalamma Dimada walk up and down one kilometer, three to four times everyday to get water for their households.

"We use the water from the borewell only for drinking. For taking a shower, we get water from the Kabini river," says Saroj, as she points towards a big blue drum. Walking around her spacious house and signalling us to follow, she says, "This house was gifted to me by my father when I got married. But it does not have a toilet."

Saroj has to go to the fields early in the morning along with the other women to defecate. "We do not feel comfortable going after the sunrise as that is when the men go," she says. On being asked whether incidents of eve-teasing have been prompted by women walking to far-off places alone early in the morning. Saroj says that nobody in her village has ever reported such an incident. "It is probable that these incidents do take place and do not come to light because women do not have many options. They have fixed timings at which they go and they need to stick to them if they want to be back before it is time for the men to go," she adds.

On days when the women menstruate, it becomes extremely difficult for them to maintain hygiene. A group of Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers are regular visitors to the village. They provide the women with sanitary pads and sanitation training. However, the women are always at a loss of options when it comes to

disposing the pads.

Rajeshwari Ganesh Rao, an ASHA worker, says that the women either put the pads in pits or burn them up in a pile after every month. "They store them for the duration of their periods and burn them together at the end of each cycle. This practice is extremely unhealthy and we discourage it," she says.

But since there are no proper garbage disposal facilities, most women continue the harmful practice of burning the pads.

Kalamma, Saroj's neighbour, says that the gram panchayat has not yet given an official work order for the development of a waste disposal mechanism for the construction of toilets in the village.

"We applied to the gram panchayat for the construction of toilets one month back. They said that the labourers among us should start building the toilets first, and apply for the money later. The panchayat said that they didn't trust the labourers with the money because they were likely to spend it on other



Saroj Prakash, a villager, shows the makeshift toilet, made of leaves and rags, used by women of the Beeramballi village. |PRASHASTI SINGH

things like alcohol," she says.

The Panchayat Development Officer, Mannu B K, says that there has been a misuse of funds on the

part of the panchayat.

"There has been an allocation of Rs. 33 lakh for the improvement of water and electricity and for the

construction of roads. We are unable to use the money because of the lack of cooperation within the panchayat," he says.

Tobacco growers rue low prices

Erratic rainfall and increasing labour costs add to their woes



Tobacco sacks up for bidding at Shantipura auction platform | ASHWIN MANIKANDAN

ASHWIN MANIKANDAN
H. D. Kote: Tobacco farmers in H D Kote claim that despite facing losses due to erratic rainfall and inflated costs of labour, the central government run Tobacco Board has set the base price too low in their auction process for selling the yield to big market players like ITC and Phillip Morris.
 R. Nandeeshan, a 40-year-old tobacco farmer from Beemanahalli village, where he owns three acres of land, says that he is Rs.80000 in debt after his crops due to unpredictable rainfall patterns, were low on

quality.
 "In order to get the best quality tobacco, it should rain during the time of sowing, and at the time of curing (removal of moisture from tobacco leaves) there should be sunlight for the leaves to dry well. If it rains after the crops have been fed with manure, the plant soaks up extra manure and the leaves burn out faster during the time of curing, making the yield low in quality," Nandeeshan explains.
 The price difference between different grades of tobacco set by the board is quite wide, considering that a farmer producing high quality

yield has invested the same as a farmer whose yield is of lower quality.
 The average price for high quality tobacco (per kg) last year was Rs.162.29 whereas the average price for low quality tobacco was Rs.113.30.
 Nandeeshan believes that luck plays a huge factor, especially for small farmers who produce limited yields every year. "It is a gamble we have to take. But when the quality of the yield is affected by factors which are beyond our control, we have to bear with the losses and hope that we can recover it in the

next yield."
 But small farmers are not the only ones who are disgruntled and suffering losses. Siva Gangaiah, 72, cultivates tobacco in 32 of his 40 acres. He complains that the profit has gone down majorly because of inflated costs of labour.
 "The skilled plantation workers are generally migrants from Andhra Pradesh who come to H D Kote during the time of harvest. Most of them charge Rs.300 to Rs.400 a day. Since most of the local workers prefer working in cotton or banana fields over tobacco, we have to call the labourers from other villages and incur their transportation charges as well," Gangaiah, who is a retired PWD chief engineer, says.
 The Chief Auction Superintendent at the H D Kote Tobacco Board, K Manjunath explains this inflation in price of labour as a demand and supply phenomenon.
 "When tobacco plantation was started in Mysore in 1984, just 11 million kg was produced a year. Now the land under cultivation has increased five times with a produce just over 105 million kg last year. The number of skilled labours has not increased at the same rate resulting in their wages to rise."
 But the question remains. Why has the base prices set by Tobacco Board not taken into consideration the increased expenses for the farmers?
 Manjunathan claims that the auction process is transparent and the average market prices for tobacco of all the grades have increased this year.
 "The base price is fixed by agricultural scientists and Tobacco companies at the beginning of every season by gauging the quality of produce."
 The auction process involves farmers bringing their produce to the Auction Platform in Shantipura. The tobacco is graded by the Tobacco Officers and then sold to the maximum bidder present at the site, while the farmers stand at the periphery of the hall and watch their yields being sold – or not.
 The grading is done based on the color and texture of the leaves, carried out by tobacco officers. Gautam T, one such officer graded a sack with bright yellow leaves with rough edges as 'LSL'. "It stands for lemon colored large leaf of 5th grade quality (the lowest quality). It will not sell for more than Rs.80 a kg," he said.
 ITC last year bought 60% of the tobacco up for sale in H D Kote and Philip Morris 20% according to the Tobacco Board records.
 Mysore has 12 such auction platforms where tobacco is procured and sold to the highest bidders on a weekly basis.
 A farmer at the auction, Madhappa from Badige village was seen carrying his sack back with him. On being asked why, he said, "my yield was graded low quality and I got a really low price for it, so I've decided to bring it back next week and see if it is graded better. If I sell at this price it'll be a huge loss for me."

Sub-leasing leaves lands lifeless



SOHAM SEN

ASHWIN MANIKANDAN

H. D. Kote: Ginger cultivation over the past five years in H D Kote Taluk, Mysore district has risen exponentially, raising concerns for administration and environmentalists alike, due to the harm it does to the soil and the water bodies near these farms.
 According to Guru Prasad, an Agricultural Officer in H D Kote, anywhere between 15000 and 20000 acres of land has been brought under ginger cultivation in H D Kote; most of which are by migrant Malayali farmers who lease lands given to at high rates – Rs.75000 to Rs.80000 an acre – from local SC/ST farmers.
 "We have seen this trend over the past few years where SC/ST farmers lease the lands given to them by the government at high rates to contractors who cross the border from Kerala. This is done

This nature of contract farming has given rise to a rather interesting migratory pattern where contractors and landless farmers from Kerala come to H.D. Kote in swarms during the season and then leave after the harvest.
 One such farmer who leased land in Devanahalli village of H.D. Kote, S Mathew from Mallapuram district in Kerala says, "Last year, about 400 families from Kerala were living in this village. Who knows where we will go next year."
 The land leased at such inflated rates by local farmers doesn't just imply high profits on ginger cultivation, but also easy money for the local farmers. But these profits can be short-lived as the overall cost is much greater.
 A 31 year old local ginger farmer in Devanahalli, T Krishnan on an informal basis with no written record as this land legally cannot be leased or sold," Prasad said.

The officer claims that the reason for this trend is high profits and suitable conditions for ginger farming in H D Kote.
 However, a farmer and an environmentalist, Vivek Cariappa from Halasuru claims that the reason for this rise in ginger cultivation is prohibition on usage of toxic pesticides like endosulfan and 2-4D by ginger farmers in Kerala.
 "The amount of toxic chemicals used for growing and then protecting a ginger crop is more than any other crop."
VIVEK CARIAPPA, FARMER

farmers, our priority is to protect our soil, whereas the farmers on contractual basis worry only about the crop, feeding it with all sorts of chemicals," Krishnan says.
 Over the past couple of years though, the calls to limit the expanse of ginger cultivation has increased. The Kabini river (used for supply of drinking water for Mysore and even Bangalore) near the ginger farms are being polluted.
 "Take the example of Kasargod in Kerala. The same thing happened and people suffered due to the increase in toxic levels of soil and water, after which the Kerala Government banned the use of these pesticides. The Karnataka Government should also take an action of similar kind before things go wrong," Cariappa said.

Organic farming reaps profits for farmers

Using traditional seeds and fertilisers has improved soil health significantly

SHRUTI AGRAWAL

H. D. Kote: A group of eight farmers from Madinathapura in Bidarahalli have been successfully practising 100 per cent organic farming for the past 11 years. They were trained in 2005 by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) during its Watershed Programme in the taluk.
 Crops like cotton, lab-lab, ragi, mango, coriander, red gram, groundnut, black gram, chilli, turmeric, chia, and quinoa are grown organically on 40-45 acres of land. Each farmer owns four to-five acres.
 "We previously used chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It was unfavourable in many ways. We were investing more than what we do today. Even the soil health had degraded," says A. Belliyappa, a 46-year-old farmer.
 Another farmer B. Kariyappa (50) beans, and castor seeds. These seeds are boiled in water, and unadulterated, pure castor oil is obtained, which is used for several purposes like soothing joint pains, and treating fungal infections.
 "Organic crops have high water retention capacity and in times of scarce rainfall, they remain unaffected. We use cow dung and urine as manure. Homemade concoctions like neem oil, and chilli-garlic paste is used as pesticides. They promote soil health," adds Kariyappa.
 "Cost of production is very less. Yields are good, too," says Mani, another organic farmer who owns six acres of land.
 The net profit for the year was Rs. 18-20,000 for the year 2017. "However, we do not have sufficient marketing. That becomes a challenge," adds Mani.

In 2017 the cost of cotton dipped to Rs. 5,000. However, farmers continue to grow this crop because the climate is suitable for its growth, and animals don't usually destroy it.
 Also, Karnataka has only one ginning mill, in Dharwad. The cotton is bought by the mills in Tamil Nadu.
 These organic farmers are a part of Savayava Krishikara Sangha (SKS), an organisation whose objective is to make the village community self-reliant, self-sufficient and economically viable. They also organise demonstration of cotton production technology through the Appachi Cotton Company and Cotton Directorate, Ministry of Agriculture.
 Ram Shetty, Secretary at the SKS, says "We maintain all record books. Weekly meetings are conducted where farmers discuss crop planning. Farmers' products have International Organization for Standardization (ISO) mark."
 SKS focuses on marketing strategies, but farmers sometimes do not follow that which can turn out to be lucrative like practising parallel cultivation. As a result, expenditure and yield peter out.
 The farmers' products are sold in states like Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.
 Under Savayava Bhagya Yojane - a programme to promote organic agriculture in the state of Karnataka, farmers were given neem oil and Trichoderma, - a free living fungus which is common in soil, and an effective biological mean for plant disease management. But, the government stopped its distribution as the programme expired.
 "NABARD's initiative in making farmers aware of technology, new seeds, cropping



Beliyappa in his field of organic peas | SHRUTI AGRAWAL

patterns, value addition, and certification is commendable," says Channappa M., CEO of Kabini Organics Farmers Produce Company Limited.
 With organic farming, growth is gradual. Farmers should first grow organic crops in a small area to test their sustainability, adds Channappa.
 Ksheersagar, an activist, and a farmer, said that co-operatives should be managed in a way to ensure that farmers are not exploited

by middlemen. Value to organic products should be added by farmers
 Value-added products help farmers stand out from the crowd. Growing special items, packaging, milling, distribution, and storage fall under the rubric of value addition.
 Can organic farming feed the world?
 "Yes. Not immediately, but gradually. Nutritious food is important for people. Also, organic farming improves soil fertility. Hence, yields are good," adds Ksheersagar.

Cotton growing gets light on farmers, heavy on returns

HARIPRASAD RADHAKRISHNAN

H. D. Kote: "An acre of land used to yield somewhere around 4-5 quintals earlier, but now we get a harvest of around 6-7 quintals," says Kalpana, who just finished her cotton harvest this year in H.D. Kote. She has also managed save big on her farm inputs. "The cost of production has also gone down by around 40%, because we use far less fertilizers than we used to."
 The reason: she has been part of a learning group (LG) of farmers in her village Boppanahalli for the past many years, in which the tillers are taught sustainable methods of cultivation. Here, farmers get a walkthrough of the entire process

– from choosing the right crop, and proper ploughing to regularising fertilizer use, to picking and storing the harvest – at free of cost.
 These LGs are a part of 'Better Cotton Initiative' (BCI), a multinational non-profit, which has partnered with Myrada Kaveri Pradeshika Samasthe (MYKAPS), a local NGO. Started in 2010-11 in Mysuru, the programme boasts of over 7100 patrons in over 200 LGs in Mysuru.
How LGs work
 The LGs have regular meetings that help bust a number of wrong traditional practices like using too many seeds hoping at least a few will germinate, which increases costs. "But, there is no need to do this. Even two seeds in a spot



Representative image | FRONTLINE

would suffice," says Sowmya Guru, a MYKAPS worker.
 Besides seeds, the expense on

fertilizers, which usually accounts for the highest expenditure in cultivation, is also cut down. "After

the first 40 days, we ask the farmers to use neem oil and chilli-garlic paste to keep off pests," says Mr. Shetty. The fact that Bt Cotton is mostly cultivated also helps with pest-resistance.
 Further, to keep pests off the cotton, at specific intervals, plants like lab-lab, castor and horse gram, are grown as 'refuse crops.' "These are planted around the cotton, and the pests are allowed to feed on these crops. So the cotton plants don't get affected," says Mr. Shetty.
 Cotton researchers at BCI, and across the country bring the farmers up to speed with latest developments in cotton cultivation.
 In most groups, surprisingly, women far outweigh men. "This is because we target entire SHGs

(mostly comprising women) and bring all members into the initiative, which helps as they are also involved in watering, spraying pesticides and other farm work," says Ms. Guru.
Ensuring guidelines are met
 There are a number of 'field facilitators' at MYKAPS, who go from one farm to another, to track the progress.
 The quality of cotton is assessed. "Good quality cotton, when pinched and pulled apart, should be 32-36 mm long (sic)," says Mr. Shetty. Cotton cultivated under BCI meets the criteria, he adds.
 One of the most important principles under BCI is to prevent child labour in farms. "We go to schools and increase awareness about the

issue, and even check their attendance records," says Mr. Shetty.
 A niche market for BCI cotton farmers also has been carved out. "Growers of BCI cotton earn about Rs.200-300 than traditional cotton," says Mr. Shetty. The cotton is sent to ginning mills in Dharwad, Hubballi and Tamil Nadu.
 Under the programme, BCI farmers, covering 5500 hectares, have produced a total of over 6500 metric tonnes of cotton, according to the MYKAPS website.
 The programme is funded by IDH, a Netherlands-based sustainable trade initiative, and the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) under its Farmer Technology Transfer Fund.



Pesticide spraying turns deadly in Vidarbha

VIDHI VERMA

Yavatmal: Gajanan Mesra barely speaks a word or two in response to anything you say. He is still recuperating, two months after a month-long treatment for pesticide poisoning he suffered late September last year.

The 25-year-old daily wage labourer suffers from partial memory loss. He suffers fits occasionally; had one episode a week before we students visited his house at Sakhara Khurd on January 6.

What happened to him? After a week of spraying pesticides on a cotton farm in late September, Mesra complained of nausea and burning sensation in the stomach and was taken to a government hospital at Ghatanji, six km from his village and later shifted to the Vasantnao Naik Government Hospital in Yavatmal.

Doctors there said his intestines were swollen. He was put on an artificial breather and had to be fed through tubes inserted via a puncture in the throat. His hands were tied during treatment to keep him from shuddering from pain. As a result of the traumatic treatment, he was mentally unstable for a month after returning home. He even beat up people around him, says his family, alleging that Mesra was not briefed on correct pesticide usage and spraying methods.

Now his mother is the sole breadwinner.

Shaban Kashiram Gautare, 51, suffered vision impairment, after spraying pesticides on cotton crops in November 2017. He says he was forced to mortgage his house and borrow money from a private moneylender at 5 per cent interest per

month to pay the huge cost of treatment in a private hospital where he was admitted for 15-20 days.

Shaban says he can repay the loan only when he starts working in the next crop season from July. He doesn't work now as the spraying season is over. By the time he starts working, the loan would have already increased manifold. His wife works as a labourer on a nearby farm. He has four daughters, one is married in Surat and the rest go to school.



Mesra says he wasn't warned of the effects of pesticide.

|VIDHI VERMA

In Yavatmal, 13 farmers and eight farm workers died, by November-end, of pesticide poisoning while spraying. Close to 500 instances of temporary blindness were reported, according to a report in

The Hindu.

Spraying was done only by men for wages of Rs 200 a day, while women were employed in picking cotton and given Rs 6 for each kg they collected.

A seven-member Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted by the Maharashtra government in October listed unusual height of the cotton crop, high-density plantation, non-use of protective-gear and widespread use of pesticides as the probable factors for the deaths, ac-

were different, it is not known whether the purchaser passed on to his workers the instructions the kendra gave, said a dealer.

This year the crop shot to 6-7 feet, up from the usual height of 4.5-5 feet. So farmers and workers had to spray pesticides above their heads, increasing the chances of their inhaling falling pesticide droplets.

But farmers say they have been using pesticides for so many years, spraying them over their heads for crops like tur, adding fatalities and serious injuries happened only this year.

"Profex Super" was sprayed by farmers on Bt cotton. Chemicals such as monocrotophos and profenos have been removed from the shelves of all the Krishi Seva Kendras following the deaths.

Kishore Tiwari, chairman of the Vasantnao Naik Sheti Swavlamban Mission (VNSSM), demanded the victims' families be given Rs 5 lakh each, according to a Scroll report.

While the pesticides harmed humans, they were ineffective against the pests as intended. In Yavatmal district, bollworm attacks decimated cotton crops despite heavy usage of pesticides.

cording to an Indian Express report.

Dealers at Krishi Seva Kendras, which supplied pesticides, asserted that farmers were instructed on pesticide use and precautions to be followed. As buyers and workers

A well without water



The mad rush to get water when the well gets filled.

|KAUTUK RATHOD

TANISHAA NADKAR

Yavatmal: Rupali's husband died more than a month ago but she is reliving the horror every day as she draws water from the same dry well that took his life.

On December 17, Vilas Rathod, a 40-year old agricultural labourer fell into the 25-foot-deep well, less than one km from Pandhari village, while drawing water. Rupali, who was with him, did not notice what happened. "I didn't see him fall. He went missing and I found him inside after some time."

He was rushed to a hospital in Yavatmal, where the doctor said he died of brain damage, hitting the head against the stony bed of the well.

"This would not have happened had the well been filled with water; he knew how to swim," said Rupali.

Since the incident, a tanker has been pouring water into the well but the water woes continue. Vilas' uncle Kautuk Rathod says the well becomes very crowded with people fighting for their fill.

Normal life comes to a halt with people queuing up right from early morning, spending their entire day at the well especially during summer when temperatures can go up to 45 degrees Centigrade and many would faint due to dehydration, says Kautuk.

"Sometimes, we go without a bath for weeks and re-use the dirty water from washing clothes to water our crops. For 6 months, our lives revolve around water."

Children must also share the burden of fetching water and they miss school 3-4 days a week. School wor-

kers reserve spots in the queue to ensure there is water for children.

"Teachers don't get angry with the children, they know how hard it is to get water," says Kautuk.

Let alone scarcity, water from the well is unfit for drinking, say residents. Chandrakala Uttam Chavan, a farmer, says children are susceptible to diarrhoea and malaria, drinking the murky brown water from the well but no one has gone to hospital yet.

"I have rashes all over my hands and neck from drinking this stinking water. It is unfit for consumption but we are forced to drink it as a last resort," she

For 6 months, our lives revolve around water. -RUPALI, VILLAGER

said, perched at the mouth of the well and dropping a small yellow plastic container tied to a rope inside it.

With few options for collecting clean water, some are renting tractors to fetch it from a handpump in a neighbouring village 3½ km away, says Kautuk.

The gram panchayat is farther away, at 9 km. "We have complained many times but received no help from the government," he says.

The acute water scarcity has, ironically, triggered entrepreneurship among some villagers. Uttam Sadashiv Chavan sits outside his house, surrounded by lightweight metal containers and an array of small tools.

"I improvise them so they can be used to draw water. I earn around Rs.5 to 10 for each," said Chavan.

Coping with cancer, coolly

VIDHI VERMA

Bhandara: A cloud of smoke engulfs a young man, who, sitting on his toes, cooks small fish on jhaadh (black burnt part of the rice crop) and transfers it to a cardboard base.

Fishing has been the main occupation of the people at Mendha since their village was submerged and they got rehabilitated at a new location, following construction of the Gosi Khurd Dam.

Mishra received Rs 3 lakh as compensation seven years ago for the family land in the submerged village. The men in his family including his 58-year-old father, older brother, 30, and Mishra himself, were earning Rs 200-500 a day by selling fish.

Then came the bombshell: his mother, Meena Ram Kushan Mishra, 48, was diagnosed with breast cancer in January last year. Two operations were performed



Affordable healthcare void has hit rural India.

|VIDHI

in a Bhandara government hospital. The family has spent Rs. 2.5 lakh on her treatment, says Mishra.

Luckily, a major part of her treatment cost was covered under the Rajiv Gandhi Jeevandayee Arogya Yojana (RGJAY). She got some medicines free. The maximum cost allowed is Rs.1,50,000 per year per family.

Later, Meena was referred to a government hospital in Nagpur for chemotherapy, for which she has undergone eight sessions over the past year. She needs to take medicines daily for four years to prevent recurrence of cancer and visits the hospital for a check-up every month.

Recalling the "very painful" treatment and monthly check-ups, Meena said: "The doctors at the hospital give saline injections. I could not get up from the bed and walk properly for a day after that."

Had there been a good hospital in her vicinity, the family would not have had to spend its hard-earned money on commuting to distant hospitals, she says. Each visit to the hospital, 50 km from her house, by bike itself cost the family Rs 100, says Mishra.

The family has, however, made peace with its lot and taken things in their stride.

Family sinking after suicides

SATENDRA SINGH

Yavatmal: "Now, this house does not feel good, I get scared and restless all the time." That's has been the refrain of Anusheya Kashiram Mudholker, whose 65-year-old husband committed suicide along with their son, aged 24, in this village in Yavatmal district in August 2016. The woman says she cannot sleep at night.

Kashiram Chandrababu Mudholker had five acres of land, and for the last three years till his death he had been growing soybean. But continuous water scarcity, followed by a drought in 2013, left him with a huge loan.

"Taking care of a big family is not a simple task. Along with the burden of loans, a huge amount was being spent on medical care of his second son, Anil, who was suffering from a mental disorder," says Tukaram Pawar, 63, whose son is married to Kashiram Chan-

drababu Mudholker's oldest daughter. It was Anil who committed suicide along with his father. Kashiram is now survived by his wife, four sons and and three daughters.

"This year too, productivity was very low because of scarcity of water in Yavatmal district" says Sunil, 23, third son of Kashiram. He had to sell the crop at a lower rate, because he needed money for treatment of his younger brother, Vishal, who has been suffering from depression since Kashiram and Anil took their own lives. Many farmers, who are solely dependent on farming, are forced to sell their crops at much lower than normal prices to meet their urgent needs or emergencies, says Sunil.

After the double suicide, the government promised the family Rs. 2 lakh, a chakki and a well on their farm for irrigation. But nothing

came of it, says Sunil, adding he was asked, instead, to dig up to 10 feet for the well, take a picture of it and present it at the Arni tehsil, which is 17 km away from Shelu, to get compensation for the well.

Sunil says he borrowed a drilling machine, which cost him Rs.2,500 per hour, and completed the job, as stipulated, after three days of hard work. Even after that he had to visit the tehsil many times for over a month. But all he got was Rs. 30,000. "A lot of money was spent every time I visited the tehsil, and there was no compensation for that. I spent more than Rs. 50,000 and got only Rs. 30,000," said Sunil. "It was not feasible for me to continue, so I stopped digging."

Last year, farmers faced an unexpected problem, because of demonetisation. Against the minimum price fixed by the government for soya and kapas at Rs. 3,200 and

5,500 a quintal, many farmers had to sell their crops at much lower rates because, initially, it did not come forward to buy the crops. The government decided on buying crops only after every farmer had sold of his produce in the market, says Tukaram Pawar. He added, "I had to sell soya at Rs. 2,300 and kapas for Rs. 4,400."

Bank loans add to the burden of farmers in the area. Tukaram Pawar, who owns two hectares of farmland, took a loan of Rs. 89,000, at an annual interest of Rs. 15,000, from the State Bank of India in 2016. Now, his dues are Rs. 1,04,492.

Farm loan waiver, announced by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis in October last year, is yet to materialise, says Tukaram Pawar. "I received a message about the loan waiver on my mobile phone, but when I inquired with the bank, they said I have received nothing yet."

ANJALI VENUGOPALAN

Yavatmal: Baldev Pawar, 67, plucks a cotton bud from a field and crushes it under his foot. Prising open the green shell, he says, "Look at how the worm has destroyed it."

To add to his woes, he doesn't have a well for his crops any more. Last year, an electricity tower was constructed on his fields at Shelu village in this district. He says he received compensation of Rs.1.62 lakh for the land lost but nothing for damage caused by drilling to a well on his land.

The irony is hard to miss. Tower after tower runs through cotton fields in the Vidarbha village, where the farming crisis is so acute that a father and son committed suicide using the same rope, from the same tree last year.

In fact, the transformers stand mute witness to the continuing crisis in the village.

This year, Pawar had to throw away most of his crops, thanks to

pink bollworm attack. This despite the fact that Bt cotton, which he has been cultivating for the past nine years, is supposed to be resistant to the pest. Rajkumar Bhitkar, a Nagpur-based journalist for the newspaper, *Sakaal*, says "We have found that many farmers were sold bogus seeds this year."

Pawar's nephew complains that farmers have no way of knowing whether the seeds are genuine.

The man, who doubles as a part-time contractor, says that they shifted to Bt because it requires less water. But rains this year weren't great and the wells have dried up. There is no irrigation here. Water for domestic use is supplied only once in 8 days.

On his loss, Pawar claims he sold cotton for Rs.4000 a quintal in Andhra Pradesh in 1985. "What has changed in the last 30 years? Nothing. The government pays just Rs.4,250 a quintal as MSP now."

Ram Gawande, 35, an ex-sarpanch of the village, adds, "Government buying has stopped

completely in the last two years."

Pawar, according to farmers, is among the rich few in the village. True, he has 12.5 acres of land but also a burden of Rs. 3 lakh-loan, he says. Pawar says he can't get his son, who is 38, married because no one wants to get their daughter married to a farmer.

"Mahabharat me Draupadi haran hua, Ramayan me Sita haran aur Kaliyug me kisaan ka jeena haran ho raha hai (In the Mahabharata, Draupadi was insulted. In Ramayan it was Sita and in Kaliyug, it is the farmer)," he regrets.

A lack of healthcare facilities in nearby areas has also contributed to his financial distress.

Pawar says he spent Rs.25000 on his wife's eye surgery at a private hospital in Yavatmal run by a doctor, who is also practising at a government hospital.

Why didn't he go to a government hospital? Because the waiting time there is too long, he says. "And the results at the government hospital aren't great." It's because



Farmers can't use electricity for irrigation, as farming is completely rain-fed.

|ANJALI V

interns are made to perform surgeries, he adds.

For all the expenses, his wife is

now partially blind. "Now I have to do the cooking," he complains.

Pawar, however, finds solace in

a temple to Jagdamba Devi in his house that was built by his ancestors 80 years ago. "The Devi came

to my grandfather in his sleep, and said she wanted to stay in our house," he says.

THE OBC FACTOR

Yavatmal: "The farm crisis is getting worse because there aren't people like us [farmers] in politics", says the nephew of Baldev Pawar, who is a farmer in Shelu. However, he left his post in the NCP [Nationalist Congress Party] five years ago to focus on his children. Both his daughters are studying to be doctors in Yavatmal, a rare occurrence in the village. But Baldev Pawar harbours dreams of entering politics. "The India TV people took my interview for a whole 50 minutes", he says proudly. He claims he has shared a stage with the Chief Minister as well.

As caste fault-lines deepen in Maharashtra, OBCs have been reasserting their position in the middle of the caste hierarchy.

Devanand Pawar, of the Congress and leader from Yavatmal, says, "We want a separate department for the welfare of OBCs at the state level."

This year, BJP MP from Nagpur, Nana Patole, resigned his post and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of using his OBC credentials to gain votes.

He also accused the government of ignoring farmers' problems. On Jan 11, he joined the Congress.

Where men hit the bottle, and their wives

AISHWARYA S

Nagpur: 'My husband got drunk and beat me even after I was diagnosed with TB and he stopped only after I got admitted to hospital,' said Manju Karnake of the Futala slum here.

As she sat by the corporation tap filling water, Manju recounted the days when she contracted TB and how, irked by her incessant coughing, her drunken husband slapped her.

Like Manju, most women in this slum, made up of more than 50 BPL households, on the banks of the Futala Lake, are victims of domestic violence, according to one of its residents.

While the women are housemaids in middle and upper-middle class homes around Futala, their husbands are engaged in daily wage labour like painting and construction works.

Men from Futala and adjoining Pandharpuri, allegedly known for contract killers and goondas, congregate on a large open field adjacent to the shacks and "wager more than half of their daily wage," said Tushar Karnake, Manju's son, pointing to his father in the company of gamblers.

After they are done with gambling, 'bumpers blast', Tushar said, using a slang in the slum to indicate that the men have started drinking.

Tushar said alcoholism had ruined his father's liver and he frequently suffered from chills and fever. On the doctor's advice of bed rest, he has stopped going to work since last month.

Manju, like many other women,



An ailing victim of domestic violence at futala, Manju Karnake

| AISHWARYA S

became the sole breadwinner for her family. But, weakened by TB, she was compelled to reduce physical labour and her income dropped drastically.

Some women pack leftovers from the houses they work in and serve them as dinner when they run out of money. If the food is rotten or stale, the family becomes susceptible to a number of diseases, said Rupa Kulkarni, an activist from Nagpur who works for uplifting women in the unorganised sector.

'Men will hit us after drinking if we fight with them about alcohol', Sarita Durve, another resident, said with a resigned smile.

Her husband coming home

drunk was a daily occurrence and he would beat her when she scolded him about his habit, she admitted.

If she didn't protest, he would quietly eat whatever food was cooked and go to bed, she added.

Madhukar Bhoir, 73, left his wife and two children when she annoyed him questioning about his drinking.

His daughter, Kiran Bhagde, who looks after him, said that when her mother died, he married another woman but she fought with him whenever he got drunk.

'Frustrated, he threw her out but now he misses her but she won't come back', she added.

Ms. Kulkarni explained that men think of domestic abuse as

their right. There is no underlying cause for violence in these households.

However, the activist pointed out, nowadays, women, emboldened by their contributing to much of the household expenditure, order their drunken husbands to sit in a corner and eat whatever is handed out.

While instances of abuse and violence persist after men consume alcohol, "let's not target the poor people for alcoholism," cautioned Ms. Kulkarni.

The poor lead troubled lives and if they indulge in an activity that reduces their stress, it should not be considered a social evil; even the well-off indulge in alcohol to handle stress, she said.

Men totter as kin suffer

TANISHAA NADKAR

Bhandara: "The ones most affected by alcohol are not those drinking but the people around them," says Alka Rajkumar Barsagde, a farmer living at Gose Khurd here for the past 30 years.

"People don't have money to feed their kids, yet they spend Rs.2,000-2,500 a month on liquor, only to come home and beat their wives and children. So many fights happen because of alcohol," she says.

Deepak Agre, vice-sarpanch of Mendha, a village 5 km from Gose Khurd echoes her statements, "People spend half their daily earnings on alcohol. If you come after 7 p.m., you will see people either passed out on the roadside or tottering."

For Alka, trouble began with the construction of the 22-foot-deep Gosikhurd Dam, less than 2 km away from her village.

"Earlier, we used to get water from the river but we have no access to it now because of the dam.

There is no water to drink. We get water from a well 2 km away and drink it after purifying it with bleaching powder. But where will we get water for farming?" she asks.

Alka says declining farm productivity and unemployment have driven the men of the village to alcohol.

According to several residents, no one has fallen sick seriously because of alcoholism yet but it seems a possibility. The closest clinic is 3 km away at Pauni but few go there because of the high expense.

Lack of clean water has manifested itself in various health issues. Stagnant water has become a breeding ground for mosquitoes with many suffering from malaria, dengue and typhoid, besides severe insect bites.

Rushia, 22, Alka's youngest daughter, says white insects des-

cent on the village along with rain-water every year. "They get into your clothes and invade food, so even eating becomes a task. We have to get inside mosquito nets or we wouldn't be able to sleep for months."

For Rushia, the village she calls home is slowly becoming uninhabitable. "I'm in my second year of B.Sc IT now. I want to keep studying but there are few jobs in this area. Everybody moves out to cities."

Her parents are in a similar dilemma -- they're willing to educate their children but see no future beyond that. "Our 24-year-old daughter Rohini wants to be a fashion designer, we will get her a sewing machine but we've decided to get her married this year after she finishes her 12th," said Alka.

Alka has five children, with two sons working in Pune as an engineer and a builder, while another daughter is a housewife in Nagpur.



Farmers averse to advice

VIDHI VERMA

Yavatmal: He wanted to pursue agricultural studies in Pune after completing Standard X. But as his sister was drowned in a canal at nearby Dabhadi village here three months ago, he had to stay at home to support his family.

Now, Pawan Rathore, 17, is studying agriculture, not far from his Chikhali home, in an agriculture school, at Amboda, on scholarship.

"At a time when farmers are distressed over crop failure, I wanted to study how to get maximum output using available land," said the day scholar, adding he spent around Rs. 500 on his books.

Pawan says he knows about the strains of cotton which can be

grown in his area, the genetically modified varieties cultivated over the years, and pesticide dosage for various crops.

But the response among farmers is not encouraging, he regrets. "Our college organised camps to impart basic knowledge to farmers on pesticide spraying in many villages, in the wake of pesticide poisoning deaths in the district. Hardly ten people attended the camp from our village when I asked them to come."

Pawan says his advice to fellow villagers on farming practices has also fallen on deaf ears.

Why others? Pawan's father himself did not take precaution while spraying pesticides. But the son has vowed to make him wear a

handkerchief this spraying season. Pawan's parents own two acres of land at Chikhali, raising cotton. They also work as labourers on other farmers' farms.

Pawan referred to a controversy over whether the two Krishi Vigyan Kendras at Chikhali guided farmers on the proper dose and dilution of cotton pesticides.

Most of the farm labourers deny they were given prior instructions at the Kendras.

It is also alleged that farm workers did not wear masks while spraying pesticides for the sole reason that the protective cover cost them more than their daily income.

However, Pramod Sakara says he was guided by a Krishi Kendra on pesticide use.

Education is none of their business

AISHWARYA S

Yavatmal: Matter-of-factly, Maya Kawdu, an Adivasi woman of Heti, said, "I am under constant pressure of raising two kids by myself and looking after my old parents. Where do I have the time to know our age and birthdays?"

The agricultural labourer, like most women in this small village in Yavatmal, is illiterate.

Married off to a man from a neighbouring village at 16, Maya soon became a victim of domestic violence and barely escaped with her life when her husband picked up a big boulder and was about to crush her skull with it four years ago.



When the burden of feeding your family is on your head, you don't think about sending your children to school.

- MAYA KAWDU, VILLAGER

Pregnant with her second child, Maya rushed to Heti. A brawl ensued between her father and husband over domestic abuse. That was the end of it. Abandoned by his family, she was 'left to her fate'.

Sheela Nanje, another Adivasi woman, said, "Maya would do household chores and make do with whatever money her husband gave her but he never wanted to keep a wife."

Almost all Adivasi women at Heti work as daily wage labourers on nearby farms and earn around Rs. 150 a day. They say they have never attended school.

"When the burden of feeding your family is on your head, you don't think about sending your children to school," Maya said.

As if in approval, Pankaj Avt-hade says earning money was always more important than education, so schooling was never encouraged in their village. He received no higher education.

His wife, Anisha, seems contented. Married at 19, she does household chores and looks after the children of other women when they go to nearby fields to pick cotton.

Anisha says Pankaj manages all household purchases and accounts. She does not know how much he earns, nor is she aware of the prices of vegetables or food-grains. "My husband buys [even] sanitary pads for me every month because I don't know which ones to get."

But Sheela and her husband do not want their children to be illiterate like them. They would like to see their children educated.

Regretting that many women in the village were barely able to sign their names, Sheela said she had resolved that her daughter would not be one of them.

As the couple cannot afford to enrol their son in a school at Ghatnaji, the nearest town from Heti, they sent him to their relatives in a town that is 'probably very far from here', Sheela said.

Her daughter is studying in the village school, which has classes up to Standard IV.

Women said they lived in such a remote village that major towns were inaccessible and no government measures or benefits reached them.

Rupa Kulkarni, an activist from Nagpur who works for uplifting women in the unorganized sector, explained that for most villagers, it was more about making ends meet than about understanding the importance of education.

In such families, all members work and all their energies are concentrated on getting two meals on the metaphorical 'table'.



Shield against stench: A wall separating Futala lake and the slum area.

| SIDHARTH

No end to squatting

SIDHARTH YADAV

Nagpur: As the sun rises over the horizon, 17-year-old Ravi Kailash Yadav, grabs a Bisleri bottle, fills it with water from a corporation tap and hastens towards the open field outside the Satpuda Botanical Garden, to relieve himself.

Three women, clutching their lotas, glance at him furtively as they are returning to the Futala slum here, where he lives.

"In the morning, we don't greet each other although we are well acquainted," says Ravi.

The slum, with 60 homes, has been holding Nagpur back from acquiring the open defecation-free status. Biogester toilets, installed in 2016 by the Nagpur Municipal Corporation (NMC), remain unused. Despite septic tanks lining the

lower end of the Futala hillock, sewage water flows uninterrupted into the lake, which the city prides itself on as Chowpatty of Nagpur.

Luckily, a 10-foot-tall concrete wall raised a year ago, separating the lake and the slum, makes life less miserable. "Earlier, a stench lingered. It was difficult to come near the lake," says 16-year-old Tushaar Arun Karnake. He lives in a one-room hut on the lower end of the hill, which gets flooded during monsoons. "Two months ago, I contracted malaria and missed school for several days," he adds.

Three equidistant septic chambers are situated beyond the wall on a filthy patch of land, littered with plastic, food waste and rags, and scaffoldings of Ganesha idols, immersed during Ganesh Chaturthi, are stuck in the muck.

"The chambers were sanctioned by the outgoing corporator before the elections early this year," says Suresh Karnake, a daily wage labourer.

The construction work was, however, stalled after the election verdict, leaving the pipes unconnected, says Suresh. So, small outlets in the wall, meant for sewage pipes, instead let water flow undeterred into the lake.

"Even cows get stuck in the dirt while grazing the fields," he adds. Worse, several biotoilets, with broken and wobbly doors, are being used to store cattle fodder.

"We have an open field adjacent to our slum. Why defecate in a closed room?" asks Suresh. Keeping toilets clean, despite inadequate water supply, is a problem, he says.

Fractured health care, Away from city

SATENDRA SINGH

Bhandara: Rajaram Shinde, 50, a fisherman, is sitting on a fibre chair, with his right hand in crepe bandage and slung round the neck, outside his house at Mendha village here. He suffered a fracture in a mishap during fishing. For treatment he goes to a homoeopath, Deva Mesram, at Ravanvadi Talab, 15 km away.

There is no hospital within a 10-km range of his fishing village. The nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC) is 5 km away, at Konda, and the government hospital, 12 km

afar at Pauni. "At the PHC we cannot get all medicines prescribed by doctors, so we have to buy them from medical shops, quite a costly affair," says Rajaram. "I prefer homeopathic treatment for my hand because it's much cheaper."

Apart from non-availability of medicines, at the PHC there is no ambulance, so people have to arrange their own transport. Government buses operate only four trips to the PHC, every two hours between 7 a.m and 1 p.m.

For healthcare of pregnant women as well as children, ASHA workers visit Mendha every first

Saturday of the month, and provide vitamins and medicines. Children are examined and administered medicines for cold, fever and vomiting.

There is also a sub-PHC, two km from Mendha at Bose Bk, where two nurses are available to attend on emergency cases, especially women in labour.

Along with the concern over lack of doctors and hospitals, alcoholism is a major woe in the village. "More than 50 percent of men are alcoholic. If people earn Rs. 200 a day, they spend Rs. 100 on alcohol," says Ganesh Agre,



Rajaram Shinde | SATENDRA S

up-sarpanch.

However, for Mahesh Bhindarker, 31, who owns a cycle repair shop, "There is a lot of unemployment here, so alcohol is what we turn to."

As for livelihood, women work on fields, while men go fishing and sell the catch in the market.

The women say they shoulder the burden of running the family, doing household chores and fetching water, apart from farm work.

They are dependent on wells for drinking and cooking, and on borewells for other purposes.

Cleaning up after PWD



Prajanma Das



Adithya Narayan

Sumitra, 34, a Kodu woman, takes a break from her daily chores. The Kodu women single handedly take care of farming as well as the household.

(top)

A man begging for alms in the middle of Picchavaram mangrove forest in Chidambaram. Picchavaram is the second largest mangrove forest in India.

(left)

DEBOLINA BISWAS

Ariyalur: Futile visits to the Public Works Department forced Rengamayaka Radha to put her resources to use and clean the 9.6 km canal that now waters the fields of almost 100 farmers in a village near the Veeranam Lake in Cuddalore district.

Radha dropped out of school in the seventh standard. "I have only known agriculture," she says.

Married to a cinema operator who passed away 25 years ago, Radha is a mother to a disabled son and a daughter. Her elder daughter passed away a few years ago.

Radha has been working in the fields since she was a kid.

"I used to go to my agricultural land but there was no water for irrigation," she said. "Everyone says widows should not come out of the house but I went to the PWD office in Lalpet and spoke on a mic(rophone) for the first time," she said.

"I wanted water for irrigation but the government didn't provide us with it." Radha gave a presenta-



Radha Canal from where it originates near the Veeranam Lake.

| DEBOLINA BISWAS

tion to the Collector about the situation but he didn't seem to be bothered about it. It was then that Radha started her fight.

When Radha started cleaning the canal along with a few villagers, the government officials asked her why she was doing so. "Since you are not cleaning it," she replied.

Radha spent around Rs. 50,000 from her savings for initiating the cleaning process. Her only source of income is cultivation.

up. "When there was no water for irrigation, only 10 farmers owned land," she added.

Radha recently won the National Award for her Social Work. She has also been bestowed with the title of "Water Ambassador" by the Government.

Things are, however, back to square one since the government hasn't made any arrangements to get the canal cleaned for the past seven years. "I went to the Collector again but PWD isn't doing anything," she said.

She was recently arrested during the farmer's agitation when she protested for the farmer's right.

"The Government said that from January 1, farmers will receive urea and subsidies for other fertilisers only if they have a Aadhar card," she said.

Giving her opinion about the dispute over Chennai taking the waters of the lake, she said, "We do not care that Chennai takes the water. We want the Veeranam lake to be cleaned and water provided to the villagers."

With soft loans, Dalit women stitch up their lives

SIDHARTH

Nagpur: Stooping over her sewing machine, Naina Prakash Yesansure rotates the wheel assiduously while focussing on the needle, lest stitching lose course.

"I have three salwars to stitch today," says the 43-year-old, without looking up from the machine she bought a year ago, thanks to a loan from the Bachat Ghat.

Like 16 other women of Plot 85 at Narendra Nagar here, who received support from the Self-Help Group (SHG), Naina underwent a six-month, government-run free course in tailoring and has become independent.

Naina, who took a loan of 10,000, was not under pressure for time-bound repayment, and at her convenience returned the money at 3 per cent simple interest eight months later.

"We don't fix a deadline since the financial condition of most women here is precarious," says Vijaya Vagadkar, SHG co-president "Yet, the default rate is low," she adds.

Women of the area, predominately Dalits, contribute to the pool Rs. 100, Rs. 200 and Rs. 500 every month, depending on their capacity. Loan eligibility varies with individual contributions; of course, greater benefits accrue to those paying Rs. 500.

"At least, the Ghat doesn't charge an interest of 30 per cent, like private banks do," says Naina. To the relief of these women, whose husbands are caterers, masons and painters, the SHG charges members 3 per cent and non-members 5 per cent interest.

A decision to take loan rests solely on women. "Husbands can't dictate terms to women. We ensure that alcoholic men don't get funds through their wives," says Vijaya, adding that in case of suspicion, loan is denied. The SHG has a fixed deposit account with a nearby UCO bank branch, which gives it interest at 7 per cent on its sa-

vings.

Making Rs. 4,000 every month, Naina supports the education of her daughter Vaishali Yesansure, a polytechnic student at the S B Jain Institute of Engineering and Technology, whose annual fee is Rs. 40,000, and her son, in Standard VIII, whose fee is Rs. 7,500.

The SHG's 20 members also prepare meals at Rs. 8 per child for two anganwadis at Ramteke Nagar and one at Rahteke Nagar. Their earnings took a hit when ICDS workers across the State went on a month-long strike in September last year. But that was a temporary setback, and the work has resumed.

As loans are given in cash, did last year's demonetisation affect the SHG? "We got lucky, we use money only in Rs. 100 denomination," chuckles Vijaya.



| SIDHARTH

Digging for gold in Kappatagudda

BHAGYASRI C

Gadag: In the lap of the Kappatagudda hills, green and replete with medicinal herbs, a revolution has been brewing since MSPL Limited arrived to drill through 17 hectares of agricultural land.

People got to know of what lies beneath the surface, and also that it could turn their lives around since they entirely on the hills for their income.

Farmers from the tribes of the Lambani hamlets had sold their rain-fed agricultural land to the company at throwaway prices. MSPL, a flagship of the Baldota Group, had promised to use the land for 'agricultural work'. But the company never intended to deliver on this promise. In 2012, when Baldota announced its intention to set up an iron ore proces-



Farmlands were sold to MSPL Limited at throwaway prices.

| BHAGYASRI

sing plant in Gadag district, they had a local geologist to survey the land and confirm the presence of gold in the hills.

When news of Baldota's intentions were made plain, the people of the hills rose in protest. Not only did they deserve more compensation, they also felt cheated when

they realized that their only means of income, which came from the hills, would eventually be snatched away.

"We are all downtrodden and illiterate here," said Gurushant-e-Swami, a revered swami of the village and an Ayurveda specialist, "People's lives in these parts are

simple, and dependent on farming and ayurveda. They have been working on these lands for over 40 years now, and will fight for it."

The plants and trees of the Kappatagudda hills have nursed the people with rain and revenue. Mining the region would also disturb the ecology of the region, stalling rain, reducing the overall soil and forest cover, and denuding the trees and lowering crop turnover.

In December 2015, the forest was declared a Conservation Reserve by the State government, soon after which the notification was withdrawn citing technical reasons, but restored following pressure from environmentalists and farmers in April 2017.

Baldota's case is weak without environmental clearances and the people's consent, and the villagers hope to reclaim their lands.

Music be the vision

KANISHKA SARKAR

Gadag: At four in the morning, they begin riaz, and music is in the air and on their minds for three hours after that. Students at Veereshwara Punyashrama here come from different parts of the country for nothing else but music. Of the 2000 students in the school, 200 are visually impaired.

After attending regular school, at around 6 p.m., Mrityunjai, 13, sat in his hostel room with a bunch of friends chitchatting and giggling.

However, as soon as he set the reeds of a basic wood casing harmonium, silence fell. Everyone keenly listened to him play the harmonium and sing a carnatic song in his melodious voice.

"I want to learn everything possible in the field of music and then just like my mentors, I wish to teach classical music," said Mrityunjai, who has been sightless in one eye since birth. He came to the ashram two years ago from Betageri village, where he used to sing along with his uncle, who is also a musician.

At Veereshwara Punyashrama, they teach

students until they get a master's degree. In 1914, with an aim of economic empowerment and social transformation with music as a medium, Pandit Panchakshara Gavai, founder of the institution, went around villages and taught Hindustani and Carnatic music to children, especially the deprived ones.

"Now, Dr. Puttaraj Kavi Gavaigalavaru (also sightless), the head of the institution, continues to mentor kids just as his teacher Pandit Panchakshara Gavai used to do," said G.R. Hiremath, a teacher at the institution.

In times when the young generation is moving away from heritage, children who are still willing to learn how to play musical instruments and sing, come to the Veereshwara Punyashrama.

"I came here because I know music will take me places," said Mrityunjai expressing how his existence is incomplete without music.

Every year, amateurs come here to learn to play tabla, sitar, harmonium, flute, and sing classical songs. They perform at various cultural events. They establish a connection with music as it flows in their veins.



Mrityunjai is keen on learning music.

| KANISHKA

Gowri S



Children at balwadi in Poondi village having their mid-day meal.

In Poondi village, the provision of mid-day meals acts as an impetus for the parents to send their children to the balwadis. (left)

A farmer ploughs a field with cattle in the Adigathur village. The village comprises four communities that depend on agriculture as their primary occupation.

(bottom)



Vigneshh

S for Solar, not Scarcity

ASHWIN MANIKANDAN

H. D. Kote: The Beechanahalli Government High School in H. D. Kote Taluk of Mysuru district looks like any other school on a Friday afternoon, with usual bustle and commotion, and the anticipation of the upcoming weekend. The school stands out though, for being the first school in H. D. Kote to install a solar powered water supply system three years ago.

A 5000 litre water tank powered by a motor, pumps water from 350 feet underground, providing the school kids uninterrupted clean water supply at all times.

Headmaster K. Naganna says that the school used to get half an hour of water from a nearby reservoir every day before 2014 and that too at a very irregular rate, leaving 204 students without drinking water on many occasions during the harsh summer months.

"All the students in this school come from seven neighbouring villages that have suffered from erratic rainfall for the past five years. Before the installation of this pump, drinking water was a major problem in this school," he said

Beechanahalli, Nereile, Magudilu, Yalamathur, Bidalarahalla, Teramunt and Ganeshankundi are among the most drought prone villages in the Taluk which received only 430.6 mm of rainfall in 2016 compared to its average of 724 mm, the Department of Agriculture said.

The solar water supply project for the school cost Rs. 5 lakh and the funding for it was provided by the Zilla Panchayat.

Bagyalaxmi Ningarajan, a member of the Panchayat which sanctioned the project says, "Initially there were some objections for allot-



The first school in H. D. Kote to install solar-powered water supply system.

ASHWIN

ment of such a huge sum of money, but since it was for the benefit of the kids, everyone came together in making it happen. The kids get fresh drinking water even in harsh summer months."

The school seems to be reaping benefits from the project with the pass percentage and overall result constantly improving over the past five years.

"The overall attendance last month was 95% and last year, our tenth class board result was also an impressive 76%," said Suma Suresh, a Maths teacher, who travels 3 hours every day from Mysuru to teach in the school.

"Last year, two of our kids – Nandisha and

Pranjala – on account of doing exceedingly well in the state board exam were awarded laptops by the Karnataka Government," Suma added.

The students of Beechanahalli Govt. High School with a well-functioning mid-day meal scheme and a sprawling playground, unlike many others in the country are not deprived of basic amenities – water, food and space – to grow.

On being asked what they like the most about their school, B Soundharya, a ninth grade student promptly replied, "the nature inside the school, sir."

Nehal Chaliawala



The crest of a temple and a water tank at the submerged Ghatumri village stand tall above the water surface at the Indira Sagar Gosikhurd dam. Water hyacinth overruns the dam. (top)

Jyoti Shivarna walks up and down a stretch of 1 km twice everyday to fulfill her family's water requirements. Young and energetic, she shrugs when asked whether the walking takes a toll on her. (right)



Prashasti Singh

Small enterprises in Adigathur

GOWRI S & EISHA NAIR

Thiruvallur: Small enterprises in Adigathur provide employment to women and promote solid waste management in the village.

Women's Self-Help Group

The local self-help group comprises 10 women from the village who work with leather-making bags, cut-shoes, purses

and intricate designs.

The income received varies based on the number of pieces sold and the intricacy of the design. "For one piece, the starting rate is Rs. 160 and we make minimum three pieces a day," says A. Saral, who is earning more than Rs. 15,000 a month. Saral has been working for 16 years and also trains the newcomers.

However, on an average, the women make Rs. 3000 to 4000 per month. The finished goods are sent to Chennai, once or

twice a week depending on the demand. From Chennai they are exported to Spain and Italy.

These women received a six-month training from a craftsman in Chennai, who was involved in exporting. "Initially 80 women underwent training but only a few managed to continue with the craft. Only two stuck it out and trained the other eight," says Saral.

This self-help group also supports women from other villages like Kadambathur. "This job is

very convenient for us because we get to manage both the household and work. If we have to go for other work, we would have to start from the village at 7 a.m.," says S. Porkodi, another worker. These women also have the option of working from home.

"If mistakes are made it can be redone easily. Before exporting, the pieces are checked, and if any damages are found, they are returned. In that case the loss is borne personally," adds Porkodi.

Solid waste management

Adigathur has started a solid and liquid waste management project in compliance with the Municipal Solid Waste Rules, 2016. Waste is collected from 650 houses and brought to the resource recovery centre, a shed with six bins meant for different stages of composting. "Two vehicles with different compartments for waste segregation start from the main hamlet at 8 a.m. and reach the shed at 11 a.m.," said, K. Chidambaranathan, former Panchayat President.

Plastics, paper and other recyclable materials are sold and the plastic that can be used for road-laying

purposes are kept in the shed. The organic waste is processed and converted to manure in 45 days, making Adigathur free of artificial fertilisers.

Every house has two bins that are provided for free by Asian Paints Limited, which also pays for the salary of the workers, vehicle expenses, and maintenance of the shed.

There are seven people working in the centre – Rajeshwari and Kannamma from the Iruva community segregate the waste, Vijaylakshmi from the main village handles the accounts and Vishwanathan is the supervisor, along with two others.



Intricate designs fetch more money; Porkodi and Saral engrossed in their work | GOWRI S

Monika E, 26, a transwoman, was forced into prostitution due to lack of family support. She was later rescued from the perils of gender violence. She lives with her foster mother in Vellore. (right)

An old woman attends Janmabhumi program in Mullumetta, where instant solutions to the villager's problems and basic amenities are provided by the Panchayat. (bottom)



Purnasneha S



Hridkamal Roy

Story of a dream betrayed

LAVANYA NARAYANAN

Vellore: When 32-year-old housewife K. Raghunayaki wakes up, she begins her day tying a cloth around her mouth, leaving just enough room for her to breathe. Polluted air has filled her house for the last 20 years. It carries the stench of chorine, chromium and years of casual neglect.

"I don't know what it is like to live in a clean home," she says.

When she arrived in Vellore 20 years ago, a newly-married bride from Thiruttani, this family home smelled of freshly-lit camphor and spice-laden sambar. It was the last time Raghunayaki can remember such scents filling her home.

In her kitchen, all the pots and pans lining the shelves are jet-black. Is it paint?

"No no," she exclaims. "These were light brown when I brought them here." The earthenware vessels have undergone severe oxidation due to extreme air and water pollution. They are the only pieces

that she brought with her to Vellore.

"The 30-odd vessels were part of my dowry. In fact, they were kept aside specifically for me to bring along to my new home," she reminisces. The pots have sat untouched on the kitchen shelves, getting darker as days pass.

A few stand out from the rest. In shades of brown and grey, tainted with the signature red streaks of rust, they are the only pots that Raghunayaki will eventually pass on to her 16-year-old daughter.

"I use these for pooja occasionally, cleaning them constantly to maintain the colour. Otherwise, they would have been like the others."

Although her house is located eight kilometres away from the chemical companies' grounds, it is filled with residual contaminants that have polluted Ranipet's air supply.

Raghunayaki says unfortunately, these conditions have become

the norm in her home.

"When my husband comes home from brick-laying work in KV Kuppan all day, he has to come into an unclean home. No matter how much I clean it, there is nothing I can do," she says. When she's not cleaning, her time is spent taking her daughter to-and-fro from the district's private hospital, RUHSA, to be treated for pollution-induced ailments.

"It is so expensive, but what can we do?" she questions.

With new housing projects cropping up every other day in the Ranipet district, development has made living conditions worse. Coupled with the polluted water that streams in from nearby rivers, every day poses a myriad of health hazards for Raghunayaki and her family.

"The tank water is clean, but it mixes with the groundwater. And in times like these, where there is no fresh rainwater to flush it out, we end up taking in contaminated water in some form or another," she says.

As the water collects in one of Raghunayaki's two-decade-old vessels, a film forms on top. It looks like she has just poured a day's worth of cooking oil into the

large pot.

"This is the problem," she says, pointing to the film that glistens in the bright sunlight. "I have tried to clean with steel wool—that simply sticks to the inside of the pot."

Relying on plastic and stainless steel vessels, she fills the pots with Corporation water, delivered to the house daily.

"We collect 500 litres in our private tank and ration its use," she says, opening the tank to reveal the grime of groundwater. While boiling the water has helped, Raghunayaki says that both air and water quality will continue to remain questionable.

"We've shown this to government officials. But they simply ask us questions, examine the sources, ask for our votes, and leave," she says.

It has been six years since officials visited her home and suggested her to shift, she smiles.

♥♥ This is our home, my home. If I leave, where will I go? - Raghunayaki

Health, but only for WCL staff

TANISHAA NADKAR

Nagpur: Sitting inside his crack-ridden 3x3-shop close to a dumping ground at Gondegaon, Suresh Hukum attributes the damage to its proximity to a coal mining site, and says it can fall apart any minute. But that's the least of his worries.

"Workers often get hurt while pushing large boulders in the coalmine. Some have even lost their limbs but received no compensation from the Western Coalfields Limited (WCL). This is why I stopped working in the mine, I would never let my children do this work," he said.

Another issue is pollution in the village. "Respiratory problems have become very common ever since the coalmine was built here. A lot of people have trouble breathing," said Suresh.

Chaya Gajananand Rao, a worker at the anganwadi in the village, says children often get a cough because of dust entering houses.

However, the doctor at the WCL dispensary, A.K Gupta, who has been working here for the past four years, says the mine

poses no health problems. "We see only 11-12 patients a month for small illnesses like fever. I can't recall any emergency cases", he said.

The dispensary's policy of catering only for employees and "project affected persons" (people displaced by the mine) has also drawn criticism from the residents.

According to Gram Panchayat Secretary Tulsiram Namdev Patil, the closest Primary Health Centre is five km away but provides good facilities. However, for serious illnesses, people have to be taken to private hospitals in Nagpur.

"Our village and farms get flooded every monsoon because of the mountains of dumped soil from the mines all around. Last year, we were stranded here for three days," added Suresh.

Cotton, the most commonly cultivated crop in the area, blacks because of the soot from the mines settling on it.

The WCL mine was built here in 1994 after a survey found the area rich in coal deposits.



Promises gone with coal dust

AISHWARYA S

Nagpur: On January 5, the streets of Gondegaon, a coal mining village nearly 40 km from here, were devoid of their usual occupants -- an unemployed man squatting under a tree, a cluster of women about to leave for the fields and teenage dropouts loitering outside their homes.

Not a soul was in the mines and the air was clear of the dusty haze that otherwise fogged the village.

Tension was palpable as nearly the whole of Gondegaon stood in protest outside the offices of the Western Coalfields Limited (WCL) demanding employment as was promised in exchange for farmlands.

Three decades ago, WCL found coal reserves in the village and secured hundreds of acres of land from the villagers for mining. In return, it offered them monetary compensation and employment.

When mines replaced houses, WCL set up 'New Gondegaon', a village 6 km away from the old one for the displaced families.

As of now, nearly 40 families, mainly of agricultural labourers, have moved to the new settlement in the hope of a job at the mining company.

Here WCL uniformly distributed 1000 sq ft of land to each family

and provided funds for building houses.

Are the villagers happy? "We received a plot, much smaller than this house, in the new settlement but I haven't even bothered to see what WCL handed out," said Geeta Thakur of Gondegaon, as she relaxed on her porch blowing away dust that settled on the plateful of rice grains in her lap.

WCL took 7.5 acres of the family's land and the three Thakur brothers were now left with nearly 5 acres of fertile land and compensation of Rs. 1.75 lakh each.

Geeta's husband, Krishna Thakur, got a job as a fitter helper at WCL for a monthly wage of Rs.30,000. Cotton and tur from the farms also contribute to the family income.

Moreover, the Thakurs are eligible for WCL healthcare facilities, provided exclusively for employees.

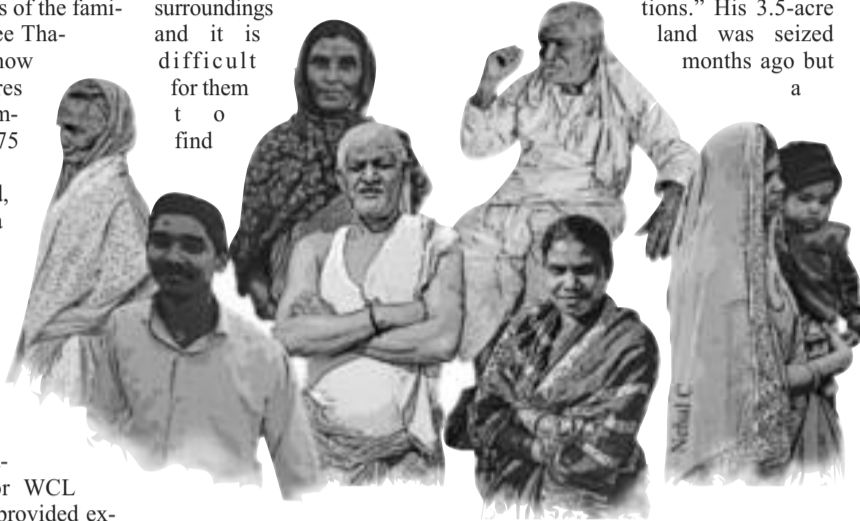
However, Geeta says WCL wants to empty the entire village but her family won't budge.

Krishna Thakur's older brother Vitthal Thakur, once held a position in the local office and retains some

clout in the village, so they are unperturbed about the 'turmoil' caused by WCL, explained Indu Raut, an anganwadi worker and mother of the sarpanch.

"Only the rich and those with work at WCL can afford to leave Gondegaon", she added.

The lot of daily wage labourers is worse as they are uprooted from their familiar surroundings and it is difficult for them to find



suitable work. They will have to walk longer distances if they move away, she said.

Sheela Ishwar Khavale, another resident, says her family lost one hectare of agricultural land to the mines nearly 20 years ago, and was

still waiting for compensation, employment and a plot in the new village. While her husband is unemployed, she picks cotton on Vitthal Thakur's farm, 2-5 km away from Gondegaon.

An outraged Namdev Devmanche Arurkar said, "WCL is asking us to break down our own houses, those that have been our homes for generations." His 3.5-acre land was seized months ago but

A village carpenter now, Arukar sometimes even fixes doors and windows at the WCL offices. He gets paid for his services but he does not find work every day.

Over to New Gondegaon- here, Rakesh Salame and his family of four have been living in a mud shack for the last month. "We tore down our house and came here. They gave us Rs. 6 lakh to build the new home but it is not enough in this day and age," he said

Salame, an agricultural labourer, stays home now-a-days.

"If we fall short of money we will use some from the Rs. 6 lakh that we received", he admitted.

Indignantly he added, "But we are being uprooted without our getting work."

Salame's family grudgingly moved to the rehabilitated settlement because they lived under constant fear of their house tumbling down because of the impact of blasts in the mines.

About complaints of discrepancies in employment and compensation, sarpanch Nitesh Raut said, "There is no displacement, it is merely buying and selling." He complained that WCL had broken its promise and failed to provide employment to a majority of landless labourers in the village.

WCL officials were unavailable for comment.

Mine blasts home and health

SATENDRA SINGH

Gondegaon: Jyoti Darne, standing with her six-year-old niece in the courtyard of her mud house here, is a picture of dismay. She lost her mother two months ago. The woman had been laid up with paralysis for the last five years and was being treated at a private hospital five km away.

Darne lives along with her father and two older brothers amid piles of waste including concrete, soil and coal dust generated by Western Coalfields Limited (WCL) mines.

Tremors from the blasts damage our houses

- JYOTI DARNE

Darne's is one of the families which, she says, did not get any job promised by the WCL, which came to the village in 1994 and acquired farm land for mining. Nor are they provided basic healthcare, unlike WCL workers' families who are getting free medicines and check-ups at the company's clinic. "We have to go to private hospitals at Kanhan which are too expensive for us," she said.

The problems get worse during the rainy season with incidence of malaria, chikungunya, and dengue. "During the rainy season, we burn neem tree leaves to keep mosquitoes away." Neem trees also help in detoxifying air fouled by dynamite blasts in coal mines.

A couple of hours after blasts, the surroundings get smoggy, and a mist of gas and dirt, resulting from dumping of mine waste, hangs over the village. This leaves villagers struggling to breathe, and causes lung ailments and asthma.

Health problems apart, "the tremors from the blasts damage our houses," says Darne, pointing to the multiple cracks in her house.



LIVELIHOODS LAID WASTE HERE: A WCL mine at Gondegaon.

| TANISHAA NADKAR

Scavenging for survival

NEHAL CHALIAWALA

Nagpur: As you approach the village of Gondegaon, miles away from the State Highway 16, you can see an array of rocky hills -- an out-of-place sight in this otherwise flat terrain. Only on close inspection would you realise that these more than 50-foot high piles of earth are man-made.

Gondegaon is primarily an agricultural village in this district of Maharashtra. When the Western Coalfields Limited (WCL) found coal here in 1994, farmlands were acquired for mining. In return, many landowners got jobs at WCL along with monetary relief. However, farm hands were not compensated in any way.

So, many of these labourers and erstwhile small-landowners with no compensatory job from WCL have turned to the WCL soil dumps, which have traces of coal, extracting which isn't cost-effective for the company. However, considering that thousands of tonnes of soil are discarded every day, these 'trace quantities' of coal are enough

to sustain numerous families at Gondegaon.

On a normal day, a coal picker makes two or three bicycle trips carrying six sacks per trip. A sack of this coal sells for anywhere between Rs. 80 and 100. He thus makes around Rs. 1000 a day -- considerably more than what a WCL employee gets.

Although not a strictly legal practice, Sarpanch Nitesh Raut

said, "This is not stealing; otherwise I would have personally seen to it that it stops. After what WCL has done to our village, these people are entitled to this coal."

The work is not simple either. There is always the risk of the coal picker getting injured by a precariously perched boulder rolling down the hill. Besides, WCL may decide to take action against these people. "There is no job security.



PICKING UP THEIR LIVES: The old Umne couple carrying coal for sale.

| NEHAL C

There are days when WCL positions guards near the dumps and we don't get paid on those days," said Gajanan Tandulkar, a resident.

For the numerous families that survive on this trade, like the old Umne couple, these man-made mountains are a boon.

Kids beware! Blasting in progress near school

SIDHARTH YADAV

Nagpur: Akanksha Naware, an 8th standard student, shrieks and shoots for the ground, as reverberations rock through the cracked walls of the school building.

"I am scared to study here," she says holding back her tears, and clutching at her teacher's dupatta. In fact, the six teachers in the school are tasked with evacuating students to safety from 2 to 3 p.m. every day when dynamites go off.

For, the school is at Gondegaon village, near here, contiguous to Western Coalfields Limited (WCL)-managed coalmines.

Standing on a ramshackle foundation with plaster peeling off the walls, the two-room Zila Parishad Uchch Prathmik Shala has 61 students in classes 1 to 8. The school holds symbolic value for the villagers.

"It marks the last point of the village towards the mines. If it is shut, WCL will encroach further

and eat into our land," says Devidas Damedhar, a teacher, who commutes 20 km from Nagpur every day.

"We get water once a day from 9 to 10 a.m. and the toilets are dysfunctional," adds Damedhar. In the past month, four girls dropped - out due to lack of sanitation.

The only tap, adjacent to an open borewell, is broken. Last year, three students fell into the

A CAMPUS IN RUINS

well, and thereafter authorities stopped sourcing water from it. However, the well still remains uncovered, says Akanksha. Half the school's boundary wall is broken and covered with babul twigs.

"When I go to relieve myself, I ask a friend to stand guard," says Anushri Vijay Somkuwar, a 4th standard student. "Once, a boy saw me, and it was embarrassing."

Let alone the woes of the school, the villagers are living

with air and water pollution, thanks to the coalmines, and face pressure to resettle at 850 allotted plots at New Gondegaon where, they say, employment is insecure and seasonal.

Most villagers, hoping for better infrastructure and quality education, have admitted their children to a 14-room school at Tekadi near Kanhan, which is four km away.

But all students admit to washing utensils and clothes, and tending to younger siblings back home.

"I attend school regularly as my mother forces me to wash clothes back home," says Simran Pawan Gajbhiye, a 5th standard student, whose father is a casual labourer.

Her mother, Savitri Gajbhiye, says, "My husband earns a meagre Rs 200 per day, so I accompany him to make ends meet. In my absence, if children don't do the chores, who else will?"

Toilet project, a shambles

NEHAL CHALIAWALA

Yavatmal: One toilet in a village with a 250-population. No wonder, there's no end to open defecation. That's Heti under the Rohtek gram panchayat in this district. To be fair, there are eight toilet structures, but seven of them have improper drainage facilities and are hence out of use.

A private contractor is to blame for this state of affairs, say villagers. He undertook the construction of 10 toilets under the Swachh Bharat Scheme, where the Central Government provides Rs 12,000 for building one toilet. He finished seven, of course a slipshod job, and dug ditches for three toilets.

"He planned to make money by constructing cheap structures with his own funds and later claim the full amount of Rs. 12,000 which the government was to reimburse us," said Govinda Mesram, pointing to the unused toilet on his front yard. Water refuses to drain because the drainage pits are shallow.

Mesram's neighbour Namdev Teka is better off in that he can use his toilet at least as a bathing facility. Water drains into two two-foot deep open pits just outside the toilet. "How can we use it for anything but bathing if all the waste is going to gather right on our porch?" he asked.

When M S Deulkar, a government inspector, came to check the

toilets before releasing the funds, she rejected the job outright. "The toilets were incomplete, how could I approve them? I told him [the contractor] to make them usable first," Deulkar said on the phone.

For the past one year, the toilets have been sitting outside the houses like monuments.



Soham Sen

Feeding the poor is divine duty for them

AISHWARYA S

Yavatmal: On a wintry Sunday evening, children of Waki in this district made a beeline for the local school, with a spring in their step and banging their steel glasses against plates to summon the entire village. The noise was deafening.

They then sat down cross-legged in two large circles on the chilly, hard ground outside the school and, as directed by the village women,

obediently laid out their plates in front of them.

The occasion was a feast, organised by 10 families in the village, to mark the annual palkhi (procession) of Sant Bhojaji Maharaj that passes through this remote region. The village provides overnight shelter to as many as 1000 devotees during the pilgrimage that covers 80 km through 10-12 villages in four days. The procession ends at Ajansara village, which is the seat of the saint.

Pawan Rathod, one of the organisers, said the feast at Waki was sponsored by the devotees of Bhojaji Maharaj. He said they were of moderate means and decided to do something for the villagers instead of giving donations to Ajansara. This is the fifth year of their initiative.

"Our condition is good, so let us do some good for our people," added Rathod, who owns three acres of land and yet is in debt of nearly Rs. 1 lakh this year.

Dam uproots lives, fouls water

12 villages submerged, families displaced by Indirasagar Irrigation Project

NEHAL CHALIAWALA

Bhandara: The population of Ghatumari village, according to the 2011 District Census Handbook, is zero. Not surprising, as the entire village at the Nagpur-Bhandara border is under water, courtesy of the Gosi Khurd Irrigation Project. The villagers were shifted to a site near Tas village, around 10 km away.

Lack of basic amenities and livelihood at the relocated village forced 13 families to move back to the Gosikhurd dam site. Once farmers, these families now sell peanuts for a living. They live at the abandoned quarters of government officials who oversaw the dam construction.

"Our children stay with our relatives because there's no school here," said Vaishali Vanve, who sells peanuts and other snacks sitting under a peepal tree.

Her neighbour, Kanta Mesram, said, "Our husbands live off our expenses." Due to lack of work, their husbands now stay at home and are



Fishermen have a tough time finding catch in the polluted waters of the dam.

| ANJALI VENUGOPALAN

victims of alcoholism.

Rubbing salt into the wounds of the displaced, the water, to make

way for which they were moved, is now getting polluted with sewage discharged into the Nag

River, a tributary of the Wainganga, from Nagpur city.

One can see a thick colony of water hyacinth surrounding a partially submerged water tank and temple dome. "Neither we nor the animals consume this water," said Nakthu Bhojar, a local.

The dam wall separates the districts of Nagpur and Bhandara. Lives on both sides of this wall have been hit, by excess water on one side and by the lack of it on the other. Ironically, Gose Khurd, the village after which the project has been named, has a major irrigation project in its backyard but farmers here don't have water to irrigate their lands and

have to rely on rains. For, Gose Khurd and five other villages in the vicinity are at the 'head' of the dam and water from the dam cannot reach them.

Mendha, one of the first villages relocated in 2007, is now a resettled fishermen colony. Fishermen there have their own problems. Fishing in the deep, still waters of the dam is difficult for the men who were used to fishing in the shallow waters of the Wainganga.

Moreover, pollution and the water hyacinth cover have adversely affected the fish population. "The fish tastes bad because of the polluted water," said Chandrasekhar Agre, a fisherman from the village.

This year, the private-run school in the village shut down following internal disputes. Now the children have to go to neighbouring Gose Bk to attend the government school there.

"We left our old village crying like a newly-wedded bride. We are still crying," said Raju Khangar, a resident.

Displaced landowner turns vendor



Pushpa at the foot of Gosikhurd

| VIDHI VERMA

VIDHI VERMA

Bhandara: Sitting on a white sack spread on the rocks, down the stairs from the Gosikhurd dam, a young woman sells beans, green peas and fried snacks to tourists with a smile on her face.

Her lot is a far cry from what it was 12 years ago. Yes, the family of Pushpa Pradip Mishra, 35, owned land at Ghatumari until it was submerged along with 34 other villages due to the construction of the Gosikhurd National Irrigation Project in this district of Maharashtra.

Pushpa burst into tears as she said that her husband ran away with another woman three years ago. She still hopes that he would return some day.

Pushpa, who lives with her son aged 14 and daughter aged 18, says she barely manages to pay for the boy's education in a private school.

Her daughter, who dropped out under Standard X, is doing household chores.

"We are not able to sustain ourselves on mazduri (rozi-roti). My daughter suggested that I leave this work and start my own business," said Pushpa, who has

been selling snacks at the dam site for over two months.

She travels 10 km by auto to the nearest market at Pauni on Tuesdays to buy fresh stock. She purchases snacks for Rs.500 or Rs.1000, depending on her savings, and earns between Rs.100 and Rs.500 a day.

Pushpa likes her new job compared to the work that demanded physical labour on the family land. "I used to get so tired doing labour. This work is good. Just take a chhatri (umbrella) and sit here and sell things."

She walks for half hour daily from her house at Mujbi village to reach the dam. Spreading out snacks, she stays here till sunset.

Like Pushpa's family, other villagers have relocated to nearby places and taken up alternative ways of earning a living thanks to the "development project" of the Gosikhurd dam.

The shift meant not only loss of livelihoods and farmlands but also lack of basic amenities like water and electricity.

The Gosikhurd project on the Wainganga river is aimed at providing irrigation to villages in Bhandara, Nagpur and Chandrapur districts.

Teachers stay put outside shut school

VIDHI VERMA

Bhandara: A group of teachers sits and reads newspapers every day outside the closed gates of the Baba Khantalu Prathamik Ashram School at Mendha village in the district.

It was a semi-government residential school for Scheduled Castes and nomadic tribes of the village. Originally, the government was funding all expenses for meals and accommodation, while the management was private.

What went wrong? The management had frequent clashes with the government over non-release of funds to run the Ashram (hostel) and to pay salaries to the teachers.

On November 3, 2017, the government withdrew recognition to the school and it has been shut

school teacher. In a case filed by the teachers demanding release of their salaries withheld for the last four years, the Bombay High Court in August asked the government to grant them salaries but it has failed to obey the order.

"We have been managing all expenses in running the Ashram for over four years without any grant from the government. We did what we could do on our own. The government is yet to disburse over Rs 2.5 crore as our salaries for the past four years," said Lakshmikant Tagade, who has been teaching here for over 25 years.

Headmaster H K Talmale says the school would reopen in the next academic session. The teachers have planned to file a contempt petition against the government if

'Why educate my daughters?'

ANJALI VENUGOPALAN

Bhandara: "Why should I educate my daughters?" asks Vatsala Shinde, an agricultural labourer at Mendha village in this district. "They won't get jobs after studying anyway." She has three girls, studying in classes 11, 9 and 3.

"No woman here has a decent job. There is no work, so I will have to marry my daughters off," she says bitterly.

Wrong focus
The focus on marrying off daughters is at odds with women getting entrepreneurial opportunities. Says Rupa Kulakarni, a Nagpur-based social activist who works for unorganized workers: "Sometimes when women self-help groups are given credit by banks, they spend it all on their daughters' marriages."
Vatsala, who sits with her friend

at their neighbour's verandah, says she hasn't been getting work for the past two months. Her husband, who is disabled, is a fisherman. She says she used to earn about Rs. 100 a day, while men here made around Rs. 200 a day.

Wage disparity
"Unequal wages are a big problem," says Ms. Kulkarni, adding women don't have access to higher-level jobs either.

"You'll find women in construction work, but you won't find a single woman mason."

Villagers say women do weeding, cotton plucking and also threshing of crops like tur, while men plough the fields and cut crops.

Water woes
At Mendha, women have the additional job of drawing water or operating handpumps, apart from cooking, cleaning and taking care of children and animals.

Ironically, the village, which was built to resettle villagers displaced by the Gosi Khurd dam, does not have water connections to homes. Vatsala says the only source of drinking water is the community well and it has to be treated with bleaching powder first.

LPG sans subsidy
Like many others in her village, Vatsala does have an LPG cylinder at home.

However, she doesn't have a bank account and hence does not get LPG subsidy, Vatsala says as she cried out, "Don't hit it," to her neighbour who raised a stick to beat a restless cow.

"You'll find women in construction but you won't find a single woman mason."

-RUPA KULKARNI, Activist



Newspaper for company on deserted campus

| VIDHI

since then. But the staff, three primary teachers handling classes from 1 to 7, and two senior teachers of the adjoining middle school (Baba Khantalu Madhyamik School) with classes from 8 to 10, come daily in the hope that the school would get a new management and would reopen.

"We haven't received our salaries because of the fight between the management and the government. Nobody tells us whether to come to school or not," said Pramod Harkishan Shendre, a primary

they do not receive their salaries by February, he adds.

The abrupt shutdown meant dislocation for students. Savita Sunil Agre, whose son was studying in Standard V, said that all children were now going to a nearby school at Gose Bk.

Even otherwise, student strength has declined over the years in the school, which was started with 300 students in 1980, said Talmale. It had around 50 and 55 students in primary and middle schools respectively till October 2017.

Exodus to English medium school

ANJALI VENUGOPALAN

Yavatmal: Already hit by cotton failure, villagers of Shelu, 35 km from here, have another worry staring them in the face. The Zilla Parishad school there may shut down as, according to ex-sarpanch Ram Gawande, the number of students has dropped from 300 to around 150.

Gawande says villagers prefer to send their children to an English-medium school at Arni, 20 km away. A free bus comes to the village to pick them up.

Says Sahebrao Pawar, principal of the Yavatmal Government College, "There is no English medium at the Zilla Parishad level. The facilities are also poorer in non-English medium schools."

For the displaced, marriage is a mirage

ANJALI VENUGOPALAN

Bhandara: Gulab Mesram, 47, isn't the typical rural farmer. He doesn't use Bt cotton, for starters. He doubles up as a contractor and does occasional social work in his village. And unlike rural men who get married at the age of 22.8, according to 2011 Census data, he entered into wedlock only at 35.

"No one wanted to marry me, because I was a farmer," he says. The story is the same for many at Pauni village in Bhandara. They are among the sufferers of the Indirasagar Gosikhurd dam project, which displaced 13 villages and 65,000 people, according to activist Vilas Bhongade. Though the displaced were given compensation to the tune of Rs. 60000 per hectare, the rates in the new places where they bought land were higher.

"I had to buy land for Rs. 2 lakh a hectare. I had 7 acres and now I have only 2.5," says Mesram. He adds his income by taking care of someone else's farm.

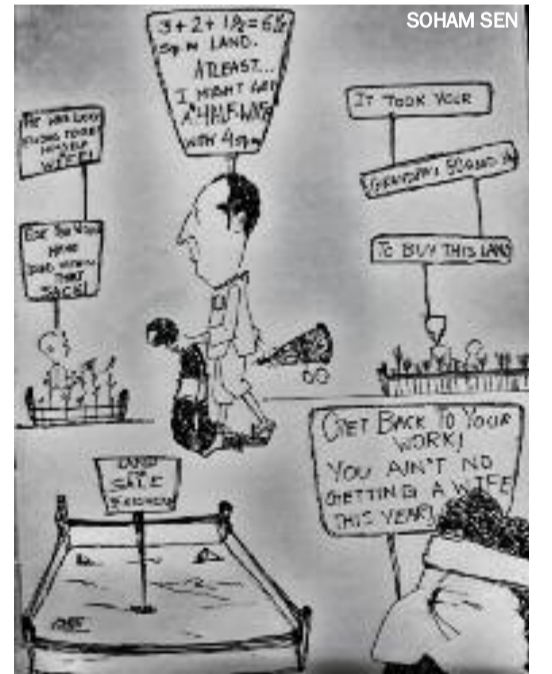
In neighbouring villages like Mendha, finding girls for boys is difficult, according to

project-displaced fishermen. Although education has improved for their children, villagers don't have the money to send their kids for higher education.

As for jobs, the villagers have been promised employment under MGNREGA, instead of the government jobs they have been demanding, says Vilas Bhongade. And even that offer is not forthcoming. DM Tadekar, a member of the newly formed gram panchayat at Mendha, says, "We are yet to receive funds under MGNREGA from the government."

Bhongade regrets that had the 25000 small ponds in the region been properly maintained, there would have been no need for a large dam like this [Gosikhurd]. He said some villagers were forcibly evicted by police. Many sold their animals because it would be too difficult to move with them.

For Kevat, who lost his lands to the dam and relies on others' boats for fishing, getting his son, now 15, married is already a worry. "They [the bride's family] will ask if we have land," he says.



Man-eater or no, lives lost as terror reigns over villages

SIDHARTH, AISHWARYA & TANISHAA

Yavatmal: "Either I die or she does," declares Anil Telangei as he locks eyes with the tigress which killed nine villagers over the last two years.

T-1, suspected to be a man-eating tigress, roams the fields of Savarkhed and neighbouring villages. The first kill on June 1, 2016 alerted the villagers to the presence of a feline on the 7,500 hectares of forest surrounding their farms.

Most killings have occurred after sunset, deterring villagers from venturing into their fields at night for manning crop, defecating, herding cattle, and fetching tendu leaves from the forest.

During his encounter, Anil furtively grab-

bed a stick, brandished it and drove T-1 away. He contacted forest officials immediately who assured him it was not a man-eater.

However, she crossed into his brother-in-law's field and killed him minutes later.

Villagers found his mutilated body the following day at 2.30 p.m. after a group of children spotted bloody, ripped clothes on the forest fringes.

"I found his left foot in a ditch, and followed the blood



trail and pugmarks," said 34-year-old Tushar Telangei.

The police reached the spot an hour later, but the body wasn't taken away till 9 p.m. for post mortem, according to the villagers.

For all their previous denials, forest officials are now veering round to the possibility of the beast being a man-eater in the wake of reports on examination of DNA samples of the last three victims by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, and the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore.

Meanwhile, nearly 200 officials have been deployed to find the tigress but locals are indignant as the tiger menace has severely restricted their movements on their own farms.

The government

provides a compensation of Rs 8 lakh to the families of each victim and Rs 25,000 for loss of cattle, but the villagers continue to live in terror.

"Forest officials only instruct us to be alert and not go out at night but it is not enough. They are taking too long to find the man-eater," said Prashant Hivarkar, another farmer.

According to the residents, foresters rarely go to Savarkhed to inform the villagers of their progress. They work independently, not coordinating with the locals.

"We know the jungle and the pathways. If only the forest officials ask us for help just once, we would immediately rush to their aid," said Ramesh Telange.

While they do not wish to kill the animal, villagers want her out of the surrounding forest range.

However, forest officials deny having received any calls from villagers and claim that none of the locals have ever seen T-1.

They say they have formed a committee to go into the village and inform residents over megaphone of T-1's movements and mark tiger-prone areas with red flags.

The villagers are also instructed not to sit in a crouching position deep within the jungle as the tigress could mistake them for a small prey. According to the officials, this has been responsible for the last three accidents.

Four people, including a sharpshooter and a vet take positions in 10-foot machans (watch towers).

Each sharpshooter is armed with a tranquilizer with a range of 30 metres. Each shot costs Rs. 40,000, but no one has sighted the tigress yet.

"She's a clever one," said S.R. Dumare, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Pandharkawada. "She sees the bait but doesn't step into the trap."

According to him, it is easier to spot her after January with poor rainfall driving her to the forest fringes in search of water. He is confident that she will be caught once the officials spot her.

On December 13 last, the Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF), Yavatmal, roped in sharpshooter Nawab Shafath Ali Khan from Hyderabad to either cull or trap the tigress.

"We hope that there are no killings while we are here, otherwise, we will be the ones in need of wildlife conservation," chuckled Dumare.

How is a tiger declared man-eater?

The State's Chief Wildlife Warden declares a tiger man-eater if it has become dangerous to humans, according to Section 11 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

Such a tiger is tranquilized and kept under observation for 15 days. If efforts to rehabilitate the man-eater fail, it is killed.

Source: Maharashtra Forest Department



A NEW EPIDEMIC PLAGUES PADERU: ALCOHOLISM
POSES TO BE A MAJOR PROBLEM | P 25

PADERU

PRIMARY EDUCATION SYSTEM COMPROMISED:
SCHOOL IN RUINS | P 26



No toilet, no water, where to go?

Paderu: Lack of toilets presents a sorry state of affairs across the Agency area. From Mullumeta to Lammasingi, residential areas and schools have no toilets at all and even if there is any, there is no water supply. **Purnima S. Das** reports on the situation and finds out where the government stands. | P 25

King has a prayer for his people – a road

Mulagaruvu: A small village, almost off-grid, on top of a hillock is connected to the rest of the world with a mud trail and through a stream Mulagaruvu, G. Madugula Mandal is virtually cut off. The nearest metal road is 2 km away and the nearest market 5 km away. But this is not a stray case. The metal roads too are in no shape to allow a smooth ride. **Prajanma Das** reports. | P 27

Kodu tribes see decline in child marriage

Kodugudlu: Child marriage is becoming a thing of the past as the Child Development Agency is now taking up measures to curb it. Anganwadi teachers go to these villages and conduct programmes to spread awareness under the campaign to 'stop child marriage'. **Ayesha Roy** reports. | P 27

Coffee and pepper growers need relief

HRIDKAMAL ROY

Paderu: The yield from agriculture in the Paderu Division of Visakhapatnam district varies from year to year. Ravi Pattanshetti, Project Officer (PO), Paderu said 70 per cent of the farmers are engaged in coffee cultivation.

In Mullumeta village of Hukumpeta mandal every family is engaged in coffee cultivation. One of the farmers in the village said that all the 45 families in the village have their own land. Most of them grow coffee which is harvested once a year. A farmer can earn up to Rs.25,000 a year from his coffee crop.

"However, the farmers tend to grow other crops like turmeric and pepper after the coffee has been harvested. A farmer can earn upto Rs.10,000 from one year's harvest of turmeric or pepper. So a farmer growing coffee, turmeric and pepper can earn up to Rs.35,000 from a year's harvest," said another farmer from the same village.

Ganja takes over Paderu

HRIDKAMAL ROY

Paderu: On January 8, a group of government-licensed labourers destroyed ganja plantations at Munchingi Puttu village. Mahesh, leader of the group, said, since November 1, 2017 the government had begun a slash and burn process to destroy illegal ganja cultivation. Wherever ganja plantations were found, the licensed labourers would cut the crops and burn them with petrol. "We have destroyed Rs.200-crore worth of ganja but this is not even 10% of what is being cultivated in Paderu Division," said Mahesh.

The operation is risky, said Mahesh. One has to go through interior villages where left extremism is prevalent and the labourers are vulnerable to physical attacks. Two members from his group have been injured in stone pelting by ganja farmers.

Coffee takes a year to get harvested, whereas ganja is ready in three to four months and the income is also high. So the farmers tend to grow ganja on their fields. Everyday 40-50 acres of ganja plantations have been burnt down for 25 days since November last. Labourers earn Rs.250 a day for this work, explains Mahesh.

Kishore Dippala* of Tajangi, said ganja was being cultivated on 2000 acres in the interior of his village. In the Chintapalle mandal

itself, 30-40 villages have taken to ganja cultivation.

Raj Killo*, a ganja farmer and local dealer, said much of the ganja produced in Paderu goes outside the State for its excellent quality. Farmers sell ganja to middlemen, who smuggle it outside the

State at Rs.1500 a kg. But when it reaches Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and West Bengal, the price is Rs.10,000. Locally one can get 2.2 kg of ganja for Rs.2000. In this business, "it's the farmers who suffer the most," said Raj.



State at Rs.1500 a kg. But when it reaches Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and West Bengal, the price is Rs.10,000. Locally one can get 2.2 kg of ganja for Rs.2000. In this business, "it's the farmers who suffer the most," said Raj.

"For a man who just wants to feed his family the distinction between legal and illegal is blurred," said Raj. It is the middlemen, buying ganja from farmers at a small price, who make

a kill when it is sold in urban areas. "But if any farmer is found in possession of ganja on his field, he will be jailed for six months," said Kishore. Talking about the plight of farmers, Raj said even coffee is bought by big businesses from them at just

some chemicals. "Farmers are at the receiving end of the law. As the Government has started burning the crops, they are in distress," said Kishore.

"Once their crop is destroyed, they will be left with nothing for the rest of the year and they resort to criminal activities such as stealing and robbery," said Raj. "Silabati (a strain of ganja) is illegally cultivated on close to 15,000 acres in the region and smuggled out in huge quantities," said Constable Srinivas Rao of the Excise department. "The farmers growing ganja do not have pattas (documents for land). So we cannot arrest a farmer redhanded."

According to Rao, it all started in 1990s when some investors from Tamil Nadu opened small businesses on the outskirts of Paderu and started teaching local farmers how to grow ganja, besides giving the seeds of which were also given to the farmers. Silabati is grown from November to February, when the climate is conducive. "Excellent quality of ganja gets smuggled to Chennai, Delhi, Kolkata and a few other cities. Farmers growing Silabati can afford the latest models of bikes", he said.

The Government needs to pay more heed to rehabilitation of the farmers rather than organising awareness programmes through Kala Yatra, a traditional form of theatre.

*name changed

No trekking and huffing, spring water is here

AYESHA ROY

Nimmalapadu: Villagers trekking miles to fetch a pail of water is not a familiar sight here. On the other hand, Nimmalapadu in the Paderu mandal has become a self-sustaining village, using drinking water from the Madanapuram spring (otta in local language).

Running down 2.5 km from a hill, the natural stream of water, albeit with biological impurities, flows through leak-proof pipes into a four-chamber tank with a

gravity-fed system. Moreover, Mr. Parthasarathy, differing with the doctors, says this water does not cause diseases. We students on a study tour, used this water.

In this system, construction, operation and maintenance are affordable, and it is a community set-up, he says. To make up for loss of oxygen in the process of filtration, it is pumped back through an aeration vent in the last chamber.

Though sand filtration fails to filter salts, fluorides and a majority of chemicals, this bio-



Gravity fed-system has given a new life to villagers making the most of community participation | AYESHA ROY

filtration capacity of 1200 litres/hour.

"I developed this 20 years ago. This device is my brainchild," said B. Parthasarathy, a water consultant for the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), Vijayawada. Thanks to his efforts, the gravity-fed system brings potable water to the houses downhill round the clock.

"Earlier villagers used to fetch river water or water, from cisterns and open wells, which was contaminated with iron and mud," said Mr. Parthasarathy.

However, even now villagers here suffer from diarrhoea, jaundice and typhoid as they do not boil the spring water, say doctors from the Primary Health Centre (PHC) and the Community Health Centre (CHC) Paderu.

"Earlier, the government suggested a borewell [to supply water]," Mr. Parthasarathy said "but tribes do not accept everything." Treatment plants are also not a good idea in these areas as "they don't like bleaching powder, so chlorination was rejected. It also tastes differently and they like only natural water." So the tribals' choice is the

filtration system has proved to be effective in eliminating iron, manganese, arsenic and also odour, says the World Health Organisation. Moreover, says Parthasarathy, groundwater is not extracted or depleted, nor is electricity required, making the system eco-friendly. Utilizing local technology, it requires zero maintenance for 20 to 25 years. "The river sand used is dried under the sun once a year and put back into the filtration tank."

The excess water that sand cannot hold flows through an outlet to cabbage, ginger and, turmeric farms and the rest is used to manufacture bricks.

People in the village sell these bricks to contractors and government at Rs. 8 a unit. "Earlier bricks used to cost Rs. 23 per unit," said Mr. Parthasarathy. The bricks are used for toilets being built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to end open defecation.

In the Hukumpeta mandal, of which Nimmalapadu is part, out of 27 sanctioned water works, 21 are gravity-fed. Work on 13 of these projects has begun, says the Integrated Tribal Development Agency in its report.

"A LANGUAGE DIES EVERY TWO WEEKS"



The women sing shyly in Kui - a tribal language spoken mostly by Kodus (Khonds). The language has been classified "vulnerable" by the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Babu Raj, 15, the only student who speaks Kui in his school said, "There is a feeling shared among my friends that if you speak a tribal language, you belong to a lower social class. It is disheartening to know that my mother tongue will be dead in a few years." | PURNIMA S. DAS

Flowers don't blossom at alien Kullupadu

PRAJANMA DAS

Kullupadu: Polyhouse floriculture at Kullupadu village in the G. Madugula mandal, launched in 2015 under the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana, has wilted. The project, jointly initiated by the Society for Eradication of Rural Poverty (SERP) and the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) was "flawed from the beginning," say locals.

The tribals say they have cultivated rice, ragi, coffee, turmeric, pepper and a few vegetables from time to time but floriculture is alien to them. However, the ITDA says the villagers need to take the initiative. Poly houses are basically naturally ventilated and climate controlled. While crops on an open field are exposed to environmental conditions and pest attacks, the polyhouse provides a stable environment.

With an investment of Rs. 44 lakhs (Rs. 24 lakhs from the Yojana and Rs.20 lakhs from the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture), the project was meant to host more than 30,000 flowers, mostly carnation and three varieties of Karavira (karvajia in

local parlance). The government supplied the villagers with saplings, pesticides and equipment once the polyhouse was constructed.

"Yes, we were given the equipment and asked to cultivate and sell the produce," said Sumithra M. of Kullupadu, who had invested one year in this project, adding she has not made a profit of even one rupee.

"The farmers here do not even know which is the right season for which flower," said G. Rajesh, owner of a rice mill, whose wife invested in floriculture. "They use wrong pesticides and fertilizers and also in wrong quantities. The workers here need proper training," he added.

The locals complained that they lost wages even though they had not made any capital investment.

Loss of wages
"We used to work on fields as manual labourers and earned Rs.200 per day. For a year we toiled in the polyhouse and could not earn anything," said V. Srikumar, one of those who worked for six months in the project.

The villagers alleged that their plea for monetary help from the



The well-equipped polyhouse lies barren inspite of proper supply of saplings, pesticides and equipment. | HRIDKAMAL ROY

ITDA, once the project failed, was rejected. "After we worked for 8 hours every day for a year, the authorities say that we needed some elevation from the ground to level and dry conditions for these flowers to grow properly but rain played spoilsport," said Narayani K.

Responding to the villagers' complaints, Ravi Pattanshetti, Project Officer, ITDA, said, "We provided the equipment and amenities but the people need to take initiatives. It is a two-way road. They need to invest themselves in learning if they expect a good yield. Marketing the

product is also a big challenge. The people are not comfortable going to research institutes and learning better ways of farming. There are discrepancies on our part as well. The Agency needs to work with the tribal people to get better results from the projects."

The Future of Coffee

Area under cultivation: 1,58,021 acres

Tribal growers: 1,54,413

Value: Rs.110 crores

The Integrated Tribal Development Agency Project aims "double area, double yield and double price" by 2025-26

Projected bearing area: 2,00,000 acres

Projected yield: 22,000 metric tonnes

Projected value: Rs.240 crores

No toilet, no water, where to go?

PURNIMA S. DAS

Paderu: S Mahalakshmi, 28, of Subbulu village in the G. Madugula mandal, during her advanced pregnancy two months ago, walked down a steep, rocky slope every morning to defecate in the open as there is no toilet in her house. "This has to be done before men wake up," she said while breastfeeding her one-day old child in the Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Lothugedda.

Lalita Marri, 20, of Mullumeta can never imagine 'a toilet and a kitchen under the same roof.' Her hamlet, with 145 households mostly of coffee and pepper growers belonging to the Kodu tribe, has no toilet at all.

"Forget it, there are no running water taps here," said Sontana Hymavatha, 38, who has been living there since her marriage 14 years ago.

"Last year, my friend, Pangi Geeta", fell off the slope and suffered miscarriage when she was nine months pregnant because she had to move her bowels at 4 in the morning when everyone was asleep," recalls Sontana.

The situation is no better in the Government Tribal Welfare School (Girls) at Lammasingi village of the Chintapalle mandal. There are 18 toilets but no running water, nor are they cleaned regularly, not to mention lack of lights. This is forcing girls to ease themselves at a big drain near the hostel kitchen.

Asked about it, headmistress S Kavita said, "There is just one handpump for 247 students for all purposes. How can I employ people to clean the toilets?"



Well-constructed toilets remain unusable due to lack of proper water supply

| PRAJANMA DAS

Ms. Kavita has other pressing problems to grapple with: "There are inadequate classrooms for students and an acute shortage of teaching staff because of insufficient funds." Moreover, in extreme winter cold, the students have to sit in the dining hall without proper windows during study hours. Lammasingi is often

called the Kashmir of Andhra Pradesh with the temperature dipping to minus 2 degree Celsius.

In the Girls Tribal Welfare School at Kothuru village, also in the G. Madugula mandal, all 12 toilets were locked for 'unknown reasons.'

On the problems suffered by women due to open defecation, L

Sathanarayana, medical officer at the Lothugedda PHC, said, "Women face frequent vaginal infection, mainly Trichomonas vaginalis, a discharge which leads to fishy odour, and Candida Albicans, a yeast infection which worsens during menstruation. The reason being open defecation and using unhygienic cloth during menstruation."

Referring to dysfunctional bleeding among women for 15 days or more instead of their maintaining the normal 3-5 day cycle, he said, "They never associate such problems with open defecation. Therefore on the 9th of every month, under the Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan, women are told about menstrual hygiene and the importance of toilets, besides antenatal health awareness.

Ravi Pattanshetti, project officer at the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Paderu, during an informal meet, said using toilets called for a 'massive behavioural change.'

He said, "It requires a considerable amount of time for people to accept and make it a social norm. There are several districts where we have built toilets but people do not use the facility for various social, cultural, behavioural and psychological reasons. Therefore, the rate of relapse into defecating in the open is high."

However, "By the end of February 2018, each household at Mullumeta will have toilets," he assured us journalism students.

*name changed

Hygiene, so near and yet so far

Napkin awareness a far cry at Allamputtu



We don't provide sanitary napkin at school, says the health instructor. The nearest medical shop is a 30-minute walk from the school and the streets have no lights

| AHANA D. CHAUDHURY

AYESHA ROY & AHANA D. CHAUDHURY

Paderu: The Kasturba Nagar Government School, Allamputtu, Paderu Mandal, is home to 250 girl inmates who are from surrounding villages. Rarely do they go home. But they have been deprived of essential health protection at school: sanitary napkins.

D Devi, health instructor, admitted: "We do not provide any sanitary napkin to the girls. They go out and buy it with their own money. Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, they are provided with iron tablets and capsule. They are taught self-awareness of healthy surroundings but sanitary napkins have never been provided."

The nearest medical shop is a 30-minute walk from the school and the streets have no lights at night. The girls have to go out themselves to buy napkins in bulk. But asked about the quality and cost of sanitary napkins they used, the girls did not respond.

The girls were mostly former dropouts who could not pursue education due to family pressure, said the Hindi teacher.

But we have still not achieved 100 per cent menstrual hygiene

C.H. Laxmi Bai

The scene is quite different in the Government Tribal Welfare (GTW) Ashram Girls Schools at Kothuru and Lammasingi villages in the G. Madugula and

Chintapalle mandals.

Girls receive one packet of 'Stayfree' sanitary napkins per month through the Health department in the Paderu Agency.

"Every day we have a health period. We are provided extra pads if someone is menstruating heavily," said Rebika Rao, a class 9 student at Kothuru.

The health teacher in her school said the girls, right from Standard VII, were told in detail about

menstruation. In fact, a nurse is permanently allotted to every girls' residential school and she stays 24x7.

"But we have still not achieved 100 per cent menstrual hygiene," said C.H. Laxmi Bai, Grade-I supervisor in the Child Development Agency, Chintapalle.

"There is still a huge percentage of women and girls who have no idea about sanitary

napkin. In some places, they do not use it as the cost is high," she added.

Women often suffer from intra-uterine diseases due to unhygienic

menstrual practices. Anganwadi teachers and health assistants conduct programmes to "teach them how to use pads, change clothes frequently and take bath regularly." In case pads are not accessible, "we teach them how to use cloth, wash and dry it," says Mrs. Laxmi Bai.

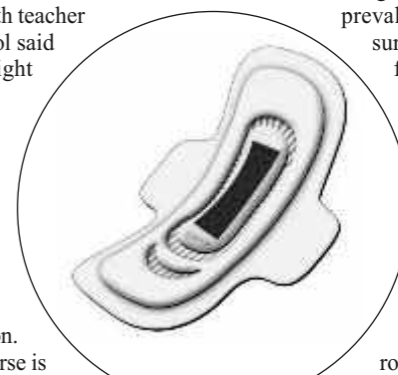
Talking about certain prevalent practices surrounding the first occurrence of menses, Mrs. Laxmi Bai says that during the first nine days, girls "do not bathe and do not step outside of their room."

The supervisor says, "Almost all Hindu tribes follow these customs but Christians do not."

A first-time menstruating girl is put on a diet different from normal "No salt, no curry, only sweet, dal, rice, milk and curd rice," she says.

But in schools, a large concern is over lack of proper disposal systems. In the two ashram schools, no dustbins were placed and girls just wrap used sanitary napkins and throw them on unused lands behind the schools or in front of their bathrooms which are later cleaned once garbage accumulates.

In the absence of any employee for cleaning toilets, the students, reluctant though, have to do the job themselves.



Mission to fight tribal anaemia



A student takes back breakfast served at his hostel

| PRAJANMA DAS

AYESHA ROY

Paderu: Bottle gourd, brinjal, cabbage, ladies' fingers, potato, beans and drumstick are commonly grown in the Agency area here. But tribal children are highly anaemic. Why?

B. Parthasarthy, water consultant for the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP), says the tribals grow natural organic food, but they sell the produce. "Their custom is such that they end up eating ragi". Their normal diet consists of rice, ragi malt and ganji (maddikal or beim sara - water of rice), the last as an intoxicating

drink.

To address the problem, Project Officer of the Integrated Tribal Development Tribal Agency Ravi Pattanshetti has initiated haemoglobin tests for all school children. Health department and Anganwadi workers are being regularly trained to conduct awareness of child nourishment and maternal health.

According to the ITDA, Hb Tests have been started in 1875 schools with a total strength of 96,406 students. It has come up with meals rich in iron. Along with milk (served every day), phodihora, khichdi, bansi rava, Bombay rava,

pongali are on the menu for breakfast at 7 a.m.

At the Prabhatva Girijana Ashram Patashala (residential school), at Allamputtu, with 247 boys, boiled egg (except on Saturdays) is served with rice, vegetable curry and rasam for lunch.

At 4.30 p.m., the children get to eat groundnut chikki with jaggery base (Phalipatti in Telugu) and ragi malt for snacks.

A multipurpose health assistant (MPHA) - men in boys' schools and women in girls' school - is posted permanently. Doctors or Auxiliary Nurse Midwives visit the schools once in 15 days for regular check-up, says English teacher Balana.

Dr. Karuna from the Community Health Centre (CHC), Paderu, says malnutrition among children arises from inadequate nourishment of their mothers during pregnancy. Moreover, most of them lack education on breast feeding."

Mandal health assistant Subhadra Solagam says that among tribes, mothers earlier did not breastfeed newborn children for the first two days after birth. But now they are trained by anganwadi workers and health workers to start breastfeeding immediately after birth. Colostrum (the substance produced in the breasts of a new

mother, which has a lot of antibodies which help her baby resist disease is essential for the child to develop immunity against diseases, she points out.

Referring to the case of a chronic anaemic child, Kameswari Vijaykumari, at Nimmalapadu village in the Hukumpeta Mandal, Mrs. Solagam said the girl had not improved despite treatment in district level hospitals. "If she consumes anything raw, she vomits," says her mother Renga Vijaykumari. Kameswari has no energy to play the entire day and she does not even smile, her mother added.

Under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), a packet of nutrient powder is given to every child per month, from his/her seventh month to the age of three, says grade-I supervisor, C.H. Laxmi Bai from the Integrated Child Development Agency, Chintapalle.

Referring to wrong notions among tribal women, she says they do not opt for institutional delivery thinking they will fall sick. They have reservations about accepting modern medicines. Pregnant women do not like eating eggs as they believe that the child will lose hair after birth. "We need to regularly conduct education programmes," the supervisor adds.

Marriage or funeral, they are dying for a drink

PRAJANMA DAS

Paderu: The entire population under the Agency area in the Paderu Division is dealing with numerous health issues - from malaria to typhoid and other water-borne diseases. But a worse epidemic is plaguing the entire tribal community including women and children - alcoholism.

Doctors say introduction of Indian-Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) into their lives has had a detrimental effect on their livelihoods. "Everyone from 10 to 80 drink in these tribal villages. Men, women and kids drink whenever there is some event in the village - be it a marriage or funeral, or even a girl hitting puberty, they will drink to it," said Dr. D. L. Sathanarayana, only doctor at the Lothugedda Primary Health Centre. While women work on the fields, apart from doing household chores, the men are mostly found drinking or smoking the entire day. The tribals were essentially

hunter-gatherers and they also practised slash and burn (podu) agriculture. There are just two seasons of podu and minor production of forest produce like honey which they sell at shandis (markets). March to June - a lean season - used to be just for drinking.

Cheaper alternative

The problem worsened after the tribals took to a cheaper alternative to Jeelukallu, which is derived from elephant palm trees. Entire families used to drink Jeelukallu, which was also said to be nutritious. This drink became popular and is in huge demand even among non-tribals and is being to towns as well.

Starved of Jeelukallu, the tribals settled for the local version of arrack, Natasarai, made from jaggery, as they cannot always afford IMFL. The younger crowd now goes for this drink, which is available in polythene sachets also. "These people had no concept of

money. Now when they sell their produce at the shandi, they get [currency] notes and they don't know what to do with it and they end up drinking," said Siddharth Dsouza, who as part of an NGO, LAYA, works for marginalized communities. "Earlier they used to drink only during one season, now they drink almost every day."

"I don't drink every day," said Raj Dippala, a school dropout who now helps his family in farming. "But once or twice a week we drink a bit to unwind." No one is ready to accept alcohol consumption as a problem. "Beer and brandy are cheap and are easier to procure than any of the traditional drinks. Natasarai is also available in the market," added Samuel K., who drives mini trucks in Paderu.

Liver cancer incidence

As a result, there are increasing cases of liver cancer in this area, according to Dr. K. Leelaprasad, who singlehandedly manages the Hukumpeta PHC. "We conduct



SOHAM SEN

medical camps where we explain why alcoholism is harmful to them but it has hardly any effect on the people," added Dr. Leelaprasad.

"We are short of staff at almost every PHC. There are 58 doctors in the Agency area, out of whom only six of us are permanent staff, the rest have an annual contractual agreement. No doctor really wants to come to this area and work because of the low salary (Rs. 38,000 per month) and the immense pressure of work."

It is hard for the small team of doctors and nurses to visit every village regularly. Medical camps and rehabilitation programmes for alcoholics are not conducted properly. "We try our best to conduct rehabilitation programmes every Friday. But it is difficult as there are so few of us," added Dr. Sathanarayana.

"The number of accidents has also risen over the past decade," said Dr. Leelaprasad. "Majority of the accidents are a result of drinking and riding a bike. Last

week I attended on an accident victim who was so drunk that he couldn't figure out for a minute whether he was unconscious or just drunk."

"Every week there is an accident reported in any of the police station that falls under my control," said sub inspector D. Lakshminarayan of the Annavaram police station. "These fatal accidents mostly take place because of drunk driving. The substance abuse cases that we receive are mostly against women in this area."

Reverse smoking

Smoking is an equally worrying issue in the tribal areas. Men and women are often seen smoking chuttas or Indian cigars made by rolling tobacco leaves. "Here people have the habit of reverse smoking. They put the lit end of the chutta in their mouth and smoke," said Dr. Sathanarayana. "This is the major reason behind the increasing cases of oral cancer in this area."

An apology for a school: No power, no door

Dilapidated building, one teacher for all five classes, no helpers, toilets out of the question

PURNIMA S. DAS

Mullumeta: It is a two-room, incomplete building without a name board, 400 metres from Mullumeta hamlet in Thadigiri panchayat. This Mandala Praja Parishad School, functioning since 2005, has students in classes 1 to 5, who sit on an uneven surface in one of the rooms from 9 a.m. to 3.45 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The other classroom is filled with leftover woods, bricks and hay.

P. Syamala, lone teacher there for the past two years, teaches Telugu, English, Mathematics and Environmental Studies. She said, "There are no helpers and I can't

leave the students and go even for five minutes because the nearby area is completely isolated which makes them vulnerable."

There is no electricity in the school and the windows are wide open without grills. The classroom has no door. Toilets are out of the question. Dr K Leelaprasad, civil assistant surgeon who manages the Hukumpeta Primary Health Centre

☛ In the absence of a kitchen in the school, mid-day meals is prepared elsewhere and brought here.

P. Syamala, teacher



A dumping site? No, it is a classroom (left) and the little learners



| PURNIMA S DAS

provided with iron tablets."

In the absence of a kitchen in the school, mid-day meal is prepared elsewhere and brought here, says Syamala. Sometimes an egg has to be divided between two students.

Poor teaching

Another major issue is the lack of qualified teachers in primary schools. Siddharth D'Souza, who works for Laya, a non-governmental

organization (NGO) dedicated to Adivasi communities, said that a couple of years ago, teaching

assistants were made teachers for a period of time to make up for inadequate teaching staff. But they formed a powerful and well-resourced union and the government had to grant them permanent posts.

"Recently, I managed to make the permanent teaching staff sit through a test where most of them couldn't answer class 6 questions though they were currently teaching class 10," he added.

Responding, Sumitra Sederrri, 25, a villager, said, "If this is what free education is like, I would rather send my children to the fields to work.

On the other hand, Vidya Chandrao, 29, said, "My children sing songs for me which they have learned in school and that is the favourite part of my day."

dren aren't provided iron tablets but I think they will be provided soon." Ravi Pattanshetti, Project officer

at the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA), Paderu, said, "Haemoglobin tests

have been started in 1875 schools with a total strength of 96,406 students, and the students will be

organization (NGO) dedicated to Adivasi communities, said that a couple of years ago, teaching

You don't have to leave school again



Back to the bliss of school: Students during the evening snack break | PURNIMA S. DAS

PURNIMA S. DAS

Chintapalle: Sheela Killo*, 14, was happy to leave home and go to school again. "Nobody could pay for my schooling as my father spent all the money on alcohol. Eventually, I had to drop out and work with my mother on coffee plantations and pepper fields," said the girl.

But last year, the headmistress of the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Gurukul Vidyalayam at Tajangi village, 129 km from Visakhapatnam—a school only for female dropouts—visited Sheela's home at Lohugedda and convinced the family to let the girl join the school. "This was the best thing my parents have done for me," Sheela said smiling.

Kodama Sravani, 15, now in Standard X, joined the school in class 6. Before that, she fell ill frequently as the previous school did not offer quality food and moreover, she had to cycle 5 km every day to reach there. Nor did the school provide sanitary pads regularly, Kavita said, adding she felt shy of discussing her health issues with male doctors in community health centres, where there were no women doctors. "I want to become a doctor," Kodama said.

Nirmala Adaribasiki, a physical science teacher in

☛ A school for drop outs is definitely a good idea but what if primary education is taken care of?

Siddharth D'Souza, NGO worker

the school, said, "To get the data on girls who have dropped out is difficult and convincing their parents to send them to school again is even more difficult." This in spite of the fact that the school has all basic facilities. All 173 students have access to equipped biology and computer labs and get two pairs of school uniform, toiletries and cosmetics. "Under the Giri Protsaham scheme, after coming back from long holidays, each child gets Rs 500 which acts as an incentive for them to return" the teacher said.

Moreover, "to provide a safe environment for girls, three staff members stay back every day—one teacher, one worker and one watchman." Only the compound wall is not well constructed and to desired length, providing easy access to animals, she added.

Commenting on a school for dropouts, Siddharth D'Souza, who works for LAYA, a non-governmental organization (NGO) for the development of Adivasi tribes, said, "It is definitely a good idea but what if primary education is taken care of? Then, there would be no need for a dropout school."

What is the origin of the scheme? The Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme was introduced in July 2004, with funding under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, to provide residential schooling at the upper primary level for girls belonging predominantly to the SC, ST, OBC and minority communities. Overtime, a few of the schools started focusing on dropouts.

*name changed

Internet plays truant with digital learning

Students starved of information in classroom and labs

HRIDKAMAL ROY

Paderu: Not more than 30 minutes of Internet each day, which makes it difficult for students to gain sufficient information, complains G. Ganesh, vice-principal of the A.P Gurukulam tribal school at G. Madugula here.

This in spite of the fact a digital classroom was recently set up by the Andhra Pradesh Government at the school, which offers classes up to graduation for boys.

Says Ganesh: "The government has given us so many facilities such as a digital classroom, a science lab and computer lab. But only five to ten minutes or a maximum of 30 minutes of internet is available on a daily basis. It's even worse on Tuesdays when there is neither the

internet nor any telephone connection."

He adds, "It makes really hard for the students to get connected to the outside world which should be our primary motive. We have saved material which we show students but it's not enough for us to make them understand it all."

Only BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited) cellphone and internet connection is available, which is insufficient, says Ganesh, adding that a private mobile network is not possible. Under the Forest Rights Recognition Act, there can be no private property in Paderu.

Each piece of land is under dispute, claimed by several tribal communities, he says.

Also owing to the prevalence of left extremism in the region, internet connection is sometimes shut down temporarily. Maybe, this is important for the government to do students are unable to access information despite availability of proper technology, says Ganesh.

Ravi Babu*, who is a functioning member of the school, said Paderu, being in the interior parts of the State not much care is received from the government.

Worse is the situation in the Government Tribal Welfare Girls' School, right opposite to the boy's residential school. It does not have a computer lab, let alone a digital classroom.

"These two schools are funded by two separate organisations,"

☛ A maximum of 30 minutes of internet is available on a daily basis.

G. Ganesh, Vice-principal

said Padmakumari T., who teaches English. "Even though the Project Officer (Ravi Pattanshetti) chairs both bodies, the funds are separate."

*name changed

Raring to go back to school

AYESHA ROY

G.Madugula: It's a sunny day at Kullupadu village. Farmers are drying turmeric, ginger and grains of rice. Homes are being painted and mud floors given a new coating to herald Makar Sankranti.

Two doors open into a two-room hut, walls painted grass green. There's no window. This is how houses have been built in this village of Valmiki tribes with more than 200 households.

K. Mounika, 19, strolls in and out to remove dried clothes from the veranda to her room. Against the floor above the four-foot wall lie five aluminum pots filled with spring water which the village gets from a gravity-fed system.

Mounika is married for a year to a rice mill worker but she is missing school. She "could not complete X standard" not being able to pay 50,000 for the course certificate. Speaking in English, she says, "I want to become an engineer if I get a chance to complete my studies. Back then I

did not get any scholarship".

Her former-father, since dead, had managed to send her to St. Ann's High School, Visakhapatnam, where the medium of instruction is English upto standard V, stayed with her aunt and then shifted to the Narayana E-techno School there, equipping herself with computer skills—MS office. This was four years ago.

"I had to come back home," as her father passed away. In her village "I helped my family in farming. Me, my mother used to plant saplings and cut the harvest. Rest of the work on farm, my cousin brothers and father used to do". Her younger sister is in Standard X in a government school.

Mounika's mother, who has B.Ed qualification, teaches in the nearby school. "She is a single teacher in the school. She needs more staff help".

Although Valmiki tribes are advanced in education as well as economy, "we are basically dependent on agriculture," says



K. Mounika, a young woman with a vision | AYESHA ROY

Mounika. "In off season earlier, we did not cultivate land. But now we have NREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme]," to provide income during the non-cropping season.

Mounika used to play kabbadi,

kho kho, volley ball and badminton.

"I think teaching in English helps a lot. If they speak in Telugu, other people from the plains do not understand. If they have to go out of their village, it helps," Mounika said.

These two students won't drop out of their goal

PRAJANMA DAS

Paderu: Drop out is a persistent problem in Andhra Pradesh, especially in the Agency area. The government had to initiate programmes to literally bribe students under the Giri Protsaham scheme, where they were given Rs 500 each for returning to school after vacation. But not all children are uninterested in education or would give up easily. They fight, whatever the odds and aspire to make it big one day.

Deepika, M., a 16-year-old Bhagatha girl, is appearing for her board examination this March. But she faced hurdles. Her father died two years ago and since then her mother, Lakshmi M., has been taking care of the family.

"I wanted my daughter to be well-educated. I wanted her to get better education. I was ready to

sacrifice to send her to a good school," said Lakshmi, a primary school teacher in her village, Kulupadu in the G. Madugula Mandal.

But for the student of St. Ann's School in Visakhapatnam, other woes remained. "The food in our hostels is not enough. If we have complaints about anything or if we are ill, the teachers don't pay heed to our problems," said Deepika. "They laugh at us and say that we

☛ I want to have a life where I don't have to be afraid of walking on the streets alone; where I don't have to depend on someone for even the smallest of things.

Deepika M.



Deepika M. | PRAJANMA DAS

are just bluffing to get a day or two off. But the condition there is far better than it is back home."

It is common for men to whistle at and tease girls or even pull them by hand or dupatta, says Deepika, adding complaining to authorities has not helped. The offenders would go scot-free by bribing the police, she regrets. "I want to have a life where I don't have to be afraid of walking on the streets

alone; where I don't have to depend on someone for even the smallest of things."

The girl has scored 96% in her rehearsal examinations and is determined to do better in the finals. More than that, she has already begun preparations to pursue computer engineering in an IIT.

Joseph Killo is another example of a student with ambitions and awareness that "Education is the only way we can improve our lifestyle." A student of civil engineering at the Coastal Institute of Technology and Management, Vizianagaram, he says, "I want to opt for M.Tech once I complete my graduation." He aspires to be a civil engineer and lecturer, eventually. His dream is to get his parents out of their tiny house at Mullumeta, a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) habitation of the Kodhu tribe in



Joseph Killo | PRAJANMA DAS

Hukumpeta, show them the world and spoil them with all comforts they have not even heard of.

His resolve grew stronger after his older brother, John, a D.Ed student at Sri Balaji College of Education in Prakasam District, died in an accident two years ago. "He (John) was the brightest student of his age in the village," said Sayanarayana Killo, Joseph's father. "My eldest son works with

☛ I want to opt for M.tech once I complete my graduation.

Joseph Killo

me on the fields to help sustain the family. But we never let Joseph ignore his studies. He will make us proud one day."

Joseph received an annual scholarship of Rs. 35,000 for undergraduate studies after he graduated from high school with 93 per cent. "It wouldn't have been possible for us to send him to college without the scholarship," said Sayanarayana.

The family of four earns around Rs. 9,000 annually from coffee cultivation. Like any other farmer at Mullumeta, the Killos grow their own food crops alongside coffee, pepper and turmeric. Joseph helps his father on the field

whenever he is home on holidays.

"I love my village but I want my family to have a comfortable life," said Joseph. "There are too many problems here -- be it water, sanitation or transportation and connectivity." The habitation has no cellular connection, neither is there a metal road up to the village. None of the 45 households has a bathroom. There is a primary school but no basic infrastructure for its 17 children, he adds.

The major reason why students discontinue their education in this area is they have to work on the fields and it is sometimes an added expense for the family if one member stays away.

But, as Joseph confirms, people are gradually realising the potential of education and are willingly sending their kids to school. He wants to come back to his village some day to help his own people.

United across caste boundaries

AHANA D. CHAUDHARY

Paderu : Gau Ramamurthy, the grandson of a revered revolutionary of the Gau class in Gondipakalu village, is making a revolution of his own 50 years later by setting up a community living in his vicinity.

A year ago, Ramamurthy brought in people from various other clans who were deprived and hired them to work on his field. Along with three brothers, Ramamurthy owns 15 acres of land where they grow turmeric, ginger, banana and papaya. The dragon fruit is a special attraction on the field, apart from other vegetables. The hired people not only work here but also stay there, making their own living and securing an identity.

Ramamurthy who belongs to the Bhagatha tribe is also the first person from the village to marry a woman from another tribe - Gamu Devi of the Kondadora tribe. Initially, he got married in 1987 but she passed away in 2004 leaving him bereft. In 2004, Ramamurthy started travelling to Kagulabonda village for electrical fittings and there he met Gamu Devi.

He declared his deep liking for her to her aunt but was rejected with several objections since the village had had no history of an inter tribal marriage except a cousin's daughter who had also married a Bhagatha man.

They later agreed to the proposal and since then they have lived together.

Ramamurthy who was already a father of two children from his first marriage, confesses to taking some contraceptive herbal medicine before his second marriage to prevent further births in his family.

It has been 14 years since the marriage but they still do not have any children. Gamu Devi is still keen on having children but her husband seems stubborn.

The situation can be reversed if Ramamurthy is willing to seek medical intervention. The Tribal Affairs Department said, if he has the will, he can take her to the hospital and find a way out.

In the meanwhile, the younger son of the first wife has died of fever, yet he is negligent and obstinate. Gamu Devi said, "Budget is never an issue. I still dream of having children. I was not aware that he had consumed those pills or herbs before marriage."

Ramamurthy has two other brothers. One is a supervisor at the Hindustan Shipping and the other is a farmer in the nearby village.

Ramamurthy is contented that his ancestral property is undivided and he has a share in it.

"I wish to increase my agricultural activity in the following years majorly focusing on moving cultivation," he said.

King has a prayer for his people - a road

PRAJANMA DAS

Mulagaravu: A small village, almost off-grid, on top of a hillock is connected to the rest of the world with a mud trail and through a stream. Mulagaravu of the G. Madugula Mandal in Andhra Pradesh is virtually cut off. The nearest metal road is 2 km away and the nearest market is almost 5 km away.

But this is not a stray case. More than 59 per cent of the villages in the Paderu Agency area are either not connected with metal roads or have unmetalled roads, leaving transportation a hassle. The metal roads too are in no shape to allow a smooth ride.

"We have asked government several times. They keep saying

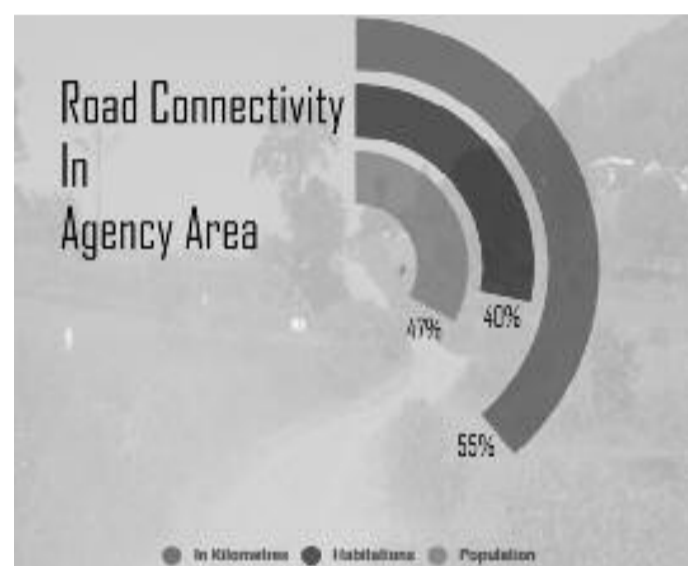
that they will finish the work soon," said Pangraj Babu, aka King, a resident. "They have started the work only recently." As the way from the village is downward, it is risky at night, he says.

"It is extremely hard for us women and children to cross the stream during rains," said G. Hansini, King's aunt. "It is really difficult to take pregnant women to hospital. No ambulance can reach here and it is risky to take them down this trail at that point." This is one of the reasons why women could not opt for institutional delivery.

There's no proper mobile phone connectivity either. But the government is setting up BSNL lines to get phone and internet connectivity. "It is difficult to develop connectivity in this area,"



The rough terrain of Paderu makes road connectivity difficult, particularly for pregnant women, reducing institutional deliveries to 70 per cent |PRAJANMA DAS



said Project Officer Ravi Pattanshetti. "The terrain is the major barrier and to top it all we are woefully short of staff." Clearing forest areas to build roads is a challenge in itself as it requires Forest department permission. "Another major problem we face is low capacity, we need more people to work," added Pattanshetti.

In another part of the Agency area, Padhagaravu, a Kodhu hamlet

of Gondhapakallu, there is a metal road nearby which, residents claim, was constructed only six months ago after thousands of applications to the panchayat.

"We take all our problems to the panchayat. They are supposed to solve our problems," said Ashok, a D.Ed graduate who is waiting for his posting. "To get mobile network, we have to travel 3 km. If we need an ambulance or in any

other emergency, someone has to go on a bike ride to make a call."

Talking about the "unresponsive" local governmental body, Pattanshetti said the last functionary on the ground is not always doing his work. "But since we are short of staff, I cannot even remove them. It is really hard to work in areas like these. We hardly find anyone willing to work here," he added.

From widowed ASHA worker at 54 to Village Sarpanch now

MEHNAZ YASMIN

Rakota: Desagiri Lakshmi (58) of the Bhagatha tribe (Scheduled Tribe) was elected Sarpanch of 22 villages in the Kitumula Gram Panchayat, Chintapalle Mandal after the Tribal Welfare Minister nominated her in 2008. She was re-elected in 2013.

But life has not always been this kind. She had already faced adversity when she was made to drop out of school twice.

First, due to clashes in political ideologies: when the Muttadar party was elected to power and she was removed from her school to wreak vengeance on her father who supported the Congress. Her father, unflinching in the face of growing subjugation, put her in a boarding school instead. He was as concerned about the education of his two daughters as he was about that of his three sons. Second, a burglary at her house, which robbed the family of their hard-earned savings left her with no other choice but to stay home and help her parents in agricultural labour to supplement their income and to ensure her younger siblings were not kept from attending school.

She became a widow in 2013 when she was 54. The same year also saw her rise and take over her late husband's role when she was re-elected Sarpanch.

Married at the age of 17 to Balayya Padal, she is now a mother of four - 3 sons and 1 daughter. She has educated all of them and ensured their financial stability. One of her sons and her daughter are teachers, one son is a police constable, while the youngest has taken the agricultural legacy forward.

She was already busy with social welfare activities several years before being elected as Sarpanch. She worked as an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA worker) before becoming the President of the Vellugu Project, aimed at curbing rural poverty in the state.

When her husband served as the Sarpanch from 2001 to 2006, she was an active volunteer in various Self Help Groups. An activist under Visakha Jilla Nava Nirmana Samithi, she undertook projects of constructing toilets in six villages, making them 100 per cent Open Defecation Free. She also constructed Gravity Fed Water Supply Systems in two villages and arranged running water in six others with the help of Rural Water Supply.

Decline in child marriage among Kodhu Tribes

AYESHA ROY

Kodugudu: Gammeli Mali of the Khonds (Kodhu) tribe lives with her five children, husband and mother-in-law in this village of 32 households. Three of her daughters were married much before attaining the age of 10. "I too was married when I was a child. It is a ritual in our tribe", said Mali.

The eldest daughter was married to her brother-in-law and the other two married of their own choice. "They went to schools to learn just to put their signature," said Gammeli referring to her daughters, Meena, Amla and Madhavi.

"We marry only inside our tribe and do not take dowry," said Ramana Gammeli, Mali's husband.

Estimates of their age are quite sketchy as according to their father, Meena and Amla were married off when they were in

when interacting with outsiders," said Ramana.

He said that they do not get many facilities from the government.

"We don't have enough food. We only grow ragi". Ragi is a six month crop, sowed in January and harvested in July through August. They produce approximately 50-70 kilograms per year.

Rajeshwari Korra, (23), an anganwadi teacher, was trained in the town Chodavaram 50 km from the village. "Even after training and several programmes by anganwadi centres, young girls are determined to marry young," she said. "If their parents do not get them married, they run away and marry on their own. Love marriages are very common among them."

Rajeshwari has studied up to X Std. and now earns Rs. 4,500 per month. "In this village, nobody was educated." But when government introduced secondary

taking place, we go along with constables to stop it and educate parents of the consequences".

Although the tribals are not aware that child marriages are illegal, Anganwadi teachers go to these villages and conduct programmes to spread awareness under the campaign to 'stop child marriage.' "We also promote education for girl child in Janmabhoomi programs and the incidence has come down. School girls are more aware of this now. The incidence is on decline," said Mrs. Laxmibai.

Child marriage leads to dire consequences for the adolescent girls. "They get pregnant soon after marriage. This causes anaemia and babies of low birth-weight or premature babies," said Dr. Karuna from the community health centre, Paderu.

Under UNICEF guidelines, marriage under 18 is a violation of human rights. In the report of Statistical analysis of Child



Child Marriage is a social norm widely accepted among Khond tribes since ages. Girls even below the age of seven get married. Love marriage is not a social stigma and girls choose their own partners if parents fail to get them married |HRIDKAMAL ROY

II Std. And Madhavi had studied till VII Std.. Their two sons, Kiran (VII standard) and Srinu (V standard) do not have birth certificates.

The medium of instruction is Telugu in government schools, but they speak in 'Kodhu' among themselves. "We speak Telugu

school in the nearby village Minimuluru, 3 km from here, she did not "want to lose the opportunity".

C.H. Laxmibai, a grade I supervisor, from the Child Development Agency in Chintapalle said, "if we get to know about any child marriage

Marriages in India (2017) from Young lives and National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), one in three of all child marriages globally takes place in India and rates are highest among the poorest and most socially disadvantaged.



Lack of proper nutrition, infrastructure and funds is hindering tribal school children from entering mainstream sports |HRIDKAMAL ROY

A missed call to save farm power



Raviteja with his mentor C.H. Prabhakar displaying his model which saves farm power |PARTH SHARMA

AHANA D. CHAUDHARY

Lammasingi: The mobile phone has made communication easy, nay, it has revolutionised human interaction. Rich or poor, every one owns the handy gadget. But a common complaint is that youngsters use it more as a source of entertainment—playing games, engaging in non-stop frivolous talk, listening to songs and watching movies.

However, a ninth standard student from the Government school at Lammasingi, using a basic mobile phone, has devised a way to cut down on farmers' cost by helping them save electricity and water. This effort

won him a national award last November.

The 15-year-old boy, Raviteja, explained that farms generally receive electricity at night, while farmers work during day. They leave the motor switched on throughout night, resulting in wastage of electricity and water overflowing to no purpose.

"I used a single-phase starter, a simple phone, a battery and a sim to conduct this experiment." The phone will be connected to the single-phase starter, which would in turn be rigged to the power source of the farm. Every time this phone is called, the single-phase starter will be triggered and it will shut off

electricity. Power is saved and can be better utilized for other purposes, says the student. Of course, battery use in the cellphone is negligible.

Raviteja, who conducted the experiment with his mentor C.H. Prabhakar last year, said, "I observed scarcity of power in my surroundings. Due to a lack of power, people were unable to live a decent life. So, I decided to use my knowledge for something productive."

Prabhakar added, "Power shortage here is an everyday affair. This is why we decided to perform this revolutionary experiment of saving power through a simple device."



Farmers await compensation

AADITYA ANAND M

Poondi: Farmers at Poondi Village in Thiruvallur are yet to receive the government's compensation for their crop loss due to drought in 2017, under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bhima Yojana (PMFBY) scheme. Through this scheme, farmers across the country would receive the compensation in case of crop damage due to natural calamities.

The PMFBY scheme, which was started in April 2016 insures farmers against crop losses. To get into the scheme, farmers are supposed to pay an amount as insurance premium based on the size of the land they own. "Last year, we paid Rs.350 for 1 acre as premium," said D. Mani, a 55-year-old farmer.

Though the Poondi reservoir is in the village, not even a single drop of that water is used by farmers. "Recently the Krishna water is let in to the reservoir and its capacity is almost full, but we are not

allowed to use that water as it is only used to cater to the needs of the Chennai people. We only depend on monsoon rains," he said.

The main crop cultivated in the village is rice. P. Rajendran, who owns 8 acres of land said that he got an additional 12 acres of land on lease last year to cultivate rice. "I spent more than 2 lakh to give salary to labourers apart from paying the insurance premium," he said.

Nearly 20 daily wage labourers worked in his land for three months. "We had to give Rs.500 per day to men and Rs.120 per day to women along with two times meal every day." He also spent Rs.25,000 in buying materials for cultivation.

"Unfortunately, the crops failed. Had everything gone well, I would have earned Rs. 4 lakhs after harvest," he said. This is the case of many farmers in the village. Some farmers were very confident that the compensation they were about to receive would help them over-



Loss pushes insured farmers to debt. | VIGNESSEH

come the loss.

Last year, the compensation for 1 acre was set at Rs.13,000. P. Rajendran should have received 2.5 lakhs as compensation. "We waited for a long time but we are yet to receive the amount. The government continues to disappoint us," he said.

It is said that the District Collector E. Sundaravalli came to the village and saw the extent of the damage. "During 2015 floods, we faced a similar loss. At that time we received the government com-

pensation so we expected the same during this loss as well," said 35-year-old M. Manoharan, who decided to do farming after quitting his job as an IT Machinist. "Through the Panchayat officials we met the District Collector numerous times requesting him to issue us the compensation," he said.

"In the Poondi panchayat alone there are 1800 acres of agricultural land and out of 1650 families, 1300 families are doing farming," said V. Durai, Poondi panchayat

secretary. He also added that 75 per cent of the fund should be allotted by the Central government while the State should allot 25% of the fund towards the PMFBY scheme. "When we approached the District Collector, the officials there said that they did not receive any funds from the government. Even I own 80 cents of land and I faced a huge loss," said the Panchayat secretary.

Many farmers said that despite the huge loss, they are managing by getting debts. "After the drought I cultivated the land once again by getting debts, I had a good harvest. This time, I am planning to start the cultivation once again," said, T. Babu, a 47-year-old farmer.

"We also work in other fields as daily wage labourers to earn some amount. Even though we are in debt, our situation is not worse. Without receiving the government compensation we somehow manage to run our family," he said.

Erratic supply in PDS outlets

GOWRI S

Kadambattur/Ponneri: Residents of Kottaiyur have raised allegations of black marketing against the employees in-charge of the Public Distribution System (PDS) outlets. Erratic supply of PDS commodities through fair price shops in Kottaiyur and Kadal Kanniyur has the residents angry. On the other hand, the civil supplies officials relate this trend to the shortage of staff across the State.

The fair price shop remains closed in Kottaiyur village of Kadambattur block on most of the days in a month, leaving only a three-day window for the residents to collect the commodities. In addition to this, the PDS employee allegedly demands extra money and does not stick to the rates standardised by the government - a clear case of black marketing.

The Kottaiyur ration shop is the only one in the panchayat and supplies commodities to four villages, namely Narasamangalam, Kottaiyur, Beemavaram and Karani.

Rice, a free commodity is allegedly being sold for Rs.5. "For 2 Kgs of sugar, the original price will be Rs.27, but here they sell it for Rs.40. Also, wheat which is Rs. 7.50 per kg is sold for Rs.10," said M. Munuswamy, a resident of Mariamman Koil Street in Kottaiyur. "When we ask, they say that they have to pay the drivers who bring the load. Since the government does not pay for the transportation of commodities, apparently they have to pitch in. This is how they justify their acts," said N. Sarasandiran, another resident.

According to Munuswamy, card holders are provided with only half a kg of sugar as against the allotted 2 kgs.

"We get Palmolein oil only on

alternate months. If the Scheduled Caste village (Narasamangalam) gets it, we won't get it that month and vice versa," said J. Janatha, an embroidery worker from Kottaiyur. Also, only 1 litre of Kerosene is provided for a card holder who is originally entitled to minimum 3 litres.

In Kadal Kanniyur, a village of 40 Irula families in Pazhaverkadu block, the ration shop charges around Rs.110 to Rs.120 collectively for all commodities. However, only 17 kg of rice is provided as opposed to the apportioned 20 kgs. One litre of Palmolein oil is given for two households practically reducing it to 0.5 litre per household. "The ration shops will be open only for four days. If we cannot collect the commodities due to some emergency within these days, we will not get it the next month," said A. Achamma, a resident.

In response to this, M.Narayanan, District Supplies Officer, said, "Because of the shortage of officers, the same officer in-charge of a ration shop has to shuttle to the other one, carrying instruments and other needed machines. This is the reason that the PDS remains open only for a few days in a village."

According to him, the shifting of PDS workers is done to ensure that the marginalized communities do not have to spend much time and money on travel to the ration shops. However, Narayanan confirmed that if there's any ration left over for a family, they ensure that it gets added to the next month's quota.

In both the villages, the residents re-affirmed that this does not happen. Responding to the allegations of black marketing in Kottaiyur, the officer said, "Sometimes there is black marketing and we do investigate and take action. We will look into the matter of Kottaiyur."



Ray of hope in Venkatapuram

SHUCHITA KUMAR

Uthukkottai: A small cemented house, resounding with the chatter and sudden eruption of laughter of school children, sits at the corner of a narrow street. Though it may seem like any other household in the quiet village, it is where the futures of many are being shaped.

Surrounded by children in school uniforms sits Kalpana Venkatesh, who had completed Class X in 2000. Though at that time it seemed like the end of her journey

The NGO has a provision where any individual can 'sponsor a child and enable him or her to access good food, sanitation, education and all round development.' In the Schedule Caste colony of Venkatapuram village, 26 children have been sponsored by the NGO, out of which 16 are girls and 10 are boys.

The sponsored children here are provided with toys, mosquito nets, books, stationary and are even taken to camps. Though the initiative was meant to be eight years long but lack of funds has

Jaganathan Dasarathan took up nursing, Hemandi Methaiya chose IT.

The problems for the selected candidates do not end there, though the NGO sponsors them, they only pay the fees for the first year. "Jaganathan had to drop out after the first year because he was unable to pay the 18,000 rupees fee for the second year of the course," said Kalpana.

Medical camps are also organised by the NGO occasionally. "A medical camp was conducted in 2015 in Pennalurpettai and I found that my blood group is B-," chips in an excited Priyanka, eagerly edging forward to show her blood report.

"Not only medical camps, we were also taken for camping where we are taught about good and bad touch and how to deal with boys who might harass us. When we were taken to a camp in the Red Hills we were shown a documentary on how to deal with eve teasers and what sexual advances are," said a Class VIII student, S. Jyothi.

The organisation has played a vital role in providing the students sex education and Kalpana has helped them get through the rough patches in their lives. Campaigns like 'The Child Safety Campaign' organised in July last year have helped both children and parents, understand, recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations.

While the metropolitan people sit in their plush offices churning packages worth 16 lakhs per annum, Kalpana is busy giving a new direction to the lives of the children in the small hamlet of Venkatapuram without demanding even a single penny. It's time to question the elite who complain but do little to bring change in the society.



Kalpana Venkatesh with students. | SHUCHITA KUMAR

in formal education, a new opportunity beckoned at her door in 2014, when she was approached by the 'Help a Child of India' a non-governmental organization (NGO).

"I was approached by the organisation, three years back to help and guide the students from my village. I help them with their homework; explain topics which they had difficulty understanding in school. They come to me after school. It's more like an interactive session than classroom teaching," said Venkatesh.

put a stop on Kalpana's income. "I was receiving 1,500 rupees every month earlier but now I am helping children free of cost. But I am happy the children are still being sponsored," said Kalpana.

The help does not stop with the completion of Class XII, but those who perform well academically are chosen for vocational training courses like Information Technology (IT) and Nursing.

The first batch for the vocational training courses, comprising three students was chosen in 2017. While Mahesh Casavan and

Damned!



Poor maintenance of Poondi dam and the nearby park has led to the number of visitors dwindling from around one lakh to 10,000. | VIGNESSEH

No govt. funds, houses half built

VIGNESSEH

Ponneri: More than 10 houses at the Irular Colony in Kattavar village remain half-built due to unavailability of funds granted under Indra Awas Yojana (IAY) scheme. Most of the remaining 50 houses are makeshift huts erected after the damages caused by Cyclone Vardah.

Not even a single household has any sanitation facilities and all the villagers defecate in open fields.

Rajendran (38), took nearly half a decade to build a ceiling for his house because he did not receive the third installment under IAY scheme. "I received the first installment of Rs.8,000 only after I laid the foundation. Then I got Rs. 14,000 after erecting the walls at 10 feet in height. After that I did not



Rajendran in front of his half-built house | VIGNESSEH

receive any funds," he says.

Rajendran, a short-term agricultural labourer, halted the construction of his house in 2012 after a financial crunch. He, along with his wife and two sons in Class XI and Class VI, moved from his thatched hut to the half-constructed house in the aftermath of Cyclone Vardah in 2016. The house has no doors and windows.

"I should have received Rs.55,000 in total under IAY scheme. But, I did not even get half the amount," says Rajendran, who gives regime change in Tamil Nadu as a reason for inaccessibility of funds.

For Sangeetha (20), shifting from a makeshift hut to a brick house was not a big relief. Unlike Rajendran, her father roofed the house with asbestos sheet. "The

heat in April and May is unbearable and during rainy days, water dribbles down and we have to stay outside our house," she says. "If we do not have money to build a ceiling for our house, how will we construct a toilet?" she asks.

"The money for constructing a toilet is given in two installments of Rs.7,000 and Rs.5,000, but only after construction. So, even though it is embarrassing to defecate in fields and difficult to bear the mosquito bites, we get adapted to them," she says.

R Saravanan, president of Pazhangudi Makkal Iyakkam (Tribal People Movement), says that the funds might have reached the Block Development Office, but have not reached the people. "The District Collector must look into this issue to resolve it," he says.

Meyyur menace: The spill-over effect of a liquor shop

NARYANAN V

Poondi: Sixteen-year-old K. Jyothika asked her mother Lakshmi Kannan (32) to get her a bicycle to reach school but eventually she dropped out in Class XI two years ago, when her family could not afford one. Initially Lakshmi thought her daughter was only finding reasons to give up studies but now she realises that Jyothika's demand for a cycle was justified, for it was not to reach her school sooner but safer.

For two decades, Lakshmi and other families from her Vettaikaran community (Scheduled Tribes) have been living in harmony with the Irula community (another scheduled tribe) at Vembudu that is spread over three streets with 48 thatched houses in Meyyur Panchayat. The village is connected through a shady narrow mud road to the Vengal main road which

leads to Meyyur town.

In 2016, a mini liquor shop was set up by the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) at the Vengal main road despite protests from the local community. Since then the entire stretch of main road as well as the poorly lit mud road leading to Vembudu has been a hub for the drun-

ks. Scattered liquor bottles, crushed plastic cups, empty snack covers are strewn all along the road leading to the village.

"My husband hardly earns Rs.400 a week out of which he takes Rs.300-350 for drinking and gives me Rs. 50 or 100 for domestic expenses," says Lakshmi.

Most men in this village are dependent only on wood cutting or construction works in the nearby villages. For most part of the year they remain unemployed. On the other hand, women in this village are dependent on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which offers jobs to women at erratic

intervals in alternate weeks between Meyyur and Vembudu villages.

"If you wish to do something for the women and children here, please help to remove the TASMAC," urges Lakshmi.

According to her, soon after inception, the TASMAC shop was

ransacked and the stocks were destroyed by the women from Vembudu and nearby villages when there were similar protests across the State to close the TASMAC shops. But the shop was reinstated in the same place within a matter of few months.

"When my daughter asked for a cycle to cross this area (TASMAC) I could not understand but now we feel so embarrassed to cross those drunken men who at times abuse us," Lakshmi adds.

A government bus plies through on this road carrying school children and women at 9 a.m. and brings them back at 5.30 p.m. Lakshmi's another daughter Swetha (10) who studies class VI and two sons Surya and Runjith studying Class VIII and VI are sent to school on this bus which was not available during Jyothika's time.

"There were 16 cases of eve tea-

sing incidents, out of which only two First Information reports (FIR) are filed and the rest of them are settled through compromise," says D. Samuel (48), an advocate at Thiruvallur court.

Samuel says, women and children from the nearby villages are afraid to cross this stretch since it is too secluded and does not have any street lights. Many parents have chosen not to send their girls to school fearing harassment from the drunken youths.

According to Samuel, the TASMAC is owned by the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) councillor Amudha Chakravarthy and the police in cahoots with the shop owners either persuade or threaten the

victims to withdraw the complaints against the TASMAC.

"You come here by 3.30 in the afternoon you can see a mini Pondicherry here," says K. Murugan (56), the district secretary of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) in Thiruvallur, known better as 'Communist Murugan' among the locals.

Earlier the TASMAC was located at Meyyur main road affecting only one village, now it is affecting seven villages since this road connects Meyyur, Vembudu, Kavrapetta, Malandhur, Abagipetta, Mammampur and Navalkuppam, adds Murugan, who is also the district secretary of CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions) Thiruvallur.

According to him, politicians are

least bothered about the welfare of the tribal people but only interested in ensuring that TASMAC is functional throughout the day.

"When I attempt to close it (TASMAC), I am getting calls from the Collector and even from a Member of Parliament (MP)," he adds.

Denying the allegations, V Panchacharam, salesperson at TASMAC, said there are no problems in the locality because of this shop.

"Earlier the shop was on Meyyur town which resulted in accidents but now we have moved to an isolated place, where else can we go?" Panchacharam asks.

Pointing to a notice board in the shop that mentions the prohibition of liquor sale to people below the age of 21, Panchacharam said, we strictly adhere to this rule hence the question of youngsters getting addicted to alcohol is irrelevant.

When love dissolves caste

VIGNESSH

Narasamangalam: Four years ago, Sathish's parents had asked him to put Nandhini out of his mind fearing their marriage could lead to a conflict between Dalit and Vanniyar communities. Nandhini's mother, on her part, adhering rigidly to her caste and its customs, tried to nip their relationship in the bud. Though the couple had registered their marriage before letting their parents know about their love, they were persistent about a traditional wedding with their parents' consent.

"My father abandoned my mother, elder brother and me when I was very young. Since then, we had been living with my maternal grandmother at Pillaipakkam village in Sriperambudur," says Nandhini, who was born and brought up in a Most Backward Community family. "There was no caste-based difference among students in my school. So the thought of caste did not arise in me."

After completing Class XII, Nandhini had joined a travels company, where she met Sathish. He worked as a driver and she worked as a system administrator. "By the end of 2012, he proposed to me and I accepted. I knew he was from Dalit community and my family would reject his proposal, but my education and employment, both unpolluted by casteism, gave me a sense of self-reliance," she says.

Three months later, the couple

registered their marriage and got into the process of getting their parents' approval. "When I told my mother about Sathish's proposal, she, without further ado, turned it down citing caste as the reason. My brother was reluctant," she says.



Nandhini

hish convinced his parents. "Sathish's uncle and brother came with a formal proposal, but my mother rejected that too."

Finally, Nandhini pinned her hopes on her grandmother. She had always been petted by her grandmother. "After seeing me in distress for over three months, my grandma gave her assent to our marriage," she says. Nandhini's mother and brother attended her wedding at Veeraraghava Perumal Temple in Thiruvallur in August 2013, albeit unwillingly.

Nandhini received a hearty welcome from the Dalit vil-

lage of Narasamangalam. "The neighbours greeted me with affection and treated me like their own daughter. In the four years of my married life, I have never felt detached," says Nandhini. "The only problem in Narasamangalam is that buses to towns are infrequent."

Nandhini and her co-sister, Chinnamma, who is married to Sathish's elder brother, have asked their husbands to build toilets. "Unlike Nandhini, I had a toilet in my mother's place. After marriage, defecating in open fields was strange to me," she says. Chinnamma was born in a Dalit family and has built a close rapport with Nandhini. "We never differentiated someone in our school, neither did our teachers. We were edified by being educated in a casteless milieu."

Nandhini is vehement about educating her three-year-old son on the ill-effects of the caste system. "All must send their children to schools. Education shapes us to bring real change in our society. It keeps the casteist practices at bay."

A 'caste - free' model: Adigathur

GOWRI S

Adigathur: Four communities, constituting 650 houses, form the model village, Adigathur, often recognised as a 'caste-free' society. Dalit, Irula, Narikurava (a nomadic group) and Naidu/Mudaliar communities are represented in small numbers, in different parts of this village.

Adigathur has a strong presence of the Dalit community- both Parayars and the Arundathiyars. While the Parayar community is engaged in agricultural labour, the Arundathiyars are mostly cobblers and bag-makers. This community has undergone a transition through the years in terms of their standard of living- the thatched huts were converted to cemented houses in the free house sites provided by the government. However, the Parayar community who are engaged in agricultural labour do not own any land.

Though the Naidu and Mudaliar community which belong to the higher rungs in the status quo (Other Backward Classes category) has its presence in the village, according to the former Panchayat president, K. Chidambaranathan, there have been no instances of caste-based violence or unrest within the village. "However, during their main festivals, the STs are not allowed to participate. When it comes to God, they segregate," he said. The village has a main temple where 'Selliamman' is worshipped. Most of the communities except the Irulas worship this God.

Before 2001, Adigathur had only three Irula families. In 2001, under the initiative of the International

Justice Mission more families were rehabilitated within Adigathur, in the free house sites, each about three cent, distributed by the government (patta). Most of them who fared as bonded labourers in neighbouring villages were later on rehabilitated within this community in Adigathur. The government had also provided Rs.30,000 each to every family for constructing houses. Now, there are 95 families in this settlement. The cemented houses in the settlement are supplemented with toilets built with the funds provided by Asian Paints Limited. However,



The hand-crafted flower bouquets Narikuravas make are sold throughout the country.

thatched huts do not have toilets. "I have a dream of seeing no thatched huts here. I am working towards it," said the former President. There are three streets in the village which houses the Irula community and their clan god is 'Kanniyamman'. "Many people from this village, across communities, come to

our temple to celebrate with us," said K. Kala, a manual labourer.

Kala, came from Egattur to Adigathur in 2000. Manual labour has always been her family's main source of income. In fact, Kala plans to run for the Panchayat President's post in elections next month and wishes to represent her community. "To an extent, the former presidents have made sure that we live an adequate life. I wish to continue doing the same if I win," said Kala.

Adigathur has also accommodated a nomadic community, the Narikuravas. Constantly on a quest for market that enables them to sell the goods they make, they migrate from place to place. The Narikurava community in Adigathur resided in Avadi before the Central government deci-

ded to rehabilitate them in this village 10 years back.

Most of the people in this community of 100 families living in 60 houses, have been to different parts of the country at different time periods. The hand-crafted flower bouquets they make are sold throughout the country during the time of festi-

Divided by boundaries, united by rationality

VIGNESSH

Kadambattur: Each and every electric pole, water tank and community tap in Kottaiyur is painted blue, yellow and red implying the stronghold of Pattali Makkal Katchi in the village. In front of one such electric pole is L. Janaki's dwelling. The 27-year-old mother-of-two waits on the porch for her husband who has wandered off with his younger son around the street.

The three-generation-old house was partitioned after R. Loganathan married Janaki in 2009. The rundown condition of the house is the reason for Janaki and her family

members taking to fields when nature calls. As soon as her husband returns, Janaki pampers her son. "My first son is 5-year-old and studies in UKG in a private school," she introduces. "The little one is 3-year-old."

Panchayat officials had explained Swachh Bharat Abhiyan scheme to Janaki during her 100 days employment under National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, but lack of space in the house and its condition have led to continuous postponement of the plan to build a toilet. She weathers the storm every day feeling embarrassed when male agricultural labourers cross the field.

"It is very difficult for women to manage on open fields. During rainy days, the situation worsens," she says. With an income of Rs. 10,000 through his job at Parryware, renovating the house damaged by Cyclone Vardah is beyond Loganathan's hope.

"The government gives us Rs.12,000, but only after we construct a toilet. If they give the money before construction, it would be helpful," he says.

Lending a hand to run the house, Janaki does embroidery. "Kottaiyur was famous for embroiderers 6-7 years ago. All the 1,000 households in the village had at least one embroiderer. Gradually, people shifted

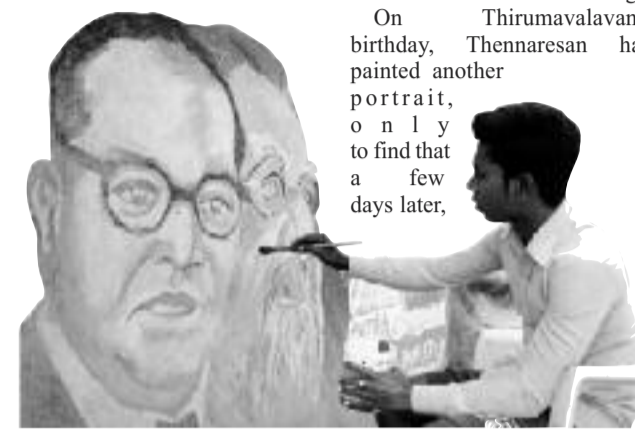
N A I S H A N A I R

Narasamangalam: His friends call him 'Mass,' a colloquialism for 'super' in Tamil, which 20-year-old Thennaresan has assumed as his pen name, painting pillars and lamp-posts in the shades of the Cuban flag, and portraits of Ambedkar and Thirumavalavan on his village walls. Narasamangalam, where he lives, is the scheduled-caste Ambedkar colony near the larger village of Kottaiyur, which houses most backward classes (MBC), caste-Hindus.

"When you paint for someone, you usually paint what they ask you to paint. But on a public wall, like in schools, you can paint faces of leaders. Since the people in my area are big followers of Ambedkar and Thiruma, I paint for them," he says. Besides this, he enjoys painting the faces of Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda and former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Kamaraj.

Until last year, he only

painted on paper, but on his friends' request, he took up a wall painting assignment. It was completely new - suddenly he had to blow up the faces. Even the tiniest mistakes would be visible. His school arts and crafts teacher



Thennaresan painting portraits of Ambedkar and Periyar | VIGNESSH

A. Peter taught him how to draw an outline on a wall. And he began by drawing the outlines of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, a social reformer against caste discrimination and the architect of the Indian Constitution; and Thirumavalavan, a Dalit leader and politician.

Thennaresan has not won any awards yet. Perhaps one, when he painted Gandhi's face for a competition in Class XII. But he did receive an appre-

ciation for his work from his idol Thirumavalavan, when the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi party functionaries arranged for him to display his work.

He got a painting autographed by Thirumavalavan too, on one of the latter's visits to the village.

On Thirumavalavan's birthday, Thennaresan had painted another portrait, only to find that a few days later,

it had been splashed with cow dung in the night. Whoever had done it, had written 'PMK only' (Paattali Makkal Katchi is a political party in Tamil Nadu that represents the Most Backward Caste - Vanniya) over the painting, leading the people in the SC colony to guess that it could only be the handiwork of certain miscreants from the MBC area.

Keruffles of this nature are common between the two villa-

ges. The only conflagration was the one in Thennaresan's mind. He was heart-broken to see his painting disrespected, and the peace between the two villages shook up.

"My work has no agenda. I didn't know it would become such a big issue. People from the PMK had to come and resolve it," he says. They removed the cow dung, and the painting still stands.

He is now more than six-professional-wall-paintings-old, charging Rs.500 per square feet for faces and designs, and Rs.25 for every square feet of letters.

He accompanies Peter, to paint cartoons and rhymes on local kindergarten school walls but for which he does not receive any monetary gains. He also decorates the village stage during functions and celebrations in the village.

"After my XIIth I wanted to join an art course but my teacher (Peter) advised me to join a more 'normal' course," he says. Painting is a part-time source of income for Thennaresan, who simultaneously handles his MBA studies.

"I can't answer my relatives saying that I am a 'painter.' Being an engineer or a manager is less degrading," he says.

"But I give away paintings to those who visit and I never refuse."

Houses for all remains a pipe dream in Irula colony

AADITYA ANAND M

Adigathur: Under the aegis of International Justice Mission (IJM), a colony was created in Adigathur village in Thiruvallur district, to rescue the victims of bonded labour and provide them rehabilitation.

This settlement was added to an Irular colony in 2012, since all the rehabilitated labourers belonged to the Irular Community. "The place was just an empty land containing thorny bushes, we then cleared everything and built the colony in 2001," said K. Chidambaranathan, former Kadambattur block Panchayat leader.

Irulas who were living as bonded labourers around the village and from different villages in the district were asked to shift here," he said. When the labourers shifted to the village, the International Justice Mission, a global organisation that protects the most vulnerable from violence and oppression, helped in providing them the basic amenities for the initial two years.

Almost all the people in the colony are currently daily wage labourers. Totally there are 76 houses in the colony out of which 66 houses have Patta (Land Ownership Deed). The other 10 houses do not have a Patta since the land on which it was built belongs to a temple.

There are many families that live in huts on the land owned by the temple. "Thirty seven families living in huts require houses. As the temple owns the land, there is a delay in getting the Patta. Once the Patta is issued, houses will be built for them as well," said R. Selvam, a social worker. He also said that



Irular colony has no facilities like schools and hospitals. | AADITYA

there are more than 100 families in the village. "Some families are in need of a house but they are adjusting by living as a joint family in a single house," he said.

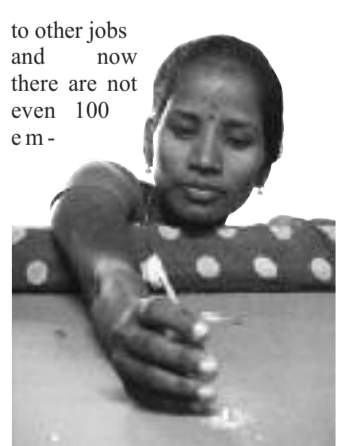
Earlier, some of the houses were constructed here without Patta, recently the government changed the rules. "Nowadays,

in compliance with the rules, houses will be constructed only if there is Patta. The government asked for a no-objection certificate from the temple, we have also given that but still there is a delay in the issue of the patta," he said.

All the constructed houses here have toilets. "Only those who live in huts do not have a toilet," said R. Selvam. In 2013, the government constructed a public toilet in the colony to stop the people from defecating in the open. "We used the toilet till the pipeline in it broke two months ago, after that we once again started to defecate in the open fields," said M. Savithri, a daily wage labourer.

The colony does not have other facilities like schools and hospitals. "There is only an anganwadi in the colony, for school, the children have to go to Manavalanagar, for hospitals, we are supposed to go till Kadambattur," said R. Selvam.

"We are receiving help from the government and NGOs, but our progress has been very slow. We think the NGOs do it to seek attention and political parties do it to gain votes, after that they forget us. They also do not really care that whether what they do reaches all the people or not. We still live amidst some problems," he said.



Janaki earns Rs. 250 for a saree | VIGNESSH

broiders in the village," she says. Janaki earns Rs.250 for designing a saree and makes around Rs.3,000 per month through embroidery.

She also works under MGNREGA and it was when a beautiful relationship began. Janaki, who is from Most Backward Community, had been working in Narasamangalam, a Dalit Colony about half a kilometre away from Kottaiyur.

She, breaking down the caste hierarchy, started befriending women from the Dalit community. "They (Dalit women) respect me more than my own relatives do. They always enquire after me and

my children," she says. Her friends at Narasamangalam had presented her sweets and bangles on Diwali. She said, "As a customary practice, I do not eat the food they cook. So, whenever I visit their home, they would never fail to serve me outside food."

Not only Janaki, even Loganathan had experienced the affection by the people at Narasamangalam village.

"When they visit us, they do not enter our house. But when we visit them, they would compel us to get inside their house and serve us tea or coffee," he says.

"During temple functions, both the communities share equal autho-

ity. Problems arise due to small conflicts among youths, but the mentality of discrimination is vanishing."

Janaki bobs her head agreeing to her husband's remarks. As it is time for embroidering, she gets inside and starts sewing beads into fabric. After listening to the entire conversation, Janaki's younger son, Kamalash, dashes out to blow soap bubbles.

A bubble floats up into the air. Like a 360-degree camera, it reflects the whole village - people, houses, temple and a glimpse of its traditions. In a split second, Kamalash bursts it with his tiny little forefinger.

Agriculture in troubled waters

A broken sluice valve in Beemavaram leaves acres of agri land inarable



Cattle grazing in the erstwhile agriculture fields of Beemavaram. |SHUCHITA KUMAR

NARAYANAN V & SHUCHITA KUMAR

Kadambattur: Residents of Beemavaram village eagerly await the Pongal festival to watch Tamil actor Santhanam in action. No, there isn't any Santhanam movie scheduled for release on Pongal but the actor would usually celebrate Pongal with his maternal relatives and friends in this ancestral village.

"Few years ago there were 100 families in this village but only 10 live here now" says K.Mohan Krishnan, Santhanam's uncle who moved to his new house at Pannur with his family. Pannur village is located on the sides of State highway (SH 120) that connects Walajabad to Keelachery and passes through the industrial belt of Sunguvarchathiram.

Although Mohan is connected to this village, lack of employment, education and women's safety has forced him to move out of Beemavaram to Pannur, where his 23-year-old son, Satish works at Bharat Petrol bunk. His daughters, Tulasi (20) works in Yamaha factory and Saranya (18) studies in Class XII at Don Bosco higher secondary school.

Agriculture was the major occupation in the village but now

vast acres of land serve as a grazing ground for the cattle from nearby villages

One of the biggest barriers to overcome in order to incur profits from farming for the people of Beemavaram is the scarcity of two resources for agriculture i.e., cultivable land and water. Though a few years back both were in abundance it's not the case anymore.

MIGRATION CRISIS

"The entire area of agricultural land has become uncultivable only because of the apathy of officials", says Siva G Subramanian (27), a resident of Beemavaram village.

Pointing at a dysfunctional 'sluice valve' (a sliding gate or device for controlling the flow of water) inside the Beemavaram lake, Siva said despite repeated pleas to the Block Development Officer, the sluice valve has not been replaced and the sludge surrounding it is still there. As a result, water from the Beemavaram Lake inundates the agriculture field located on the opposite side.

According to the locals the government officials came and

took pictures of the flooded fields, destroyed crops and broken sluice valve. But since then none of the officers have set foot in the village.

Once a home to hundred families, Beemavaram now bore a deserted look with only ten families left. One of the primary reasons for the migration from Beemavaram is due to the failure of agriculture which forced the people in search for other livelihood options.

"Many people sold their agricultural lands to big companies after their fields became untenable for crop cultivation. They have now started working as daily wage labourers" said G. Radhakrishnan, who owns 40 cents of land in Beemavaram.

While the government officers have turned a blind eye, the number of households in Beemavaram village is dwindling with the decline in the amount of arable land for cultivation and the resultant loss in income and livelihood.

A timely effort by the government officials would have not only prevented acres of agricultural land from becoming uncultivable but would have prevented migration.

A village in ruins

AADITYA ANAND M

Kadambattur: With abandoned houses and deserted roads, Beemavaram is an isolated village in the Kadambathur block, in Thiruvallur district. The village which once had 50 houses now has only 10 houses as many residents had migrated over the decades from the village to industrial hubs nearby.

"Most of the people moved out in search of jobs and better facilities," said J. Sampath, a real estate broker, who lives in Mummudikuppam village, near Beemavaram. The main occupation in the village was agriculture and embroidery designing.

According to him, the farmers were facing huge losses and embroidery designers also lost their job as the demand stopped since the factories began to use machines.

When people decided to look for alternative jobs, many factories emerged in places like Sunguvarchatram. Many people went there to work as daily wage labourers and earned more than what they previously earned.

The village also lacked many basic facilities and roads were constructed only two months ago. "We had only mud road all these years and we faced many difficulties especially when it

rains. Our feet would get stuck in the mud and it would be very difficult to walk" said S. Shiva, a native of the village.

The nearest bus stand and school are in Pannur, which is three kms away from the city. "During rainy season, school students would struggle a lot to go to their school. This is also one of the reasons for many people to move out," he said.

"While seeing them struggle, I would feel very bad but we were helpless as we were not able to drop them in school in our bike," said S. Yoganathan, a native of Mummudikuppam who stays in Beemavaram to graze his cattle.

The villagers particularly mentioned ex-MLA, G. Raviraj, a Pattali Makkal Katchi candidate, who won in Tiruttani constituency during 2001 Assembly elections. "He made our village to get noticed by the government officials. He built a water tank for us during his tenure, said G. Radhakrishnan.

Before that the villagers were drinking the water from the local pond. "The MLA also tried to provide road facility but we got it only a year back," he said.

He was not hopeful about the people returning to Beemavaram. "Today, we have good road facility and water, but as there is no scope for agriculture, nobody will return," he said.



Roads were constructed in the village only two months back. |AADITYA ANAND M

Kottaiyur's private health predicament

SUDIPTO CHAUDHURY

Kottaiyur: L.Janaki (27), from Kottaiyur stays in a house devoid of indoor plumbing. When asked about plans to make a functional toilet in the house, she says it will be done when the house will be renovated in the future. "Currently, we (she, her husband and sons, five year old Kamlesh and three year old Linges) relieve ourselves in the open," she says.

Another Kottaiyur resident, V. Dhanalakshmi, says "The thorny bushes at the edges of the fields are the area we go. However, since that area is sometimes between the fields and the houses, it is very embarrassing."

D.Manjula, from Poondi, adds another to the already difficult circumstances in her village. "As the area we go to is frequented by agricultural labourers at work during the day, we can only go at night or early morning."

Only about thirty of the estimated hundred houses in Kottaiyur have toilets. When asked why they have a common

reply that the money given by the government, a sum of about Rs.12,000, is not enough to construct a functional indoor toilet. And even then, this financial help is not given to all the people in the village.

Speaking to S.S. Kumar, Project Director at Tiruvallur BDO, some clarification is obtained. "The money that is given is an incentive and not a matching grant. Additionally, we provide technical help whenever villagers initiate the building of a toilet in their house. Lastly, continued awareness is spread against open defecation and the importance of hygiene through the various schools, self help groups and anganwadis in the area," he said.

Speaking about the people who are devoid of the program, he said that "The money is given as per prior census, so sometimes it may happen that a few people are left out. But we are putting repeated efforts to include everyone."

Going beyond the obvious problems related to open defecation, the situation becomes more problematic during the rainy season, when stagnant water causes insects to breed and diseases run rampant, in addition to frequent cases of allergic reactions, fever and stomach upset. At this time, only basic medical supplies can be availed at the anganwadis.

The only other options are the private hospitals at Sunguvarchatram, at a distance of about 10 kilometres. However, as opposed to government hospitals, private hospitals charge a hefty fee of about Rs 300 per consultation. "We have to manage" says Janaki. "At least we are at peace that we are taken care of. In fact, during pregnancy, it is actually better to get the doctor consultations and sonographs from private hospitals as the doctors in government hospitals are very authoritative about which clinics to go to for the various scans and reports."

This is echoed by Manjula, who says that "For the medical check-ups they go to government hospitals, but for treatments, they find it better to go to private hospitals."

That said, the situation is not completely bleak. She says that government hospitals try to do their bit. For instance, they distribute sanitary napkins to balwadis in the area, to be taken as needed. Dr. Md Anvar Sathick, who runs Shifa hospital in Sunguvarchatram, said, "Most of the cases I would get earlier were due to one of two reasons- malnutrition or unhygienic conditions. But, the situation has been improving over the years, as education among the villagers is growing."

Nevertheless, the private clinics have their hands full. "I along with my brother, with whom I run the clinic, take care of the simple cases and spread awareness the best we can. For more critical cases, we refer them to larger facilities like the Madras Medical College."

SNAPSHOTS

Invasive weed destroys crops in Beemavaram

An invasive weed species, *prosopis mesquite*, a thorny tree originally from South America, has made farming difficult in Beemavaram. The weed grows as high as 15-20 feet in a matter of three years and cannot be

uprooted by hand. JCBs are required to clear the fields, which costs upto Rs.75,000. The brick houses in Beemavaram, most left abandoned due to the lack of sustainable livelihood, cost Rs.50,000 to construct. The Panchayat cannot get the people of the neighbouring village and Beemavaram to cooperate, or has any incentive been provided to the villagers to clear their fields.

| EISHA NAIR

Hints of progress for the girl child in Poondi taluk

EISHA NAIR

Poondi: The sex ratio in Poondi, at 998, according to the 2011 Census, is higher than that of rural Tiruvallur, at 985. Among the Scheduled Tribe community it is 991.

"We do not differentiate between our girls and boys," says B. Nagamma, a manual labourer from the Irula community. However, the more significant causes could be access to education for both girls and boys, nuclear family and marriage practices.

"There is no dowry in our community, marriages are usually conducted by the bridegroom's family," says M.Senchalamma, who was earlier a construction worker.

The Irula community does not experience migration of adult males, as other villages like Kottaiyur and Beemavaram.

According to Poondi Panchayat Secretary, V.Durai, Poondi village has three anganwa-

dis for each community, the Irulas, most backward classes and Arundhatiyars. In all, five balwadis exist under the Panchayat, the other two being in Rangapuram and Krishnapuram.

Durai says, "The reason could be a nutritious diet. The Irulas catch their own fish."

Senchalamma thinks it might be due to keeping active. "Free of cost exercise in our work, keeps the diseases away," she says. Apart from this, "The panchayat officials check if the number of cases reported of an illness is high, then they send workers to clean the tanks with bleaching powder to prevent infections."

"Nurses visit once a week and if any illness is reported, people are sent to hospital. All deliveries happen there now," adds Senchalamma.

According to the Panchayat Secretary the census data is outdated, while the population of the village is 7536 the census data shows



Representational image

only 4160 people.

"Whenever we need relief funds, the State looks at the census data to allocate, and so it is inadequate," adds Durai.

Lastly, Irulas form nuclear families after marriage.

Nagamma says, "Thirty-four years ago, a woman would give birth to at least six children. Now the number is reduced to three."

"Until marriage, we live as a group family. First month after marriage, the bride and groom stay with groom's parents before moving to a separate house," she adds.

There is no dowry in our community. Marriages are usually conducted by the bridegroom's family.

Where flowers bloom, so do their hopes

Despite being in the grip of poverty, households in the Narikkuravar community are busy adding colours to the homes of many. The 60 odd households in this settlement eke out a living by making artificial flower bouquets. Raw material procured from Chennai is used to make vibrant bunches and carried across the country. The flowers are in great demand during Ganesh Chaturti in Maharashtra.



|SHUCHITA KUMAR

Gudiyam Caves, a cavern to prehistoric times



Located 12 kilometers away from Poondi reservoir, the pre-historic Gudiyam caves in Goonipalayam is a perfect location for trekkers and adventure seekers. The stone age site believed to be inhabited by the Paleolithic man, is today in a neglected state with very few visitors who also leave a trail of garbage and liquor bottles all along the rugged road, endangering some rare species in the vicinity.

|NARAYANAN V

Poor sanitation undermines better health

GOWRI S

Ponneri: Residents of the Irula colony in Kattavur face serious health threats due to the lack of proper sanitation and accessible hospitals.

According to the census data, 10.49 per cent of the total population in Kattavur constitutes the Irula community. There are 50 houses in the colony, all of which are without toilet facilities. According to the residents, both men and women defecate in the open fields which are situated almost a kilometre away from their houses.

The situation worsens during the rains when the fields inundate and become muddy. "When it rains it is very difficult. Most of us catch fever and wounds start appearing on our legs," said M.Kaveri, an agricultural labourer and a resi-

dent of the Irula colony. These wounds are treated mostly by applying turmeric.

The women in the village do not find this practice as safe. "Young women like us walk for four to five kms into the fields early in the morning with the help of torches, by 5 a.m. so that there are no men around. The men go nearby probably a kilometre away," said E Soundari, a 22-year-old mother.

Accompanying the thatched houses in this colony are small square compartments made of sarees which are used by women for bathing. These flimsy, unroofed compartments are also used by women during menstruation. Pregnant women are also left with no option other than the fields.

The nearest hospital is the Ponneri Government Hospital which is about 3 kms away. "Even in cases



Makeshift bathroom made of sarees, used for bathing. |GOWRI S

of emergency, we have to walk for about 1 km and catch a bus from Kattavur to go to the Ponneri hospital. The fortunate ones will be taken in motorbikes by someone in the village," said Kaveri.

According to certain residents,

the ambulance services cannot be relied upon. "They take at least half an hour to reach from Ponneri. Mostly we avail the 108 service, but since it shuttles all through the day, it takes time to reach," said P. Ramesh, who is a worker in the

local political outfit, Pazhangudi-Makkal Iyakkam.

A snake bite incident in the village which occurred six months ago gives an overview of the danger they are in, when accessibility to medical care is considered. Ramesh said, "The man was sleeping inside the hut when a snake crawled on to his leg. We immediately tied a cloth around his leg in order to not let the poison spread. That's how he was taken to the hospital."

Ramesh, who is also an active social worker in the area, said that the government had promised to provide Rs.12,000 for building a toilet in each household only if they start constructing the structure. "Reimbursing is not an option because we do not have a regular income and are incapable of funding the construction even in its initial stage," he said.

Nine ponds end water crisis in Adigathur

EISHA NAIR

Kadambattur: The people of Adigathur village have constructed six new ponds, and revived three existing ponds, making the village self-sustained in water, leading to a gradual increase in the ground water level, employment and agriculture.

"We took precautionary measures. The rest of Tamil Nadu was facing water scarcity... it was time to start caring for our water bodies," says K. Chidambaranathan, former Panchayat President and the man behind this watershed in Adigathur's history.

An Irula woman, who worked on five ponds, had a different perception of the water problem. "Before, in Summers, the water would collect in the only natural lake in the village which would often dry up. And when it didn't dry up, its water would flow into the river. So we had to find a way to make the water stay," says K. Kala.

Chidambaranathan and his wife, C. Sumathi, have together, been in power for 16 years and seen to the launching of projects such as a waste management program, a women's self help group enterprise, toilets for all, a tree-plantation drive, use of natural fertilisers in farming and so on.

Inspired by environmentalists like Piyush Manush, and rural success stories, Chidambaranathan and Sumathi traveled to Rajasthan and Ralegan Siddhi to study their models. They met Anna Hazare, a social activist known for his watershed management programmes; and Rajendra Singh, a Stockholm Water Prize winner, known as the 'Waterman of India.' Since Adigathur was topographically different, they decided to implement their own traditional methods, used



One of the six newly built ponds in Adigathur |GOWRI S

by previous generations, like digging ponds and building bunds. Work started in July 2007 and ended in 2011. The revival projects took place from 2007 to 2010, and the new ponds' construction from 2010 to 2011. The ponds were all

Some ponds are over 15 feet deep, used not only for drinking but also for agriculture.

constructed on government land used for agriculture or grasslands, but no houses had been moved. "We surveyed the land, marked it and convinced people to support us. We worked without risk or incentive," says Chidambaranathan.

Water goes from the pond to the tank and is distributed to all houses. The villagers get water twice a day - at 6 to 8.30 a.m. and later at 4 to 6 p.m. "No hand pumps! The water comes straight from the tap," says Kala.

The MGNREGA scheme was utilised for labour and funds. "Around 400 people came to work from 9 to 1 [p.m.] for Rs 100. We

are allotted Rs. 20 lakh annually, and each pond cost around Rs. 5 lakh," says Chidambaranathan.

Some ponds are over 15 feet deep, used not only for drinking and household chores, but also for agriculture. Cultivation happens twice a year now. "As locals were involved they were loyal and personally invested. Their borewell is giving water after so many years," said Chidambaranathan.

The president believes in mixing "Hitler and Gandhi" in policy making - "practicing love and discipline." "Sometimes when we did less work in the day, I would take a few brave colleagues to the pond at night. I carried arrack bottles in my bag to give them after work and everyone was happy," laughs Chidambaranathan.

However, the new ponds have been created using JCBs, ensuring more depth. "Now more water will stay," says D.S. Swami, from the Narikurava community, who had worked on all the ponds. Swami says he is indebted to Chidambaranathan, who housed his people 20-25 years ago, and says "whenever he calls I am ready. We have to work for our own village."

Education: a path to freedom

SHUCHITA KUMAR

Uthukkottai: Children wave enthusiastically every time a big yellow school bus passes through the narrow streets of Katchur village. Though India has topped the charts with the maximum number of illiterates in the world where 287 million people can neither read nor write, this village in Uthukkottai taluk is trying its best to provide good educational opportunities.

With one school till Class VIII, another providing education till Class X, eight primary schools and senior secondary schools five kms away, Katchur has a large number of children enrolled in schools.

"There are many government and private schools in and around our village. Children are sent to school once they attain three years of age," said B. Hemabhushanam, greeting his son Harish who had just come back from school.

According to locals, ten years ago boys were preferred when access to education was concerned but the conditions have changed now, every child from a household is sent to school without a gender bias.

Established in 1990, by 'Share and Care Welfare Society' is Christ King High School where a large number of children from the village receive education till Class X either in Tamil or English medium. This private school provides



Asha, Vandana and Sevandhi, on the way back from school | AADITYA ANAND M

basic facilities like toilets, benches and books.

"In the initial days it was very difficult to persuade parents to send their children to school, since many were in the shackles of bonded labour," said Stephen Arogyasan, the founder of the school, "Most were not even aware of the educational facilities being provided by the government" he added.

With 200 students, the school has come a long way since its inception. However, the numbers have started to decline in the recent days with parents opting for schools with better infrastructure.

"The weak students are taught using different and more interactive methods. After school classes are held for them. And if any of

them is facing either an emotional problem or physical abuse at home, we can come and talk to our teachers and they help resolve it," said S. Premalata, a Class X student.

On the other hand some parents and students are not very happy with the way of teaching being practised at Christ King. "They make the children work on the farms and dust the school furniture. We did not send our children to school for this," said R. Rajamma, an unhappy mother.

An ex-student of the school, R. Deepak (12) said, "We were asked to pick weeds from the farms and were made to sweep our classrooms."

But according to K. Devan (30),

"I am a pass out of the same school, they used to make us do all this work back then as well. But it was more of an extracurricular activity. These things do help in the long run."

Education models may differ but the desire for it is quite high. Five kms from Katchur, the Government Higher Secondary School, attracts a large number of students wanting to continue their education.

"I have passed Class X and wanted to study more, I travel by government bus everyday but it's worth the effort. In the absence of sports activities, we engage in debate and other competitions," said A. Asha, a Class XI student.

Although, the village paints a rosy picture, the high dropout rates tell a different story. Students who fail in Class X opt out of education with the girls usually getting married.

"The student dropout rate for both boys and girls starts increasing from Class VI. Most of them leave school and start working with their parents. Girls usually take up household chores," explained Stephen Arogyasan.

Understanding the need and importance of education can help children come out of the vicious circle of family debt and bonded labour. Katchur is setting an example but it's still a tough path to tread before the dream of 100 per cent literacy is realised.

'Happy that we are able to help others'

AADITYA ANAND M

Poondi: At the end of the Sivan Koil street in Poondi village, few women were chatting leisurely in front of a departmental store. One of them was M. Rani, who runs the only shop located in the Most Backward caste colony.

"The shop was started only a month ago as we shifted here to our own new house," said the 55-year-old M. Rani. She said that as there was no shop in the locality, she decided to start one. "We always go near the Poondi bus stand, to buy something, which is a kilometre away. So I wanted to start a shop and I am happy that it happened finally," she said.

She said that it was not a sudden decision. "While constructing the house itself, we built a small portion in the front for the shop," she said.

☞ We felt that running a shop would help get some income - M. Rani

Rani's husband R. Munuswami (70) was a farmer and the couple owns 1 acre of agricultural land in the village. "We used to work in the field a few years back, now my husband can't work and we have leased out the land. We usually get 20 bags of rice from the land," she said. She has two sons. "The first son is married and he has two sons, but currently unemployed. The second son is employed in the TVS factory in Ambattur."

In 2017, because of drought, many crops failed in Poondi. "We could not harvest, so we were forced to buy rice. Also my first son resigned his job, so we felt that running a shop would help get some income," she said. She added that they went to Thiruvallur and purchased different items for Rs.50,000 in



M Rani in her departmental store | AADITYA ANAND M

order to start the business. She said that she was not sure whether she gets any profit. "Since I am not educated and new to this, I do not know, my first son takes note of the income, I just manage the shop," she smiled.

However, the people around the colony and other streets nearby only buy from the shop. "It has been barely a month, but I am very satisfied that through this shop we are helping the people living nearby," she said.

SNAPSHOTS

Is community certificate a necessity?

The Panchayat Secretary of Poondi is of the opinion that the difficulty in obtaining community certificates is the primary reason for the increasing number of school dropouts in the Irula community. "Certificates are essential for the admission processes in colleges but most of them do not have one," said V Durai. Most of the Class 12 students drop out and take up odd jobs for sustenance. However, S Durai, a resident of this community said, "Even though you have the certificate, higher education is out of question unless you have the money."



|GOWRI S

The 'invisible' inhabitants of Poondi

NARAYANAN V

Poondi: Sixty-year old Krishnan Kollapary stands shoulder to shoulder with his family at all times. Not because he concurs with them on all issues but his 500 sq. metre house at Ponniamman Koil colony in Indira Nagar is hardly enough for his nine-member family to move around.

Originally a native of Andhra Pradesh, Krishnan, a Telugu-speaking Naicker has been staying alongside the Irulas - a scheduled tribe community, for several generations now. His wife Vijaya Krishnan (47) and eight others including their fifteen-year old visually challenged son are confined within their narrow house.

Located near Poondi lake, the Irula settlement at Indira Nagar is located at the lowest end of the slope with Most Backward caste(MBC) occupying the upper portions of the slope, signifying the social standing and flow of power.

Fishing is the major source of income for the 49-odd Irula families here. An ethnic group traditionally known for its snake and rat catching occupation, Irulas have taken up fishing after the government's ban on snake killing.

While the Irula men fish from late evening till dawn and sell the catch in the morning, the Irula women are employed in wood cutting and waste collection jobs under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) which comes at very erratic intervals.

According to Krishnan, due to lack of transportation facility, fish



Krishnan K (60) and his visually challenged son with their family. |NARAYANAN V

are currently sold within Irulas and MBC communities at Indira Nagar. "Since we do not have any bargaining power, we are constrained to sell fishes at Rs.40-60 per kg. Which can otherwise fetch upto Rs.120 kg in outside market" says Krishnan.

He believes that if the government can arrange few two-wheelers, fishermen here can sell their catch in nearby town at competitive prices. Krishnan also feels that the government should arrange for alternative employment since fishing becomes untenable during peak summer when the lake is dry.

Concurring with Krishnan's view on employment, Maari (55), points at his semi-built house, few metres away. "This house is built

What is the use of all these IDs, when the govt. don't even recognize the existence of Irulas -Maari, a resident

for our family through government funding but was abandoned just before completion."

Maari, an Irula, lives with his wife M Lakshmi (45) along with their newly-married son and daughter in law and three other sons dwell in a single room house next to Krishnan's.

He was planning to relocate his married son to the new house after construction is completed.

There are five such semi-built

houses abandoned to give a work-in progress perception forever. Despite their repeated attempts to highlight these issues at Thiruvallur collectorate, Maari says their efforts were suppressed at every level of bureaucracy.

"What is the use of all these IDs, when the government don't even recognise the existence of Irulas in this area?" asks Maari, flashing his family card and MNREGA card with resentment.

Countering the Irula's claim, an official at the district collectorate said they have installed street lights at Irula colonies at Veeraghavapuram, Venkatapuram, Nemili and Thazhavedu, conspicuously overlooking the question on housing as much as an Irula's existence.

Doing all they can, for a loved one's smile

SUDIPTO CHAUDHURY

Kadambattur: Imagine the crushing sense of pain when the people you entrust the well-being of your child to, casually tell you to "let her die".

Dharni, 13, was going to be a normal baby, at least that is what the scans at Egmore Children's Hospital, Chennai predicted when R. Devi and her husband, Rajendran, were expecting her. Theirs was a love marriage, with Devi's maternal home opposite to Rajendran's. They were understandably excited for the arrival of their first child and followed all pre-natal advice.

However, during the delivery, a ten minute lapse in medical assistance led to the new-born being deprived of air in the womb. The resulting impact on the brain caused delayed sensitivity to the outside world.

"She was just silent when I first held her. She cried the first time when she was almost a month old" says Devi, now 32.

They initially thought that Dharni's condition was curable and got initial treatment at a hospital at Perambakkam, 10 kilometres away. However, when there was little improvement in her condition after two years of visits, they widened their search and were referred by the Life Aid Centre for the Disabled at Kadambattur to Dr. L. Sankaranarayan, Consultant Neurologist at the govt



Devi (left) with Dharni. |SUDIPTO

hospital at Chengalpattu, where she was diagnosed as suffering from Cerebral Palsy.

"There has been a lot of improvement since we started going to the doctor. Dharni has trouble focussing her eyes earlier and was completely bed-ridden, but now is mobile and can identify this road (pointing to the street in front of her house). If she wanders too far, though, somebody always brings her back".

In addition to this, once a month, Tamil Selvi, a state appointed therapist visits Dharni and helps her with basic physical

exercises. Dharni, too, likes her.

The family was among many in the area whose main source of income was the embroidery business. In a small shed behind the house, they had even employed four workers. However, due to factories producing designer clothes on a large scale, they became redundant.

Devi says that when the business started slowing down, others in the village went out looking for alternate jobs. She tried to do the same, but one day, an unsupervised Dharni was hit by a passing two-wheeler. "Since then, I sit at home with the doors closed and embroider by hand."

Devi earns Rs.250 for simple designs and Rs.1000 for heavier, intricate work usually reserved for marriage sarees. This is barely enough to run the house as the doctor's bills for Dharni's treatment amount to almost ten thousand rupees a month.

With no special needs school nearby and the nearest hospital about ten kilometres away at Sunnagarhatram, the family needs to keep tabs on every rupee that they earn.

Some months ago, Dharni got typhoid and had to be admitted for a month and Rs.8000 was spent for her treatment. "Seeing her condition, doctors told us to just leave her [to die] rather than spend additional money on her" says Rajendran, his eyes welling up with tears.



LACK OF PAN CARDS FOR THE THIRD GENDER DENIES THEM LOANS FROM CENTRALISED BANKS | P 35

WORK AT THE BRICK KILNS INVOLVES THE ADOPTION OF VARIOUS PAINSTAKING POSTURES | P 33

VELLORE

Vellore's plight : Farmlands to wastelands

Effluent runoffs and reckless waste disposal by leather tanneries in the district have destroyed the water quality, leading to a loss of crop yield, rise in unemployment and distress in the farming communities

KALYANI S. & ARVIND A.

Ranipet: As many as six- reservoirs around Ranipet have become unusable for domestic and irrigation purposes because of pollution from the chemical industries and tanneries.

"I've been a farmer for 25 years and I've seen the quality as well as the quantity of my produce decline over the years right before my eyes," said S. Vinayagam (42).

Ranipet in 2006 was the only Indian city to be on the list of the top 10 dirtiest & polluted industrial cities in the world, prepared by the New York based NGO, Pure Earth. Twelve years later, the city has worsened leading to contaminated water sources and infertile land. The farmers are facing the brunt of it due to their direct dependence on land and water resources.

Vinayagam grows groundnuts in his 50 cent land. But he still works as a labourer in Thiruvallam on land owned by someone else. Since income from his own land doesn't suffice, what he earns from working as a labourer, he invests in his own land. The biggest pollutants of the lakes are the byproducts left behind as waste after the chemical manufacturing processes.

"These companies have each taken over one or two lakes. The

pollution has caused a lot of crop failure in my home village, Kaarai. When it rains they start draining out their wastes and at that time, the water is filled with white froth," said E. Anthony (48), a labourer who lives near Katta Thope Eri, one of the six polluted lakes.

A few companies specialize in manufacturing detergents and fabric whiteners, and these processes yield phosphorous compounds as byproducts. When dumped in water these cause a problem by acting as fertilizers for the algae, causing uncontrollable growth and leads to an algal bloom. This saps the oxygen and mineral content of the water and decreases its quality.

"When I started farming 25 years ago, a 100 cents area of land would give around 20 sacks of rice. Today the same land will hardly give 14 sacks of rice, sometimes just 10. Such is the decrease in the quantity of the produce," Vinayagam said. Besides farming, the fishing industry has also been affected by this pollution.

"The Thandalam lake used to have a booming fishing business. But now, the fish population isn't large enough for that and the ones we do get are not fit for eating," said K. Rajaseker (39), a secretary in the Ranipet branch of the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi and who has lived in the town for 30 years.



Effluents discharged into the sewage passing through Rajiv Gandhi Nagar, Ranipet. | PURNASNEHA S.

In a report published in the International Journal of Environmental Sciences in 2015, the survey of 65 soil samples from Vellore showed hundreds of 'hot-spots' of chromium contaminated agricultural lands. The concentration exceeded 200 mg/kg which is the permissible limit prescribed by many environmental agencies.

"All of this used to be farmland but now they've become uncultivable. We used to farm groundnuts, rice, plantain, lentils, millets and other crops. But that was 40

years ago before all this company business started," said S. Narasiman (43), a labourer and resident of the town since age three, as he pointed to the Katta Thope Eri.

Pulianthope Eri, Manianpettu Eri, Manikanagar Eri and Pinji Eri are the other polluted lakes that lie nearby Ranipet. The last relatively unpolluted lake in Vellore, the Kaveripakkam lake, the largest still remains as the sole water supplier to about 60 per cent of the district which lies on the northern bank of the Palar River.

Tanneries flout rules, release chemicals

DEBANGANA GHOSH

Vellore: Ranipet, Vaniyambadi and Ambur of Vellore district accounts for 30 per cent of the Indian leather manufacturing industry. India thrives on its leather industry. But the downside is that it has come at the expense of other livelihood options and is responsible for high levels of pollution causing health hazards.

India consumes less than 1 per cent of the leather goods it manufactures. Most of it is exported. But the slurry of harmful chemical effluents produced has led to heavy air and water pollution, disrupting the lives of people living in the surroundings.

According to P. Venkateshwar, farmers' rights activist and the farmers' association leader, Vellore, "In the initial stages of tanning, lime, sodium sulphide and chromium sulphide are used to remove the hair and fur. These chemicals are also extremely harmful for the soil. The chemi-

cal waste gets dumped into the Palar River. Due to this we can't grow crops like paddy, sugarcane and coconut anymore."

Consequently, the farmers are compelled to join the neighbourhood leather factories for work at

poisonous slurry and solid waste at night or during rains. He said even if 90 per cent tanneries work under regulations, 10 per cent do not.

Ranipet villages now have numerous man made lakes on what

They release factory wastes during rain and our kids keep on falling sick. We have complained on many occasions but no action was taken about this." - S. SUJATHA

low wages.

Venkateshwar added, "Most of the chemicals used for tanning are imported from Italy and Germany. Ironically, these chemicals are banned in those countries itself. They think instead of wasting, they can sell these chemicals to India and make money."

Water treatment plants like Vanitec in Vaniyambadi said that they treated the tannery waste precisely enough to create zero per cent discharge.

However, Venkateshwar said that most of the factories release

were once fertile agricultural lands, where the factory effluents are released at nights.

Even the nullah passing through the residential area, Rajiv Gandhi Nagar, Ranipet, where many of the tannery workers live, was filled with untreated whitish-grey effluents.

Resident S. Sujatha said, "They release factory wastes during rains and our kids keep on falling sick."

"We have complained on many occasions but no action was taken about this," she added.

Not a silky road ahead for handloom weavers

PURNASNEHA S.

Onnupuram: A multi-coloured sari with a peacock design border dries in the sun after starch was applied to it.

An old couple, who wove the saree together, wipe their sweat off and sit down for their afternoon break - two glasses of frothy buttermilk. She wears a dull cotton sari and he, just a dhoti.

Life has been exactly the same way for this couple and the other weavers here in West Arani, despite having produced silk saris worth

Government have failed to acknowledge the masters behind this magic.

Inside the thatched hut, Sathanandam has two pit looms - one belongs to him and the other to his son-in-law, who works from here on some afternoons. The pit is intricately designed and measured to fit Sathanandam, his pillow and the loom's peddle.

The jacquard box, placed above the loom, contains needles that punched against the design cards sourced from Madurai and provided by the company. They are

been working for six hours since morning. He works over nine hours a day, as it takes him four days to weave a 6-yard sari, which includes a 27-inch blouse material.

Though he weaves silk saris for an exorbitant price, the life of this oldest weaver at Onnupuram is devoid of any sign of luxury.

According to Tamil Nadu's recent Handloom and Textiles Policy Note 2015-16, the handloom industry in the State provides livelihood for 1.89 lakh weaver households and 3.19 lakh weavers. This second largest rural occupation in India, after agriculture, suffers the burden of GST, the lack of policy implementation and most importantly, the impact of modernization.

According to Sathanandam, after the implementation of GST, a 650 gram sari that costed Rs.2600 at the rate of Rs.4 per gram of silk thread that is brought from Bengaluru, is now Rs.3250 at the rate of Rs.5 per gram.

Moreover, the price of the golden zari used in weaving silk saris has now increased to Rs.14 per gram from Rs.12. The cost of the raw materials has increased making it difficult for the weavers who are then asked to use cheaper materials.

"Now, the company has asked me to mix threads. Even retail owners of stores like Nalli, Kumaran and Palam cannot find the difference," boasted Sathanandam.

Having had three girl children, Sathanandam and his wife, Manonmani, got them all married at a young age into weavers' households in the same village. They continue to work in the looms. Two of their sons-in-law own power looms in Arani.

"With one person from a family getting an engineering degree and then a diploma in textile designing, it is easier to modernize the trade. Yet, handlooms here shall never cease to exist," said Manonmani, serving me a copper-glass filled with tender coconut water.

Sathanandam gets a monthly wage of between Rs.9,000 and Rs.12,000 from KSG Silks, but Manonmani insists that it is barely enough for them.

"We're handloom weavers and we're poor. This is what life is for us," Sathanandam said and went back to his loom.

GST chokes small scale industries

ARVIND A.

Gudiyattam: Half a year after the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax, small scale industries in the district are still reeling under its effects and have incurred substantial losses, the unit owners said.

The indirect tax which came into effect from July 1, 2017 was projected as a simplified tax to improve the country's economy and transparency in the market. However, the initial effects proved otherwise, causing loss in revenue due to the high tax slabs which ranged from 0 to 28 per cent.

The tax slabs on 178 items were revised on November 10, 2017 bringing the maximum tax slab down to 18 per cent after protests across the country. Two months later, the situation still looks bleak for small scale industries.

In Vellore, the most affected sections were the weavers of lungis

and silk saris as well as the matchstick cottage industries. Their revenue saw a decline due to an increase in production costs since the advent of GST.

"Some 20 days ago, we protested and demanded relief from GST but nothing really came of it.

After GST, the owners are finding it a headache to meet profits, which in turn causes issues for the lungis weavers in the form of wage cuts. This is especially a problem since there is no monopoly in this business and everyone is affected one way or the other," explained G. Srinivasan, ex-president of the CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Unions), Vellore branch. Gudiyattam has about 4000 working handlooms where lungis are woven.

"Our wages have remained the same but due to GST our em-

ployers are facing issues. The cost of the raw materials have increased and so has the cost of the end product due to which the demand has decreased, so we don't get as much work," said S. Prakasam, one of the handloom lungis weavers based in the town.

The town is the location of matchstick industries which have also been severely affected and are still struggling to survive. This industry was also badly hit by demonetisation.

"During demonetisation we weren't able to pay the daily wages at all. Most of the money we had on hand became useless, it cost us a lot of business. Not only that but prices of various raw materials including wax increased," explained S. Karthik, one of the owners of Shekar Matchworks.



With 60 years of experience, M.V. Sathanandam earns Rs. 1500 for his labour on a sari, despite its market price being almost triple the amount. | PURNASNEHA S.

Rs.50, 000 - Rs.80, 000 a month for the last 50 odd years.

"If you're telling my story, don't paint me like a hero. I'm just doing the one job that I know well - my generational occupation. Although, it's the most cursed profession in India right now," says M.V. Sathanandam, after meticulously folding a lime green sari coloured with an attractive pink border and sliding it into a plastic cover for dispatch to his master weavers' company - KSG Silks, where he has been working for three years now.

While the recent year has seen a significant rise in the demand for handloom textiles among the urban population, both the buyers and the

changed periodically to keep up with the latest fashion trends.

In most households at Onnupuram, the weaver is required to spend his earnings on a jacquard box, in case of damage.

Sathanandam begins weaving. An array of 2400 silk threads in two colours - a shamrock-green and a bright mittai-pink (neon), unfurl into a gorgeous hand-woven silk sari, as Sathanandam's feet peddles the rusty looking pit loom and his hands move swiftly across the floral borders. Sathanandam's wife, S. Manonmani, who occasionally helps him with his work, signals that his lunch is ready.

Her 82-year-old husband has

Mid-day meal with contaminated water

MIRAH ZAMIN

Vaniyambadi: The government primary school at Vadakarai village has 109 children enrolled but only 47 children eat the mid-day meal provided by the government. Minnur and Vadakarai are two villages situated on the northern banks of the Palar River with the highest exposure to contaminated water.

"Every alternate day atleast one child complains of stomach ache or nausea and it has become very common for us now," says M. Thangabali, a farmer who is left with 12 acres of barren land.

North Palar basin was once a green corridor with 217 lakh acres of cultivable land. Coconuts, bananas, wheat, rice, millets, sugarcane and betel leaves were grown, providing agricultural income to 3 lakh people of 196 villages in 7 taluks of Vellore.

Effluents released by the nearby leather tanneries have contaminated the groundwater.

The wastes contain chromium, calcium, ammonium and acids that cause skin diseases. Melanosis and black and white spots on skin is common in the area.

Every single household in the two villages has at least one member who has lung or kidney disease.

"Our drinking water comes from a borewell 80 kilometres from here. For washing purposes we use the Palar river water. The cooking water used for the mid-day meal is also taken from the Palar," says N. Dhanya Lakshmi, a resident of Vadakarai village.

Lakshmi Ramalingham, in-charge of providing the mid-day meal says that the borewell water is not available at most times and that she has made several complaints but nothing has been done about them. "I have no other option but to use the water that comes from the Palar river to cook," she added.

The farmers' association of Vellore and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) hold Vanitec, a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP), accountable for not doing its job properly.

However, Abdullah Basha M., an official at Vanitec said "Our company has always been innocent when blamed for the effluents in the river. We are trying our best to reduce pollution caused by the tanneries by recycling waste water."

R. Janardhan, the leader of Vadakarai village said, "After the year 2005 the condition has worsened for us. Two lakh villagers migrated to Tirupur to work in textile industry."

FACES OF JAVADHU HILLS



Saravan Raj studying in 5th standard at the Mount School, is one of the few children who travels from Kundrandi, Javadhu Hills to Tiruvannamalai for his education. He aims to be a police inspector like his mother. On the other hand, Sashidaran, his 3-year-old brother accompanies their father to the field everyday. | PURNASNEHA S.

Mud and sweat: Dying craft of the Kosavars

ARVINDA.

K.V. Kuppam: Kosavars are a community of potters who are found all over the district.

But in recent years, many have abandoned this traditional vocation, causing a gradual disappearance of the craft.

"I make things such as pots, stoves and things like agal vizhaku (mud lamps), for Karthigai Deepam. During Vinayagar Chaturthi, I fashion clay Ganapathi idols by hand. I also make horse statues which are used during Puravi Eduppu (a folk festival involving a votive procession of terracotta horses) in the neighbouring villages. I am preparing for this year's Pongal sales," said the 60-year-old P. Pandurangan who learnt the craft when he was just 10 years old.

The street where his pottery workshop lies, Kavari Theru in Pazhya Krishna Puram was filled with such workshops just 10 years ago. Now, Pandurangan's is the only one there.

"Most of my peers have passed away and the youngsters who know the craft have gone on to better paying jobs. Even I only recently began doing this full-time



P. Pandurangan, P.K. Puram.

JARVINDA.

after retiring from my previous job," he said.

He worked as an attendant with the RUHSA (Rural Unit for Health and Social Affairs) branch of the CMC (Christian Medical College), Vellore.

"I sell my own wares at a fair that is held weekly on Monday at K.V. Kuppam. I do business with other traders from neighbouring villages who come to sell their produce," he added when asked about his current business.

Pots are sold for anything ranging from Rs.50 to Rs.250 depending on the size while the stoves and the ovens sell for Rs.200. The idols sell for varying rates mainly depending on the size, with some being as big as 10 feet.

When asked about his children, Pandurangan said "They weren't interested and decided to pursue formal education. Even I didn't learn this for a livelihood. I started doing this fulltime only after retirement."

"My two sons are both employed, one is an engineer at TVS and another works as an attendant at CMC," Pandurangan added.

"My grandchildren did show interest initially, but we did not let them do this for a living since it doesn't pay much. Now they have well-paying jobs in the cities," he said proudly.

Despite this, the craft does hold a special meaning for his family.

"Pottery has been in our family for generations. My grandfather and his brothers, his father and their fathers all got by using this trade. It's a very important part of our family history," explained M.J. Arvind (24), Pandurangan's grandnephew who is pursuing a M.A. in English.

This parliament is for and by tribal children

PURNASNEHA S.

Arasavalli: Started in 1984 under the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme, the Government Tribal Residential Middle School in Arasavalli in the last 15 years has proven to be no ordinary residential school. With 312 students studying here, this school resembles a successful joint-family, drawing more children from the Hills each year.

This school is said to be the most popular school on Javadhu Hills among the Malayali tribes. Currently a total of 154 boys and 156 girls attend this school, from over 30 neighboring villages. While now there are classes from I to VII, the government recently provided permission for VIII standard, which is to start in the next year. With eight teachers and one headmaster, the school runs on money from sponsorships and crowdfunding.

Apart from having well-equipped classrooms, this school also has a smart lab with computers, a projector and some books for the children to read during their free time.

Two months ago, under the guidance of one of the teachers - S. Mahalakshmi, the students were introduced to the concept of leadership and the need for a democratic



Finally, a functioning young parliament.

PURNASNEHA S.

student government which would take charge of the various tasks relating to the overall operation of the school.

At 7.30 p.m. it will be dinner time, so the ministers from the food department- V. Senthil, D. Prabhu and R. Perumal get the plates ready, while the other children continue to enjoy their favorite part of the day: 'play-time'. The children's parliament of this school, known as the Roja Children's Society consists of 23 members from classes VI to VII. With departments ranging from food, security, cleanliness and education, the parliament is headed by K. Komadhi, the President and R. Mohanapriya, the Vice President.

The opposition party, with a total of five members, will pinpoint the

mistakes committed by the other members. This makes the process more transparent and leaves less room for mishaps.

R. Mohanapriya, the Vice President of the children's parliament said, "These responsibilities help us as children to explore our talents and understand the different roles of a leader. We were taught the importance of voting and the necessity to elect the right leaders."

The students either report to S. Mahalakshmi or to Jayabalan S., who single-handedly takes care of the children at night.

"Our goal is to allow the children to think freely and find their talents. The parliament system inspires our children to take leadership roles seriously," said Jayabalan.

Constructing a stronger nation, one brick at a time

LAVANYA NARAYANAN



Overworked workers at the Brick Kiln hope for a better future.

ISIDHANTHA JAIN

K.V. Kuppam: Of the many labourers that drive Vellore's economy, the brick builders of the city say they are the most overworked.

In a district where many people are employed in the tanneries and the shoe factories, the area's brick builders make up a less-documented bunch. They travel in groups of 10 to 20, contracting work for a pay that barely keeps their families afloat. It is "fate," they say, as they spend over 12 hours a day moulding, baking, and stacking bricks to be sold to private housing companies.

"I have been doing this since I was in the third standard," says E. Nagaraj, who runs a kiln on a rented land.

Now 42 years old, he accompanies his parents to the kilns in the K.V. Kuppam block as early as 5 a.m., just as he's been doing every day for the last 34 years. Once there, he takes stock of the ten male and female workers that he employs, assigning tasks that will keep them busy for the next 12 to 14 hours.

"This is all we know," he shrugs, gesturing to the group behind him. They begin with the soil, bringing in four tractor loads from surrounding areas per month for Rs.70,000. The soil then gets mixed with the day's 5000 litres of water, provided by a private supplier. Once ready, the mixture is moulded and shaped into bricks and left to set for 24 hours.

"These bricks are now ready to be dried," Nagaraj says as he points to the rows of bricks that have been lined up meticulously by the women who work for him. Unable to climb the ladder to load the bricks into the industrial kiln, the women are in charge of the groundwork. The batch will sit overnight absorbing the water in preparation for the final stage: baking.

"We can stack up to 10,000 bricks in this soolai (kiln), see?" Nagaraj points, standing atop a ladder used to load the bricks in the large kiln. It's only one of the 50 kilns in Vellore district, and one of the four that occupy surrounding lands.

Nagaraj is only in charge of one, paying Rs.10,000 per year to rent the land used for his business.

As the male labourers load the bricks inside, one is assigned to haul piles back-and-forth from the storage ground. Another will sit near the oven through the night, ensuring that the bricks do not over-bake in the kiln. They'll be paid extra, but with a base payment of Rs.1 per brick for each pair of labourers. But

the labourers say it's hardly enough to justify the hours of physical labour.

AID India's District Coordinator S. Kumaran says, "They all work every single day, but each pair of people is only paid per 1000 bricks, and even that payment is only issued when those bricks are fully prepared: from the mould to the oven."

The organization has fought for better working conditions, advanced machinery to expedite the process, and better pay for the workers.

Kumaran says that over the years, their pay has risen, almost doubling over the last decade.

For contractors like Nagaraj, the income is not enough to clear the Rs.3 lakh debt that he has incurred over three years; especially not after meeting the expenditure on raw material, water and firewood. Nagaraj cuts only a 10 per cent profit before being able to pay his staff.

"And one ton of firewood is not nearly enough, you see. For one lakh of bricks, we need roughly 25 tonnes of firewood," he explains.

Nagaraj gets customers from Vellore and surrounding areas in Tamil Nadu and, sometimes, from other parts of Southern India as well. However, at a market price of Rs.6 per brick, buyers will often only purchase 4000-5000 bricks at a time, leaving Nagaraj to wait anxiously for the next customer.

"I ensure that each pair of workers receives around Rs.3000 per week at least. If they prepare extra bricks, then I pay them Rs.1 per brick. But beyond that is difficult," Nagaraj says. He is often the last to leave the grounds, bringing food for his parents who work with him and returning home only around 8 p.m. or 9 p.m. every day.

Ask him what keeps him going, and he has one answer. "My sons," he smiles. "They will be waiting to eat with me every day, no matter how late it gets." Aged 21 and 18, Nagaraj's boys study in an English-medium college and school located just a few kilometres away from the K.V. Kuppam brick-laying grounds. That, Nagaraj says, is the closest they'll come to the grounds.

In fact, Nagaraj has no interest in them joining what has been the family business for so many years. Instead, he dreams of a settled life in Chennai, something he calls a "much brighter future" for his children. "This is our headche, our fate," he says, matter-of-fact. "For them, God has bigger plans."

Moulding disorders and illnesses for a lifetime

KALYANI S.

K.V. Kuppam: "When I was pregnant with my first child, I worked here till the day I went into labour," declares K. Soundary (24), with a certain pride. Antenatal care is beyond question for the women workers at the brick kilns of K.V. Kuppam block in the district.

Work at the kilns involve the adoption of various painstaking postures like stooping or squatting for prolonged periods of time. The entire procedure of brick making-quarrying and mixing, moulding, and baking is undertaken separately in different kilns located close to each other, each belonging to a different owner.

M. Selvi who underwent Caesarean sections for both her deliveries says her back has been hurting since the delivery of her second child eight years ago. Lack of adequate post-natal care is only half the problem.

In a paper published in the Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) were found to be prevalent among brick kiln workers due to the postures they adopted during their work as well as their work environment. As per the research, while 87 per cent of the workers reported as having some kind of pain, 51 per cent reported of having pain during work hours.

"My parents were brick kiln workers as well, and I have been doing this job since I was 10 years old. During the 3-4 months when it rains, we have no work. So then we engage in the 100 days work and do

a little de-silting work at the river banks," says D. Devaraj, who last visited the hospital three months ago for a back problem.

Most labourers here go to the Rural Unit for Health and Social Affairs (RUHSA) for consultation. Started by the Christian Medical College (CMC) Vellore in 1977 for the socio-development of the K.V. Kuppam block, the RUHSA follows a unique integrated health and development model that is based on the principle that without economic development there can be no social betterment. It even conducts frequent visits to the kilns.

However, the RUHSA still charges Rs.200 per consultation from the workers. And, for the labourers who earn a meager piece rate of Rs.1000 per 1000 bricks made, this out of the pocket spending over time becomes a burden.

The Musculoskeletal Disorders thereby also result in high health expenditure over the years.

"The doctors at the RUHSA give us tablets. They tell us there is only one way the body ache will go and that is to stop this strenuous work. But then how can we eat if we don't work?" asks 37-year-old Jamuna, who says missing even a day's work is a hit on the income of the household.

E. Vijaya has been suffering from chest pain for the past ten days. She also recently caught a common cold. Her only daughter who was born after 12 years of marriage goes to the government school nearby.

"We ourselves find this work labourious. I would never want my daughter to do this work," she says.

There is no toilet facility near any of the brick kilns. Open defecation is the norm, although some women who live nearby take a run to their houses to use the toilets in between work.

Post delivery, it is only normal for the women to start working after around a month's rest. Without anyone at home to look after the baby, the child too is then brought to the kilns and made to sleep in mini tents here, while the parents engage in everyday work.

"I met with an accident a few years ago and broke my shoulder bone. I am not supposed to do this work. But I have no choice. It still hurts, but I need this work," says R. Bhaskar (42), whose wife accompanies him in carrying the bricks to the spot where they will soon be baked.

There is also enough literature on the occupational hazards of being exposed to toxic gases like oxides of sulfur (SOx) and nitrogen (NOx), fluoride compounds, hydrogen sulfide (H₂S), carbon monoxide (CO), carbon dioxide (CO₂), suspended particulate matters (SPM) and various amounts of carcinogenic dioxins that are released at the furnaces. Respiratory problems are also seen among the workers who spend time at the furnaces where substances like wood and dung cakes are burnt.

Working in pairs at the kilns, most of the workers have internalised the aches, as everyday things in their lives. The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act of 2008 seems to have kept a distance from their lives.

Rolling beedi, gathers no money

DEBANGANA GHOSH

Veppanganeri: Substandard raw materials have compelled beedi workers of Veppanganeri village in Vellore district to pay from their own pockets to meet the orders, pointed out Activist G. Srinivasan.



After collecting the tendu leaves and tobacco from middle level companies in K.V. Kuppam, most of the women spend their afternoons cutting the leaves and rolling beedis with tobacco. In many families, men are involved too and this is their only source of income.

These activities are done in groups with a target of cutting and rolling 1000 beedis in a day and 4000 a week to earn around Rs.1000 per group per week. This money is then divided among the members. Members cutting leaves earn between Rs.150 and Rs.200 every week for 4000 leaves.

G. Srinivasan, ex-President of the Centre of Trade Unions (CITU) in Vellore District said, "They do have an organization and get legal wages but the raw materials they are given, the leaves mainly, are of poor quality. So if they are contracted to roll 1000 beedis, only 700 beedis can be rolled from them."

He added, "To compensate for this, the owners deduct the amount from the wages. This is a loss for the workers and they in turn spend their own money for extra leaves to avoid this. This again leads to loss of wages"

Srinivasan worked with the Veppanganeri beedi workers 10 years back.

The women however seem content earning extra money making beedis and have no complaints about the poor quality of the leaves being supplied by the contractors.

P. Shanthi, 48, a leaf cutter said, "I have been doing this for 30 years now, since my marriage. My husband is a mason and my sons go to work in Arcot and Chennai corporations. This is my income to support my family. I am happy doing this. Every year our payment also increases."

N. Selvi, 47, a beedi roller said, "We are doing this because it is the only thing we know. But we are getting our children educated. I do not want my children to try this or take it up as a full-time job. I have been doing this for 20 years."



Workers at the brick kilns adopt painstaking postures for long durations of time, making them more susceptible to Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

ISIDHANTHA JAIN

Company's negligence, 3 dead

The death of three labourers at V.O.C. Nagar, Ranipet comes as the latest in a string of accident related deaths in tanneries spread over the past decade

KALYANI S.

Ranipet: Arun never topped his class or excelled in sports, like his elder brother.

So, when his father asked him to join the leather unit to work after his 10th standard boards, Arun did not give it a second thought. In fact, he turned out to be a really good worker, handling daily jobs on his own.

But, little did Arun know of the tragedy that awaited him and his family.

On December 28, 2017, Arun (18), his father Jaisankar (38) and another worker were crushed to death when part of a faulty machine fell on them at their factory in the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) complex.

"That morning itself at around 10 a.m., my brother had informed the owner that the new vacuum machine was faulty. The owner after getting it temporarily fixed by a mechanic had asked the workers to continue their work. That day at 6:10 p.m., this happened," says B. Pushparani (42), Jaisankar's sister.

According to her, the police couldn't find the owner long after the incident. Neither did the owner show up at their house to offer condolences after he was found by the police, nor does anyone from the family know his name.

Jaisankar, who had been working as a labourer at tanneries for the past 10 years and at Chinnappa Leathers for the last four years, had only lately started to save up a little. The new portion behind his house at V.O.C. Nagar in Ranipet

that is under construction has now stopped midway.

"The company owner had bought another company's scrap machine at about 15 per cent of its actual market value and he had started production while it was being readied. When all they care about is profits and when they are confident that no action will be taken against them, then why would they care about their workers' lives?" asks S. Muthukumar (27), Jaisankar's relative.

Muthukumar put the major blame on factory inspectors who do not conduct inspections regularly or properly.

Chinnappa Leathers, which was closed after the incident, reopened on January 4 this year after an inspection.

There is a reason why some tan-

neries prefer to work behind closed shutters, says Muthukumar. These factories don't provide their workers with good quality gloves, masks or shoes, while manual cleaning of machines that handle toxic substances still continue, he adds.

A First Information Report (FIR) has been registered at the Ranipet Police station, but the family has no hope even though many lawyers approached them saying they could negotiate for better compensation.

"But it's not money that we want. Last week three people died.

How many more will have to die here before a permanent solution is reached in terms of workers' safety? Workers are seen as machines and when they don't work, they are just replaced," says M. Kanaka (27), daughter of Pushparani.

This is not the only incident at the chemical, leather and shoe factories in Ranipet.

In 2015, around ten workers including nine migrant labourers drowned in toxic sludge in a tannery at Small Industries Development Corporation (SIDCO) area.

But it's not money that we want. Last week three people died. How many more will have to die before a permanent solution is reached in terms of workers' safety?

- M. KANAKA, daughter of Pushparani

Intertwining threads of freedom and courage

MIRAH ZAMIN

Onnupuram: Offering juice and tea to everyone who arrives at her doorstep, the 68 years old Saraswati Ramaswami has spent most of her life at the loom, weaving silk saris in her parental village Onnupuram.

Located in Arani, it is one of the towns of the Tiruvannamalai district.

Saraswati 'amma', a Devanga (weaving community) by caste, is the sole breadwinner of her family for the last 45 years now.

"I am happy that I am making my own livelihood and I am not dependent on anyone. My work makes me most happy," she says with her flawless smile.

Married at 13 years of age to a man 10 years elder to her and deserted by him at 18, she found love and peace in weaving the colourful saris.

"My world collapsed after I lost my three sons and my husband left me for another woman, I had no income of my own and my in-laws threw me out of their house," she recalls while fixing the orange coloured threads on her loom.

Her husband who worked as a Hindi teacher in a government school often mentally and physically abused her. "On our first night he told me that had his mother not persuaded him to her and would have never married a weaver's daughter," she said with tears in her eyes.

When her first son was born at the age of 15, her husband for the first time in her married life hugged her but the happiness lasted no longer than two months, as the infant died of chicken pox.

She suffered the same ordeal again when her second baby died of a viral infection and the third of jaundice.

"When my husband eloped, I



tried to kill myself by jumping in the well but my father saved me and brought me to his house and gifted me the handloom which was used by generations in our family," Saraswati mentions while watching the repeat telecast of her favourite daily soap Deivamagal.

Saraswati takes a week to weave every sari. It provides her with a monthly income of Rs.2800 for four saris. She gives most of her money to her younger brother, the only surviving member of her family, who lives a few blocks away.

Saraswati no longer weaves the traditional South Indian sari but has shifted to weaving multi-coloured saris, taking the North Indian market into account.

She has a five year contract with a company named Indira-

mani and this is the last year of the contract.

"I will not work anymore after this, I want to rest now," she adds.

"I have worked for this company but not even once have they given any sari to me on festive occasion nor have they given any increment," she mentions.

Asked if she likes to wear the sari she weaves, she says "We are weavers, we are supposed to produce saris not wear them ourselves."

In the initial years when Saraswati started weaving, she faced a lot of problems. She once dislocated her shoulder because of the flying shuttle. The designs then went wrong and her payment was denied to her.

She recalls how even after two years of weaving, she would very often complain of body ache to her father.

"Standing and pedalling to operate the handloom was the toughest to learn," she adds.

Her only friend Krishnakaveri died some four months ago and since then, she has not tried making new friends.

She says friendship is a lifetime affair and bonds cannot be created with everyone.

"I have not eaten dosa ever since my friend Krishnakaveri died," she paused.

"She was the one who used to get me hot dosas for lunch," she added.

While she gets back to work and starts peddling the loom again, she abruptly pauses to mention how she is now turning blind and would no longer be able to weave.

She plans to send the loom to her brother's house when she retires so that she can accommodate a queen-size bed which she saw a few years ago at a furniture shop.

"I have been saving money for the bed since the last seven years. Being old, I can no longer sleep on the floor," she said.

"I will not work anymore after this, I want to rest now," she adds.

Non-union labour face increased neglect

ARVIND A.

K.V. Kuppam: Workers who sell thatched roofing materials and brooms made from coconut fronds in Veppanganeri village are disgruntled due to the continuous neglect they have faced in recent years.

These folk fall under unorganised labour under The Tamil Nadu Labour Welfare Fund Act of 1972. However, they have not received any benefit in the past ten years.

"They always come and ask us our names, take lists and promise

us loans. But it has been years and we are yet to see any sort of action from their side. Even some NGOs and foreigners visit us occasionally but even then it's the same," said V. Mahalakshmi (45), a frond worker for the past 20 years.

They are forced to eke out a meager living earning just Rs.5 for every frond they weave. Their other product, brooms made of frond sticks sell for little over Rs.20 a

piece. "We buy the fronds from the coconut groves nearby, dry them ourselves and chop them down the middle before we begin weaving them. We haven't studied and this is the only job we do," said B. Vishnu (50), a frond worker himself and Mahalakshmi's husband.

"I have two daughters and a son. One daughter works with us while we married off the other. My son does some labour work in the nearby villages. We don't get too much money but we make do with what we earn," he added.

The neglect has only grown and it has left the workers defeated.

However, due to them being non-unionised, the struggle only worsens.

"Organising such loose sectors into a union is a very difficult task. If these people come to protest, they lose at least half a day of work by which they'll lose a part of their daily earnings. So it takes a lot of convincing to get them together and there is no guarantee the protests will yield relief," explained G. Mullaivasan, ex-President of the Vellore district branch of CITU.

SIPCOT's darlings

LAVANYA NARAYANAN

Ranipet: When 24-year-old N. Karthikeyan moved from his home in Gudiyattam village to his uncle's residence in Ranipet last January, it was under the promise of a tannery job: he anticipated strenuous physical labour and less-than-optimal working conditions in order to send some money back home to his parents.

Instead, he became a sales clerk in the SIPCOT branch of Vellore's Darling Bakery that carries a 40-year-old legacy. Karthikeyan calls the bakery "one of the best things that could have happened to him."

"Many of us arrived, only to find the tannery closed because of the death of a few workers. The bakery needed people and was only happy to take us right away," he says.

Karthikeyan is one of the 18 youth who have joined the Darling Hotel family, helping the Hotel's bakery branches in Muthukadai and SIPCOT in Ranipet. The branch owner M. Vijayarangan says the targeted hiring wave was "completely intentional."

"When my brother, M. Ananthanarayanan and I, moved to Vellore district from Tirunelveli almost 15 years ago, we were hired at the original Darling Hotel in the city by S. Ponusamy. It gave us a much better future than a factory job would have: better hours, better working

conditions. We look for people like us when we hire, and try to give them better lives," he says.

Over the last 10 years, the brothers have grown the enterprise. While they leave the cooking to the catering school graduates from various parts of South India, they say counter service is provided by youth who come to the city, seeking jobs with decent pay.

"It helps our business as well: they tell their friends in other sectors about our Hotel and Bakery, and they come visit us," Vijayarangan says.

"The boys are willing to learn any craft as long as they are given proper training. If that is the case, why not hire them in these sort of businesses where it benefits both the restaurant owner and the workers?" Vijayarangan questions.

And the system comes full-circle with the bakery's main clientele in SIPCOT: factory workers. Vijayarangan says it's his way of giving back, feeding labourers who work long, taxing hours at the many factories in the SIPCOT complex.

"These young boys, they are the future of this city," Vijayarangan smiles.

It is a dynamic that the brothers aim for, using Ananthanarayanan's position as the leader of the Tamil Nadu Hotels Association to hire young individuals with similar backgrounds.

FACES OF JAVADHU HILLS



Kamsala R., carries 105-115 firewood sticks, weighing almost 35 kgs for 4 kilometres effortlessly from the forest back and forth, every day. However, she weighs not more than 30 kgs. | PURNASNEHA S.

Simli speaking: The sweet that satiates, from Villupuram to Vellore

LAVANYA NARAYANAN

Sathuvacheri: It's 11 o'clock in the morning and 36-year-old housewife S. Kalpana is in the middle of her first shift of the day.

Fifty perfectly-round, dark brown urundais – or marble-shaped sweets – are lined up on an old sari spread on the cemented floor.

Wiping away the sweat from her brow, she continues to mesh together the mixture of ragi, roasted peanuts, freshly-made ghee and hand-pounded jaggery.

Soon, her morning haul of 200 pieces will be ready for pick up, getting Kalpana Rs.150 of her Rs.300-a-day salary.

"I had no idea how to make this," she confesses, rolling out the dough. Despite watching her grandmother prepare Simli, the homemade sweet, in their home in

Villupuram, Kalpana, the eldest of four children, was more interested in clearing her board exams than spending time in the kitchen. She had just finished class ten when suitors came calling, much to her dismay.

"I wanted to become a gynaecologist, but then, my father said it was time to marry."

Kalpana was just sixteen when her marriage to the 28-year-old A. Periasamy, a factory worker who also happened to be Kalpana's second-cousin, forced her to forget her academic dreams.

"I had to learn to manage a family and prepare myself for having children," she says. An occupational transfer moved the family to Vellore and only six years later, Kalpana was a mother of two children. She spent the next 13 years at home, tending to the house as Pe-

riasamy worked double shifts in factories around the city, hardly making ends meet.

"I knew I was capable of earning for the family too. But it was not



Simply Simli at Hotel Famous | PURNASNEHA

acceptable for the women in our family to work," she explains.

Yet, as the children grew older, Kalpana began to look for work with Periasamy's support.

After a rather unsuccessful hunt, a chance visit by Periasamy's friend and owner of Vellore's Hotel Famous, Sivaraman, presented an opportunity that Kalpana couldn't refuse.

"He tasted the sweet and immediately asked if she could make more to sell in his coffee shop," Periasamy beams.

Previously just a nutritious snack for her children's tiffin boxes, the simli suddenly became an extremely important part of Kalpana's household.

Over the last year, Kalpana has made almost 1.5 lakh simli sweets. Now, she says it is as much a part of her daily routine as her morning

prayer.

"I receive four kilos of supplies at 7 a.m. every morning from the shop. By the time I prepare the first batch, it is 9 a.m. Four batches together are sent across to the hotel, and the same happens in the afternoon," she tells us.

Once sent over, each piece is sold at Rs.8 and at the end of the day, Kalpana is paid Rs.300 for her work.

As the afternoon parcel of supplies arrive at the doorstep, her children, S. Deepa (14) and S. Balaji (10), return from school. They drink their coffee and spring into action, unloading the supplies and helping Kalpana prepare the evening bunch of sweets that will be sent back to Hotel Famous in just a few hours.

"Here, try and tell me if it is correct," Kalpana says, handing two

The 'Simli' Secret Recipe:

- 1 kg Ragi flour
- 1/3 kg pounded jaggery
- 1/2 kg dry-roasted peanuts
- 1/4 kg ghee [clarified butter] with additional ghee when rolling the mixture into 'urundais'

Method: Gently knead the flour with pounded jaggery and dry-roasted peanuts, adding ghee as needed.

rolls each to the children.

"Taste testers: a reward for their help," she smiles.

She sets aside the other two gingerly, wrapping them in cloth so they do not dry out.

"For him," she gestures, a pick-me-up after a long day of factory

work for Periasamy.

And what does she take for herself?

"Well, the money is more than enough. But sometimes I like to try one or two bites too."

She pops a morsel in her mouth and closes her eyes: it's just right.

Labourers suffer, wages plateau

Migration threatens jobs of native labourers

KALYANI S.

Vaniyambadi: M.Sathyamoorthy (53) has worked for most of his life at a small tannery in Vaniyambadi. But when he started his work there some 27 years ago, it was a sprawling business despite it being just a semi-processing and a finishing unit.

The semi-processing unit was shut down roughly three years ago. Today, the finishing unit runs with just five workers running the various machines.

"The cost of production has multiplied tremendously and the business is bad today. We are no longer able to maintain the same level of production, nor keep as many workers as we once used to," says C. Ganesh Moorthy (57), manager of the tannery.

"The additional costs of treating the sewage at Common Effluent Treatment Plants (CETPs) had also turned out to be unviable while running the semi-processing unit," he adds.

Small tanneries like these face extra burdens where waste disposal is concerned, while bigger tanneries that let out larger quantities of effluents often stay outside the grid.

"Globalisation meant greater competition and the smaller tanneries could no longer compete with the bigger ones. Treatment plants turned out to be expensive while electricity costs also rose since manual labour was increasingly being replaced by machines at the factories. The worst hit during all this were the workers," says Arul, a local leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)).

Wages had to be minimized to cut costs and no form of protests in the recent years by the unions

could ensure any form of increment in the wages, says Arul.

"The workers are afraid to stand up against the owners because they will lose their jobs. Now that the inflow of migrant labour from States like Orissa, West Bengal and Bihar have increased, the local labourers have also become easily replaceable," says Arul.

Some claim that migration of workers from the Northern States to work at the tanneries is a recent phenomenon. However, many workers like Purkan Ali and Shujaat Ali, both from Orissa have been staying in the district at Ranipet for over eight years.

"These migrant workers are paid way less than the locals because they do not question the owners. They are usually also more willing to work for longer hours and shifts," says K. Sathiyani, Maniyampet Panchayat President.

While these contract labourers usually work at the tanneries in shifts, working hours usually extend beyond the stipulated eight hours. On an average, most wor-

kers earn Rs.200- 250 per day, and are paid on a weekly basis. But some tanneries still opt to pay their workers on a piece rate basis despite alternate methods.

Arul also claims that the tannery owners who prefer to stay far away in Chennai have immense power through their owners' associations to even meddle with the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB)'s reports.

Irregular inspections and limited safety measures at tanneries, that have been frequently called out by various reports also continue to plague labourers in the tannery. Provisions like the provident fund and other healthcare benefits are also only provided at the bigger factories.

"Sometimes for a day's holiday, they cut two days' wage. I've personally worked standing in the sludge myself, because sometimes the factory itself is filled with the sludge. The owners do not dare to enter in these types of situations. And yet, they do not care at all about whatever happens to all of us," says K. Arjun (30), a tannery worker.



KANIMOZHI S.

Kudigam faces a difficult trail towards access to healthcare

PURNASNEHA S.

Odugathur: Krithika, a 3-year-old child, lost her mother at birth. The 20-year-old woman had a haemorrhage and died due to the lack of medical help.

"It was midnight when her water broke. I understood that she had complications. I focused on getting the baby out first. But we're not doctors here, so don't ask me why I couldn't save her," said Kamsala R, an old woman who serves as a doula or a midwife during many homebirths in Kudigam.

The recent maternal mortality rate (MMR) for India reported by the World Bank showed a significant decline from 215 per 100,000 live births in 2010 to 174 in 2015. Yet, about five women continue to die every hour in India due to various complications at childbirth. The 45, 000 mothers who die every year contribute to 17 per cent of the world's MMR.

"How could she have travelled that road to the hospital, while she suffered severe pain?" asked Hemalatha, who is appointed by the Peenjamandai Primary Healthcare Centre as the medical in-charge for these 60 households.

There is no road; just a rocky path that leads out of the village.

"Reaching a hospital is a hurdle even otherwise," she added in agony.

"Sister" Hemalatha, as they call her, ensures that monthly medical camps are arranged here for the villagers, provides sanitary napkins for women and distributes medicines for immediate pain-relief. Since the death of Krithika's mother, Hemalatha has had an additional responsibility to take the pregnant women along to the PHC for regular prenatal check-ups.

"Pregnant women often experience miscarriages while travelling through the hills on a tractor. Owing to that if they choose to walk, it takes around three hours to reach the clinic. The risk of miscarriage and injury is immense and



Residents of Kudigam do not seek medical help unless life-threatening, because the nearest Secondary Healthcare Centre is almost 10 kilometres away. The rocky path through the hills has never seen an ambulance.

PURNASNEHA S.

can be fatal," she said.

According to the data collected from the fourth National Family Health Survey, 16.7 per cent of rural India access government healthcare, while 14 per cent and 12 per cent continue to depend on community health centres and primary health centres.

Prema, who has been a nurse since May at the Peenjamandai PHC and the Thongumalai SHC, both which provide immediate medical help for Kudigam said, "The government provides a sum of Rs.12,000 for pregnant women in rural India. This is distributed across three stages - prenatal check-

up, delivery of the first or the second child and, postnatal checkup and vaccination of the child. Additionally, Rs.700 is provided for mothers who deliver at the PHC. This has increased the number of pregnant women going to the hospital from this village."

She also said that the government has provided a jeep for both doctors and nurses from the PHC to reach Kudigam. Since the terrain gets worse every year after the rains, this facility has hardly been utilised.

As Kudigam is located on the top of Javadhu Hills, reaching the nearest government hospital, which

is nearly 50 kilometers away in Odugathur is difficult.

Hence, these villagers seek medical help either at the PHC or during the different medical camps conducted by colleges like the Christian Medical College, Vellore.

While Hemalatha considered these camps effective in terms of healthcare, she noted that the recent inconsistency in their schedule left many patients undergoing treatment without proper care and advisory.

According to the NFHS data, 55.1 per cent of households do not use government health facilities while they're sick. The most important reasons for this are the poor quality of care - 48.1 per cent, the lack of easily accessible facilities - 44.6 per cent and ironically, the long waiting time - 40.9 per cent.

There are some who manage to get private health care.

Archana Velu, the wife of R. Velu (who serves as the standalone teaching in-charge in the local school), recently gave birth to her second child, at a private healthcare institution in Jamunamarthur.

"I heard that they reuse products in the PHC. Plus, I've always wanted high-quality healthcare for both my children. Thankfully, my husband owns a bike. So it's easier for us to reach a hospital than the rest," she said.

Almost 49 per cent of rural India as per the NFHS data opts for an unregulated private medical sector because of the inadequate healthcare network in the rural areas.

Venkatesan, also referred to as 'Natammai' here, said that a few members have been constantly urging the forest department to construct a path till the neighbouring village, Arasavalli that has regular bus services to the government hospital in Jamanamarthur.

"Deaths occur periodically here. At the end of the day, our lives are not privileged enough for us to get proper transportation or medical facilities that are considered essential in every city," he said.

A challenge to the status quo

MIRAH ZAMIN



Manisha Devi, is one in four children to study from the Ramalingham household.

dard this year and Jay Kumar (12) is in the sixth standard at the Society for Rural Development (SFRD), Guniganthur, Javadhu Hills. All four went to the Adi Dravidar residential primary school situated in the Kudigam village and were then sent to SFRD. From there the elder two siblings went to Governmental Higher Secondary School in Sathuvachari, Vellore and later to college for graduation.

"Not many in the village have money to send their children to Vellore district to study, so my father borrowed money when Tamilselvi and Arun wanted to study after higher secondary," said Manisha Devi, the third child of the couple who has taken a year's break because of health issues.

The parents are coffee plantation labourers who are seasonal migrants working in Kerala for Rs.440 and Rs.350 respectively per day. They have borrowed nearly Rs.3 lakh for Tamilselvi and Arun's education at an interest rate of 12 per cent per annum.

"We have worked as coffee plantation labourers our entire life and only earned Rs.800 jointly per day, we never wanted our children to face the same penury and we felt education was the best way out," says Magendran Ramalingam in a telephonic conversation.

In order to lessen the burden on their parents, both elder children work part-time as home tutors to meet their needs and also contribute in repaying the loans. Both Arun and his sister want to come back to the village and open a school to provide higher education to children.

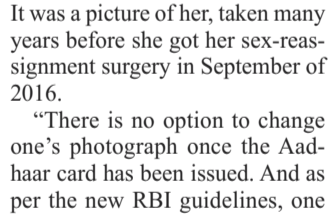
"We have lived all our life outside home and it was not easy. Many children of my village are not getting education because their parents don't want to send them away", says Arun.

Old identities against new names: the curious case of transgender women

KALYANI S. & PURNASNEHA S.

26-year-old.

Her only official identity proof, an Aadhaar card, although had her name and gender right, got one thing wrong - her photograph.



It was a picture of her, taken many years before she got her sex-reassignment surgery in September of 2016.

"There is no option to change one's photograph once the Aadhaar card has been issued. And as per the new RBI guidelines, one

Rajapalayam: Despite having procured new Aadhaar cards, nine transgenders from the first transgender self-help group (SHG) in Vellore can apply for neither a PAN card nor bank loans.

Monika E., dressed in a black sari, approached her bank for a loan in order to pay the medical bills for her mother's accident. She was asked, "Why is your photograph so different?"

"If you want to avail a loan, just go back to wearing trousers and being Somu Erusappan. I felt ashamed and walked away," said the

requires a PAN card to get loans from centralised banks. Sadly, our PAN cards do not recognise the third gender yet," says K. Ramya, community level facilitator of the Tamil Nadu State Rural Livelihoods Mission (TNSRLM).

The SHG was formed only a year ago under the guidance of Ramya, but with the help of their savings of Rs.300 per month and a sum of Rs.15,000 from the District Collector, they have provided loans within themselves from the fund for immediate needs.

"The SHG as a collective cannot avail of loans from the Central Bank of India where they have their accounts. Instead, the loan

must be procured on behalf of the TNSRLM. This issue is due to the lack of PAN cards for them and it cannot be resolved until the RBI guidelines are changed," added Ramya.

Monika and her eight friends, who have been living together for five years now, beg on trains. This is only temporary, as the government has promised them employment at an upcoming power laundry.

Yet, since the Prevention of Begging Act, 1959 criminalises begging, these women engage in a criminal offense, which might also affect their chances of obtaining a PAN card.



The Aadhaar card form is a transgender's only identity proof. And yet, their photographs remain unchanged.

PURNASNEHA S.

Infertility and poor healthcare on the rise

DEBANGANA GHOSH

Vaniyambadi: High rates of infertility, balding and an increasing presence of cancer are just a few health hazards faced by the residents of Vadakarai situated on the northern banks of the Palar river.

An agricultural village, over the past decade, many have lost their occupation and health due to high pollution in the area that has contaminated its soil.

Over a span of 30 years, the quality of the river water has deteriorated tremendously after the tanneries in Vaniyambadi started using chemicals instead of natural dyes. These chemicals produced effluents which were then discharged into the river.

According to Dr. K. Krishnan, Executive Director, Foundation for Sustainable Development, "40 to 50 years ago, each woman had between 5 to 10 children. Now most of the families are regularly visiting fertility clinics for a single child and the doctors are making money. This is the situation with all the 230 villages along the bank of the Palar river in Vellore."

The Palar once used to be their only source of clean drinking water. People still wash their utensils and clothes in the river water.

Children here suffer from premature baldness, skin infections and kidney stones. Some residents also have elephantiasis.

R. Janardhanan, 73, farmer and village accountant said, "After quitting farming I started cattle rearing. But soon my business failed as all my cows turned sterile after drinking the river water regularly. I had a loss of Rs.50,000. Even the women here have become infertile."

He added, "In 1996, a case was filed in the Supreme Court against tanneries by the



The Palar river, filled with pollution, poses various health hazards for Vadakarai residents. | PURNASNEHA S.

Vellore District Environment Monitoring Committee. It is still going on. When we approached the then Vellore District Collector, he did not pay any heed and told us to buy sheep and sleep." The Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC) is seven kilometres away.

R. Nagarajan, resident and retired Assistant Treasurer, Sub-treasury of Tiruvannamalai said, "Many deaths were reported from this village. Despite that no action was taken. Now we get borewell water. Even that is partially contaminated."

Nagarajan added, "Most of the PHCs don't maintain exact numbers and records as severe actions will be taken against them by the Government. Many diseases go unreported as well. Villagers won't visit a doctor until they can't stand on their feet."

By 2005, most farmers gave up agriculture and started cattle rearing instead. The soil became unsuitable for cultivating any crop.

While men continue to look for alternative employment opportunities, most of the women are employed in the tanneries. Interestingly, only women of the village work in the tanneries.

Owners prefer female labourers as women do not form unions and can be paid less. They earn Rs.80 to 90 a day, making around Rs.2400 a month, working eight hours daily.



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Using rainwater - not a drop to waste

Check dams: An effective tool

PRIYA LALWANI

Jangaon : Telangana government in its legal battle against the centre last year to levy GST (Goods and Services Tax) on the ongoing schemes of irrigation and safe drinking water had a clear agenda – to be able to get rid of the increasing levels of fluoride content in its groundwater which was much higher than the permissible levels.

The subsequent months saw various flagship schemes being launched with massive fundings, aiming for a better standard of living in districts and their villages. Amongst others, most of these schemes had their major focus on the usage of surface water of the perennial rivers (Mission Bhagiratha), developing a system that is able to provide water for purposes other than industry use, increasing the state's green cover, desilting of tanks and their restoration (Mission Kakatiya).

Laying its roots in the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IMWP) of 2009-2010, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government came up with programs for the improvement of watershed techniques and development of water-harvesting structures.

One such innovation was the



A check dam in Mekalagattu

| PRIYA LALWANI

creation of check dams for the recharging of groundwater reservoirs and promoting surface vegetation.

Functioning of a check dam is like that of a normal dam, except the barriers in the building of the former are 10 times smaller than the latter. It is built across the direction of water flow on shallow rivers and streams to retain excess water flow during monsoon rains in a small catchment area behind the barrier. Pressure created in the catchment area forces the retained water into the ground and thus replenishing it.

“In contrast to a dam with skyrocketing building costs, a check dam costs around two lakhs and generates short-term employment opportunities,” said R.V. Giri, an official from MARI (Modern Architects for Rural India), an NGO working for the upliftment of the poor and marginalized in Telangana.

As availability of water increased, there has been a boost in the growth of the cash crops such as maize, paddy and cotton.

Sammiyah Yadav, president of the Farmer Producer Organisation

(FPO) and also a member of the village watershed committee in the Mekalagattu village in Jangaon district said that, “The number of barren lands has fallen drastically because of the watershed programs, especially after the installation of four check dams last year.”

The farmers expressed comfort over the model's capability of replenishing borewells at a higher rate than the usual.

“One borewell takes approximately a month to fill itself. Out of 20 non-functioning borewells last year, 15 have come to life because of the effective groundwater percolation,” said P. Raman, a village farmer.

There are now more working days and smaller gaps of agricultural unemployment in the year for most check dam beneficiaries.

In case of the non-functioning of the model because of higher dependency on the monsoon season, the villagers resort to the two tanks that have been restored under the Mission Kakatiya of the TRS government.

☞ **Two years ago, Jangaon was a symbol of severe water crisis. Now, the villages have abundant water for irrigation as well as households.** - P. RAMAN

Making hay while it rains

LAKSHMIKANTH KOUNDINYA

Fathepur: Fathepur village in Jangaon district is dependent on rainwater for agriculture. The village has 487 households with a population of about 2500. The primary occupation of villagers is farming and they cultivate paddy, maize, cotton, pulses and grams.

Fathepur receives an above-average annual rainfall of 500 millimetres (average annual rainfall in India is 300-650 millimetres). Yet, ten years ago, the village suffered severe droughts. Plots remained barren and the annual yield was too low for sustenance. Consequently, villagers' morale fell and it translated into migration to cities.

“At that point, under the guidance of Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI), we understood that managing rainwater would revive our village. We started working on the lines of NABARD-assisted watershed development project and began to implement various techniques to harvest and harness rainwater,” said Raju Nayak, committee member, Project Watershed, Fathepur.

To qualify for NABARD's loan, a village should prove its commitment by performing voluntary la-



Left to Right: A pipeline and a tank installed under mission Bhagiratha in Fathepur

| PRIYA LALWANI

bour. In Fathepur, one member from each household of the village worked four days a week, for a month, and the village received Rs.15 lakhs from NABARD, in three instalments.

Under the watershed project, villagers constructed check dams (an ancient technique to check the water flow velocity), water absorption trenches (6000-litre trenches to facilitate groundwater replenishment), stone gully plugs (plugs using loose-stone to prevent soil erosion) and sunken ponds (dug in channels to store excess rainwater).

“A lot of positive things began to happen in the last few years. We

had better crops. Migration to cities stopped. The health of the village improved and we could see it in our children and our women,” said Elisha, Anganwadi worker, Fathepur.

Fathepur identified its core concern and channelled efforts to address it. Water is a key resource for villages in Telangana and Fathepur set a great example to other villages by efficiently managing its water. With Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government's Mission Bhagiratha kicking off in nine districts, the supply of water might increase, but if it is not used optimally the benefits of the scheme will suffer erosion.

The 'un'fair price shop of Narayanapuram

Biometrics no longer functioning in e-PoS (electronic- Point of Sale) machines installed last year

PRIYA LALWANI

In the previous year, Telangana's Chief Minister K. Chandrababbar Rao examined the implementation of 'Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme' for the state's public distribution system. This was done to prevent the widespread illegal hoarding and theft of the PDS rice. The supplies have a fixed time for their distribution. Currently under scrutiny, the scheme aims to provide the money directly into the accounts of the beneficiaries (ration card holders) instead of distributing the commodities. It is being studied for its feasibility and elimination of the fair price shops with severe stock shortage and de-licensing of its dealers.

Narayanapuram is a self-proclaimed model village in Parvathagiri Mandal of the Warangal rural district where the sarpanch E. Venkateshwara Rao takes credit for having constructed cement roads, for having one of the best government schools, producing two IIT graduates, furnished ST and OBC hostels, building toilets in 192 homes of the village and installing 276 safe drinking water taps. The inefficient Public Distribution System (PDS) in the village finds no mention.

In a population of 2600, a majority depends on a single fair price shop which once provided sugar, tamarind, dal and cooking oil in large quantities. Now, it just sells thick rice grains and kerosene.

“It has been three years since the state cut the supply of all the other commodities and I had loads of villagers coming to my house with questions. I had no answer,” said J. Ramulu, the shop dealer handling Narayanapuram's incoming ration stock.

In early 2016, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) government announced that each member in a 'Below Poverty Line (BPL)' family, i.e. white card holders, will get six kgs of rice per head and one litre of kerosene per family instead of the earlier quota of two litres.

“There is usually a shortage of 10-15 litres of kerosene and 8-10 kg of rice for every quintal received. Once it's out of stock, I just have to pull the shutters down”, he added.

According to the villagers, stock shortage has always been an issue in the entire mandal.

“It is believed that the dealer sells the missing commodities in the black market,” said J. Kandikatla, a leader of a Self Help Group (SHG) in the village. All the members of her group said that the dealer sold private goods like soaps, detergent, tooth-pastes etc. with his own profit margin.

It was last year when the biometric machines were introduced in all fair price shops. This was done to keep a digital track of supplies and increase efficiency. But there have been complaints about the machine not being able to recognise the fingerprints.



☞ **Villagers blame me for the shortage, but it's not in my hands.**

-J. Ramulu, FPS owner

S. Ramalakshmi, a resident of Narayanapuram for the last 30 years, said, “My son is a daily wage coolie and the sole breadwinner in our family of seven. But last month, we were denied of rice and kerosene because the biometric didn't recognise his fingerprint as his fingers had turned coarse due to the laborious work.”

Along with the flaws in the biometric system, a constant complaint from villagers was about the substandard quality of rice. “The quality of rice is very poor. It turns

sticky after it's cooked and becomes hard to feed the younger ones,” said Ramalakshmi.

Suryanarain, the Deputy Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) of Parkala in Warangal Rural District, said, “The loopholes in the Public Distribution System are being filled slowly and gradually. We are in constant coordination with the village panchayats. Villagers across the districts need to be patient.”

He mentioned that there exists a dedicated grievances redressal cell which is set up for receiving complaints and queries from the public.

The complaints are then routed to concerned authorities for redressal. Files of Parvathagiri mandal are being scrutinised for a better identification process of Above Poverty Line (APL) and Below Poverty Line (BPL) families to ensure equal share and prevent malpractices.

He said that in some districts, the faulty e-PoS machines were repaired and in some cases were replaced with a new machine.



Sacks of rice piled up at Narayanapuram's only fair price shop's godown.

| ANAGHA

No cotton yield this year, farmers in debt

MOHINI CHANDOLA

Parvathagiri: Farmers in Narayanapuram village under Parvathagiri mandal have been left in the lurch following their cotton crop failure after using genetically modified seeds which promised a higher yield.

According to the up-Sarpanch Lonavathu Sreenu, the village produced at least 15 quintals of cotton per acre in 2017 while this year, the produce had fallen to two quintals per acre.

Most of the 276 families residing in Narayanapuram rely on agriculture for a living. The village is popular for its 800 acres of rich Paddy, Chilli and Cotton fields.

Sarpanch E. Venkateshwara Rao said, “After Bt cotton was introduced in the market, all farmers in the village started using it. They plant the seeds during monsoon in June/July.”

Bt (Bacillus Thuringiensis) cotton, which is a variety of cotton seeds, is genetically modified to produce natural insecticide in its tissues. This eliminates the need to buy insecticides and pesticides, requiring less labour and thus, reducing cost of cultivation.

Rao continued, “For regular cotton, 20:20 urea mixture and fertilizers are used but for Bt cotton, less is required. For the past 3 years,



| SIMRAN BAJAJ

the quality of Bt cotton has come down and the yield declined.”

The 20:20 urea mixture is used by farmers to add nitrogen to the soil to promote green leafy growth, giving the appearance of healthy and lush plants. The 20:20 urea mixture is a water-soluble compound which contains 20% Nitrogen and 20% Ammonium Phosphate, which are essential for healthy growth of plants. Major fertilizer companies like FACT and SPIC provide the fertilizers in

granular form to farmers. The latest variety of Bt cotton, known as Bt-5 is easily available in Warangal, about 30 kms from Parvathagiri. Companies like Kaveri Seeds, Rasi, MAHYCO and JK seeds sell Bt seeds at a price

cheaper than organic seeds reducing input costs for farmers who are financially dependent on private moneylenders to buy seeds. Sahilu K, owner of a two-acre cotton field said, “We take most loans from money lenders. The

banks only provide loans if you mortgage your land.”

Companies like MAHYCO and Rasi are banned in Maharashtra and Karnataka as they failed to pass government approval tests and were providing sub-standard seeds to farmers. The latest variety which has traits like Herbicide-Tolerance (HT) is being sold to farmers in black market. The seeds are not of the quality approved by the government but the lucrative price lures the farmers in.

Since 2014, more than 124 farmers have committed suicide in Warangal district alone, which is the epicenter of agrarian distress in the State.

After his crop failed, Sahilu said, “I was forced to burn the crops since there was nothing for me to sell to the market or the traders. It was a waste.”

Farmers in other villages like Ramannagudem, suffer the same fate as Sahilu. For the past five years, the village has relied on genetically modified cotton and faces the same results as Narayanapuram. They say that all of them have given up on organic farming since it is harder to maintain growth.

Rao, who is also a member of Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), said that the Telangana government has announced a cash compensation of Rs. 4,000 for every bad seasonal crop -Rabi and Kharif, grown in 2019. Starting May 15, the farmers will be able to procure relief from the government in case of another crop failure.

☞ **I am stuck neck-deep in loans. The seeds have now left all our lands barren without any scope of recultivation. I've seven mouths to feed. I don't know what to do.**

-SAHILU.K



Woe of a distressed farmer: Veeranna, 64, had little to no cotton yield this season from his two-acre farm in Ramannagudem

| SUGRA KHANWALA

Where do they belong?



Children of Devudugutta standing by a trench dug by the forest department

LAKSHMIKANTH KOUNDINYA

Devudugutta, a tribal settlement with 120 people belonging to Gothi-Koya, Muria and Gondri tribes, does not exist according to the Government of Telangana. It is because their settlement, located in a reserved forest area, amounts to encroachment of government-owned forest land and poses a danger to ecological balance.

"These tribals, native to Dantewada and Bastar districts of Chhattisgarh moved to Devudugutta around seven years ago when they found themselves in the midst of a Maoist insurgency," said Md. Rafi,

project coordinator, Save the Children.

Caught in the crossfire between Chhattisgarh police, Maoists and Salwa Judum (a state-sponsored counter-insurgency militia), they traveled through the forests, crossed the border, and settled down between Pasra and Tadvai villages, about eighty kilometers from Warangal. Their settlement is by a hill, five kilometers into the forest from the Warangal-Etunagaram road. They built a temple on that hill and called their new settlement Devudugutta (God's hill).

According to R.V. Giri, a member of Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI), these tribes are originally forest-dwelling

cultivators and hunter-gatherers and seldom came in contact with the mainland civilization. Their women delivered babies at home, severed umbilical cords with arrowheads, and induced the babies to sleep by smearing a drop of Mahuwa liquor when they went to work. As forests disappeared and animal numbers dwindled they were forced out of forests to look for work in the nearby villages, while their families continued to live in the forests. Naxalism sent them packing from the Dantewada forests in a mass migration which earned them the label, Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), or 'homeless' with all the indignities that name implies.

Occupation of the forests brings them into frequent conflicts with the State Forest Department. When the tribals made huts by felling trees, the forest department personnel demolished their fragile dwellings. So, more trees were felled and new huts were built. When women tried to grow vegetables in small patches of land, the plants were trampled upon and trenches dug at various places to prevent further cultivation. Despite repeated assaults, the tribals have refused to relocate. "There are two reasons for their unwillingness to relocate," said R. Murali,

Executive Director, MARI, "first, they believe their relationship with the forest to be intimate and organic and hence inviolable. Second, the support they get from certain political factions which help them obtain land rights only to buy it off from them later at cheap prices, thereby profiting from the tribals' naiveté."

When their very existence is threatened, other necessities like health and education are ignored. Apart from an NGO that caters to children below the age of five, and a medical camp that visits once a month, nothing else is cared for. Constant assaults have instilled fear and uncertainty that have seeped into their very bearing. Their postures were distressingly diffident — eyes dreary, expressions blank and confused, hands crossed and backs bent.

According to MARI officials, when these tribes migrated to Devudugutta, a vestige of Maoism still clung to them; over time it got mitigated and now has completely disappeared. However, in some men's faces the withdrawal symptoms were evident. Their past brush with Maoism estranged them from state and the society, the forests they call home are owned by the government, and all they are left with is fear, silence, loss of self and shattered homes in the hill of Gods.

Lavval, only 40 per cent 'Swacch' with toilets

MOHINI CHANDOLA

Lavval: Under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), the Central government has initiated a scheme to provide Rs.12,500 to build private toilets for every household in a village. According to the National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16), only 35% of Rural Warangal has access to clean sanitation facilities.

Only 40% of households in Lavval, a village in Jayashankar (Bhupalpalle) district, have private toilets.

The village is heavily reliant on agriculture for income and during the off-season, the entire village becomes jobless.

Since 2015, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has provided financial assistance to households living Below Poverty Line (BPL) to construct Individual Household Latrines (IHHL). According to the Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) guidelines, the Centre would provide Rs.9,000 (75%) while the balance Rs.3,000 (25%) was to be provided by the State.

But in the same year, the Swachh Telangana guidelines says that the State would pay Rs. 8,000(66.6%) and the Centre would pay Rs.4,000 (33.3%) per unit.

In spite of the difference in the percentage of amount shared by the State and the Centre, the tribals in the village received only a part of the promised amount.

V. Susheela, the village ward member said, "Initially we received Rs.8,000 to build our own private toilet and the balance had to be paid by ourselves. A lot of people couldn't afford it. Two weeks ago, the government announced that Rs.12,500 will be given so now the number of applications from this village has shot up."

Lavval, which is 5 km from the Warangal-Etunagaram road, is secluded and lacks basic sanitation facilities. For a population of 200 people, there are no public toilets available for use.

Residents without a toilet in their homes, defecate in the open, risking several infections and diseases.

Raju Shrivastava, a resident said, "We did not have toilets at all until a few years ago till Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI) started working for us. Now, at least 40% of the households have toilets. But there is still no drainage system or public toilets facility."

The villagers have applied for a proper drainage channel in the village, but are yet to follow it up.

"If there is one thing I want to change in this village, it is that a proper drainage system should be done," Susheela remarked.



Toilet at the ward member's house, one of the few in the village

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Education in govt. schools - a report card

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Warangal: The Government School in Fathepur, Jangaon district consists of multiple classrooms where students of different grades sit together on the floor. And the teacher remains busy shuffling from one class to another while the students learn by rote memorization of textbooks.

The story is similar in other villages like Lavval in Jayashankar (Bhupalpalle) district, Narayanapuram and Ramannagudem in Warangal district.

All the classrooms have students of different grades sitting together while the teacher is constantly hopping from one class to another. While in private schools, each grade has a different classroom and a teacher allotted to it.

A class 3 and a class 6 student reads and speaks in English the same way in government schools while a child from private school speaks better. K. Narayan Reddy, District Education Officer (DEO), Warangal Rural said "Children in government schools are first generation learners. They do not have the opportunity to interact in English like private school children, who have the luxury of interacting in English even at home."

In Ramannagudem, the school was established in 1987, and the literacy rate (above 40 years of age) is 0 per cent, said N. Ramesh, Government Primary School teacher.

In Victory High School,



(Top) A Math class (Bottom) Kids of different standards sitting together.

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Regonda, Jayashankar (Bhupalpalle) district, the Headmaster's office has a shelf covered with trophies won by the students. The students participate in inter-school activities, interact there and learn. While this is absent in government schools, DEO Narayan Reddy says this is because government school lacks funds.

In Lavval village, the primary school has an attendance issue, "Parents take their kids to visit relatives for a long duration, as

much as 10 days and this hampers their education" said A. Ramanjiah, Primary School teacher.

Headmaster of Government School in Fathepur V. Komrullu said "parents prefer sending their girl child to government schools, while they send their boys to private schools."

"They believe the boys will get better opportunities there. Hence, we have a higher ratio of girls in the school", he added.

The state had converted government schools into English Medium schools only two years ago, but the same old faculty is continuing. On interacting with the faculty it was visible that they themselves are not well-trained in the language that is now the medium of instruction.

DEO Narayan Reddy said, "The teachers were trained when the schools were converted."

As far as other subjects are concerned, the students are faring well. On observation, it was found that primary school children were faring well in Mathematics, Environmental Studies (E.V.S.), Telugu and Hindi.

However, on the other hand, Narayanapuram Sarpanch E. Venkateshwara Rao said that two government school students from the village are studying in IIT.

They believe the boys will get better opportunities there. Hence, we have a higher ratio of girls in the school.

- V. Komrullu (HM)

Where 'Beti Padhao' is the norm

MEGHA KAVERI

Lavval: Deepika is a happy child. On this Monday morning, she is wearing a green frock. As the teacher asks a question, she is seen raising her hand to indicate that she knows the answer. She likes coming to school daily and also likes the dal served for the noonday meal at school.

Mandal Tadvai, not only has a favourable sex ratio of 1,100 but also some villages here like Lavval, take pride in educating their girl children. As per the Education survey of the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Round 71, the female literacy rates among India's rural population have increased over the last 10 years and now stand at 56.8%.

Lavval, a village in Mandal Tadvai, with a population of around 100 members of the Koya tribe, is located off the Warangal-Etunagaram. The village has one pre-primary school and a primary school and the children are enthusiastic about coming to school and learning. The anganwadi here has five boys and five girls enrolled and Manjula, who is the in-charge, is happy to have an equal number of boys and girls.

"Some parents send their daughters willingly to the anganwadis and some don't. We go to those houses that don't send their children and bring them to the anganwadi", she says, with a smile.

The anganwadi in Lavval serves two other villages and serves lunch and snacks to the

children enrolled in it. The progression of a child from anganwadi to a primary school is automatic in Lavval.

"We make sure that the child moves to the next level of education after anganwadi. We issue a certificate to the child, which acts as a referral, thus



helping the child to get into a primary school," she adds.

This is exactly what happened with the six-year-old Deepika who studies in class one in the Lavval

Primary School. Deepika has a brother who is now in the anganwadi, under Manjula's care.

When Deepika was five, Manjula made sure that she was admitted to the primary school, located right opposite the anganwadi. "It wouldn't have been possible without the parents' cooperation," said Manjula. Vattam Srilatha, Deepika's mother, endorses Manjula and adds that she wants her daughter to get a job and secure her future. "Whatever she wants to study, she can," she adds.

Across the road, inside the school, Deepika and her friends are playing a game by placing their feet beside each other's and counting. "She is regular to school and is a good child," says A. Ramanjiah, one of the two teachers in the school.

The primary school in Lavval village has classes up to 3rd standard. For middle school, children depend on the nearby villages like Tadvai or Ramannagudem that have two middle schools and two secondary schools each. A short

conversation with the kids in Lavval Primary School tells us how determined they are to study more. "We want to go and study in

hostels," they say in unison, indicating that the schools outside Lavval have hostel facilities.

Although Srilatha dropped out of school after her 12th class, she is determined to educate her daughter and son. "My husband also encourages Deepika to go to school. We are curious about her education and ask her about it every day," she remarks.

On January 10th, Deputy Chief Minister and Education Minister of Telangana Kadiyam Srihari proposed to provide free education to promote girls' education in the country. During the cabinet meeting with the HRD Special Secretary, Member Secretary and the Education Ministers of Jharkhand and Assam, he added that this meeting was intended to encourage girls and provide compulsory education up to post graduation level. Presently, there is a special residential education center for women, SC/ST girls in Telangana. This would soon be implemented across the country, he said

MEGHA

Need another pay-hike and permanent jobs, say Anganwadi Workers

LAKSHMIKANTH KOUNDINYA

Jangaon/ Bhupalpalle: There are 67,411 Anganwadi workers (AWWs) working in 35,700 Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) in Telangana. Visits to six AWCs in Warangal and Jangaon districts evinced the disparity between anganwadi workers' job and their pay.

"Our day starts at 8 a.m. We conduct the prayer at 9 a.m. We give snacks to children. We have school-readiness activities. We conduct indoor and outdoor games. There is story telling. There are picnics. We also do home-visits. It is quite a work," said B. Kamala, AWW, Fathepur AWC.

When Telangana state was

formed, the salary of an anganwadi worker was Rs.4,200 per month. In 2015 it was revised to Rs.7,000 and the hike last year took it up to Rs.10,500.

"It's not greed, but we spend the whole day here and we must be paid more. We are happy that government hiked our salaries last year, but it is still less," added Kamala. When asked how much salary she thinks is apt, she said "At least Rs.15,000 per month."

The anganwadi worker at Lavval, B. Manjula, apart from running the centre, makes sure that children maintain hygiene. She also educates their parents about the importance of sanitation.

"I take the extra load because I strongly believe that hygiene is the key to good health. For the work we



Anganwadi worker M. Elisha at her centre in Fathepur

ANJANA KANKANALA

do, most anganwadi workers are not happy with the pay. Yet I am sure we are the most dedicated workers in villages," Manjula said.

Anganwadi workers also work with pregnant women and new mothers to make sure that they receive all the benefits of Arogya Lakshmi programme of the government: one full-meal for pregnant and lactating women at the Anganwadi Centre.

"We have 10 pregnant women registered with us, and four new mothers. We follow up on their health checkups and immunization. We ensure that they are taking their (Iron and Folic Acid) IFA tablets. The mother and the child should be healthy, that is our goal," said, Elisha, AWW, Fathepur AWC

Anganwadi workers also ensure

that new mothers receive KCR kit (named after Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao). The kit contains — a soap, oil, shampoo, towel and napkins, clothes, powder, diapers and toys for the baby. It also has sarees and a handbag for the mother.

Despite their woes, Anganwadi workers are toiling relentlessly for their centres. They feel that the government must recognize this and make their job permanent and provide adequate remuneration.

"In Fathepur, we have 31 children under the age of five, and we are two workers. It is a big number for two of us, but when I see these children and their smiles, all my troubles vanish and I just want to be here every day!" added M. Elisha.

These children are like clay and it is important to mould them into healthy human beings.

- B. MANJULA, AWW

Healthy habits must be inculcated right from a young age.

- M. ELISHA, AWW

We go for home-visits, to know the living conditions and food habits of the mother and the child.

- B. KAMALA, AWW

Govt jobs go missing

Reservation for SCs and STs doesn't reach the intended

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Lavval: In the village of Lavval with a population of 210 in the Jayashankar (Bhupalpalle) district of Telangana, where every resident belongs to a Scheduled Tribe, not even a single person is employed in a Central or a State government job.

N. Lakshminarayana, a B.A Economics graduate from Lavval had applied for the job of a constable, but never got a reply. He feels that if people from the village who have post-graduate degrees cannot secure government jobs, then he has no chances. He said "reservation is useless."

Another mostly Scheduled Tribal village, Narayanapuram in Parvathagiri Mandal, Warangal Rural district has a population of 2600 and only four people from there have government jobs. The village Sarpanch E. Venkateshwara Rao said "there is a huge competition for government jobs and we do not have any coaching centres."



E. Venkateshwara Rao, Sarpanch of Narayanapuram addressing the team |MEGHA KAVERI

"We don't have any information about any openings in the government, it is only due to media that we have some information now", he added.

In Ramannagudem, another village made up entirely of tribals, out of 850 people, only two are employed in government jobs (in Railways). B. Rajender, a resident pursuing M. Com said "even though we have reservation, jobs go to those who can pay bribes."

A. Ramanjaih, a Primary

School teacher from Lavval said "the number of government jobs are not enough, and now that STs are getting minimum required education, it is getting even more difficult."

At the Gram Panchayat office in Parkal, Vijaya Bhaskar, Bill Collector, said that earlier all the jobs were taken up by the Andhra [Pradesh] people. But after Telangana was formed, lot of new jobs were created, but now there are no government jobs.

Last year around April, Telangana Government had passed a bill to raise the quota for STs to 10 per cent from the existing six per cent.

According to a report in *The Hindu*, 90% of the State's social composition of the population were SC, ST, BC and minorities.

The Government of India had initiated the Creamy Layer Certification in 1993 by which socially and educationally advanced section/persons of backward communities are excluded from the benefits of reservation and services under the Government of India.

K. Sudhir, Private Secretary to Backward Classes Welfare Minister, said that in Telangana, around 20 per cent of the total backward class has been issued Creamy Layer Certificates.

The office of the Commissioner of Backward Classes Welfare was unavailable to comment on the exact number of certificates issued in the past three years in the State.

Stunting morbid in Fathepur

MOHINI CHANDOLA

Fathepur: According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-2016), 26.8% children under the age of five in Warangal District are stunted. Among the tribals the number of cases of stunting is greater.

In Fathepur in Jangaon district, with a population of 2500, around 76% are tribals. The village's economy predominantly relies on agriculture and the size of a nuclear family ranges from 3-8.

There are two anganwadis in the village, providing education and basic healthcare to 18 boys and 13 girls. Ten pregnant women are under their care as well.

M. Elisha, an anganwadi teacher in one of the centres says, "Everyday, we give the children one egg, rice and vegetable sambhar (lentil soup)/ green leaf sambhar for lunch at 12 pm. On Wednesdays, they get two eggs."

According to the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), every child between ages 0-3 years is to be provided at least 500 calories of nutrition everyday to prevent malnutrition, which is the leading cause of stunting. The three items in one meal - rice, sambhar and one egg - add up to around 400 calories, which is not sufficient for a healthy, developed growth in children.

Another source of nutrition vital for growth is protein, which is lacking in the meals provided by the anganwadi. The only source of protein in their diet is egg, which provides only 10g of protein. Rice is given plentiful, which is rich in carbohydrates.

Nutritious food, good drinking water and good hygiene are essential components of the pre-natal care in first trimester of a pregnant woman, to prevent stunting in children.

As per the Rapid Survey on Children (RSOC) conducted by the UNICEF in the year 2013-14, before the bifurcation of the State into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, 35.4% of the children under the age of five were stunted and 12% of the children in the same age-group were severely stunted.

Malnutrition in women during pregnancy causes stunting. Hence it is important to ensure that pregnant women fulfil their nutrition requirements before and after delivery.

As per the reports in the Hans India, the Telangana government has launched a flagship



Stunting is common in children in Rural Telangana. The girl and the boy above are of the same age yet the difference is stark

MOHINI CHANDOLA

program, *Arogya Lakshmi*, to improve the nutritional status among pregnant and lactating women and to reduce low birth weight in infants. This scheme ensures one full meal for pregnant and lactating women, which will be provided through anganwadis. It has also been reported that there are around 4.5 lakh pregnant and lactating women benefitting under this scheme in Telangana as in 2016.

Elisha says, "It's very hard to keep pregnant women motivated. We make them have the egg and milk here, because they give the food to their husbands or their children. Even with the rest of the meals, they tend to feed their family first."

In the village, the government school has over 25 children (five to seven of age) who are stunted.

Apart from nutrition, clean drinking water and sanitation facilities are also major factors in stunting. Both the anganwadi and the government school grounds have one common toilet, which is used by both boys and girls. The students eat in front of the toilet.

In certain villages like Ramannagudem (Warangal district), there are no toilet facilities and no access to clean drinking water. In addition to a poor diet, most children in the village are stunted and some are born with defects and mental illnesses.

N. Ramesh, teacher in a private school, Ramannagudem, says, "There are no toilets in this village. Men and women defecate on the same grounds and drink from nearby water sources. This has resulted in poor hygiene and the children are affected."

Stunting becomes permanent by the age of three; so it is vital for pregnant and lactating mothers to ensure their own health and that of their children.

B. Kamala, another anganwadi teacher in Fathepur says, "The government has said that rations for each undernourished child will be doubled until his/her height and weight are stabilized."

Baby steps in children's nutrition

Government schools in Telangana provide rice, dal and eggs as part of the Midday Meal scheme. However, the meal provided in schools hardly helps children fulfil their nutrition requirements. According to Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) a boy aged 5 requires 1290 kcal a day and a girl of the same age requires 1200 kcal a day. Anything less leads to malnourishment.

Telangana government also keeps a track of the Midday Meals provided in schools using a real-time online tracking tool, updated everyday by the school coordinators using text messages.



Children eating the midday meal with eggs in a government school in Fathepur

|SIMRAN BAJAJ

ANJANA KANKANALA

Parvathagiri: As education slowly seeps into the small villages of Warangal, topics of sex and menstruation are still subjects spoken about in hushed tones behind closed doors.

In the Upper Primary Schools of Narayanapuram and Theegarajupalle which have classes till seventh standard, girls are not told about periods and know nothing of

how their bodies work.

N. Mamatha, student of Class VII, from Narayanapuram, goes to the government upper primary school in the village. She says that neither her teachers nor her parents told her about periods. "When I got it, I asked my cousin sister who is older than me and she told me what it was and told me not to talk about it."

V. Srimathi, a teacher in the school says that they don't teach

When I got my periods, I asked my cousin sister who is older than me and she told me what it was and told me not to talk about it.

-M.MAMATHA

students about it because they are expected to go to Secondary School and learn it.

However, many girls attain puberty before that. Parents, on the other hand, expect teachers to cover the topic so they do not take the responsibility of educating their

children about it.

In Theegarajupalle, Soujanya B, a student of class X in the government secondary school says that her teachers didn't talk to them about it either.

"If a girl has any questions about it, we are supposed to ask the tea-

Where survival is a challenge for infants

Home-births are the norm in this hamlet due to multiple reasons like accessibility and fear

MEGHA KAVERI

Pasra: The Gothi-koya community had their first ever hospital birth in November 2017. Gothi-koya babies till then were born at home births for several reasons. Their belief that a child should be born within the confines of their homes, with familiar faces around, tops this list of reasons.

Home-births in Devudugutta come with its own share of problems. The mothers are prone to infections because the conditions are unsterile. Clean water is a distant dream, since their only source for water for all purposes is a stream in the forest, 200-metres away from where they live. Hence, the mortality among women and infants is high.

Indhu's was a special case. She was rushed to the closest hospital in Pasra, 10 kilometres away, after she went into labour. She had to walk five kilometres, in pain, up to the main road, from where she was taken to the hospital in a hired vehicle. After delivery, she stayed in the hospital for the next three days, with her baby.

"The morbidity among children is high because of these [the distance and the lack of facilities to reach the hospital]. Pregnant women here rarely go for check-ups and are almost always malnourished. So it is only natural that the child is affected too," said Mohammed Rafi, the Project Coordinator of Save the Children, an NGO working with the Gothikoyas in Devudugutta.

As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-Round 4, the Infant Mortality Rate per 1000 live births in Telangana is 38.

The Telangana government deposits money in installments in the bank accounts of the mothers of every child born in a government hospital. This is apart from the Baby-kits provided to the mothers immediately after delivery, under the flagship program launched in June 2017 by the KCR government. Schemes like these aim to bring more women under the care of skilled medical workers, thereby reducing the chances of complications during labour.



Jothi is hesitant to talk about her age |MEGHA KAVERI

"We encourage these people to go to a hospital because it helps in cases of emergencies. Also, when the government is providing perks to deliver a child in a hospital, it is better to do that," added Rafi.

Jothi, from the same village, who looks to be in her early 20s, gave birth to a boy in her home, three years ago.

She explained: "I don't prefer going to hospitals because I am scared of hospitals. It is too much for me to take in. What if my family and I are not treated with respect?"

This fear of being ill-treated in a hospital is still rampant among women from tribal communities. This is one of the reasons why they hesitate to go to hospitals.

While a lot of urban women these days are opting for home-births, their reasons are in stark contrast to that of the Gothi-koya women. In case of labour-related emergencies, the access to quality healthcare is much easier for a woman in the city compared to a tribal girl in a place like Devudugutta.

In fact, they are being encouraged and given incentives for institutional deliveries.

An email sent to the District Health and Medical Officer, Warangal-Rural seeking comments on this issue remains unanswered.

The RTI lady of Lavval

SIMRAN BAJAJ

Lavval: Off the Warangal-Etunagaram road, beyond a 4 km long dusty and bumpy road, there is a tribal village called Lavval. It is home to a very courageous woman, V. Susheela.

In a pucca house with kutcha exterior, Susheela lives with her husband and two sons. She has a daughter who is married in the same village. The smoke from the wood burning stove is beginning to taper off when we arrive. Draped in a green saree, she runs to fetch fancy plastic chairs to seat the visitors. From the humble and warm demeanor, it is difficult to guess that she is the village ward member.

The 57-year-old came to the village almost four decades ago when she got married. She became the village ward member 5 years ago and is hell-bent on improving the conditions of her village. She recalls that she stood up to take the post when none of the village members came forward.

She has never been to a school and can only sign her name, but this does not deter her from working for the welfare of her village. Her older son Laxminarayana helps her with the official paper work.

She educated all her kids, but had to face disappointment when they had to get back to farming as none of them managed to get a job outside. The entire family funds for themselves by working on a four-acre farm land. On an average, they make Rs. 50,000 a year by farming.

Five years as the village ward member and now the village has a completed anganwadi building, a water tank, a bore-well, water pipelines and a society store-room for rice.

She was the first one in Tadvai Mandal to file a Right To Information (RTI) query for the village anganwadi, water tank and pipelines. On her third attempt, she finally succeeded. Prior to her applications, the officers there were unaware of what an RTI is, she said with satisfaction.

Right To Information (RTI) is a tool provided by the Government of India to its citizens in 2005, to mandate providing government information to those requesting for it.

Anybody can make an RTI application by paying a nominal fee and it must be responded to by the concerned authorities within the prescribed time. If the RTI response is not satisfactory, the RTI Act allows the petitioner to appeal to a higher authority for recourse.

She takes pride in the fact that her efforts have yielded results and is determined to get proper roads for the village and another check-dam.

The farming land for all the villagers is in the forest, which by law is a Reserve forest. They have only permission letters to use the land, but no title deed.

As a welfare measure, the government tried to relocate the villagers to an area which is 30 kms away from their farms, but Susheela says, "What's the point if all our farm lands are here and we are there?"

In the cool shade of the kutcha sitting area, Susheela says that every month she travels 80 km away to visit the Gram Panchayat at her own expense. She is resolute in improving the living conditions of her people, even if sometimes she has to bear the cost.



Susheela is determined to improve the amenities in her village. She was the first one in the mandal to use an RTI query as a tool to avail services |SIMRAN BAJAJ

It is 2018, menstruation still a taboo in the hinterlands of Warangal

ANJANA KANKANALA

As education slowly seeps into the small villages of Warangal, topics of sex and menstruation are still subjects spoken about in hushed tones behind closed doors.

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how their bodies work.

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children about it.

In Theegarajupalle, Soujanya B, a student of class X in the government secondary school says that her teachers didn't talk to them about it either.

"If a girl has any questions about it, we are supposed to ask the tea-

cher privately after class hours. They do not talk about it openly." She says that this is the same even with the topic of sex.

It is only from textbooks that students get a vague and confused understanding of it. Because of poor connectivity and no internet access, many a time their doubts on these topics go unanswered.

Students from private schools are comparatively better equipped to understand such topics.

Nikitha B. from Notre Dame English Medium School, Theegarajupalle, says that girls of classes VI, VII and VIII have workshops and counselling classes where topics like the menstrual cycle are explained to them.

"They also taught us the difference between good touch and bad touch and told us that if we ever feel that we are in danger, we must tell our parents or our teachers." But outside of the school, these to-

pics are still considered taboo.

Shobarani, an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker in Parvathagiri mandal said that her team visits government schools in and around Parvathagiri to spread awareness on menstrual hygiene and test adolescent girls for anaemia.

She also added that they distribute free medicines sufficient for one course to anemic girls in schools.

The MPS Scheme shows its two faces in the same district

Despite saving, woes continue

Women here are yet to see any benefit from MPS Scheme

PRIYA LALWANI

NABARD's most revolutionary foundation, the Self Help Groups (SHGs) or Mahila Podhupu Sanghams (MPS) in India's slums and villages have been an ideal source for providing credit at the grass roots level without much hassle. However, in the villages of Telangana, a lot needs to be done to make the model more comprehensive.

In one such SHG in the Lavval village, located in the Jayashankar Bhupalapalle district, each of its ten members make a small contribution of Rs. 50 every month. With the model's bank-linkage program, the group manages to get a loan amount of Rs.100000 sanctioned by the nearby grameena bank once in every two months.

Vasam Nagamani, one of the members, resorted to daily wage labour along with farming because of extreme shortfall of funds. "The loan, on division, comes to a very less amount per member. We have to turn to private loans and money lenders to fulfill our needs," she said.

This leads to a burden of hard deadlines of repayment of all the loans and various restrictions in the usage of the received money. "The leader ensures that the money is spent entirely for farming purposes because personal spending like marriage or entrepreneurial purposes, the repayment process becomes difficult and the deadline is not relaxed at all," she adds.

The 15-member Tara SHG in



SHG leader Goglutu Rangamma smiles for the camera despite her problems

PRIYA LALWANI

Narayanapuram village of Parvat-hagiri Mandal, Warangal district, has been caught in a vicious circle of debt despite their huge land possessions. The loan amount of nearly Rs.500000 gets divided into Rs.30000 in each members' bank accounts.

"For one acre of land, we need approximately Rs. 25000 for buying seeds, pesticides, fertilizers with labour charges and tractors' rent. We own five acres of land and both our sons study in a private school and with that, the farming season usually clashes with the time due for payment of the schools fees," said Muppidi Manjula, the SHG leader.

In such cases, a wide shift to countless private lenders is ram-

pan.

Other significant factor to consider in the model is the age limit of 55 years to which a member can borrow from the Revolving Fund (RF) system of the SHGs. In the Fathepur village of Jangaon district, Banothu Bujamma heads 30 SHGs, each comprising of 15 members. In the past year, she was obligated to remove as many as 70 members from various groups above the prescribed age limit. Under the regulation, they were assumed to be 'ineligible' to repay the loan.

V. Kamath, 62, was removed from the SHG which he was a part of since the last 25 years, said "I was asked to withdraw all my contributions in late 2016 which was

the time when demonetization had hit the country. Due to this, the repayments of all my private loans got delayed by months and were eventually fined."

The Ramannagudem village located in the Warangal district deals with what the women residents there call 'a hopeless out-of-hand' situation. Once home for about 35 SHGs, Ramannagudem now has no SHGs.

Community Activist (CA), Rajita, appointed by the Village Organisation (VO) is responsible for distribution of the loans received from the preferred bank and facilitate the distribution of the same to the respective SHGs.

But, the cycle remains broken for the past two years. The CA is accused of conspiring with the bank and seizing all the loan amounts belonging to the SHGs. According to the villagers, the amount involved is as high as Rs.800000.

"Three months ago, we protested for three days outside the bank for the e-statements of our accounts as it claims to have sanctioned the loan. The manager insisted on us halting the protest to expedite the process. We waited months for the arrival of the statements, but in vain," said Goglutu Rangamma, the leader of a 15-member SHG in the village.

Re-engineering the process of the bank-linkage model of the SHGs becomes crucial along with eliminating or legalizing the activists under a regulatory framework so that incidents, like the one in Ramannagudem, are minimised.

Women call the shots

MPS Scheme liberates women financially

MEGHA KAVERI

Fathepur: In Fathepur village in Jangaon district in Telangana, around 950 women manage the savings and micro-financing schemes introduced by the state government.

Mahila Podhupu Sanghams (MPS) are groups of 10-15 women between the ages of 18 and 55 who deposit a small sum of money into a common bank account and are eligible for loans from that account which can be used to set up small businesses like kirana stores, buy cattle and poultry or for personal purposes like weddings.

The Mahila Podhupu Sanghams (MPS) in Telangana play the role of a money-lender in villages. In the place of traditional lenders who advance loans at sky-high interest rates, the MPSs mobilise funds and offer credit at nominal rates. National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) introduced the idea of linking bank accounts with the MPSs to offer loans. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) later adopted that idea.

The MPS/Self Help Groups are set up under the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWRCA) scheme which was merged into the Swarnajayanti Gram Swaraj Yojana (SGSY) from April 1999.

Fathepur has around 65 MPSs divided into two Village Organisations of 35 and 30 MPSs each who deposit money regularly and lend money to its members. "Once the deposits in the common savings account touches Rs.20,000/-, the MPS becomes eligible to obtain a loan of Rs.1,00,000. The loan limit keeps increasing once the existing loan is repaid", says Ravi, the Cluster Co-ordinator for Fathepur.

As soon as the loan money is received in the common loan account of the MPS, it is distributed among the members of that MPS according to their needs. This amount is to be repaid at a nominal interest rate by the members over a period of 10-12 months.

MPS scheme differs from a chit fund scheme by dividing the loan proceeds among all the members.



Hence there is always the risk of a seemingly huge sum getting smaller and smaller as the number of people who are in need increases.

Every MPS maintains a register-like book, with names of the members and the details of their bank accounts and the amount required for a loan. The loan is advanced to them based on their ability to repay. Banothu Bujamma, Head of the Indira Gandhi MPS and a village organisation named 'Vijayalakshmi', which has 30 MPSs under it, says, "Loans are given to people who can pay it back. Since it is women who borrow, mostly they make sure to pay the installments on time. We keep in mind the seasonal cycles while deciding to lend money to members."

"MPS loans are not given to women who are above 55 years since their earning capacity is limited. However, women older than 55 can keep depositing money into the savings account", she adds. Also, the rate of defaulters is very small since Bujamma is known to be strict in getting the money back. "It is the villagers' pooled money. How can I be relaxed about it", she says.

Similar is the story of 'Swashakti' village organisation, which is a collective of 35 MPSs. "Most women borrow for family purposes or to buy cattle. They also repay it on time, since we go and collect it from their houses", says Lunavath Bujamma, leader of 'Swashakti' and Ashwini MPS in Fathepur.

Mekalagattu villagers say 'no' to usury

LAKSHMIKANTH KOUNDINYA

At Mekalagattu village of Jangaon District, Raghunathpalle Mandal, widespread awareness about government lending schemes has helped villagers escape the fangs of usury.

The village panchayat and the NGO Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI) worked together to obtain credit for the village from funding schemes in the farming sector and those under watershed development project which are facilitated by National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

"Previously, villagers used to take money from the usurers for buying seeds, fertilizers, repairing their crops, and buying and maintaining their cattle. Now most of the villagers take crop loans and cattle loans from the government through NABARD," said Uma Kesav, Panchayat Secretary, Mekalagattu.

Explaining how owning cattle ushers in financial stability and independence from usury, the president of Farmer Producer Organization (FPO) Sammiah Yadav said:

"A healthy buffalo costs Rs 40000 to Rs.60000. A normal buffalo generates Rs.2000 for the owner per month. If the buffalo is



big, it can generate as much as Rs.5000 per month. So it is a source of steady income."

"NABARD provides Rs.10,000 to Rs.20000 as a loan for farmers to buy cattle. The loan is repaid over 20 months at 12% p.a. But in order to avail this loan, the farmer has to grow fodder on an acre of land to prove his ability to feed the cattle," he added.

For obtaining credit for improving irrigation in the village, a Village Watershed Committee was constituted and with the help of MARI, the committee applied for NABARD funding. Check dams and gully plugs were built from the funding received from NABARD.

Apart from government schemes, there are 23 women Self Help Groups (SHGs) that function as credit centres in the village.

They provide loans ranging from Rs.10000 to Rs.20000.

There are short-term loans (1 week to 3 months) and long-term loans (3 months to 2 years). They encourage entrepreneurial activities and help women achieve financial independence. Almost all women in the village have availed loans from SHGs at least once.

B. Yelamma, a member of a SHG said, "We are happy that the government is providing loans between Rs.50000 and Rs.75000 for marriages because marriage is when we need quick money and we go to money lenders."

Despite government's lending schemes and high penetration of SHGs, usury still exists in Mekalagattu. Explaining this, R. Murali, Executive Officer, MARI, said:

"It might sound strange, but there is always a kind of loyalty that the exploited extends towards the exploiter. The usurers lend money without any fuss to the villagers as and when they ask. For them, a few thousand rupees is not a big amount and they give it just like that and for that, these poor farmers feel indebted. They are okay with any interest rate, no matter how ridiculously high it may be. And sometimes, this indebtedness is carried forward for generations and the usurers amass land and property."

In The Footsteps of Indiramma...

MEGHA KAVERI

Fathepur: "Indira Gandhi is my inspiration and I used to call her Indiramma when I was in Congress"

Banothu Bujamma smiles fondly making the above statement. She was a part of the Mahila Congress in Fathepur when she heard of the assassination of her beloved leader. "It broke me to know of her death," she adds.

Bujamma, 45, was born to farmer-parents in Fathepur, Mandal Station Ghanpur, District Jangaon. She never went to school. She worked on the farms with her parents and was politically curious from a very young age. She also got married in the same village so she did not have to relocate to a place far away. A mother to a girl and a boy, she considers Fathepur as her own family, despite losing her daughter a few years ago.

Right now she is the president of the 'Vijayalakshmi' Village Organisation, which is a collective of 30 Mahila Podhupu Sanghams (MPS). She also heads her own MPS of 15 members, named 'Indira Gandhi', after her leader. She was elected the head of Indira Gandhi MPS in 2014 and has led it to date. Her fair and no-nonsense traits have only pleased the members of the MPS who would have none other than Bujamma to lead them and hence re-elected her.

Her lack of education hasn't taken anything away from her, she claims. "I can still sign my name. I have a good memory and can tell the installment due dates and the amounts for all the loans in my group. I don't need a calculator or a paper and a pen," she says confidently.

It is this enthusiasm in her that prompts people to repay their loans on time. She personally ensures that every installment is paid on time. She has also personally removed a few members from her own MPS as they were above the



Bujamma heads a Village Organisation which has 30 MPSs in it. She is seen smiling at the mere mention of her idol, Indira Gandhi

[MEGHA KAVERI]

prescribed age-limit.

Although she was in the Indian National Congress when it was led by Indira Gandhi, she is now a supporter of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) party.

"Bujamma's support carries so much weight that in the Gram Panchayat elections held four and a half years ago, she ensured that the local TRS candidate won by spending a mere

Rs.75,000 while her relatives in the nearby village had to spend Rs.2,00,000 for their candidate to win," says Ravi, the Cluster Co-ordinator for MPS in Fathepur.

On her political acumen and popularity, she laughs and says, "He doesn't even care I made him win. Look at the road in front of my house. People say that Bujamma is 'pedda' (big) leader and all, but I will ignore it with my ears closed."

The times they are a-changin' for girls in the spectrum of education

ANJANA KANKANALA

A slow revolution is taking place in the small villages of Theegarajupalle and Ashalapalle in Warangal where school enrollment of girls has been climbing steadily and now more or less equals that of boys.

M. Jemuna, 20, got married seven months ago after her 12th grade exams. At the time of the proposal, her parents extracted a promise from the groom's side to let their daughter continue her studies after marriage. She is now pursuing her bachelors in science in SVS College and wishes to pursue her postgraduate degree and then get a job. She lives with her husband who has a Ph.D in History and teaches at Kakatiya University in Hanamkonda.

"My parents have always encouraged me to study. They never forced me to stop studying and do farming. I want to study well and get a good job so I can make them proud." Jemuna's in-laws are also supportive of her education.



M. Jemuna visiting her hometown in Theegarajupalle during her college vacation

[ANJANA KANKANALA]



Sangeetha (left) with her parents Yamunabhai (middle) and Narasimharao (right)

[ANJANA KANKANALA]

In the village of Ashalapalle, a small family makes a living by growing vegetables on a small piece of land. Narasimharao and Yamunabhai, the parents, are uneducated and have been earning their livelihood through farming all their lives. Their daughter, Sangeetha, is in 11th grade at the government school nearby. Most of the girls in the village have dropped out of school to get married or work in the fields. However, Narasimharao does not want the same for his daughter. "In the olden days, girls were not given the opportunity to study. But times have changed. Now, girls and boys are equal and every parent must treat them equally." Though they have a son, they have always ensured that both of them get the same opportunities.

Sangeetha says that sometimes she doesn't feel like studying and do her degree and would rather stay at home and work but her parents don't encourage that behaviour. "Even if I say that I don't want to study and offer to work in the field, they won't let me. They want me to study and get a good job."

White-water spelling dark days for men

Residents of Ramapuram village are being diagnosed with renal failure with 40 deaths so far

ADITHYA NARAYAN

Ariyalur: Ramapuram village faces the mystery of its men falling prey to kidney failures after the age of 40. Forty deaths have been reported so far with the last two deaths happening in a span of 20 days. Four people are undergoing dialysis.

While the doctors have managed to diagnose the problem and recommend dialysis, they haven't been able to put a finger on the cause for these renal failures. Villagers attribute it to the presence of calcium carbonate in the water but doctors have denied it.

Rajamani, 38, says that her husband, Murugan, 45, has been going to the hospital for dialysis twice a week for the past four years and has to continue this for the rest of his life to stay alive. Murugan, who is a painter, has to pay Rs. 2000 for treatment in Pondicherry. If he misses it, his legs begin to swell up and pain.

Subramanian, 40, who was a farmer until three years ago when his kidneys failed, is unable to work since his body isn't strong anymore. "It started with a fever. The doctor conducted some tests, diagnosed kidney failure and now I'm on medication which costs me



Subramanian was diagnosed with kidney failure three years ago.

| ADITHYA NARAYAN

Rs. 5000 per month," he says.

Subramanian's wife, a daily wage labourer, earns Rs. 4000 per

month plucking weed and cutting grass. "It is with this money and another Rs. 1000 arranged by her

that we have to survive on", he adds.

R. Vijayakumar, whose father passed away at 43, says, "We consider ourselves lucky if we cross 45. Forty is the new eighty for us."

There have also been speculations that alcohol was responsible for the kidney failure as the disease was prevalent among men. The villagers refute these claims saying that most of the victims were teetotalers.

The disease which was strictly restricted to men until recently seems to have caught on to women and kids as well. Four women and

a two and a half year-old kid were diagnosed with the same problem.

Villagers have their own take on the cause of the problem. K. Muniyan, 74, says, "Companies like L&T and AFCON supplying raw materials for the adjacent national highway that came up 10 years ago used to conduct piling at a quarry about two kilometres from the village.

The piling that went up to 300 feet used to happen at six in the morning and evening." People like Muniyan hold these companies and their work responsible for calcium carbonate seeping into groundwater.

Faceless in government registry



K. Sujatha has been suffering from polio for the past two years.

ANJANA KANKANALA

ANJANA KANKANALA

Warangal: While all Indians are gearing to identify themselves through Aadhaar cards, PAN cards, and ration cards, the displaced people from Chhattisgarh, living in Devudugutta in Warangal, do not even have birth certificates.

Identification is a major problem in this village as they live in the reserve forest area of the Pasra Forest, which is not their permanent residence. Children do not have birth certificates because their parents fear institutional delivery and choose to deliver their babies at home.

Out of the 120 people living in the village, only 24 have Aadhaar cards. Mr. Raji Reddy of Modern Architects for Rural India (MARI), an organisation that works for the welfare of the village, says that these people got their Aadhaar cards during the elections.

"Before elections, people from political parties come and get IDs for them in return for their votes." The address on all their Aadhaar cards is just the name of the village, the mandal and the district.

However, it is not just Aadhaar cards that are difficult to obtain in these far-off places. In the village of Narayanapuram in the Nallikur mandal, disabled people find it hard to get themselves identified as disabled.

K. Sujatha, 26, contracted polio two years ago. She says she found it very hard to get certified as disabled to receive a compensation of Rs.1500 per month. "I had to keep going to the government hospital to get approved as 'Physically Handicapped' and a medical certificate."

The procedure starts with using a disability form to obtain the certificate. In order to receive compensation, the individual must be 60 per cent handicapped (40 per cent in case of SC/ST). Once the medical certificate, income proof, and address proof are ready, it has to be sent to the nearest Welfare Department office.

Sujatha says that this takes a long time because they delay the process. The only way to get a certificate quickly is to bribe someone, she said.

Even after getting compensation every month, she says it is hard to run the household since her husband is an alcoholic and does not work.

"Many of us who are disabled face this problem. Our husbands are not working because we are getting money from the government." With Rs.1500 per month, Sujatha educates her two children and takes care of her family.

Another way of seeing



Students spend time in villages as part of RAWE | PRATIBHA

PRATIBHA SHARMA

Gadag: Students from the University Of Agricultural Science in Dharwad are on a 50 day tour in Gadag district as part of their curriculum- Rural Awareness Work Experience (RAWE). The course requires them to spend time with village families and become a family member to eliminate the sense of being an outsider. This would allow them to familiarize themselves with the conditions and identify their problems.

Dr. Surekha Sankangovdar, 51, the accompanying teacher said that whatever they have learned in college is put into practice on this field trip.

For the first ten days of the tour, each student regularly visits and spends time building rapport with five chosen families.

From the 11th day, they start carrying out surveys to identify the major issues of the families and help them according to their needs and interests identified in the survey.

"Initially, the families are welcoming but reserved. They do not give information in-depth. But gradually they open up and our children become a

part of their family," Sankangovdar said.

Yesterday, the students distributed books made by them to nursery class. They used vegetable cut-outs and drawings to teach them the alphabet.

"With the help of the surveys, we realised that anaemia and open defecation are two major issues in this district. Students will now hold demonstration and dramas to spread awareness about the harmful health effects of defecation. The local leaders help us get familiar with the villages and their lifestyle," Sankangovdar said.

"We are going to hold a drama on the movie 'Toilet: Ek Prem Katha' and a play on gender discrimination in Kannada for high school students, to spread awareness on both the issues," said Soujanya, a student.

The students also prepare audio-visual elements and instructive tutorials to spread awareness. This kind of a programme creates a ripple effect, said the teacher. The families under our students invite their relatives and other villagers to our programme. This expands the course horizon and helps us conduct reliable surveys.

A BALLAD OF THE ANGLER

DEBDUTTA MITRA

Cuddalore: At Devanampattinam hamlet, cyclone Ockhi has left emotional scars on its folk, especially the fishermen. R. Ashok, 32, was one of the fishermen whose trawlers got stuck in the storm.

"I remember that day when I had gone along with five others including three people from Assam and two from the nearby Poompuhar village," said Ashok, who had received no warning about the cyclone. Although the boat owner discouraged them from venturing into the sea, they were driven by

the thought of earning money. "While returning, we were informed that a cyclone was coming in but it was too late by then," he recalled. "When the cyclone hit us, we turned the boat to another direction but that made matters worse as the weather got worse," he said recalling how he was in tears at that time.

Ten people from Devanampattinam died in the cyclone. Ashok was injured after hitting against metal fittings on the boat. "The men from Assam were also injured despite their better survival skills as they are ex-army men," recollected Ashok.

Child marriage: A vicious cycle

GARIMA BORA & PRASHASTI SINGH

H. D. Kote: Bhagyalakshmi* is only 18 years old, and she is already seven months pregnant with her second child. To make things worse, she is anaemic as well.

Married at 14, she delivered her first child at 16, through a C-section, as the baby could not rotate during the time of delivery. Also, her uterus was too small to expand for the delivery. She was diagnosed anaemic after five months of her second pregnancy.

The duo of child marriage, and subsequent adolescent pregnancies, can be a fatal mix, as it can lead to a number of complications like anaemia, pregnancy-induced hypertension, premature labor, and low birth weight.

Most families in the villages of H.D Kote start looking for a suitor as soon as a girl reaches puberty. The girl is then married off in a small and clandestine ceremony at a nearby temple to avoid public scrutiny.

According to Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR), Karnataka accounts for 23.2% of the child marriages in the country.

The community field workers in Vivekananda Memorial Hospital (VMH) in Saragur say that around 50% of tribal women in the taluk get married before they turn 18.

Dr. Akshay S Dinesh, Resident Medical Officer of VMH, calls malnutrition a vicious cycle. "Once a woman is married off at the age of 17 or 18, it is likely that she will give birth before she turns 20. And if she is not properly nourished, then she won't be able to provide proper nutrients to her child through breastfeeding", he says.

According to The Maternal and Child Health Journal, another reason behind mothers and children being undernourished is the fact that when women give birth to their first child at the age of 18 or 19, they often fail to meet their own body's nutritional requirements. The situation worsens during pregnancy as it increases the risk of damaging the reproductive tract. Most of the times their second child is born within a gap of less than 2 years from the first pregnancy, affecting the health of both mother and child.

According to the Deputy Director of Women and Child Welfare Department K Radha, there are 238 malnourished children in the HD Kote taluk.

Santosh Mara is a member of the Betta Kuruba tribe. She is 6 months pregnant and she walks for 2 kilometers to reach the nearest anganwadi center. Walking down this stretch to avail the benefits of government schemes for pregnant and lactating women is a tough task for her.

The Mathru Poorna scheme is one of the most recent initiatives of the Karnataka Government to address malnutrition in the state. Under this scheme, pregnant and lactating mothers are provided with a cooked meal of rice, pulses, leafy vegetables, boiled egg, and milk for 25 days in a month.

Initiatives like these have helped some women and children wriggle out of malnutrition, but most of them still remain undernourished.

Three out of 10 pregnant women in Basapura village, H.D.Kote are anaemic. The numbers are higher for tribal women, says Jyothi B R, an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker

Dr. Nattu Bhaskar, Chief Medical Officer of the .H.D Kote General Hospital, says, "Almost all pregnant women who come to our hospital are anaemic. We do not even record anaemia unless it is an extreme case." Although over the months, many women have been seen religiously availing themselves of the government schemes,

added Dr. Bhaskar.

According to Dr. Anup G S, Community Health Specialist at VMH, a large number of women do not avail the benefits of the schemes because of social reasons. The fear that the anganwadi cook might be of a 'lower caste' and that the food she cooks would be 'polluted'.

*Name changed



| GARIMA

Treading a long walk to school

EISHA NAIR

Thiruvallur: The Government Elementary School in Kattavur starts at 9 a.m. and students, as young as six-year-old, start from their village at 8 a.m., unaccompanied by adults. It takes an hour to reach by foot, and they often get late. "They go in a group. The younger ones hold the hands of older ones while walking. And we go for our daily-wage jobs like agriculture and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 100 days work," says R Lakshmi, a woman from the colony, whose daughter and son study in Classes 5 and 3 respectively.

There is no auto or bus facility from Uppalam to Kattavur. "We get tired walking to school with the weight of our bags. A Class 1 student carries four notebooks and two books, and the number of books goes up with the next class," says M Shweta of Class 7.

The government provides slippers free of cost, but they don't fit their feet. While some parents buy slippers for their children, most children walk barefoot. "My friends and I step on glass pieces and thorns sometimes and get hurt," adds Shweta.

In Kadal Kanniyur Irular Colony, the elementary school in Korai Kuppam, which has classes up to 8 is a kilometre away, after which the colony children go to Pazhaverkadu which is 9 km away.

Most girls study up to Class 8, and boys up to Class 9. According to Manikandan, a resident of the colony who dropped out after Class 9, the students can hitch a ride in the fishermen's minivan from Korai Kuppam some days, but on other days they either bunk school or walk it up. "The minivan starts usually at around 8 or 8.30 a.m. and I used to go to Korai Kuppam early at 7 or 7.30 a.m. to catch the van.

During the fishing ban period, the fishers don't go to the sea and so on those days the van won't come," he says.

"The fishers go to sea only two weeks a month. So, the other two weeks I had to walk to school. It was the main reason for me to discontinue," he adds.

However, according to a Class 7 student B. Malliga's father D. Babu, a minivan service is available on most days.

For a fee of Rs. 10 a passenger, it picks students up and drops them to school.



Children walk 3 km to reach school.

VIGNESSH

Honey, it's windfall for our strawberry

MEHNAZ YASMIN

Paderu: Coffee, pepper and turmeric have long dominated agricultural markets here. But here's a farmer, who avoided the beaten track and has taken to strawberry.

Kusalavudu Bouudu ventured into strawberry in 2008. He and 5 other farmers in collaboration procured strawberry runners from Mahabaleshwar and Pune. But as the soil here was unsuitable, he roped in an agricultural scientist who prepared an organic manure – neem

cake; cold-pressing neem fruit and kernel to improve soil fertility. Drip irrigation and borewells were mechanised (each plant requires 4-5 litres of water every day) and rows of runners were planted at a distance of one foot from each other.

The effort has paid off. Bouudu says he now earns Rs. 5 lakh per acre (24,000 saplings), on an investment of Rs. 1.5 lakh.

Bouudu's nurseries boast of a variety, of which Sabrina, the most profitable breed, bears the largest fruits. It sells between Rs. 40 and

Rs. 50 for 5 fruits. The other varieties are Nabila, Winterfell and Camaro. "I want to create a strawberry hub here," he said.

Dr. Jogi Naidu, Professor of Agriculture from the Regional Agricultural Research Station, Chintapalle, said, "Strawberries are easily scalable and replicable but need a lot of intensive care and multiple irrigations.

Seeing positive results in the last few years, we are identifying farmers who are cultivating strawberries and encouraging them to grow

dragon fruits and apples also." Another such produce about to dominate the markets is honey. In fact, the demand has gone up so much that it is not easy to "meet the needs," said K. Babuji Naidu, scientist at the Regional Agricultural Research Station, Chintapalle. Apis Mellifera and Apis Cerana Indica (Indian honeybees) are the most economical breeds because they are easily domesticated, require moderate rainfall, are relatively less ferocious and also exhibit lower swarming tendencies, says

Naidu, who has an M.Sc. in Entomology.

The strength of a colony and production of honey is decided by worker bees which "forage" for nectar. While the queen bee coordinates functions, the drone bee only mates before it dies.

Honey bees are reared in 'brood chambers' containing eight frames of wax sheets (20 to 60000 bees in each such chamber). In one cycle, 50-60 kg of honey is procured from each comb, says the scientist.

Honey is "extracted and sold"

and does not require purification expenses. Its by-products enjoy a huge market, he says. Beeswax is used in preparation of wax sheets which catalyse honey production. It is also used in pharmaceutical and dental industries for its medicinal properties. Propolis and royal jelly are in demand in the cosmetic market. Pollen, rich in

protein, is used as a diet supplement.



| MEHNAZ