

# COVERING DEPRIVATION

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## Child marriage still lives on, but stays off records

DEEPAK SINGH

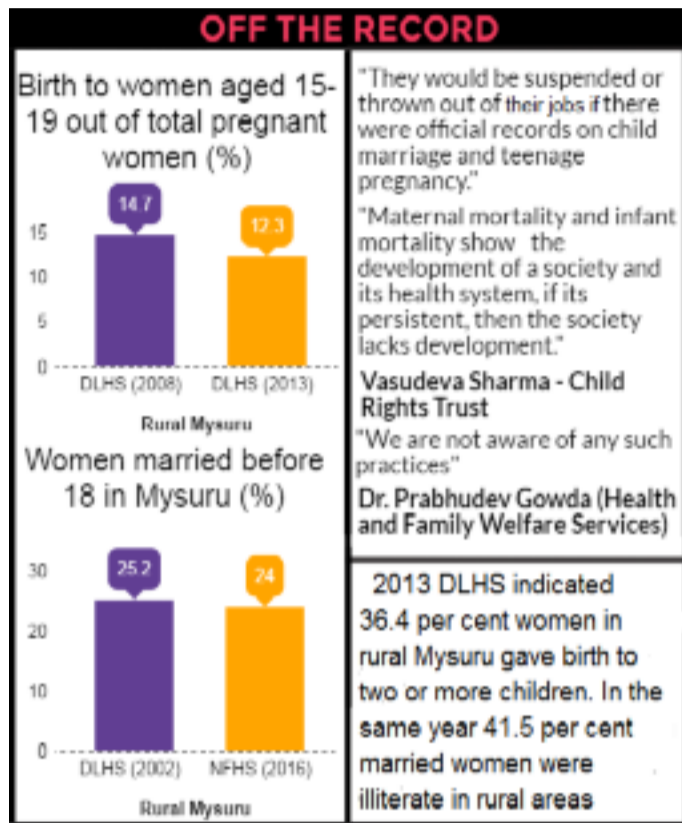
MYSURU: The knowledge that child marriage is illegal, and that even witnesses to it face punishment, has forced Anganwadi and ASHA workers to ignore the prevailing practice and manipulate records to save their jobs and prevent social scrutiny. In the tribal settlement of Jenu Kurubas in Hanagodu village of Hunsur Taluk in Mysuru district, an Anganwadi helper, Shanti, said there were even teenage pregnancies in her tribal settlement.

She said, "It's common for women here to get married by the age of 14 or 15." There have been many cases of teenage pregnancy in girls who are as young as 16.

However, the anganwadi teacher Parvati rejected Shanti's claim and said, "All the married women in the tribe are above the legal marriage age."

Veena, a member of the same tribe, lives with her husband Manikanta, and her children. Her age is registered as 24.

Her daughter Arpita is seven, according to Parvati. If Veena was asked about her age or her children's age, Parvati would answer. When Veena was finally allowed to speak, she said her children were aged seven, five, three, and one, maintaining a gap of two years which health



officials usually recommend for mothers.

Referring to the child marriage and teenage pregnancy data of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), Vasudeva Sharma, Executive Director at Child Rights Trust said "The government data is so falsified that we are ashamed to even publish it."

On Parvati's reluctance to admit fabrication, he said "They would be suspended or thrown out of their jobs if there were official records on child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Vasudeva added, "The government has conducted no education or empowerment programmes. They have failed to provide proper treatment and

a proper health care system to the women."

The District Level Household and Facility Survey (DLHS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS) presented a grim picture.

Vasudeva said that whenever Anganwadi and Asha workers find a case of child marriage or teenage pregnancy, they simply write the mother's age as above 18. "Maternal mortality and infant mortality show the development of a society and its health system, if it is persistent, then the society lacks development."

"If a woman dies giving birth to a child and her recorded age was below 18, then there will be an inquiry over the cause of death and if the woman is above 18, then there is no inquiry," he added. Vasudeva said health officials give 'high fever' and jaundice as the cause of death to avoid further scrutiny.

However, Dr. Prabhudev Gowda of the Health and Family Welfare Services (Government of Karnataka) said that they were unaware of any such practice. He also asked for the details of people who were allegedly recording incorrect information, in the records.

He also tried to contact Deepa M, Director of the Women and Child Development Department. However, she was unavailable for comment.



Children waiting for class to commence | JOSEPH S

## Lesson in harmony

JOSEPH SEBASTIAN

CHILLABANDA: As soon as Sana concludes the mandatory grace before the mid-day meal with "Om Shanti Shanti Shanti", little brush-fires of conversation erupt and Md. Fiyaz taps on the table and extinguishes them.

Approximately ninety students study at the MPPS Chillabanda - Yerradodi Primary school in the Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh. Just before the mid-day meal began, Fiyaz concluded an English lesson for the students of classes III and IV.

In the opposite classroom, M. Raghunandan taught students of classes I, II and V, rhyming words and poetry.

Three teachers, including the headmaster, manage the school. "The headmaster turns up just once or twice a week. He is required to come daily only if the strength of the students is more than 100", says Fiyaz.

Rifts appear on closer inspection. Although not clearly demarcated, the village is divided into distinctly Hindu

and Muslim neighbourhoods.

When this was pointed out, Fiyaz said "Hindu and Muslim students sit together and have their meals. Even Mr Raghunandan, a Brahmin, and I share our meals."

He was right. Inside the school, these divisions are rendered invisible. Akbar sits with Vijay Kumar and Sana sits with Leelamma and enjoy the rice and tomato curry which was the menu on Tuesday.

"There are discrimination and divisions in bigger villages, but it does not exist in a tightly knit school like this," Fiyaz said.

As soon as the students finish their meal, they move out and wash their steel plates. The single tap outside the classroom has run dry, so the plates are washed with the drinking water they bring in plastic bottles.

As Fiyaz commenced his lesson, he remarked "There is no problem that education cannot solve. Seeing their children mingling and playing with each other, their parents have also started to sit together discuss each other's problems."

## Depleting catch

MURALI KRISHNA

Pazhaverkadu: At Jameelabad, a fishing village at the southern end of Pulicat Lake, a couple of old fishermen, sitting atop battered canoes, recall old times when the catch was plentiful.

There has been a great depletion in the number of fish in Pulicat because of unsustainable methods of fishing and, over time, various environmental problems.

"We don't get a decent catch here as large-scale commercial fishing is rampant at the sea", says M Mubarak a young fisherman. Purse seine nets, that are banned in Tamil Nadu, are still being used in big boats. This does not leave anything for small fishermen like Mubarak.

The lack of proper waste disposal systems is also a cause for the massive depletion. "There's a significant rise in the number of tourists,

and this has invited littering", he says.

Industrial effluents, sewage and pesticides flowing into the lake, wastes from nearby fish processing units and diesel/oil spills from boats have affected the village.

"Breeding among fishes hasn't been happening properly", says S Mariappan, Teaching Assistant, Aquaculture Department of Fishing Technology.

According to him, 'over fishing and exploitation', remain the main reason for fish depletion.

"There's a possibility that some of the local varieties of fish might become endangered after 20 years", says Mubarak.

Even though, the lake is mostly located in Andhra Pradesh, it is the Tamil Nadu side which has more fishermen who are dependent on the lake. Ensuring their sustenance will be a challenge in the coming years.

## Connected by just a mud road

SAMUEL MERIGALA

ARASANATHAM: A small village of 140 families in the Sitheri hills, Arasanatham is connected to the nearest town, Vaachati, by a single mud road that snakes up the deceptively treacherous terrain.

Life at an altitude of 442 metres (1450 ft) above sea level has its scenic perks, but drought and unemployment have forced denizens of the village into seasonal migration.

"We are either forced to work as coolies in other parts of the district, or migrate in search of jobs," says Aandi, the village head.

The controversial 'encounter' of alleged sandalwood smugglers in 2015 in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh put this village under the spotlight.

Seven of the 20 woodcutters killed were from Arasanatham.

"We are just told how much we are getting paid for the work we do," explains Murugan, a friend of a villager who lost his life in the encounter.

According to Murugan and other



The Murugan Family | SAMUEL M

villagers, finding work which pays enough to save and send back to the family is a task in itself.

"We don't ask questions," he says.

When asked how the villagers find jobs, Murugan explains that a local contractor with links to a big developer in either Chennai or Bengaluru takes the villagers to the site.

"We are only paid enough for our basic necessities like food and soap. We

have to collect the remaining from the local contractor only after we finish our contract," he reveals.

For most of the year, children are taken care of by their grandparents.

"Sometimes I wish I had the strength to work too," says 65-year-old Chinna, Murugan's father.

The village head tells me that the ration is brought to the village periodically on Bajaj M80s because the

government does not want to risk damaging its vehicles on the road.

There isn't a single shop in the village. The nearest shop is in Vaachati which is an hour's trek down from Arasanatham.

The road might be the first step towards development in this forgotten village, whose dwellers have to walk an hour to procure bare necessities and migrate hundreds of kilometres to earn the money to do so.

Aandi says that the village has sent one letter after another requesting a proper road. "I am not a signatory and my thumb is losing its ridges after the repeated attempts," he jokes. None of the others laugh, though.

The houses promised under the Amma housing scheme for the families of the villagers slain in the encounter are still unfinished.

The Public Relations Officer of the District Collectorate, however, claims that grievances of the village have been heard and that a budget for the road will be allocated in April 2017.

"Work will begin by May 2017," he assures us.

## An illness that's all in the family

KARTIK BHARDWAJ

VALINOKKAM: Marbu Nisha (10) has her fingers sunk in her eyes and her head held low as her mother Mousini Bibi tries to calm her down. "She can't speak, she can't see. She listens but doesn't comprehend. She is afraid of people and sounds."

Marbu Nisha is one of the many children in this village in Ramanathapuram District who suffer from such mental ailments. Her mother, Mousini Bibi, tried to put her in a school but Nisha gets agitated when surrounded by people.

"Her father works at a construction site in Saudi Arabia. He sends money and toys"

"How did Mousini Bibi meet him?"

"He is my uncle's son," replied Mousini. Valinokkam is a predominantly Muslim village where marriage within the family is the norm.

Mohammad Ravi, 15, who is mentally impaired, is also born out of an interfamily marriage. He suffers from a speech impairment, and in the absence of schools for differently-abled children in the region,



Md. Ravi and his mother | KARTIK B

he doesn't have any access to education.

"He mimics his sisters. He takes the bag and pretends to go to school like them" says his mother Saida Banu.

Banu admits that during Ravi's treatment, doctors had told her about the problems that interfamily marriages can

lead to. "My daughters are not going to marry inside the family," she says.

Dr. Mannar Mannan of Public Action for Development (PAD), an NGO at Vembar in Thoothukudi district, says this problem is not confined to villages like Valinokkam. It is prevalent in rural areas with a significant Hindu and Christian population like Vembar and Keelamundal. He adds that Tamil Nadu follows a practice of girls marrying their uncles and thus the faults in the family stay in the family.

Awareness programmes have been launched by the nuns at Daughters of the Sacred Heart, a congregation at Rochmanagar near Vembar. Apart from religious customs and tradition, poverty is the root cause of these practices. Nizar Ali, Mousini Bibi's uncle, says her father and mother died in an accident and she had no one to turn to. "Everyone asked for a hefty amount, and we didn't have much money. It was then that we decided that we must marry her within the family."

"We know what the doctors tell us, it's just that we can't afford dowry" he adds.

U M ABHIJITH

Rameswaram: Cleanliness is next may be next to godliness, but this does not seem to be in evidence at Rameswaram, the most sought after pilgrimage town in India after Kasi.

With around two crore people visiting every year, almost every pilgrim takes a dip in the sea, which is believed to cleanse a person of his or her sins.

But the people abandon used clothes and other material on the banks itself, leaving a pile of garbage. In fact, the Rameswaram municipality has decided to launch a boat in the sea in which pilgrims can dispose of their wet clothes, says sanitary inspector Ayyappan.

Christopher, a fisherman who has been living at Olakudai village near the Ramanathaswamy temple, said:

"People who come to visit the temple premises and in other parts of the town."

In fact, 35 of 172 sanitation workers in the municipality are deployed on the temple premises. Sweeping and cleaning on the temple premises are done in three shifts a day, while it is two shifts in the remaining parts of the town.

Awareness campaigns are also conducted from vehicles which relay audio messages on waste disposal, says Ayyappan.

Lack of proper drainage system is another major issue.

"We are planning to introduce more underground systems to improve drainage," said Ayyappan. Stagnant water acts as a breeding ground for mosquitoes. Dr. Mahalakshmi, who works in the government hospital, said that malaria was

the most prevalent disease here.

"Even though the number of cases have come down recently, it is still prevalent," she added.

Several new projects are in the pipeline.

Recently, Rameswaram was included in the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT).

Under the scheme, only cities with a population of one lakh and above are included, but Rameswaram was exempted from this norm, as it is the birthplace of the former President, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. Green Rameswaram is another initiative of the district administration, in collaboration with the Vivekananda Kendra. It aims at zero garbage production, and has provisions for rainwater management and providing solar panels to houses without electricity.

## The failed promise of 'beti padhao'

NAVMI KRISHNA

A. GOKULAPADU: "When we know that we will be made to [drop out from school and] sit at home, why will we bother to have a goal," said C. Sashirekha, a class XI dropout, when asked about her aim in life.

"I wanted to be a doctor and Biology used to be my favourite subject," said S. Muskaan (16), the topper of 2015 batch of Zilla Parishad High School (ZPHS) of A. Gokulapadu village, about 15 kms from Kurnool.

Muskaan, like five of her classmates, had dropped out of school after 10th standard. Despite having very supportive parents and a score of 7.3 grade point, she had chosen not to enroll for intermediate education in Kurnool.

After studying in ZPHS in A. Gokulapadu, the villagers need to travel over 15 km to Kurnool city for higher education. Separated from the main road by a 3 km pucca road, the village has no bus service and relies on two-wheelers and erratic autos for transportation.

"It takes over one and a half hours to commute to and fro

Kurnool. To catch a bus, we need to walk 3 km to the main road. Sometimes we get autos, but that's unreliable, especially in the evenings," Muskaan added.

The issues with the long commute were further complicated when, in 2015, two class XI students and an adult drowned as they were crossing the narrow stretch of river between the village and the main road.

Sashirekha (18) says that since the incident, the already

**According to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's statistics for AP, in 2013-14 only 1 in 25 girl students study beyond 10th standard**

conservative parents are even more cautious to allow girls to commute to Kurnool. "Before this incident, 50 per cent of the girls graduating 10th



Muskaan's father would like to educate her | NAVMI K

used to be allowed to study further in Kurnool. Now it has decreased to about 25 per cent," she said.

She is not wrong. Of the seven girls who graduated from A. Gokulapadu's ZPHS in 2015, only two have gone for further studies. Out of them, only one is commuting from the village, while the other has moved to Kurnool city.

Muskaan (16), a district level archery champion and kabaddi player, said that though she had applied for state scholarships in

order to secure admission in a residential school in Kurnool, but was unsuccessful.

Her father said that he wanted to educate her, but, "the school and hostel fee add up to over Rs.30,000. Her mother and I are daily wages workers. We can't afford it."

According to 2013-14 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan's Statistics for Andhra Pradesh, in the class wise girls' enrollment from 2012-13 for 10th standard is 5,07,868, while for 11th in 2014-15 is 20,212. Which means that only 1 in 25 girl students

study after 10th standard.

Dropout rates are not caused by lack of facilities alone. Muskaan's classmate Habibunisa Begum (16) dropped out of school after 10th standard due to parental pressure. Her father, an RTC driver in Kurnool bus depot, does not allow his daughters to study beyond 10th. Her two elder sisters too, despite good marks, had stopped studying after 10th. Now, they study tailoring. The classes were provided under the Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) scheme until last year. Now they are taking private classes costing around Rs. 5000.

Habibunisa's youngest sister Feroza Begum is in 7th standard now. The family agrees that of all the 4 sisters, she is the brightest. Will you let Feroza study beyond 10th, I ask?

"No, their father will not allow it," Dudekkula Kasimbi, Habibunisa's mother said. "Besides," she added, "they'll not ask how much they have studied. They'll see how proficient they are in Quran and if they know tailoring."



SRAAC factory owned by T.G Venkatesh | TGV GROUP

## Factory effluents put villagers and villages at risk

ANKITA BOSE AND JOSEPH SEBASTIAN

KURNOOL: Sree Rayalseema Alkali and Allied Chemicals Limited (SRAAC) plant on the banks of Tungabhadra, has created a plethora of environmental, economic and health implications in and around a radius of 5 km.

The worst affected are Tandrapadu and Bairapur villages which have incessant complaints against the plant and its owner, T.G Venkatesh, a Rajya Sabha elect from Andhra Pradesh. Tandrapadu villagers complain that most of their hand-pumps do not work because of the depletion of groundwater there.

"Since the factory's establishment in 1998, it has used up most of the groundwater. What is left is contaminated with high chlorine and fluoride content," said a resident, G.K Reddy.

The factory produces toilet soaps, fatty acids and chlore-alkali products; by-products of which namely sulphuric acid, hydrochloric acid, hydrogen peroxide and chlorine methanol have created various skin problems for the villagers.

In Bairapur, a village situated 3km from the Alkali factory, inhabitants complain that the factory has dug bore wells deeper than what the villagers could afford, leading to an acute water crisis.

After repeated complaints, T.G Venkatesh provided water through lift irrigation in Tandrapadu village but Bairapur doesn't enjoy these same benefits.

Bairapur receives water from Tandrapadu village which is allegedly polluted by factory effluents.

Farmers allege that the pollutants from the factory have rendered the land infertile, leading to the death of plant roots which has added to the drought the region has been suffering for over three years in a row now.

Failing agriculture has led to a severe economic crisis in the region.

"Our land has become poisonous," said Mohammed Mahfuj, a Tandrapadu resident.

K. Balaswaria, a farmer in Bairapur, said that micro-irrigation and drip irrigation techniques are unsuccessful because of fluoride and chlorine contamination. "We are left with no option except migration or tenancy," he said.

SRAAC's violations also extend to the employment of contract labour in hazardous conditions. "They employ labourers and then pay them, very little.

They don't make the workers permanent and fire them according to their whim," said G.K Reddy.

The factory workers are also subjected to long working hours. "Workers leave at around 6 in the morning and do not return before 8pm," said Madhusudhan Reddy from Panchalingam, another village near the Alkali factory. He also said that around 5 to 8 people from the village work in the factory.

Reddy, and his sister N. Ananthalakshmi, the village sarpanch, transport materials from the SRAAC to Chennai, Bangalore and other cities.

"People refrain from complaining about the issues considering the amount of power T.G Venkatesh holds. Even if somebody dares to register a complaint, they are silenced by compensation provided by the MP," said Ananthalakshmi.

Villagers allege that the Pollution Control Board has conducted inspections several times but T.G Venkatesh's political influence prevents them from taking action or filing factual reports.

The Pollution Control Board officials refused to comment on the matter.

The villagers' hopelessness was reflected when one of the residents said, "Even if the Prime Minister himself visits our villages (Bairapur and Tandrapadu), I really don't think there is likely to be any improvement in the conditions around here."

## Healthcare stays a distant dream

VARUN DIXIT

GADWAL: Adil (82), lost his night vision three years ago and now trudges every week to a medical shop a mile away to get tablets which he hopes would restore his vision.

Adil's life is a struggle against age, ill health, low income and loneliness. He has toiled close to sixty years of his life to weave the rich tapestry that delight consumers across the world. Yet, his monthly earnings do not exceed Rs 1,000.

He says, "This ailment is definitely the result of years of strain, as almost every weaver who worked with me has developed vision impairment at this age."

His situation hasn't improved despite medication and there is little indication that it would in the future.

However, the fear of losing his eyesight completely prompts the weekly mile-long trip to the nearest pharmacy.

His village, Anantapur, does not have a hospital. The only health facility in the village is a sub primary Public Health Centre (PHC). It takes care of most of the ailments that occur in the village.

The affluent villagers go to the city hospitals, but the rest rely on nurses of the PHC for treatment.

The senior most nurse at the hospital who has a Secondary school certificate is in-charge of distributing medicines to the patients.

She says, "We are provided with certain medicines for frequently occurring diseases in the village and according to that we dispense the medicines to patients".

Kamla, a resident of the village alleges that the nurse mostly gives one medicine for every disease; so she has to go to Gadwal for her arthritis

**"Adil's life is a struggle against age, ill health, low income and loneliness."**

treatment.

Adil who lives alone and survives on his savings cannot afford a weekly visit to a city hospital.

"Travelling 15 kilometers to the city every week is not feasible at my age, nor can I afford the costly treatment in city," he said.

For years now, Adil and the villagers have been asking the Sarpanch to open a hospital in Anantapur, but their demand has not been met till now.

## Drought-hit village finds water under tombstones

The eeriness of graveyards is now a thing of the past

SAURYA SENGUPTA

SALKAPURAM: In Salkapuram, the eeriness associated with cemeteries is a thing of the past. Acute water shortages brought about by successive droughts and high fluoride levels in the ground water have forced the residents of

the village to improvise to meet their daily needs. A burial ground lies across the road leading up to the village. It is shared equally amongst Hindus and Christians in the village. Beside this ground lies a wanka, or, a small stream which was used to draw water during the monsoons. When the wanka would dry up, villagers had to rely on a water purifying unit in the village, which sold water at Rs. 5 for a 10 litre pot. So, the residents decided to dig into the wanka, says R.K. Reddy, a retired Andhra Pradesh Road Transport Corporation employee. The exploration led them into the burial ground. Digging into the free spaces in the compound, they stumbled on vast reserves of groundwater. "We were standing on graves, and staring at something which would potentially solve our water problems."

A borewell was installed in the cemetery later that week. Not all households in the village are pleased with this arrangement, though. Some argued that the burial ground was an impure place, and to drink water from it would bring ill-luck. Others felt their religious beliefs were being slighted. Reddy says that there are hardly any religious tensions in the village with Hindus, Christians, and Muslims living in free interaction with one another, and the

**When we were children we were scared of even crossing the road and today our grandchildren head out with pails and buckets at 10 pm without blinking an eye**

proponents of this idea were not keen on inciting tensions. "We did not want to kick up a storm amongst the groups that wanted the bore, and those who did not," says David John, a grocery shop owner. An agreement was reached by which no water from the cemetery would be used for irrigation. This agreement suited the

several 100-odd families in the village which lived off means other than agriculture, and thought the water would be wasted on crops and grazing. "Desecrating the space was bad enough; to waste it then on plants was not acceptable. Even today, we prefer to just drink the water, and not bathe with it," Sunita John says.

The fright of a dark burial ground is a thing of the past. "When we were children, we were scared of even crossing the road. We used to hear stories of spirits waiting on the other side to nab you. Today, our grandchildren head out with buckets at 10 pm without blinking an eye." Sangeetha, an ASHA worker, says that the burial ground is used less often because of the vastly improved health conditions in the village. But, a parallel problem has emerged, wherein the villagers have begun to dig into the ground for sand. "We are worried the sand mafia has its eyes set on the burial ground." As the health conditions get better, and the burial ground is not used as often every year, the residents face the increased threat of encroachment on the wanka well. But they are prepared to brave the worst for their water. "Who will pay so much money for water every day? We will just have to scare encroachers off," Reddy says. And scaring people away is a task the burial ground is adept at.

## A farmer's family comes to terms with his suicide

MEDI CHAITANYA

KURNOOL: Anjali, 4, doesn't want to look like a geek. She wants to put on her flowery red salwar kameez but her mother who knew that the zip was broken and would expose the child's tiny frame was reluctant to grant her wish.

Finally, P. Rameswari opened their prized possession - a rusty box containing her two sarees and three pairs of Anjali's dresses, worn thin from wear. Giving in to Anjali's persistence, she dug out the red salwar and patched it up with safety pins in two minutes. Anjali's brother Hari Krishna (7) is reluctant to be photographed by strangers. He took a bath in a blink and put on his school dress as if eager to attend school.

Rubbing their faces with talc powder vigorously, Rameswari clasps the photograph of her husband close to heart, intent

on not losing him again.

Rameswari's husband Pikkili Madhu (30) was a tenant farmer who committed suicide in September 2015 in A. Gokulapadu village in Kurnool district.

According to 2015 NCRB data, 516 farmers/cultivators and 400 agricultural labourers committed suicide in Andhra Pradesh, an overall increase of 44.9 per cent from the previous year. "I never considered him a brother, he was my best friend," says Madhu's cousin Gopal tearfully gazing into a passport-size photograph in his wallet.

Every summer they used to migrate to Hyderabad to work as construction workers. In their free time, they always went fishing or shared an occasional glass of toddy. "He was wearing my shirt that day so I asked him to take it off as I needed it that day," says Gopal, who works at a private company in Kurnool.



Pikkili Madhu's wife and children holding his picture. | M CHAITANYA

He remembers that Madhu mumbled something like "This is the last time..." When Gopal returned from his bath, the shirt was neatly folded on his bed.

That was the last time Gopal saw his brother's pensive face.

For the past eight years, Madhu had grown cotton on his three acres of leased land, at a

rent of Rs. 10,000 per acre. Having no bore well, his yield was dependent on rain. He couldn't get a loan-eligibility card from the government to get

a bank loan, so he took private loans up to Rs. 3 lakh at a minimum rate of 24 per cent.

Madhu, his wife, two kids and his parents lived in a one-room house. His father was gored by an ox when he was tilling the land in 2014; diabetes worsened his condition and he died in November.

His mother Ramulamma died in March 2015. "Father-in-law had asked my husband to leave farming and migrate to Hyderabad as we were incurring losses year after year," says Rameswari while ladling rice into a lunchbox as she gets ready to go to the cotton field.

After her husband's death, she stayed with her mother for four months, after which she returned to work as a daily labourer. Her husband had enjoined her to keep the children from taking to agriculture and she was now ensuring that by sending them to school. When Madhu's two brothers got married, they remodelled their house for Rs. 50,000 each. It's been one-and-half years, but the family hasn't

received any compensation. According to G.O 62 of Andhra Pradesh, if a farmer commits suicide, the family should receive a compensation of Rs. 3.5 lakh for family welfare and Rs. 1.5 lakh for debt payments.

Nagamani, Madhu's neighbor, had seen him carrying a rope the day before he was found dead. She thought he was going to the field. "If a literate person feels sad, he doesn't have to talk about it - he can write it and get it off his mind. But when an illiterate person is depressed, the only way to get out of that is to share with others. Madhu was a kind of person who shared happiness with others."

He was found hanging in the tamarind grove close to his field on Friday morning. Recollecting that day, Gopal says "He thought death would lighten his sorrows, but we felt he weighed more on the noose."

Rameswari can't leave the village as she needs to repay the debts. She will not leave her home, as it remains the last thing her husband had built with his hands.

## Self-reliance via beedi rolling



Shahida rolling beedis | ANKITA B

ANKITA BOSE

GADWAL: Shahida, a housewife with a 20-year-old daughter, in the Alampur village in Gadwal district has finally found something that she could call her own - a self-help group of ten women who roll beedis to sustain themselves.

Seven years ago, when her in-laws died, Shahida had an overwhelming urge to break free from a life where all her activities revolved around the welfare of others - her husband, in-laws, and daughter. She longed to earn enough to meet her little needs without handouts from her family.

She spoke to women from neighbourhood who came to her little house of one bedroom, a TV set and a small yet neat kitchen for an occasional afternoon chat. Her enthusiasm was infectious and soon she had a group of ten women who were determined to use their skills to earn for themselves.

Beedi-rolling was something that was unanimously agreed upon given their minimal educational qualifications. Soon, they managed to get a Rs. 1 lakh bank loan and Shahida set up their "business".

The women still come for the afternoon chats. Only now, they sit together in Shahida's bedroom, watching soap operas while rolling beedis amid giggles and gossip. Each one rolls 1000 beedis in a day.

Shahida wakes up at five in the morning to read the 'namaz'. With renewed energy, she prepares breakfast and packs lunch for her husband, an electrician, who leaves for Kurnool town at 8 am.

She then completes the remaining household chores, has a bath before taking out her basket from under the bed. The basket is filled with tobacco, tendu leaves, little red threads and a pair of scissors. The rest of the morning is spent in cutting the leaves into even squares and rolling the beedis.

By 7 in the evening, Shahida is done with her quota of 1000 beedis. She cooks dinner for her husband and herself.

A back ache has been bothering her but she still enjoys her work. "I can roll beedis now without even looking. The backache is sometimes severe but it doesn't matter when I get the money in hand," says Shahida.

Their little business has flourished over the years. They take loans regularly to develop it further. At the end of the week, all the beedis are collected by a wholesale dealer who sells it in the market. The ten women generate savings collectively, part of which they spend on the raw material.

Shahida does not know where her beedis go, under what brand and who smokes them. She seems content with the Rs. 5000 that each of them gets at the end of the month.

Shahida's husband was not in favour of her plan when Shahida first broached it. But she had convinced him that it wouldn't come in the way of her household duties.

"My husband is not around much except for meals. But when he creates trouble, I ignore it by keeping shut," Shahida explains.

Shahida's daughter, Shahina is pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Kurnool city where she stays in the hostel. She comes home during the weekends and occasionally helps with the accounts.

Shahida pays half of her daughter's college fees. She wants her to complete her B.A. and continue working after she gets married.

Shahida understands the importance of savings and she is glad that she could achieve it, repeatedly admitting that it wouldn't be possible without her teammates.

"I am happy that I can buy the red saree that I really want without having to ask my husband for money," she says gleefully.

# Women sit on the chair, whilst men pull the strings

SAURYA SENGUPTA

KURNOOL: In the Panchayats reserved for women in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh, women who have been repeatedly elected to the position of president, serve merely as surrogates for a powerful male of the family - husband, brother or father - who become de facto decision makers.

In Salkapuram and Gondiparla villages of Andhra Pradesh, and Lingनावai of Telangana, though women had been voted into power, they play no role in the functioning of the village.

This is symptomatic of a larger problem where women are not allowed into the public space, let alone make policy decisions, claims N. Ramesh Babu, a political analyst working for Andhra Jyoti newspaper. "In some ways, the reservations have further



Sarpanch Lakshmi Devi of Singawaram village | CHAHAK M

limited the role women play in public life. The family patriarchs believe that they have done the women in the family a favour by 'allowing' them to become sarpanch, and the rights end there." He says no amount of affirmative action can enforce this change unless people

recognise the women's right to enter public life. When the husband of S. Venkatamma, the Sarpanch of Lingनावai, is asked why he speaks for his wife, he replies, "She has just been nominated to the post. Actually, I am the one who is better at governance, since I am

more experienced." The nature of these blatant proxy elections is accepted even among the villagers. "One cannot blame the families, can they? The reservation rule itself is unnecessary, because we would have voted for her husband, if we could," says a resident of Gondiparla village, referring to the Sarpanch Lakshmi Devi.

The dismissive attitude is evident even in the public appearances, and campaigning. At a Janmabhoomi program organised in Salkapuram village and hosted by T.G. Venkatesh (TDP), the Rajya Sabha MP from Kurnool constituency, Ichhamati, the unanimously elected Sarpanch, is not even allowed to speak. Her husband, Maddiletty, spends fifteen minutes speaking about his own achievements as the Sarpanch of the village. Ichhamati is not allowed to answer questions posed by reporters. An older

woman who sits beside her informs the audience that the questions should be posed to the man conducting the event - her husband. The attendees at the program - mostly residents of Salkapuram - do not even recognise her presence at the meeting.

Central and state authorities are not unaware of this kind of manipulation. A dossier published by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) in early 2016 states that "There are complaints of relatives of lady office bearers interfering in their work. Certain states like Maharashtra have issued guidelines to discourage this tendency. MoPR is formulating guidelines on this subject." However, no formal guidelines have been issued since then, on the subject. In the absence of such rules and guidelines "hiding behind a woman's skirts [or saree]" assumes an entirely new meaning.

## After note-ban, parents struggle to pay school fee

Defaulting students run the risk of wasting one year

VARUN DIKSHIT

SALKAPURAM: Note ban has disrupted the academic careers of the students of S.S.P Public School in Salkapuram village as the school isn't accepting the now defunct Rs 500 and 1,000 notes for fees; and the villagers don't have enough Rs 100 notes to deposit the whole amount. The school management extended the deadline to December as over 50 students have still not deposited the fees.

The defaulting students run the risk of wasting one year as they won't be allowed to take the year-end examination.

The school Principal, Sumita Srinivasulu said, "As per our annual schedule we take the half yearly fees in November, but only 38 students out of 165 have managed to deposit the fees on time this year".

The school was founded by Sunita and her husband twelve years ago in the heart of the village and since then they have

personally tended to its growth.

The initial years were difficult as the couple went door-to-door to talk to reluctant parents to send their children to school. Gradually the strength has increased from 12 in the first year to 165 now.

Mrs. Srinivasulu said that the affluent and middle class children were sent to Kurnool for education. The ones who can't afford to send their children to the city send their children to our school as the fee was nominal.

She adds that demonetization has created a distressful situation as they need to pay the teachers and for that collection of fees is absolutely essential for them, hence they took the step of not allowing defaulters to sit for the examination.

"My child has been studying in this school for the last four years and I have never failed to deposit fees but this year due to demonetization I am helpless," said Kamlesh, a parent.

Kamlesh said he would arrange to pay the fees in cash as soon as possible as he begged the school to allow his child to sit for the examination.



Children at a private school in Salkapuram | VARUN D

## Farmlands sold as sons migrate

Educated youth seek new pastures



Farmers at a village in A. Gokulapadu | JOSEPH S

JOSEPH SEBASTIAN

A. GOKULAPADU: Education, which promised to be the passport to the future, is slowly becoming a double-edged sword for the farmers of Kurnool and Gadwal districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Many landowners like 63-year-old Saibaba Reddy who expected their children's education to replace their sickles with modern harvesters now find their hopes dashed as they migrate to urban centres in search of better opportunities.

Reddy, whose eldest son is pursuing engineering in the U.S., grows jowar, millets and red chillies on his 50-acre farm in A. Gokulapadu. His children are unlikely to follow his vocation he says ruefully.

"Many have had to sell or lease their land because there's no one to look after it," remarks Reddy woefully.

Mounting debt and falling income have been key reasons for farmers selling their land.

Elsewhere in Balapanur, 90-year-old M. Fakir Sahib still manages to supervise and manage his 8-acres, but he realises that age is catching up.

"My son is a doctor in Kerala," he says.

It's anybody's guess what would become of his land after his time.

While big land owners can rely on their children's steady income, the sale of land leaves landless agricultural workers without a livelihood.

It's an arduous task for daily wage labourers to find work as the rapport they built with the previous owners is lost.

"New land owners only hire people they know," says Gopu Krishna, a daily wage worker at a tobacco plantation near Balapanur.

However, there are some who believe that adopting modern agricultural practices would go a long way in making farming a lucrative career option.

J. Krishnappa, a mechanical engineer, who took up farming in 1968 and now uses modern harvesting combines believes that the current generation doesn't want to toil in the sun.

"They want easy money, and the city provides them with that," says Krishnappa.

He believes that government schemes are introduced with good intentions but are not really helpful. He holds that education is still the key and children should understand the rewards of hard work from a very young age.

"The school curriculum should include courses in agriculture and children should be taught the basics from a young age," he said.

## Rural sanitation and 'swachhta': An overview

ARADHANA KALIA

KURNOOL: In the wee hours, when the village of Chillabanda is asleep, 30-year-old Razia Begum wakes up to go out in the fields to defecate just like the other women of the village, who will get a chance to "go out" next only after the sun goes down.

"If we have to go in the afternoon there is one community toilet that we can use. Even those people who have toilets at home mostly cannot use it because we have a water shortage in our village," she says. The community toilet which is just a four wall

compound lies in dire state spreading stench in the area around it.

"Going out in the fields would require only one bottle of water to wash after open defecation but the toilets require extra buckets of water so, it's better to go out," she says. Out of the 206 households only 93 have toilets at home.

According to the 2015 report prepared by Division of Child Studies - a joint initiative of UNICEF and CESS on water and sanitation in Andhra Pradesh, the households that have water facility on the premises account for just 25.88

per cent in Kurnool district only 47.5 per cent households have latrines.

The villagers of Gondiparla, an hour from Chillabanda, were encouraged to build lavatories at home after receiving the initial funds of Rs 3000- 4000 under the Swachha Bharat Abhiyan. But they have received no money for the past year. Building toilets in rural India was one of the major promises PM Modi made during the 2014 general election. The Swachha Bharat Abhiyan was launched to provide sanitation facilities to every family by the year 2019. Under this program Rs. 9,000 is

to be given from Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin) while the State's share is Rs. 3,000.

Many of these toilets have lasted barely a year because of the low quality material and improperly dug pits for the septic tanks. In Salkapuram village the SC colony has no toilets because of the lack of space for building them. An application for building a community toilet, hasn't yet been sanctioned. The sanitation problem extends also to the unavailability of sanitary napkins. Mass produced sanitary napkins are non-biodegradable and thus pose disposal problems.

So a majority of the women resort to cloth napkins which they wash and reuse.

"For girls of my age, we have to miss approximately one week of school during the menstruation cycle," says V Madhavi a 14 year old student in Chillabanda.

A program like Swachha Bharat which addresses open defecation only as a problem which can be solved by building a toilet, paying no attention to providing a steady supply of water, or raising awareness of health and hygiene, is bound to fail as it perpetually ignores the social and cultural realities of village life.

## "I usually do only simple designs. Hence I get paid less"

NAVMI KRISHNA

GADWAL: When 14-year-old Jayanthi married Oggu Suresh, she had been assisting her grandfather in his weaving loom. Seventeen years later, she continues to work as one of the many weavers in the Raghavendra Colony in Jogulamba Gadwal.

"For the first saree I wove, I earned Rs. 700. Now, I earn around Rs. 1500 per saree," Oggu Jayanthi smiled

Half of the narrow room was taken up by her weaving loom. The other half was sparsely furnished with a settee, two chairs and an old-fashioned TV set.

Made with a combination of cotton and silk, Gadwal sarees are famous for their intricate Zari borders. Woven predominantly in and around Mahbubnagar in Telangana, the sarees fetch up to Rs. 10,000 depending on the amount of gold work in it.

Raghavendra Colony is home to over 30 weavers who work independently on weaving looms at their homes. Typically, they work through a middleman who provide them the raw materials and accept the finished product. These middlemen sell the sarees either in small shops in Gadwal town or to large stores in Hyderabad.

Jayanthi said that their remuneration

*Nagarajulu claimed that the middlemen sell the sarees at twice as much as the normal prices, but the weavers are paid the same.*

depends on the complexity of the design. "I usually do only simple designs. Hence I get paid less," she said.

Jayanthi's neighbour and an independent weaver Chinni Nagarajulu (50) earned

Rs.3000 per saree. He works on three or four sarees per month, each taking around seven days to complete.

However, during marriage season, Nagarajulu claimed that the middlemen sell the sarees at twice as much as the normal prices, but the weavers are paid the same. Though there is a Weaver's Sangham which doubled as a worker's union, Jayanthi said they are ineffectual and termed them as a "waste".

The Central government had come up with schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi Bunkar Bima Yojana aimed at providing insurance to handloom weavers in case of natural or

accidental death or in case of total or partial disability. However, the weavers, complained that this is yet to be implemented. A. Anjaneyalu (50) said that when her husband, A. Rameshwaram, died due to kidney failure, she received no compensation from the government.

The weavers claimed that even though they contract many diseases because of the nature of work, the government brushes off their grievances citing insufficient funds.

"Earlier, the Central government used to give a subsidy of Rs. 600. Now, they say they don't have the money and have stopped it," she sighed.

# Two faces of anganwadis in one district

ARADHANA KALIA

SALKAPURAM: Revathi is a 4-year-old girl who lives in the village of Salkapuram and spends seven hours every day in the nearby anganwadi with 28 children below the age of five. It allows her mother, an agricultural labourer, to get on with her chores and work in the fields. Her anganwadi is a small, colourful room filled with pictographic charts of fruits, vegetables, animals, birds and alphabets.

On one wall hangs a large blackboard where their teacher has drawn a scene from the story she has been telling the kids. On the opposite wall, there is a chart to measure the height and a weighing scale for the children - the teacher records the data every month.

As soon as the clock strikes half hour past noon, the children are told to take their plates and sit in two rows so that the ayah (helper) can serve them vegetable sambar and rice along with one boiled egg so that they get the right amount of nutrition for which the standard has been set by the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS). The ICDS initiated its Anganwadi program in 1975. Today there are an estimated 1,053 million anganwadi centres across the country. Out of the 85,946 functioning



Children at an anganwadi in Salkapuram. Many of the anganwadis in Kurnool and Gadwal lack proper infrastructure and facilities | ARADHANA K

anganwadi centres in Andhra Pradesh, as many as 3,486 are in Kurnool district.

The objective was to provide early childhood care to young children in the 1 to 5 age group and to remove the burden of childcare from mothers and elder siblings - so that children like Revathi improve their health by eating nutrition rich food and develop the habit of

going daily to an educational institution. But not every child gets an anganwadi that is as good as Revathi's.

Five-year-old Sujatama's story is different. In Chillabanda village the anganwadi she goes to is in a dire state. Plaster from one of the walls of the bare room is peeling. There are no mats on the floor and no charts on the

walls. There is no weighing machine or charts marking the height of the children. In one corner there lies a gas stove (within reach of the children) for cooking the noon meals.

Lakshmi Devi, who is the ayah there, said that the teacher who lives in the nearby village of Goruntala comes only twice a week, so she handles the children in the anganwadi

the rest of the time. Sujatama and her 25 classmates spend their time colouring books or playing with each other. The anganwadi gets the monthly supply of rice and dal but for the past 10 months they haven't been getting eggs.

According to the ICDS norms, up to three years of age a child should get eight boiled eggs per month and from 3-4 years of age it should be 16 eggs per month. Like Chillabanda, there are other anganwadis which also face problems in food supply.

In Lingantai village, there are a total of five anganwadis which sometimes do not get the nutrition powder needed for the children below three years.

Akbarpet village in Alampur district has not been getting eggs for the past year.

In all the anganwadis located in the above mentioned villages, there were no toilets for the children nor did they have any proper space for the children to play outside.

While there are some women who hesitate to send their children to the anganwadis because they think they are too young. Others who can afford it send their children to the private and convent pre-schools.

The present child malnutrition status in Kurnool lies at 27 per cent.

# Community toilets - a demand unmet



Residents of SC colony in Salkapuram | B PRADEEP

B.PRADEEP

A.GOKULAPADU: Caste demarcations are not history in the rural areas of Kurnool - it is practiced in several ways. Villagers of Salkapuram and the A.Gokulapadu protest the construction of a community toilet in the centre of the village for people who already have toilets at home.

The residents of the Schedule Castes (SC) colony in the villages of Salkapuram and A.Gokulapadu says that "the government practices discrimination with us," as they are not allowed to use the toilet facility there.

The official data on toilet construction in SC settlements are not reliable - the ground reality is different. Both the colonies have about 90 households, with around 120 children each, of which only five have a toilet. SC colony in Salkapuram has two.

Lack of water and space to build toilets is the major constraint," feels C.Ravi, a colony resident.

Jadala Yesu, a cotton farmer says, "we will give you what we decide, not what you want", attitude of officials is no help. All we want for this colony is a community toilet"

The situation in A.Gokulapadu is not different. Toilets, wherever built, are not in use for lack of water. Funding problems too have left the constructions incomplete.

Amid this, some feel going out in the open is easier as houses to scheduled castes were demarcated and allotted in the periphery of the village, which are now nearer to the open fields and bushes.

Davidu (30) a centering worker says pride is specific and seasonal, "the Reddy landlord invites us with warm words to poop in his fields in

the summers, but rains abuses along with the monsoons." He explains that during monsoons, the labourers refuse to come to work as it becomes difficult to clean the poop off the fields.

Yesu adds, "my poop is their fertilizer, we make the land fertile." It is beneath the dignity of women and girls to go out in the open every morning. As a matter of safety, health and hygiene, women have higher chances of complications.

"It is very insulting. Every time a vehicle passes I stand up and cover my face in shame," says T.Manemma.

During the rainy season, open fields shrink to smaller spaces as people do not want to go farther to squat, to avoid the risks of flooding or insect bites attacks.

For one of the V. Pedda Giddamma (35) come monsoon, she skips her evening meal to control her bowel movements. It is the easiest way followed by many women to address their dignity and safety concerns.

Understanding it as a political problem, V. Samyelu, a retired village Congress Working Committee member says that "lack of co-operation among parties hinders delivery".

In Salkapuram, the woman Sarpanch from a dominant caste is represented by her husband, and the local leader and government belong to different parties. On the other hand, A.Gokulapadu, caste-feudalistic in nature has been ignoring long pending issues and villager's legitimate demands.

M.Rama Devi, the panchayat secretary of Salkapuram, assures that the request for community toilets in SC colony has been escalated.

## Kowlur to light up with new LED lamps

JOSEPH SEBASTIAN

KOWLUR: The streets of Kowlur, a village in Panyam Mandal of Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh, will soon be shining bright thanks to the 140 street lamps which are being retrofitted with new LED lights.

The Sarpanch, N. Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy who was personally overseeing the installation, claimed that this would reduce the panchayat's electricity consumption considerably.

Reddy said that all the 510 households will benefit from this project as the village would now be lit for 12 hours after sunset.

"This is a welcome move. The street lamp outside my house has been inoperative for almost a month now. Now it's lit up and safe," said Ghanem Ahmed, a farmer who often returns home late through a barely lit street.

LEDs consume 6-8 watts of electricity, only a fraction of what incandescent and CFL lamps consume - 60 watts and 13-15 watts respectively.

"These bulbs have a long lifespan which will slash the overall maintenance and operation cost by half," said Reddy.

While incandescent lights and CFLs have an average lifespan ranging from four months to at the most 2.5 years, LEDs can keep on going for almost a decade.

Reddy also mentioned that the funds for this project were acquired under the 14th Finance Commission which "has taken the view that the measures recommended, including the grants to the local bodies, should go towards supporting and strengthening their primary functions to deliver basic services".

However, LEDs incur huge installation cost. A single LED bulb costs around Rs. 470 while conventional bulbs cost Rs. 25-180.

Retrofitting of street lamps with LED lights in the villages has been one of Chandrababu Naidu's pet projects to become the national number one in the energy sector.

Earlier this year, Naidu directed the senior officials of panchayat raj to devise a plan to install LEDs by the end of 2017.

# Handloom weaving in dire straits

VARUN DIKSHIT

GADWAL: The renowned handloom weaving sector in Gadwal which employs thousands of people in the area might become a thing of past as mechanisation, modernization and sophistication of power loom are pushing the ancient craft of handloom weaving to the margins.

Kongari Yellapa, a second generation weaver for the last 42 years, said, "Power loom is taking all our business as it is more efficient. It takes 15 days to make one saree in handloom whereas 3-4 days are enough to make a saree with power loom"

Weaving a saree requires immense effort, says Surya, who, for the last 60 years has put in 12 hours every day and in return earns only Rs. 3,000 per month.

He said, "When I started, I used to get Rs. 400-500 per saree which was pretty decent at that time. But today, after 40 years, the price of everything



Kongari Yellapa at his work station | ARADHANA K

has increased but my income remains low. The power loom sector has absorbed more than half of the business".

Power loom is in tune with the fast changing demands and fashions as compared to handloom. However, Oggu Jayanti, a lady weaver who learned this art from her grandfather, said, "Power loom

cannot match the quality of handloom sarees. The shine of sarees made by handloom lasts for 10-12 years whereas the sheen wears off the power loom sarees within 3-4 years."

"But sarees made by power loom and handloom looks identical and generally customers can't figure out the difference between two. This is

the reason power loom sector is flourishing," Jayanti said. The Modi Government has said that it plans to have the National Institute of Fashion Technology and leading members of the fashion industry support weavers by sharing knowledge about the new methods.

However, both Oggu Jayanti and Konnari said, "Absolutely nothing has been done by the Government thus far to help us in any way."

The handloom sector provides employment for an estimated 12.5 million people and is the largest rural employment provider next to agriculture, generating jobs also in semi-urban and urban areas of the country.

To bring back the lost identity of this sector, Government has to protect this sector from competition from the powerloom sector; otherwise handloom weaving in Gadwal would soon become a part of history.

# "Urban reporters should visit rural India"

SAURYA SENGUPTA

SALKAPURAM: As Dr. D.P. Parthasarathy walks us over to an empty space beneath a Banyan tree, we notice an unevenly shaped rock jutting from the ground in an otherwise even space. The rock is marked with crimson and white coloured powders, and white flowers adorn its base. We ask Parthasarathy whether it was an improvised lingam. He tells us it isn't. We ask him, what is the rock supposed to mean? "In India, there is no meaning for anything," he says.

We came across Dr. Parthasarathy in Salkapuram village as he carries out a round of weekly checks on the village cattle. He spends around three hours administering injections and medicines to cows and bulls, which are chained onto a metal contraption, which looks like two large inverted horse-shoes, placed in front of each other. His hands move expertly across the body of the cattle, in search of an appropriate spot to inject his syringe. He is dressed in white scrubs, over a checked shirt and an ID card, which reads 'Govt of Andhra Pradesh, Animal Husbandry Department', hangs around his neck. As he wraps up the day's work, he agrees to show us around the farms in the nearby villages.

He is curious about our presence there. "I have rarely



All in a day's work for Dr. Parthasarathy | B PRADEEP

seen any media persons in these villages. They just turn up if a large number of people commit suicide during droughts. That apart, you urban reporters seem to find no interest in rural India."

Parthasarathy is eager and restless, wanting to show us around, introduce us to people, and familiarise us with the setting. But beneath the excitement lies considerable resentment over the portrayal and ignorance of rural India, not just by the press, but by urban society generally.

"What your college is doing should be made compulsory for all people in urban sections, not just reporters. Come, live with us for a week, and observe."

Born into a family which was the first one to be educated, he grew up with nine brothers in a village a few miles from Salkapuram.

A graduate of the Tirupathy

Veterinary College, he began working with forest agencies in Kotapalli, a belt inhabited by the Chenchu tribe.

"I am from a very poor place, but our family insisted we leave the village and educate ourselves. My aim is thus to empower rural areas in whichever way I can." Dr. Parthasarathy claims he has been working in rural areas for 21 years. He has two children - his son Dileep works in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) in Hyderabad. He hopes for the same from his daughter, Indira.

"I do not want my children to become doctors. Our family has enough doctors. But I want them to work in the remotest of areas in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and others, and actually help people."

He takes an active effort to make sure people from the Chenchu tribe, for example, are able to spread their wings by

providing guidance and financial support to IAS aspirants. One of his protégés is preparing for the Indian Forest Services in Delhi, and is scheduled to take his exam later this year. "Guidance is primary. They will find the funds if they search. It is important to know what to do with those funds."

A staunch believer in the precepts of former President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, he believes successive

governments have ignored the majority of India's rural underbelly. "Dr. Kalam advocated the principle of P.U.R.A [Providing Urban amenities to Rural Areas]. This sought to administer the basic essentials to villages - water, good health, and primary education. All government schemes that are promoted should serve these functions."

Criticising the policies of the NDA government at the Centre, he says that demonisation was carried out to "fool" the people of the country, and divert attention from the "real issues."

"The previous Congress governments were so corrupt and inept that the current government can do whatever it wants, and get away with it."

In his two-decades of service, he has seen countless farmer crisis and crop failure, Yet, he refuses to be stoic about the world around him.

# Healthcare woes of Bairapur's villagers



Villagers in Bairapur | ANKITA B

ANKITA BOSE

BAIRAPUR: Villagers of Bairapur in Mahabubnagar District of Telangana have to travel 9 km to the nearest health care unit in Alampur or to Kurnool city (16 km) for advanced medical facilities.

Villagers said that a doctor visits every fortnight to attend to their medical complaints but emergency cases are often fatal as patients die on the way to the hospital. The insufficient ambulance facilities also lead to increased number of deaths.

Voya Valmiki Narayan, former Deputy Sarpanch of Bairapur talked about how his wife died on the way to the hospital two years ago.

"She had convulsions at midnight. By the time we could arrange the ambulance

and take her to the hospital, she died on the way due to a cardiac arrest," said Valmiki.

"Medical emergency deaths are very common here," agreed the other villagers in unison. Bairapur which lies in Gadwal district of Telangana, is situated very close to the Andhra Pradesh border. According to Valmiki, the village gets marooned amid potential vote bank politics.

Mandal officers seem to be in complete denial of the situation. Mandal Parishad Development Officer of Gadwal, M. Mallika Arjun rejected the claims of the villagers. On the contrary, he maintained that regular health camps are held in the village.

As for the deaths in cases of emergency, Mr. Arjun said, "We can't do anything in case of emergencies as of now!"



Life goes on for Ramesh's children | M CHAITANYA

## Misreporting suicide to deny compensation

MEDI CHAITANYA

TELANGANA: Pogala Jayanna and Thodsu Ramesh an, two farmers of Eravenu and Peddapodilla villages in Kurnool District committed suicide one year apart in 2015 and 2016. They were only two of the 12,602 people who committed suicide that year in the farming sector. However, their deaths have been recorded in a way to fudge NCRB data.

Ramesh and Jayanna have a few things in common - both are tenant farmers, have rented land, incurred losses for the past five years, and had taken loans from money-lenders.

Still, each one has a different story as do the 12,600 others.

Ramesh, 30, has over 30 sheep. He has two kids, Ashwini (7) and Satwick (5). From his two acres, the government took one acre for the Sri Ram Sagar Project. From that day onwards, he has been cultivating corn and cotton in 3 acres of leased land. He doesn't have a 'loan eligibility card'. Crop failure for the past three years didn't shake his firm belief in the land.

However, he committed suicide on October 27, 2015.

"Suicidal death by poisoning due to family disputes" reads the conclusion of a final report into the death of Thodsu Ramesh by a three-member committee consisting of Sub-inspector of Police (SI), Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO) and Rural Development Officer (RDO) of Palakurthy Mandal in Jangaon district of Telangana. "There might be an immediate reason for suicide, but that doesn't give us the full picture. We tend to cover suicide as an event but forget to understand the process that leads to that fatal decision," says Kiran Vissa, state convener of Rythu Swarajya Vedika, an NGO working for ensuring sustainable livelihoods for farmers.

Bad monsoon affected Ramesh's farming and pressure to pay the debt from the moneylender increased in the last year. When the crop yields were high two years ago, lack of remunerative price had hit him hard. He started drinking to 'forget the pains'.

Ramesh's wife Swaroopa said that he had picked a fight with her on the morning of October 27th. "Who doesn't fight in a marriage?" she asked, readying her children for the school.

Swaroopa came to know about Ramesh's death from his brother, Onesh, with whom the family was not on good terms. He gave a complaint saying Ramesh died due to a family dispute.

Onesh now has his eyes on her one-acre land.

Swaroopa sold off her 40 goats to pay the debts after her husband's death.

"Ashwini too has a growth problem, but I don't have the money to take her to the hospital," says a sobbing Swaroopa.

Pogala Jayanna's (50) family had 10-acres of land in Peddapodilla village, Kurnool district. After marrying off his three sisters, he sold off five acres of land to settle the debts. He had leased four-acres of land after property partition.

Jayanna committed suicide in October 2016 - death due to illness, said the First Information Report. He developed abdominal pain as he had been exposed to pesticides for the past 35 years.

"Anna had abdominal pain from constant exposure to pesticides. He had cultivated tomato and pulses, but last year he didn't even get back half his investment," says Raju, Jayanna's youngest brother.

Raju also says that Jayanna suffered abdominal pain from constant exposure to pesticides, but that didn't stop him from working. "Anna had cultivated tomato and pulses, but last year he didn't even get back half his investment," he said.

Both Jayanna's and Ramesh's deaths were reported inaccurately.

According to NCRB 2015 data, of the 8,007 reported cases, 22.2 per cent of farmers/cultivators committed suicide due to 'family problems' and 'illness'. Of 4,595 agricultural labourers, 59.1 per cent because of 'family problems' and 'illness'.

In a report published by the Rythu Swarajya Vedika in October 2016, it was pointed out that of the 40 families visited in Andhra Pradesh, 20 had no bank loans - their loans were from private lenders. Twenty-two tenant farmers had no loan eligible cards.

In 39 out of 40 cases, one of the key reasons for crop loss was drought, cyclone or flood. However, because of the failure of the government to provide effective crop insurance or disaster compensation, they went deep into debt and despair.

# Anger over sewage spills over

B.PRADEEP

KURNOOL: Waste water and sewage from 3,000 houses built under the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) scheme 16 years ago has been flowing into the 24 huts in Sri Kotla Nagar in Kalluru mandal under the Kurnool Municipal Corporation (KMC) limits for the past eight months.

All the huts in this colony are at a lower level than the government built houses of the IAY. This composite 'weaker section' colony lacks a drainage channel and the solid and liquid waste empties into the open nalas adjoining the huts on the other side of the road.

The sewage started to overflow and enter the houses after the nala that opens into private lands was blocked by its owners eight months ago, in response to the rising value of real estate developments. It has been a perpetual problem ever since, leading to stagnation of waste water in the colony, making it a stranded island surrounded by sewage.

While the KMC officials say they drain the waste water

logged in the colonies using sewer sucker trucks, the residents have a different story to tell.

"Every evening between 5.30 and 8.30, the waste water reaches up to here," said K.Rani, a home-based beedi worker pointing to the wet base plinth of her room.

G. Narsamma, recollecting her every day stomach-turning evenings, said "We can't eat. The sewage boils like waves."

Failing to evoke any response from officials for so long, the residents of Sri Kotla Nagar on Wednesday staged an angry protest by blocking the Kurnool-Bellary highway that runs just outside the colony with sand bags, bricks and construction stones.

"The commissioner didn't even get down from his vehicle," the residents say. The Circle Inspector of Kurnool IV Town warned the residents that they would be booked under various cases if they continued the protest.

"The town planning officer told us to wait till the Janmabhoomi phase works are



Hutment walls damaged by standing sewage | B PRADEEP

over," said K.Prakash, a graduate in the colony.

The residents, who have a stack of the numerous petitions and requisitions made to various officials over eight months, are not ready to believe officials trying to placate them with empty promises any more.

The situation of women here is much worse. Most who recognize home as a productive

place engaged in home-based work like beedi, agarbatti rolling and stitching old garments to bed sheets.

Children are at serious health risk due to constant exposure to stagnant sewage. Finding the piglets amusing, they are often seen playing with or touching them. With noxious and unbearable stench emanating from the wet surfaces inside the

rooms and overflowing nalas outside, women believe Swachh Bharat is a mockery of their lives here.

Complaining of the absence of an Anganwadi centre and a Primary Health Centre, of sewage mixing with drinking water, the stray pig menace and swarm of mosquitoes in the evening, residents ask - "Can anyone live in these conditions?"

Four families with toddlers have already vacated their houses fearing the health risks, says Md. Salauddin, a colony resident.

The Andhra Pradesh State Housing Corporation, in its website and through the district's progress report, boasts of constructing 7,773 houses, a 100 per cent completion this year. With innovative housing programmes that feature habitation score cards and geo tagging reports, the officials have no time to talk to weaker sections' problems, feels R. Lavanya, a native of Kurnool and now a student of Development Policy, Planning and Practice in Hyderabad.

## Reddys fetch top price in marriage market

NAVMI KRISHNA K

LINGANVAI: If Varun were a Reddy in the Linganvai village of Gadwal, Telangana, he would have fetched at least Rs.25 lakh in dowry. Of course, being a Reddy, he would have owned several acres of land to justify the amount. That he was a Brahmin decreased his marketability considerably.

*Dowry is punishable with fine and a jail term - Dowry Prohibition Act 1961*

Across the villages of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the prevalent dowry practices offer insight into the deep-rooted caste system in the area. Dowry is a norm, no questions asked. The amount a healthy male is likely to receive is determined more by his caste than his personal achievements or looks. Property trumps job, even today.

The dowry system is practiced across the state,

irrespective of religion. Doddekula Kasimbi, a mother of four girls and a BC Muslim, from Gokulapadu village in Andhra Pradesh says that the expected dowry to marry off her daughters would range from Rs.2 -3 lakh and 4 thula (equivalent to 40 gm) of gold. The girls are expected to be educated till Class X besides being well-versed in Quran and tailoring.

This tendency of parents to stress their daughters' proficiency in tailoring is not limited to a particular village. A. Anjaneyalu, a weaver from Gadwal, said that when it came to marriage alliances, tailoring was a mandatory accomplishment. "It is a way for her to supplement her husband's income if need be. And she can work from home," she said, explaining the pragmatic logic.

The average dowry in the middle class families of the Padmashali community in Gadwal is around Rs. 1-2 lakh. The marriage expenses add another Rs. 70,000. It is not uncommon for the families to borrow from moneylenders and end up in debt.

According to the Dowry

Prohibition Act 1961, the offering and accepting of dowry is an offence punishable with fine and a jail time of up to five years. However, the villagers of Pullur and Alampur maintained that it is "normal and consensual".

M. Mallikarjun, the Mandal Parishad Development Officer of Gadwal insisted that no case of dowry has been reported by the villagers. If there was a case of dowry being demanded or given, he said that the procedure is that it will be identified by the self-help groups, after whose intervention or counseling, the matter would be escalated to the Women and Child Development Officers at the Mandal level.

However, for this to take place, "the cases need to be reported," he said. "We have sensitized the self-help groups about dowry and child marriage. If anyone needs help, they only have to ask."

The villagers, however, refuse to report such instances. Dowry had become legitimized in their social environment. As one villager put it, it was a part of their tradition.

## KCR effigy burnt to protest anti-dalit govt. decisions

ANKITA BOSE

GADWAL: A group of Madiga Reservation members (MRPS) burnt the effigy of Telangana C.M K. Chandrashekhar Rao (KCR) in front of the Alampur Mandal office in Gadwal on January 6.

The gesture was to protest KCR's decision not to extend senior IAS officer K.Pradeep Chandra's tenure as Chief Secretary of state. Pradeep Chandra who belongs to the Dalit community retired on

January 1 and was succeeded by S.P Singh.

According to the MRPS members, KCR's decision was 'vengeful' which could be clearly recognized by recalling his decision to extend former Chief Secretary Rajeev Sharma's term by six months. They accused the C.M of favouring Rajeev Sharma, an upper caste member, who was made the Chief Advisor to the state after his retirement on November 30 2016.

The protesters shouted slogans as they lit KCR's effigy on fire, "Anti-dalit CM KCR, Down Down!"

The MRPS founded by Mandha Krishna Madiga boasts of politics which supports the aspirations of the weaker sections of the society, especially the Dalits.

Madhu Kumar Madiga, one of the protesters from Alampur village said, "Rajeev Sharma was grandly congratulated in a special ceremony arranged for

him and he was designated the Chief Advisor. On the other hand, Pradeep Chandra was completely neglected. This clearly shows KCR's bias against Dalits."

Pradeep Chandra had been serving as a Chief Secretary in the Revenue Department and contributed a lot in managing finances of the newly formed state of Telangana.

Although his retirement was just a month away during the time of his appointment as

Chief Secretary, KCR had been confident of securing an extension of at least six months from the Centre. His failure to do so has been the major reason for resentment in the Dalit community.

KCR has been consistently on the radar by Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee (TPCC). He has been repeatedly accused of being an "anti-Dalit" leader and of neglecting the community.

## Handloom weaving hangs by a thread

ARADHANA KALIA

Kongari Yellappa (51) wakes up at 8 every morning and works till 6 in the evening to weave the famous Gadwal saree, a work which he has been engaged in for the past 43 years. His father was also a weaver and when Yellappa was 8 years old, he started assisting him, working from the same room where he now works on a handloom.

His village is a part of the handloom cluster of Gadwal in Andhra Pradesh whose weavers are famous for creating the Gadwal saree

for the past 300 years. The Gadwal saree is distinguished by the painstaking interlocking technique (called kechchu) that connects the cotton border to the silk pallu. It is said that the king of Gadwal sent weavers to Benaras to understand the motifs and brocade and learnt how to weave sarees using gold and zari.

Sadly this legacy is now hanging by a thread. "About 10-15 years ago there were around 2,000 weaving families in Gadwal and today they have been reduced to about 200," says Yellappa.

The introduction of power looms has taken its toll on handloom

weavers in the region. While it takes about 15 days for the weavers to make a saree on the handloom, the power loom, which uses low-quality silk, takes only three days. This is then sold in the market as an original.

"The designs that we make using the handloom are very different from the powerloom ones. We can tell the difference just by looking at it but the customers can't, hence they end up buying the cheaper power loom one," he says. Weighing 800 gm, a handloom woven saree can last up to 15 years or more while the power loom saree weighs only 300 gm and has a life of 3-4 years only.

Kongari Yellappa works on contract and so do a majority of the other weavers in Gadwal. Most cannot afford the cost of raw materials and setting up the looms for making a saree. While the silk, which comes from Bangalore, costs Rs. 5,000 per



The rising cost of raw materials and competition from powerlooms is crippling the handloom industry | NAVMI K

kg and the cost of setting up a handloom is around Rs. 25,000.

Hence the contractor provides them with the raw material and the designs of the saree, their work is to get the silk dyed, weave the saree and present him with the finished

product. Yellappa gets Rs. 2,000 for every saree he makes - he sells them for Rs. 10,000 in the market.

Yellappa has discouraged his two son and daughter from learning the art of weaving because for him there is no future in this trade. "It takes 20

days to set up a handloom of 240 threads, 15 days of hard work to weave a saree and all I earn is just Rs. 4,000 per month for two sarees", he says. "I didn't want my children to face the same hardships and then earn an amount that is the bare minimum one can get", he adds.

There are no government schemes for their benefit. Every election, the politicians show up with empty promises. Though there is space in Gadwal to make a handloom factory (thus ensuring a minimum government price), the proposal is still pending.

Yellappa earlier had four power looms in his house and employed people to work on them but after they ran into losses, he had to sell three of them. Now there is only the one on which he works.

And he may well be the last one to work on it.

## Tobacco fields...up in smoke?

AKHIL VISHWANATH

HUNSUR/H D KOTE: Tobacco farmer's worries have multiplied with licensing issues and fears of a ban coupled with the fall in yield per hectare in Hunsur and HD Kote Taluks of Mysore district.

"Tobacco farming will stop after two years. I will stop growing tobacco and shut my barn," said Harish Gowda, who is one of the many non-licensee tobacco farmers in the area. He recently changed his crop from tobacco to ginger.

Many non-licensee tobacco farmers have shifted to other commercial crops after the tobacco board refused to grant new licenses.

The Board which was established in 1982 to regulate tobacco cultivation in the country last issued licences in 1990.

"Now, the Tobacco Board doesn't want to encourage tobacco farming in the area and at the same time, it can't deprive the licence holders," said Dr. S Ramakrishnan, Principal Scientist, Central Tobacco Research Institute (CTRI), Hunsur.

"One reason the Indian Government decided against issuing new licences was to discourage tobacco cultivation. It wants to restrict the area

under tobacco cultivation," he added.

India, a signatory to World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) charter, must reduce tobacco cultivation to 60 per cent of its current area by 2020.

Scientists at the CTRI explained that tobacco was used as a blanket-term in the document and since there were several kinds of tobacco, the failure to specify the kind raised a confusion.

"The tobacco that they are referring to is not cigarette tobacco, which is grown here. Since this is export oriented, we feel that they might not touch this tobacco. Instead, tobacco cultivated in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh which aren't export-oriented, might get banned. Once all these other kinds of tobacco have been banned, this tobacco might also be banned," said Dr. M. M. Swamy, Agronomist, CTRI.

There has been a consistent investment in building and maintenance of barns, even by those who didn't hold licences. Tobacco cultivators in the area claim that loans taken for such purposes can't be repaid if a ban or reduction is enforced.

"I support regulation. Let the government take over the land and give us a small share. If they



Farmers Ibrahim Khan(left) and Muhammad Pir(right) holding up dried tobacco leaves | ANANAYA B

ban tobacco, I can't repay my loan. I can't get another loan to cultivate a new crop," said Ibrahim Khan, another non-licensee tobacco farmer.

Dr. Ramakrishnan revealed that CTRI has been mandated to work on finding crops alternative to tobacco in the area.

"It is a contingency measure if at all anything happens to tobacco in terms of banning,

and moreover, it is a matter of government policy, they can simply ban it in one stroke," he said.

Earlier, a total of 1 lakh hectares of tobacco cultivation in the area yielded 100 million kg. Over the last five years, a drop in the total production has led to the tobacco crop area being taken over by other commercial crops - mostly ginger, according to scientists at

CTRI.

"If farmers feel ginger is profitable, they will grow ginger. What is needed for ginger cultivation? Irrigation. They dig bore wells to fulfil the need. Nearly 15,000 hectares of land have been newly converted to ginger cultivation," said Dr. M. M. Swamy.

Several farmers over the decade had leased their farm land to ginger cultivators from Kerala. A lease agreement for two to three years was signed and the cultivator would then dig a bore well and hire workers at his own expense. By the time the crop was raised and collected, the lease would expire, and the cultivator would move in search of a fresher, richer land to sow more ginger.

Although farmers would receive a princely sum as lease, cultivators would leave the land depleted of its strength by using chemical fertilizers in excessive quantities. Authorities also found that the ground water table had further sunk to lower levels.

The government has issued an order annulling such agreements after this year.

"I can sow ginger only after 2 to 4 years once the present crop has been harvested. Earlier, I would plant tobacco and then ginger, I don't have that option now," said Harish Gowda.

## We Grow, But They Reap

ANANAYA BANERJEE

AZAD NAGAR: Muhammad Pir, a 50-year-old farmer, has been growing Nicotiana tabacum since the 1980's. He owns 3 acres of land and grows tobacco and corn.

"There's a huge difference between the tobacco we grow and the one you consume," he states.

"In fact, we grow the best tobacco but we do not get adequate returns," he says, as he dumps a bale of steam-dried leaves on the table.

The best quality of tobacco is sold for up to Rs160-170 and the lowest grade fetches around Rs. 60-70 per kg.

"This is exported to the west. If you try some, you'll get a good head rush," he chuckles. He lifts the bale, dusts it down and points to the debris and says, "And this is what India smokes, absolute shit."

Muhammad talked about non-issuance of licences for growing tobacco and how it affects their income.

"Nowadays, it is rare to acquire a licence even if you have the essential prerequisite like tobacco steaming barn. Without a licence, we are at the mercy of those who have it."

Pointing to a house, he says "Can you see that barn? That family got their licence because of the barn they built themselves. Now they get loans for pipes, pump sets and finishing. People like us, we would need at least 3 lakhs."

The tobacco cultivators operate on the basis of a licence that was acquired by possessing a minimum of an acre of cultivable land, documents to authenticate ownership and a drying barn to enable the steaming process.

He sounds thoroughly dejected when he says, "We don't even have the money to earn money. We have to give our tobacco to people with barns for drying and selling on our behalf. They charge us anywhere between Rs20-30 per kilogram. What margin does that leave us with?"

"Banks are ready to give loans to those without a licence but even they demand a share of our profits as the interest on the loan," he says.

After almost three decades of being a part of the family business, Muhammad wants to retire.

"If I didn't have a family to feed, I would sell my land and go live in the mountains."

### BAN ON TOBACCO

Farmers are apprehensive about the proposed ban on sale of tobacco.

India is a signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) proposals which seeks to limit the production and sale of tobacco.

So far 180 countries have signed the treaty.

Several tobacco growing countries such as Indonesia, Malawi, USA, Argentina, Cuba, Mozambique have opposed the treaty by refusing to sign it.

Farmers in Azad Nagar have been growing tobacco for four decades. They are now worried that the control on tobacco cultivation may threaten their livelihood.

India is world's 2nd largest producer of tobacco after China.

But, the bulk of tobacco consumed in India is produced in the unorganised sector.

The measures if implemented will fall on beedi, zarda, khaini, chillam etc.

## Predatory lending burdens tobacco farmers?

'Banks gave loans without much collateral as they were assured of returns from tobacco.'

PAVNEET SINGH

HUNSUR: Tobacco farmers in the taluk are in debt because of liberal lending by banks and "conspicuous consumption" by the farmers, according to scientists at the Central Tobacco Research Institute (CTRI).

"Banks offered loans upto Rs. 3 lakhs without collateral because they were assured of returns in the long run from tobacco," said Dr. S Ramakrishnan, Principal Scientist, CTRI, Hunsur.

"Also the farmers indulge in

conspicuous consumption. They buy cars and spend on lavish marriages," he added.

However, farmers claim rising input costs are the reason for the high debt. As much as 5 kg of firewood is required for producing 1 kg of tobacco and Rs. 2 lakhs is required to build a furnace for curing tobacco.

"A farmer has Rs. 5 lakh to Rs.7 lakh debt. The situation becomes unbearable in rain deficient and drought years," said Rizwan, a licensed farmer.

The cultivation cost for an acre under tobacco is

Rs.40,000. In a typical year with sufficient rainfall, a farmer can expect to make a profit of at

"Farmers buy cars and spend on lavish marriages."

- Dr. Ramakrishnan, CTRI

"Rising input costs are the reason for high debt situation."

- Rizwan, farmer.

least Rs. 40,000 per acre. Small and marginal farmers here have about three acres. They cultivate tobacco from June to November and maize from December to

February.

Once the crop is harvested, the farmer takes it to the Tobacco Board godown.

The price per kg is fixed through a competitive bidding process. The nearest auction platforms are in Hunsur and HD Kote. Price varies depending on the quality of tobacco. There are six grades based on physical appearance. The price last year varied between Rs.70 and Rs.180 per kg - a good price, according to scientists at CTRI.

Tobacco Board decides the

quantities that can be sold to listed buyers. The cap for a farmer with three acres of land is 1645 kg, exceeding which a penalty is imposed. The licence is revoked if the farmer does not cultivate tobacco for 2-3 years.

"The supply chain is such that the farmers need not worry about selling the produce in the market. There are 20-25 registered buyers like Indian Tobacco Company (ITC), Golden Tobacco etc. who bid through an e-auction. In fact, much of the produce is exported," said Dr M.M. Swamy, Agronomist, CTRI.

## Suicide does not guarantee all farmers right to compensation

'Only after I told them that he hanged himself, did they stop calling'

DEEPAK SINGH

HUNSUR: Suresha, a farmer from the Jenu Kuruba tribe of Nagapura village in Hunsur taluk committed suicide by hanging himself in his house on September 10, 2016.

He is survived by his wife Mutthu and three children. Mutthu and Suresh were relocated from the nearby forest to Nagapura village in Hunsur Taluk along with other members of their tribe about 16 years ago. They were given three acres of land by the government which Suresha used for cultivation. "We were happy there and we were happy here, until Suresha killed himself," said Mutthu.

Suresha had two lakh rupee debt for the last four years. He had taken loans for agriculture, but because of drought his crops failed and he could not repay his loan.

Mutthu said that the private lenders who gave him the loan kept calling him everyday and even threatened him. She said he was really scared but she had no idea he would do this.

"Only after I told them that he had hanged himself, did they stop calling," said Mutthu.

The members of the tribe were unwilling to talk about Suresha's suicide. "They think it gives the tribe a bad name if you talk about him," she said.

Mutthu is unaware of compensation given to farmers who commit suicide for agricultural reasons. The villagers who are reluctant to talk about the suicide have been of little help. The Anganwadi teacher and many others in the village claimed that



Mutthu standing outside her house in Nagapura | DEEPAK S

there had been no suicide in the tribe, thus no help came Mutthu's way.

She is uneducated but aims to educate all her children. "I can't write my name, I don't know my age or age of my children, but I want all of them to study and not go through what I did."

In such circumstances, Mutthu is going to a village accountant to request for compensation seemed impossible. "I mostly stay in Coorg for work. I have put my children in the government school here and they stay in the hostel itself. It's easier for me this way. I come here once or twice a week to meet them," she said.

The issue of a farmer not qualifying for compensation is a matter of grave concern in a country where numerous farmer suicides have taken place. In one of his farmer suicide reports P Sainath while

the loan which should have been taken for farming on his land only," he added.

Ragaswamy (72) of the BR Colony in Hanagodu is a clear example of how a farmer gets caught in debt traps. Bad monsoon has severely affected his agricultural produce and income.

"I took a loan of Rs. 86,500 in June for farming and I cannot repay it," he said.

Ragaswamy will pay Rs 90,000 with Rs 3,500 as interest.

He said he would take further loans from private lenders to pay back his first loan taken from Primary Farmers Assistance Forum, that he and others in his village call 'society'.

"If I don't pay back on time, they will double the interest, so I will borrow from my friends who will charge a higher interest, but I will pay it back eventually," he said.

quoting a farmer wrote that there are at least 40 clauses on the inquiry list and that a farmer can't even die peacefully.

"Since January 4, 2016, 43 farmers in Mysuru have committed suicide. Eight of them were ineligible for compensation, 28 had qualified and remaining cases are under consideration," said D. Randeep, District Magistrate of Mysuru.

Suresha's was a clear case of suicide because of agrarian distress, but it has not been recognized as one.

"The family would not have qualified for compensation, but I will look into the matter," said Randeep. Land ownership is the primary criterion for receiving compensation. "It should be established that the farmer was unable to pay back

## Farming community hit hard by demonetisation

SURBHI GUPTA

AZAD NAGAR: More than half the village is dependent on agriculture. The farmers were already in a fix due to low rainfall and when demonetization hit them, incomes were lost and fields stood without workers.

"It was a tough time. I had no money for the first 15 days, the work on the fields had to be stopped. I wasn't able to pay the workers their wages," said Khayim Shareef, 28, who grows rice, maize, tomatoes and ragi. He generally dealt in cash, hence, transactions through cheque and account transfers were new to him.

Shareef couldn't buy pesticides so part of his crop got infected. He even sold two cows. "I threw away 2 tonnes of tomatoes in December as the rate was low. I lost around Rs 70,000," he said.

Thirty-year-old Tanveer Pasha narrated a similar story as the work on his fields also stopped as he was unable to pay the workers; he sold two cows too. "I lost Rs 2 lakhs from the failed tobacco produce as I couldn't hire labour, the leaves withered and fell."

Abdul Samad's main business is selling dry ginger which was severely hit. "My money has got stuck in the bank, so I have difficulty in procurement and sale. Only if I buy ginger, will I be able to dry it and sell it further?"

"No work has been done for 60 days, if I worked all this while, I would have earned Rs 60,000. Last year I had earned Rs 2 lakhs."

Samad's purchasing power was reduced by 90 per cent. He used to buy 4 tonnes of ginger in one day. In the past two months he could buy only 4 quintals in

cards to pay for different things, but we earn so little, have no money in our bank account, what use will they be to poor and illiterate people like us?"

### BUT ALL PRAISE POLICY CHANGE

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been successful in selling his agenda, of fighting the rich and recovering black money, to the rural masses. In spite of huge losses, the villagers were all praise for the policy change.

"This is a really good move. I am a poor but an honest man. I did suffer but for a short while. But the rich, who have black money, would be suffering the most," said Samman, sugarcane juice stall

owner in Hanagodu. Earlier, he sold nearly 150-200 glasses in a day. Now, he manages to sell around 50 glasses.

Khayim Shafeef said "I faced my problems, but I have no black money. It should be a difficult time for the rich people."

Asgar Pasha, a daily wage worker said, "Whatever Modi did was good. People had so much of black money that it would really affect them the most."

a day.

On the other hand, agricultural workers had their own woes.

Dependent on the daily wage, Syed Fasiullah said, "Anyway due to poor rain, the work was less, this added to our woes. There were days when I didn't earn any money and there was no food at home, we used to eat whatever the neighbour cooked and shared with us."

The 40-year-old earns Rs. 300-350 for a day by working on the nearby fields.

Debunking the Prime Minister's dream of a digital and cashless India, Fasiullah's wife, Bibi Hajira said, "They show us in the ads how to use those

Asgar Pasha who earns around Rs 300 a day by working on a tobacco field had to put his daughter's marriage on hold. "I have taken a loan from my employer. So, I had to give as collateral the jewellery my family had. Due to note bandi, I am not able to withdraw the money from my account easily. I need more cash in hand for all the arrangements, so I am asking the people around me. I am unable to pay back the loan too, and my daughter needs the jewellery."

Zikaullah Maqbool, 42, the waterman at Azad Nagar explained that daily wages have fallen from Rs. 500 to Rs. 300 after notebandi.

# A lifestyle overhaul for tribals

PAVNEET SINGH

HUNSUR: B.M Kala is from the primitive tribe of Beta Kurubas, who were displaced from Nagarhole forest area and given kutcha houses here.

In 1999, as part of the Forest Rights Act, these tribals were evicted from their traditional homes and resettled.

The Government had suspected their role in tiger poaching, smuggling and ivory trading in forests. As part of the package, the government gave 5 acres of land to each tribal.

This was the year B.M.Kala became a farmer. Now, he is a farmer from May to October; a coffee plantation worker from January to April and a casual labourer the rest of the year.

For a lot of them, farming is a new occupation. They were honey hunters also engaged in basket weaving and clearing weeds. Beta Kuruba means 'shepherd of the mountain'.

But, in the village, they had to adapt to farm cultivation and depend on the vagaries of the monsoons.

Agriculture department officials trained the tribals and provided free seeds.

Kala lives with his wife and three children in Nagapura Hadi-4. The first building of the village is the Anganwadi. The Gram Sabha office divides the village into two sides. Even the lives they lead have become perfectly symmetrical.

The main occupation for males in the village is farming



Tribal women and children in block 4 | ANANAYA B

He added, "The bank does not provide loans because there is no collateral, even though the tribals have *pattas*." The land comes under Forest Department and hence tribals cannot lease or sell it.

Moreover, they are not accustomed to the concept of saving or accumulating assets. "A lot of men have taken to drinking alcohol in the village since there is not much to do", he said.

Migration is another issue faced by the tribals. In the non-farming season, males travel to Coorg coffee plantations to work. He will soon move to Coorg and stay there till April to pluck coffee leaves. He will get Rs. 3 for one kg of plucked coffee leaves.

Women mainly look after household chores, but the stronger ones do get employment at Coorg on daily wage basis. For the rest of the year, Kala works as a casual labourer earning about Rs. 300 a day.

Even his food consumption patterns have changed due to resettlement. In the forest, the tribals ate different varieties of potato: Noore, Naare, Utregashu.

The ration which Kala gets from a fair price shop is three kg rice, one kg sugar, one kg salt and one litre oil. From the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, his family gets five kg dal, five kg jaggery, two litres cooking oil and some ragi.



A kaccha house in the resettled tribal village Nagapura Hadi - 2 | SURBHI G

## Home away from home

SONAKSHI AWASTHI AND RUPALI PANGTEY

Nagapura Hadi is a group of T-shaped villages where tribals were resettled. There are six such hamlets at intervals of 500 metres.

Block 2 has 45 houses with an approximate population of 250 people. Each family now lives in a one bedroom pucca house. This one room accommodates at least seven members of the house.

The light brown road leads to Nagapura Hadi Block 2 where dark brown huts have been built one beside the other like a train rake. Children play in the pathway between the two rows of houses. Scattered yellow and orange shrubs decorate the

sides of the pathway and huge trees on either side give shade to the brown habitation. Each kutcha house has a big open space where some residents tend to vegetable patches while others wash their utensils and put the clothes out to dry on a rope.

A group of roosters, small birds or baby parrots run through the open space in the houses. Goats and cattle are led for grazing.

There is also a kutcha extension, essentially made of mud and supported by a weak scaffold of bamboo sticks and tree branches. These extensions are mostly the bathrooms of these villagers.

Each house has a latrine

constructed by an NGO; however bathing space is conspicuously absent. Supported by a skeletal structure and curtained often by at least two dupattas or a bed sheet, it forms a canopy over a base meant for sitting while taking a shower.

Since the interiors converge towards the extension these bathing structures of most of the houses are more or less next to each other.

Inside the house of the village head K Mani in Block 2, a damp smell takes over our senses.

A television set on the right side and a cot on the left took over and a bathroom right in the centre. This house was different from the others.

## 'If there are no nurses, what do I do?'

AKHIL VISHWANATH

HUNSUR: Field workers such as the auxiliary nursing midwives (ANM) are limping from village to village in Hunsur Taluk, covering its 296 villages; there are only 47 ANMs against a sanctioned strength of 76.

"Policy makers must understand that vacancies result in decreased reach of the health department and the reduction in coverage affects health awareness activities and services indirectly. Plus, the community here needs continuous assessments.

ANMs and Asha workers bring field reports to the Taluk Health Officer's table. Fewer field workers means fewer assessment reports," said Rajeshwari H M, Block Health and Education Officer, Hunsur.

A new Measles and Rubella (MR) vaccine campaign is set to begin on Feb 7. A Junior Health Inspector is worried that there will be no supply at the PHC just as it happened when pregnant women who had queued up in front of a health camp at an Anganwadi were sent away since their tablets and injections were yet to arrive. Sometimes these pregnant women were also made to wait for hours as there was a shortage of staff to conduct blood tests and distribute nutritional supplies.

"At Nerlukuppe, there are two positions that are vacant at the PHC. At Doddahajjuru, there are two sub-centres that are empty. These areas are provided services through camps and deputations," said MB Juby, Junior Health Assistant, Hunsur Hobli PHC.

Sitamma, mother of a pregnant woman sitting in the check-up room at an anganwadi, revealed that when Meenakshi, a nurse who used to check her daughter, quit two months ago, a complaint was made at the local PHC since no

midwife or nurse was available. She then took her daughter to a former government doctor who had opened a private clinic in her area.

"If they say there are no nurses, what do I do? If they are not there when the time comes for my daughter to deliver, I have to take her to Mysore," she said.

"Government funds, allotments, and policies are always a problem," said BHEO Rajeshwari.

Under the National Rural Health Mission's Janani Suraksha Yojana, pregnant women with a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card were to receive Rs. 1000 in their 3rd to 6th month pregnancy, essentially, to procure locally available nutritious food.

"Pregnant women haven't received the money for the last three years," she said.

Under the State Prasuti Aarayke scheme, all tests at the government hospital are free for pregnant women and they also receive free ration. It is given to the pregnant woman but other members in the house consume it.

Under the Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS) and digitisation drive, field workers were given a free SIM. The data-entry system was modernised and hosted online. The field worker had to open the App, and enter the information. Earlier, entries were made in a ledger that was carried in the field kit.

Only a free SIM was given but not a smartphone. With meagre salaries, field workers couldn't afford a quality smartphone.

Soon, the data-entry system reverted to its earlier process of field workers coming back to the PHC to enter the data manually. "Technology was supposed to cut down the time between request and delivery but it has remained the same," said BHEO Rajeshwari.

## Govt. school takes pride in its cabinet ministers

SURBHI GUPTA

AZAD NAGAR: Twelve-year-old Syed Afnan does not have to grow old to contest for the post of Chief Minister. He holds the position in the cabinet at his school, Government Urdu Higher Primary School, Hanchya. The school has elected its own set of ministers to look into the daily affairs.

Afnan, the Chief Minister, is the monitor of the class in the absence of the teacher; he is the boldest of the students, and hence, deemed fit for the job. The school with more girls and fewer boys, has its academically brightest student, Afreen Taj, as its Education Minister.

Abdul Qadir, the Health Minister, knows his responsibilities well. He checks the nails of the students on a weekly basis and makes sure everyone comes in proper uniform.

The Food Minister makes sure everyone stands in a proper queue

for the midday meals and washes their plates properly. The cleanliness of the campus is under the Department of the Environment Ministry.

Momina Banu, the Culture Minister, takes care of the cultural activities of the school all year round and organises the moral science class where students are taught Hadiths from the Quran. Lastly, Sadiya Banu, the Finance Minister, has the least demanding job. She has to distribute stamps that the students receive on Teacher's Day and Children's Day.

"We choose responsible and bright students and give them different responsibilities. These titles empower them and they make sure other students are following rules and the school works in order," said Sajeela Bano, teacher.

It is part of the curriculum which teaches students about the administrative system, team spirit and situation handling.

## Coffee plantations: choice, not migration

SURBHI GUPTA

HANAGODU: In spite of receiving two to five acres of land in resettlement from the government, tribal people prefer to work in coffee plantations in Coorg.

They do not cultivate the land provided as they are unaware of the process of cultivation and they do not have the credit facilities to regularly invest in inputs like seeds, fertilisers and irrigation.

They prefer working at plantations where they receive payment in one instalment for three months. The owner provides them with shelter and food too. In the second system, owners arrange jeeps to pick and drop tribals from the villages; this works best for women as it is flexible. Many have leased out their lands and continue working in plantations.

"People from Kerala take the land on lease for roughly Rs. 30,000 for an acre.

They hire people from nearby villages to cultivate and come to check once in a fortnight or a month. Tribals will continue working on the plantations," said Suresh, a tribal from Neralakuppe.

This is not a case of migration but preference as they used worked in the plantations when they lived in the forests.

"The work in the plantations includes plucking the coffee seeds or tea leaves and does not involve skilled work. There will be a leader from the tribals itself who will negotiate the terms and the price," explained Dr. Ganesh Prasad, Faculty (Planning and Research), Abdul Nazir Sab State Institute of Rural Development, Mysuru.

Nowadays, labourers from Bihar and Assam are also being employed; available at much cheaper rates than tribals.

*Many have leased their lands for roughly Rs. 30,000 an acre.*

## Teacher pays anganwadi rent from salary

AVANTIKA CHOPRA

HUNSUR: An anganwadi, which should be funded by the government, is being run and financed by the teacher and the helper of the school.

Mavataru Jauregauda Yashoda, 50, has been teaching here since 2009. The area provided for the anganwadi is a rented accommodation with a room and a kitchen. A back area serves as a bathroom for the children as well as the staff. The rent for the accommodation is Rs. 1000 per month.

As per the scheme, the government should either construct an anganwadi or pay a rental of Rs. 750 for the accommodation. Yashoda along with the anganwadi helper, earning Rs 6000 and Rs 3000 respectively, have paid the security deposit of Rs.5000 and continue to pay the rent.

When asked if they were aware of the accommodation allowance provided by the government, Yashoda replied, "The government initially paid Rs. 200 but not anymore".

Several complaints were made to the Indian Child Development office (ICDS),

located one kilometre from the anganawadi, but they received no response.

According to the school records, there are a total of 60 kids but only six were visible on a Wednesday morning. The helper is responsible for bringing and dropping the children from their homes.

When asked about the low attendance, "Most of the children have gone back to their villages", replied Yashoda, the helper.

The space is hardly enough to accommodate ten people. There are holes in the wall, which are covered with torn and outdated charts and pictures. The roof is held together with wood, rope and tin. No proper sitting arrangement is available either for the teacher or the children. They sit on torn, overused mats on the uneven floor. The landlord provides no electricity and the staff uses hand-fans during summers. The toys are broken and hardly any books are available.

However, a monthly ration of milk powder, sugar and wheat are delivered to the anganwadi by the Child Development Project officer (CDPO).



M.J. Yashoda playing with the anganwadi children | AVANTIKA C

When the CDP assistant officer, Venkatappa, was asked about the accommodation and rent, he said, "Anganwadi space is provided by the government and if any accommodation is rented, then the government pays for it. The CDP officer

receives the funds and further transfers the money in the landlord's account."

When asked for the evidence of money transfers, the officer immediately said that the money was handed via cheque and the signatures of the

landlords were taken. No records of the same were shown.

The landlord, Vimla, when contacted, said that she receives rent via cash from the anganwadi teacher. She too had no receipts of the cheque.

# Gender discrimination over sterilisation

In 2016, only two men underwent vasectomy, whereas 1257 women underwent tubectomy, says Hunsur Taluk Health Officer

## More women opt for surgery But men run away

SONAKSHI AWASTHI

HUNSUR: Women of Azad Nagar, a Muslim cohabited village in Mysore, have been opting for irreversible sterilisation in record breaking numbers to put a halt on excessive child birth.

The majority of the women population are deprived of the information relating to oral contraception and condoms.

Unaware of male sterilization, vasectomy, women between the age of 22 and 25 undergo tubectomy. One out of fifty women knew about vasectomy and yet chose to go through the surgery in the absence of work.

Nagma Banu, 22, said that "My husband asked me to have the surgery and if he gets the operation done, it would affect his masculinity, strength and his ability to work."

The women of the village are often visited by a nurse from the Government Hospital, Muthumariyamma Kovil, Hunsur, who provides pregnant women with rationed food.

Where a private hospital charges Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 for a tubectomy surgery, the muslim women of Azad Nagar village visit the government

hospital for a free operation.

Shivananjay, Senior Health Inspector of the Government Hospital said that 150 women of Hunsur Taluk undergo laparoscopic tubectomy every month.

"The ideal time to have a laparoscopic tubectomy is three to four months after the delivery but women get it done soon after child birth," said Shivananjay.

According to the official data maintained by the hospital, 1257 women, falling under 28 to 35 age underwent laparoscopic tubectomy from April 2016 to December 2016 whereas only 2 men underwent vasectomy during the same period.

Dr. Devatha Lakshmi, Taluk Health Officer (T.H.O.), said, "Females come voluntarily for the surgery because they'd rather stay home while their husbands are able to work."

Awareness campaign programs are carried out twice a month in Taluk hospitals for men, women, married couples and pregnant women. Men and women are made aware of sterilisation and contraceptives in laparoscopy tubectomy camps.

According to the 2016 official data, on an average, 800

women bought oral pills in a month, 400 women inserted Copper-T Intrauterine device (IUD) in the uterus and the government is said to be working towards the Postpartum Intrauterine Contraceptive Device (PPIUCD).

People attending such campaigns are also paid 'motivation fees' of Rs. 150 and Rs. 200 to women and men.

"Thirty surgeries take place in a day and so we have two doctors for tubectomy surgeries and one on-call doctor for vasectomy surgeries," said Dr. Lakshmi.

Out of the innumerable people attending the awareness campaigns, an average of six muslim women from the Taluk attend such programs per month, i.e. three women attend one campaign held per month. The hospital was not able to provide with the data relating to the attendance of muslim women belonging to Azad Nagar in these campaigns.

The women remain uninformed of basal options of contraception that come to mind and opt for a permanent tubectomy due to lack of knowledge and awareness.

The numbers have only

increased in the past five to seven years according to Dr. Lakshmi. "Usually men don't get it done. They fear they'd be the odd one out and women are left with no option," she said.

Prior to 2016, the number of women who underwent irreversible tubectomy was far less than the present number.

Women of the previous generation falling under the 55-65 age bracket, never went through an operation.

Oblivious to other forms of contraception, the current generation chooses to undergo irreversible sterilisation at a young age.

Laparoscopic tubal ligation or tubectomy is a surgical procedure done on women as a permanent method of contraception excising the fallopian tube and vasectomy is the surgical cutting and sealing of part of the ducts carrying semen as a means of sterilisation.

Severing their religious constraints, the women willfully undergo the operation to free themselves of menstrual bleeding and pain at a very young age.

AKHIL VISHWANATH

HUNSUR: On a recent Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND), a sterilisation camp was organised in Hunsur Taluk mostly by female staff and only women were approached to attend the meet because men were either at work or had locked themselves in refusing to attend the meeting.

Earlier, when general health camps were held in villages, men were invited too. But, women were always in greater attendance than men.

Men and women hardly came to health camps together and even if they did, their awkwardness with a subject like sterilisation would make them flinch and quit the camp.

Since, participation of men was negligible, specific campaigns were directed at couples, women, pregnant women, and also for men, especially to explain the No Scalpel Vasectomy (NSV) procedure.

"When specific camps for men were organised, we went from door to door and invited men to assemble for the awareness talk. But, once the news of our arrival reached a man, he would instruct his wife to say, 'He is not at home,'" said MB Juby, Junior Health Assistant, Hangudu Primary Health Centre (PHC).

A man who had undergone vasectomy was also taken in front of men during a camp. Men attend such camps, say yes, express their fears, sign up for further tests and then, fail to turn up.

"The work men do in the area is strenuous, with long hours of standing, squatting, and

lifting. Many work as coolies or coffee plantation labourers in Coorg, especially tribals. Even though men are told that it doesn't affect their physiological functions, they refuse to undergo the procedure. They fear loss of wages," said Taluk Health Officer Dr. Devatha Lakshmi.

For those below poverty line, the incentive to undergo the operation is Rs. 1100 for women and Rs. 1250 for men.

And, for those above the poverty line, it is Rs. 650 for both men and women. But, along with economic concerns, societal pressures restrain men from stepping into a sterilisation clinic.

A man, who braved the initial tests, asked, "If this procedure leads my wife into an extra-marital affair, if she gets pregnant out of wed-lock, how do I show my face in public?"

He then refused to undergo the procedure.

Dr. Lakshmi argued that sterilisation beats temporary measures such as condoms and contraception, which are not 100 per cent effective.

"Women forget to take contraceptives. Non-availability of condoms or unwillingness to use a condom or to procure it leads to unprotected sex."

"More failures happen due to temporary measures than permanent methods," she said.

Answering the question whether sterilisation was the only method to help family planning or condoms and contraceptives can also be used, Senior Health Inspector Shivananjay said that although condoms are supplied for free, the decision to use it is between husband and wife, and 'often, they decide not to use it.'

"We can't rely on people's self-control. Can we?" he added.



## Rolling beedis to straighten daily lives

RUPALI PANGTEY

AZAD NAGAR: It is one of the many hubs of tobacco in Karnataka where women work either in preparing tobacco leaves or as beedi rollers. For these women their financial security seems to be more important than their health.

Those like Shaheen, 55, who lives across the road and have been rolling beedis since the past 10 to 12 years, seem indifferent to the consequences of beedi rolling. For her financial stability is most important, even if it means injecting herself with pain relief medicines at the Hunsur Taluk Hospital.

"Tobacco and beedi leaves are given to us. These people come from Mysore and send us 5 kg of these leaves at one time," she said while her fingers were busy rolling the leaves. Leaves are sent to these casual labourers in batches of at least ten leaves. After the beedi is rolled, one end is tied with a string. The beedis are then collected and filled with tobacco making sure that none goes to waste.

For Shaheen it is their everyday work, she rolls the beedis while her daughter-in-law cuts the beedi leaves to shape.

"After making 5,000 beedis, we are given Rs. 500 for eight days of work. In a day we usually make 500 to 600

beedis," said Neha, 33, who has been working with Shaheen, her mother-in-law. Their husbands, father and son, work in a restaurant and as a coolie respectively.

Neha, not possessing her mother in law's patience and calm, cribs, "We spend at least 12 hours working on this, my back and my shoulder hurt. I am not happy with the money we receive by the end. Because we have to do it, so we do it." Beedi rollers like these receive their pay after two to three months often.

Meanwhile the mother-in-law interjects, "The doctor has told me to work less since not only my back hurts but my eyes do too; he has given medicines for relief." On asking why she does not leave the job? She chooses to remain silent and continues filling tobacco in the empty beedi rolls.

In another case Fowziya, 33, has been working since the past eight years in order to sustain her family of three girls. Her husband left her when she was 25. Beedi rolling has given her the means to earn more for her family alongside farming.

"In the morning I have to work on the field, after that in the afternoon till evening I spend my time rolling beedis," she said.

With problems like shoulder and back pain along with smarting eyes, those like

Fowziya choose not to visit the hospital at Hunsur district; instead she applies pain relief gel like zandu balm.

Fowziya says, "I don't have enough money to spend on travelling to Hunsur everytime to get a regular checkup done, even if it's free. Whatever will happen, will happen, it is for the Almighty to decide."

With no primary health centre in the village, and the Hunsur Taluk Hospital as the next stop for all health problems, even the common ones, those like Fowziya do not tread beyond the village.

With no farming lands of their own, it has become necessary for, both Shaheen and Fowziya, to work day in and day out to produce as much beedis as possible despite the toll it takes on their health.

Often beedi workers who are diagnosed with health issues are sent to the Beedi workers hospital in Mysore meant to take care of their needs.

According to Dr. Lokesh Kumar, Dermatologist, Hunsur Govt. Hospital, he sees nearly 4 cases every month related to eczema.

"During the selection of tobacco leaves, people mostly get allergic to tobacco and develop eczema. Moreover, their personal habits such as washing hands with detergent soaps can aggravate this problem."



Women separating tobacco leaves in a farm at Azad Nagar | RUPALI P

## It's a Bloody Myth

RUPALI PANGTEY AND SONAKSHI AWASTHI

HUNSUR: "Don't stick out your belly too much for them to touch," the mother-in-law called out to the daughter-in-law.

This popular myth relating to pregnancy is blindly followed in Liberia, West Africa, where the mother to be has to guard her pregnancy from evil spirits. Only the family members, the pure souls, can touch the belly until the baby is born.

In Azad Nagar village in Hunsur taluk, Mysore, it is a prevailing myth that when women used a cloth instead of a sanitary napkin, the blood filled cloth should not be disposed off carelessly. The belief is that the woman would not bear a child if a snake happens to pass over the cloth.

Primarily due to this reason, the present generation of the Muslim village started using sanitary napkins and disposed them off in dustbins.

Earlier women disposed of the cloth ideally by burning it. But before the burning, women would dump their cloth in one place and then burn the load the next day.

The most common and prevalent superstitions in India are those relating to menstrual bleeding and pregnancy.

An Anganwadi worker, Rati Kumari, a resident government employee is responsible for the

health of not only pregnant women and their newborns; her task also includes informing adolescent girls about menstrual cycle during its onset.

According to the Shuchi menstrual program, they are supposed to ideally provide 13 packets containing 10 sanitary napkins every year free of cost. However, on field, Rati says, "There is Shuchi sanitary napkins; girls till eighteen years of age are given six sanitary napkins from the Anganwadi every month."

The onset of menstrual cycle in an adolescent girl in the Jenu Kuruba - converted Hindus - which forms the population of this village, is celebrated in keeping with the customs of the tribe. According to Rati, the house which is a one room and kitchen abode is cleaned and painted, followed by separate bedding for the girl in the same room. Houses in this village have a single room which is shared by at least seven members. For the next 15 days none of the villagers eat or drink from this house as they feel it is 'not pure'. At the culmination of 15 days, a priest conducts a ceremony where the girl is given gifts and the villagers eat in her house. At a time when urban spaces are talking about breaking taboos regarding menstruation, for the deprived spaces menstrual awareness is still a path breaking issue.

## A Silent fighter:

SURBHI GUPTA

She cannot hear or talk to you, but that will not deter 11-year-old Noor Aisha from interacting with you and making you her friend. She will introduce her mother, pull you toward her house and take you on the village tour.

"When she was born, she was extremely pretty, that's why I named her Noor Aisha. But two days after her birth, she was diagnosed with jaundice," said Sabreen Bano, her mother.

After consultation with doctors at Hunsur, she was admitted at Basappa Memorial Hospital in Mysore. After around a fortnight, her condition did not improve. "The doctors fed her with glucose water and they shouldn't have done so. Her head was inflamed and filled with water," said her mother.

Studies indicate that feeding glucose water to infants can have adverse effects. It can lead

to swelling in the body and cause change in infant's behaviour. In fact, it can increase the risk of jaundice.

Even before she completed a month, Aisha had been a patient at three hospitals in her state. After the



## Paves her path against all odds

medical goof up at Mysore, she was rushed to National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences in Bangalore which further referred her to the Indira Gandhi Institute Of Child Health Hospital in the capital itself.

"We stayed there for 2 months, whichever doctor saw her, said that they cannot guarantee any success, and I should take her back to the village, but added that she was improving," said Sabreen.

"She couldn't even sit, she used to only lie down, only when she was around 3-years-old that she could walk with support," she recalled.

Today, she can wear clothes, get ready and go to the school by her self. But Aisha's

hearing ability stands at only 35 per cent compared to others.

Her disability and fate doesn't stop her from competing with the other students and studying. When she joined school, she couldn't walk properly, she couldn't understand instructions, was not able to recognize and her cognitive skills were weak. She couldn't even hold a pencil properly.

"Over time, she has improved manifold, she can write some words now, is able to recite poems and tables with others, her memory skills have improved, understands instructions too. She has a strong urge to learn," said Sajeela Banu, her teacher at Government Urdu Higher Primary School, Hanchya.

Aisha's father, Safiullah suffered from brain haemorrhage 10 years ago, hence, has been unemployed since then. He used to work in tobacco fields and owned a grocery shop.

Today, Sabreen manages to run her household single handedly through the shop. Aisha has an elder brother and sister who don't live with her.

"I cannot afford to raise them with the income I earn, so my mother is raising them," said Sabreen.

On Aisha's future, she said, "I hope the best for her, she will do well in life and live a happily married life, Insha Allah," with a morose but smiling face.

*"She can write some words now, is able to recite poems and tables."*  
-Sajeela Banu





Midday meals in progress at the Government Higher Primary Girl's School | ANANAYA B

## Happy Meals & Full Attendance

ANANAYA BANERJEE

HUNSUR: "This school was actually established by the British Government in 1858," says Roopa Bhat, Principal of Government Higher Primary Girls' School. She has been teaching for the past 20 years of her life and joined this school in 2010.

Situated in a corner of the city, away from the bustle of the main Chowk that always remains crowded because of the Government Hospital and the Hunsur Police Station, the school looks like a tiny church from afar. It opens into a courtyard surrounded by classrooms full of children with bright faces.

"We have over a hundred students studying here as of now; around seventy girls and almost fifty boys. We turned it into a co-ed setup a few years back when the midday meals scheme was started," states Aravindha. He teaches mathematics and science to all the classes, from Grade I to VII.

Roopa Bhat adds, "Students come here to study from all the nearby districts like Azad Nagar, Beejanahalli, Rameenahalli apart from Hunsur Taluk. A lot of children are coming in regularly since

the introduction of the Akshara Dasoha. Their parents make sure they don't miss school."

Leading the way up to the kitchen storage where the government provisions are stacked, Aravindha says "It is quite a successful midday meal scheme by the state government. They provide us with rice, dal, oil, salt, pulses and some funds every month for the students. There's also a provision for milk three days per week."

Jute bags lay across the room, piled neatly one upon the other. Three saree clad cooks are firing up huge pots set atop wooden stoves. "It is already 12 noon and the meal is to be served to the students in an hour," one of them tells Aravindha.

The lunch takes place in the most orderly fashion. Children line up around the courtyard, ready to eat. They are dressed neatly and are on their best behaviour as they sense an unknown face in their midst. Food is served at a single command from their Principal, and they begin to chant a hymn.

"We have taught them to pray before every meal, no matter what their religion is," she says, dotting on her children like a proud mother.

Aravindha says, "We could do

much better only if we had more teachers. There are just four of us, the student-teacher ratio is way too low for us to be able to achieve real change."

Meanwhile, the school has applied for substitute teachers.

The principal says, "We also have a student called Saundarya who is a special needs child. She has had a few growth defects since birth but that hasn't stopped her from pursuing education. Her parents are economically backward but are very supportive of her efforts."

In walks 10-year-old Saundarya, supported by two of her classmates, into the Principal's office. She greets her teachers with a shy smile and leans slightly onto her friends for support.

"In fact, Saundarya's education is being sponsored by Vijaya Bank. They have agreed to pay her fees till she graduates," reveals Aravindha, proudly.

Roopa Bhat says, "They helped another child from our school similarly when they paid for the medical expenses of a disabled girl, Ramya. She was operated on her legs around five years ago. She's studying in Chikkamagaluru now. We still get updates about her medical condition."

## They live with fear in their hearts

ANANAYA BANERJEE

AZAD NAGAR: "We want someone to come and talk to us about our problems," said 30-year-old Rizwan, a tobacco cultivator from Govindanahalli Nala in Hunsur Taluk.

He said that an atmosphere of fear has set in after BJP came to power at the Centre. "As BJP started to take over, we started feeling very unsafe. They would want us to seek permissions to celebrate Eid," said Rizwan.

"We live in a secular country but with fear in our hearts. We are not allowed to celebrate our festivals," he added.

Kothur G Manjunath, the former MLA from the Congress Party, was known for assisting farmers in the constituency and contributing to development of roads, education and water facilities in the village.

For the first time, people in Azad Nagar were denied permission to carry out a procession to commemorate Tipu Sultan's birth anniversary in November 2016.

"We remember him as a freedom fighter who fought against foreign invaders," says Rizwan adding, "Why should we be penalised for celebrating a historical figure?"

Waseem, a farmer, accused Pratap Simha, the BJP MP for creating a divide in the community.

Ahead of the celebrations, several BJP activists along with Pratap Simha had gathered in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office to protest the celebration of Tipu Jayanti.

The mosque flag was allegedly burnt by some goons from Mangalore, which incited the villagers and caused rioting in the area.

"We have lived in harmony with the Hindus here for decades, but these incidents are exploited by politicians to serve their interests," said Rizwan.

## Fighting to survive

AVANTIKA CHOPRA

AZAD NAGAR: "Just Fowziya, I don't have a surname," she said with a wry smile on her face.

Dressed in a pink and green tattered salwar kameez, she points at the broken verandah door. "I don't have the money to fix it. Anyone can enter this place by shoving that door in."

Fowziya is a single mother of four living in a single rented room with a verandah for Rs. 400 in Azad Nagar, Hunsur. It lacks basic amenities and has cracked walls. The only thing granting her privacy is the 'dupatta' on the single window in the house. An opening in the roof, plastered with a transparent plastic sheet, is her only source of light. She doesn't have the money to pay the bill.

Married at the age of 14, Fowziya is one of the many victims of child marriage in Azad Nagar. Even though people there are aware of the minimum marriageable age, they continue getting their daughters married off early, citing poverty and fear of straying as some of the evident reasons.

Fowziya moved to Mysore with her husband, Taj Mohiddin, where he worked as an auto driver. At 16 she had her first girl child and had two more girls until she had a boy. Soon after that, she got herself sterilized.

Eight years after her marriage, her husband left her and married another woman. It was only then that she shifted to her present location. Initially she worked as a casual labourer, but couldn't continue as she has four children to look after.

Knowing that she lives alone, men around the area expect her to be available. There have been incidents when drunken men have barged in and tried to misbehave with her.

"They tell me that they will

pay me for a night but I am a married woman. I will work hard but not earn like this", she says.

Fowziya has been working as a beedi maker since the past six years. She

earns Rs. 100 for every 1000 beedis she rolls. She receives her payment by the end of the month and the only way she feeds her children is via government-supplied ration.

Since she is uneducated, Fowziya gives immense importance to her children's education and made sure they all go to school. The eldest daughter Mahaq is studying in a convent school as her grandmother lied to get her admission. "We have told the school that she is an orphan," she said.

Fowziya doesn't want to remarry because she fears for her children. "Who will marry my daughters if they see that both the parents have remarried?" Moreover she blames the 'Other woman' for her husband's betrayal. "She has used black magic to distract him. I have given him a son, why would he leave me?" she asks with tears in her eyes.

With no means of regular income, Fowziya tries her level best to make ends meet. She sits for hours to roll beedis, reuses as much as she can and wastes as little. She works for a better life for her children and herself.



Fowziya braving a smile | RUPALI P

## TABOO FOR MUSLIM WOMEN

# 'They can't go out for work'

AVANTIKA CHOPRA

HUNSUR: Muslim women living in Azad Nagar village, even after receiving primary school education, tend to stay at home or get married. Though the enrollment of women in schools is high the working culture is yet to surface in Hunsur, Mysore.

Located 45 Km from Mysore City, Govindanahalli, popularly known as Azad Nagar, is a small village consisting of both Hindu and Muslim population. The village has 300-400 kutcha and puca houses. A road divides the village in two. Though the children attend a common

anganwadi, primary schools are separate for both communities.

The residents of Azad Nagar understand the importance of education but hesitate to send their girls out to work. According to them, women need to do household chores and look after their children whereas it is the men who go out and work.

Nasreen Taj, a resident of Azad Nagar, has educated both her son and daughter. Her son works as an electrician but her daughter, who has studied till Class X, is not allowed to go out and work. She helps her mother in household chores and is soon to be married. Nasreen's daughter-in-law, who is a

graduate, also stays at home. "If she works, she won't be able to look after her children", adds Nasreen.

Gulnaaz Bano, another resident, works as a beedi maker. Her husband, Abdul Saleem, used to work as a casual labourer but due to health issues he is usually at home. Both her daughter and daughter-in-law are educated but are not allowed to work outside. The financial situation in the house is bleak but Gulnaaz is adamant on keeping her girls at home. "I will go and work outside if I get work but not my girls", she says.

As per the 2011 Census data,

out of the literate rural population of Hunsur, 72 per cent are men and 55 per cent women. Literate men number 75,383 and literate women 56,718. The employment data shows that only 269 women are employed as compared to 1037 men in various small-scale factories.

According to sources, factories hesitate to employ women workers, as they tend to take frequent leave and most of them quit due to family pressure.

The common work done by women in Azad Nagar is beedi-rolling and miscellaneous farm jobs.



Rajavalli boys practicing a game of volleyball in their makeshift court | AKHIL V

## Playing ball for a way out

PAVNEET SINGH

HANAGODU: For the first time in a decade, 'Rajavalli Boys' were not able to compete in the annual volleyball tournament held in Bilikerekaival on Makar Sankranti.

Bilikerekaival is a village in Hunsur Taluk where farming the jola, ragi, ginger and maize is the livelihood of the farmers. But, the major draw here is the volleyball tournament conducted in January and on the eve of Ugaadi (New Year) in April.

The tournament has run into organizational problems. A recent fight split the Panchayat into two factions. The power struggle means the arrangements could not be made in time. In fact, the players were practising in a makeshift volleyball court.

Volleyball is taken seriously here. A youth from the village, Putta Raju, had joined the Army and learnt to play volleyball. He later taught the village boys to

play and convinced the elders to conduct tournaments in the community.

The village youth are hopeful that the sport will be their way out of poverty once the current fight is resolved.

In the opening ceremony last year, the Panchayat leader had offered scholarships for the youth team. The 'Rajavalli Boys' won the tournament but did not receive any scholarship.

"We were hopeful of getting a scholarship but the panchayat leaders cited lack of funds as the reason," said Rajesh, who has played with the team for three years.

"We want the fight to be resolved soon and we get a chance to defend our trophy," he added.

Ashok, a senior team member said, "We want to participate at the taluk and district level in the future. If some students are able to get scholarships to study in colleges in Hunsur and Hanagoddu, it will help them get a government job."

The girls' throwball team from the village won the taluk level competition and went on to represent the district team in 2014.

Employment opportunities for the youth in the village are limited.

They have to migrate to Bangalore and Mysore to work in factories or coffee plantations in Coorg.

Some help their families in farm cultivation. Others do coolie work in towns. Hardly anyone completes education till the high secondary level.

Recently, Krishna, 45, a bus-driver and captain of the senior team 'Raitila Mitra' committed suicide at the railway tracks. His teammates pooled in money and conducted a tournament in his memory.

"He had a bad marriage and was struggling to cope. We wanted to honour his memory through the game", said Pavan, his teammate and friend.

"We can't wait to get back on court", he added.

## What's in a name?

PAVNEET SINGH

HUNSUR: 'Azad Nagar' is one of the few Hindi speaking villages in Hunsur Taluk. It has about 400 families, a Muslim majority, cultivating mainly tobacco and corn.

The administrative name of the village has caused some confusion in the Taluk.

It comes under Govindanahalli Gram Panchayat and is officially called 'Govindanahalli Nala.' But no one refers to it by the official name. Locally it is referred to as 'Azad Nagar'. The bus driver knows the village by 'Azad Nagar'.

A panchayat member said, "If you see the official documents or the website, you will not find the name 'Azad Nagar' anywhere. What happened was some people started writing their address in ration cards and Aadhar cards as 'Azad Nagar', which has given it local legitimacy. The official name is Govindanahalli Nala."

The confusion in the names of the village is a small matter for the farmers but it creates problems when it comes to the issue of mail.

The postal records have no mention of the name 'Azad Nagar'. "A lot of letters marked by the name reach Azad Nagar in Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh", the panchayat member added.

The local tea-seller, Rashid, said "It was called 'Azad Nagar' even before Partition when Mysore was a princely state. The Government has re-drawn maps and created new constituencies. However, the old name has stuck."

## 'Not a drop of water in the borewell'

SONAKSHI AWASTHI AND SURBHI GUPTA

for the children and school purposes.

Another reason for the acute

HUNSUR: Absence of borewells and zero rainfall has led to a drought like situation in Azad Nagar village. Once in six days, the people of the village receive water from water tanks and drums transported from Hunsur, 3 km away.

"We send our children to school without a bath because we get water for an hour and have to save for cooking and washing," said Ruksana Banu, mother of two.

The source of water for the village was a borewell situated a kilometer away which has dried up.

Zikaullah Maqbool 'the waterman', head of water management of the Village Panchayat, said, "Digging up to 300-400 ft, there is not a drop of water in the borewell."

Situated in the centre of the Urdu School, there is a borewell. But Zia claimed that the borewell water was not distributed to the residents of the village since the director of the school has restricted its use

water since past few weeks. There are two taps in the village and only a few manage to secure



Taps, pipes and pots stand dry in Bijapur Colony | DEEPAK S

water shortage is the zero percentage rainfall that the village has received this season.

"The Krishna Raja Sagar dam has no water and there is no rain because of which the situation is even worse," said Zika.

In the interiors of Hanagoddu, villagers in Bijapur Colony have been surviving with almost no

two pots of drinking water during day break.

For others, the lone option left for them is to walk long distances to fetch water. The villagers showed storage containers that stand dry outside houses.

Due to scarcity of water and bad transportation facilities, villagers bathe and wash clothes

once in 5 days. Recently a 87-year-old woman died and the villagers said that they did not have water to even wash the body before cremating it.

"This year there has been hardly any rainfall, so there is no water. There are days when we have to get up at 3 am and fetch water from a pond which is an hour's walk from here. The whole process takes us around 4 hours," said Chandabai Kadapa. Many women make 4 to 5 visits to the pond during the day.

"The people, especially children are falling ill after drinking the water we get from pond. They often complain of an upset stomach," said Shivaji Shinde.

The taluk is facing water shortage as the groundwater has not been adequately recharged due to low rainfall. But the owner of the nearby banana plantation lets the villagers use water in spite of facing the same problem.

"What kind of a life is this? We don't have water, we hardly get any ration, we can't afford to feed our cattle," complained Krishnabai.

## A village hauled over the coals

TANNU JAIN AND SHREYAS UBGADE

BARANJ: Gokuldas Nihare (54) looks listless as he sits in his drawing room staring into space. For the last two years Nihare, once a land owning farmer, has been on the dole.

Nihare sold 12-acres of his land to Karnataka Emta Coal Mines Ltd (KECML). The company, a joint venture of the Karnataka-based public sector firm KPCL and private entity EMTA, acquired 1,200 hectare near Baranj village in Chandrapur district. Besides Baranj, KECML had been allotted three more blocks in Bhadravati.

However, more than the loss of land and livelihood it is the death of his younger son Nilesh (24) that has shattered Nihare. Nilesh was employed in KECML.

The sudden closure of the mine two years ago left him jobless. Frustrated, he committed suicide. In the wake of the Coalgate scam, the Supreme Court cancelled the four coal blocks allocated to KECML. The order led to the dissolution of KECML.

Despite the reallocation of the



The closed KPCL-EMTA coal mine near Baranj | TANNU J

blocks in 2015, the partners engaged in a legal battle over ownership, but failed to start the mines.

Maya Makhulkar, Sarpanch of Baranj blamed the local MP and Union Minister Hansraj Ahir for the inadequate compensation that the villagers got.

"Ahir had assured the villagers that KECML would compensate the farmers with Rs. 8 lakh per acre," says Makhulkar. However, she adds that only Rs. 4.05 lakh, was paid in two installments. According to Makhulkar, along with the agricultural land, KECML took over

the homes of some villagers to dig for the coal beneath. This led to Baranj being categorised as a 'Resettlement Village'. "As we are a 'resettlement gram panchayat', the Centre has blocked funds," she claims.

Other villagers even question the legality of the land acquisition and the amount paid as compensation.

"I have no documents for the sale of the land and haven't received the full compensation yet," says Vijay Randive (40), who sold 20 acres. He claims that the compensation for non-irrigated land was Rs. 8 to Rs. 10 lakh and for irrigated, Rs. 12 lakh as

per government orders. He added that the villagers were entitled to a job for every 2.5 acres sold. However, flouting the norms, the company only gave a job on the sale of 6 acres.

Further Randive claims that half of the land was acquired through KECML brokers who coaxed the villagers to sell their lands.

"The patwari, tehsildar, minister and collector connived with the brokers and sold off rest of the land through the land acquisition department keeping the villagers in dark," alleges Randive.

With the land being acquired, even the landless laborers employed in the mine are now in a quandary.

The mining has affected the health of the villagers and also disturbed the ecological balance of the area. Due to depleting ground water levels, the agricultural lands are parched.

Although the Sarpanch held Ahir responsible for the sorry state of affairs, the local MP had urged the Union Power Minister Piyush Goyal to direct Western Coalfields Ltd. (WCL) to take over the blocks from KPCL. The reason was that WCL has "a better compensation" package.



Mala Bandu Balpane standing on the land where her house once stood. She refused the compensation amount | CHANDAN M

## Dismantled dreams

CHANDAN K. MANDAL

BARANJ: Mala Bandu Balpane (35) with her three children and husband lived happily in her cemented four-room house in Baranj village in Chandrapur. Life was beautiful and she hoped to prosper in coming days.

However, her hope collapsed with her house that was flattened by Karnataka Emta Coal Mine Ltd (KECML), which operated coal mines next to her village.

Recalling how she had lost the house, she said, "Sahib visited us and promised job to my family. They said if I didn't clear the land, my family wouldn't get job."

According to her, KECML officials promised her compensation once she moved away but the cheque never came. About eight years ago KECML, a joint venture of Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL) and Bengal Emta Coal Mines Limited, took up the operation of six coal mines in Baranj from villagers of Baranj. The company paid at least Rs. 4 lakh per acre as compensation.

However, private dealings were also made by agents who asked the villagers to leave their houses.

Mala said she got Rs. 12 lakh for her three acres of agricultural field but nothing for her dismantled house.

"My next door neighbour got Rs. 20 lakh for a small house whereas they offered me a meager Rs. 5 lakh so I refused the compensation," added Mala. Hers isn't an isolated case. According to Ajay Lihitkar, a local leader, about 150 houses were dismantled out of which 20-25 haven't received compensation. The

remaining houses also have cracks in them because of the frequent blasting at the mines.

Subhadra Bai Ramchandra Deharkar (65), whose five-room house was also knocked down by KECML, takes visitors to show the land where her house stood a few years back, hoping she would be given the compensation. The villagers have been allocated plots in Ghorpad 14 km away from Baranj Mokasa.

Ankush Parchuke (28), once a welding helper at KECML said, "They want us to leave this place but we don't like Ghorpad. There is scarcity of water and soil is also not good."

Ankush was among the very few villagers who got a job at KECML.

"I worked for two and a half years there. As per the rule, six months is the training period but my training period never got over and I was paid Rs 2,500 only," said Ankush, who was arrested during a protest launched by workers.

Diwakar Ganpat Parchake said he got a job as a security guard in KECML mines only after paying Rs. 10,000 to the middlemen. He has not been paid for last five months.

"They promised us facilities on par with that offered by Western Coalfields Limited (WCL). You will get minimum Rs 8 lakh per acre land. Your children will have jobs. Now, we have no jobs and no land. They employed people from UP and Bihar and not the villagers," said Diwakar.

Explaining the haplessness of villagers Diwakar said, "If our farm lands were still with us, we could still grow crops and feed our family."

"We have no options. If we stay, what will we eat? What will we do here? Finally, we all will have to go."

## Throwing away their books in coal mines

NIDHI CHUGH

TELWASA: Some children from Telwasa and Baranj were told to drop out from school by their parents when their fathers lost their jobs as coal miners at the Western Coalfields Limited (WCL).

Jijabai Dattu Jhunjhare, a resident of Telwasa village, said, "My son lost his job and now he works as a labourer in a farm."

Sapna Sachin Jhunjhare, Jijabai's daughter-in-law, said, "We didn't encourage our son to study after he failed class Xth because we needed to feed ourselves. He works in the same shop as his cousin."

In Baranj the Zilla Parishad School now only has 47 children - 19 girls and 28 boys in Class I to VII.

Jyoti Nilkinth Nakade, the Headmistress, said, "Around 45 students, boys and girls, dropped out after class five, because they could not afford to pay the minimum fees we asked for after the kids had reached class five."

When asked why their parents could not afford the fees, Mrs Jyoti Nakade said, "Their parents worked as coal miners and now they work as farm labourers."

"The parents of these children put them to work from a very young age and do not have the money to educate them."

The girls work as domestic helpers and help their parents in farm labour.

The boys work in shops in their villages or try finding a job in bigger villages.

The children contribute to the family income and share the responsibility of filling the family's stomach.

## Living in fear of explosions

TANNU JAIN AND SHREYAS UBGADE

TELWASA: Just 10-km away from Baranj, the people of Telwasa were handed a different set of problems due to mining by WCL, a subsidiary of Government-run Coal India Limited (CIL).

Villagers of Telwasa live in constant fear of the blasts in the mine, which is within 300 metres from the village. As per the norms, blast sites cannot be within 500 metres of any residential area, claim the villagers.

"Blasts are carried out three to four times a day. Sometimes, even at midnight," says a landless labourer Mahendra Kumre (32), pointing to the serpentine cracks in the walls of his mud house.

"Last year, a girl in the neighboring village of Chargaon died when the rubble from the blast fell on her house and it collapsed," he adds.

The ordinance factory functioning on the periphery of the village adds to the woes of the villagers.

Ideally, a mine should not operate within 5 km of an ordinance factory. With the expansion of the mining area, this has been reduced to 3 km.

The villagers are now demanding that WCL either shut down the mine or resettle them at a site away from the area, which often results in a deadlock.

The landless labourers who are in no way involved in the mining will also have to move.



A coal block near Telwasa | TANNU J

Guarding the blast site is a young man. A post-graduate, he quit his job and returned to Telwasa with the hope of getting a better job, after his land was acquired by WCL.

However, his hopes were dashed, as due to a legal tussle within his family over the ownership of the land he could not claim the job.

Now, employed with a private security agency, the man stands guard over the land that he once owned; the once fertile farm land that has become a coal mine for WCL.

An email was sent to WCL seeking its response to the story but there has been no reply so far.

## Unsettled dust: Mining away health and hearth

SUMEDHA GROVER

BARANJ/TELWASA: Chandrapur district in Maharashtra is known for the abundance of coal. The land is pockmarked with deep coal mines, some active and some defunct. While the mines might have helped the district economy grow, they have led to the deterioration of air and water quality in the area contributing to a number of diseases.

Sachin Chalkhure, who works with the residents of villages like Baranj said, "Diseases like diarrhoea, typhoid and malaria are very common place because of the contaminated water. The particles in the air cause respiratory diseases like asthma and

TB and there is no respite for those who live here."

The coal mine near Baranj was shut down in 2014 and has left a number of people struggling to survive on contaminated resources. The edges of the mine have a yellow tinge due to the presence of residual chemicals in the water. Due to this, the groundwater in the area has also been contaminated.

Sanjay Tukaram Devgade, 48, who worked at the mines for three weeks before looking for other opportunities in Bhadravati said, "Everybody has been suffering because of the mines. We weren't given masks or hard hats when we worked. Most workers got breathing problems because of that and so did the people in the village.

Now that the mine has been shut down people are suffering from diarrhoea and typhoid."

The animals in the area have been affected too. There isn't enough fodder for the cattle and the contaminated water has led to the death of many animals. With acres of farmland now ruined, there is barely even subsistence agriculture. Whatever does grow has the risk of being contaminated.

"We have to make ends meet somehow. After the mines have closed we don't have to live in a cloud of dust but now there are other problems due to unemployment," said Ashish Randive, another resident of Baranj.

It is not just the mining activities

that have raised health concerns.

Chandrapur was declared a dry district in 2015 which led to the creation of a new industry of illicit alcohol. In Tanda village next to Baranj, the tribals brew hooch from Mahua that they collect from forest areas in the vicinity. According to the villagers, they make 100 bottles of hooch from one bottle of Mahua extract by adding urea to the mix which is detrimental to health.

"They are used to drinking a lot and now without any work they drink away their days. The most cases we see in this area are those of alcoholism and alcohol poisoning," said Tejaswini Taskade, head of the outpatient department of the Rural Hospital.

Dr. Vivek Shinde, who visits the village often to treat patients, was critical of the mining companies and the government which does not maintain stringent standards of health and environmental protection.

"We have open cast surface mining in this region. After the mining has stopped it is necessary to sprinkle water over the area to prevent dust and chemical particles from polluting the air. That never happened. The water wasn't treated before being drained into the nearby drains and rivers."

While the number of patients has seen a slight decline after the mines closed, the standard of living of the residents has seen no improvement.



Landslides caused by blasting at the KPCL-EMTA coal mines in Baranj village | AIHIK SUR

## Pockmarked earth: The under-mining of environment

AIHIK SUR

The eastern Maharashtra villages of Baranj and Telwasa lie in the Chandrapur coal mining belt. The mines have led to the deterioration of the environment in and around these villages which has led to serious repercussions for the residents.

The coal mine at Baranj closed in 2014. It is now a black desert with hillocks scattered here and there, formed by dumping of coal.

Sachin Chalkhure, a resident of Baranj said, "When the mine was open, the ground water from the surrounding areas was sucked into the mine because it got deeper every year. This left the surrounding areas with insufficient ground water level. The phosphorus

laced water from the mines runs into the Wardha River, numerous cases of water-borne diseases have been reported," continued Chalkhure.

As per the Central Ground Water Board report, fluoride is a common contaminant in Chandrapur district while high nitrate levels are also found in some areas. Endemic fluorosis, dental caries, mottling of teeth, pain in joints and other such diseases have been observed in Chandrapur district by various investigating agencies.

According to Chalkhure, the water filter machine which was installed in the mines doesn't work. It's just been put in place for the officials to show them that some action has been taken.

Maruti Nimkar, the guard at the closed coal mine at Baranj, said, "When the

mine stays open there is dust all around. The trees which you see are green right now would be black then."

Sandeep, a resident of Baranj village, used to work at the mines. He said, "Before the mines were established the whole area was farm land. Now the temperatures have increased considerably and the temperature in the mines touches 50 degree Celsius."

Pointing at a nearby pond filled with moss where local women were washing clothes, Sandeep said, "This pond along with other wells nearby would dry up when the mines reopen. We would have to go a well which is 3 km from here."

Telwasa, unlike Baranj, is situated right beside an active coal mine. The small village shrouded in thick smog is barely 500 ft away from the mine.

The village gets direct water supply from the ordinance factory nearby. "People drink this unclean water and get ill," said Gopinath Khande, a villager. He added, "The water from the borewell can't be drunk too because the coal mines have polluted it."

According to Pratiksha Nagrale (18) "There are plans of extending the coal mine up till the Wardha river. They have acquired more land there. When they do that the river will be ruined completely. Right now there's still something left, after that the water won't be usable."

The river was covered in yellow grime indicating the presence of phosphorus. Fishermen complained that the number of fish has decreased in the river, and that they had to look for other employment.

# Farm to fabric: A pipe dream

SHREYAS UBGADE

WARDHA: For Vilas Khadse, a worker at the sprawling 52 acre Bapuraoji Deshmukh Cotton Mill in Wardha, life was more or less a routine for the last 27 years. However, four months ago, without any notice, Khadse and 500 workers were informed that the mill would be shut down indefinitely.

"It was bolt from the blue. One fine morning, we were told that the factory had shut down...My wife is ill and bed-ridden and my children are studying. Their future is at stake...", said Khadse, who now works as a labourer and earns Rs. 200 a day. At the mill he earned Rs. 11,000 a month.

Once a co-operative venture, the mill, for the last few years, was being run on a contract basis by private companies from Rajkot, Jalgaon and Mumbai because of increasing overhead costs.

The closure of the mill and the predicament of the workers was yet another jolt to the once ambitious co-operative movement and the ailing cotton processing industry in the district.

"Over the last decade, five of the six ginning and spinning mills in Wardha city have shut down," said Babulal Avhad (63), who worked as an electrician for 29 years in one of the mills. Avhad now guards the desolate 8 acre premises of the mill. A part of the mill is being redeveloped and rented out to shops.

With the change in the technology, from handloom to power-loom, the old composite mills became obsolete as cloth was manufactured at less than half the cost in power-looms. While the power-looms bloomed in Ichalkaranji, Malegaon and Bhiwandi in Western Maharashtra, the 'cotton belt' in Vidarbha including Wardha lost control over the cotton processing market.

"There are no power-looms in Wardha. The only cloth manufacturing factory is in Hinganghat [taluk]...", said P N Nawle, manager of the only functioning ginning mill in Wardha city.

"Cotton harvested from the fields goes through a 3-stage 'farmer-party-broker' chain till the lint reaches the mills," added

Nawle. With brokers in this chain cornering the maximum profit and the cloth market beyond their reach, cotton growers hardly had a say beyond the mills.

Sukhdeo Mohite, a cotton farmer, said "We have to settle for whatever price the 'party' quotes, even if it is less than the MSP."

Delay in government procurement makes things worse. The Kharif cotton was yet to reach the Wardha Agricultural Produce Market Committee.

"All the cotton goes to the private mills," said Bhagwant Misal, another cotton farmer.

There are issues as well. At the Gram Seva Mandal in Gopuri established by Vinoba Bhave in 1934, Bt cotton grown by majority farmers in the district is a taboo.

"We only accept 'good cotton' [organic variety] for the Khadi shirts and pyjamas. A small group of organic farmers supplies it," said N N Satpute, departmental secretary of the Mandal.

Can the market be revived for cotton? Will the textile park launched last year in Amravati (not in the 'cotton belt') rescue the farmers?

"The textile park will surely generate employment. But, things won't change much for cotton farmers," said veteran farmer leader Vijay Jawandhiya raising doubts over the project.

Despite all the constraints, there is no dearth of cotton. In fact, figures show there is a glut. From 254.35 kg per hectare in 2015, the harvest expected this Kharif is 540 kg per hectare.

At the counter of a juice shop in a commercial complex of one of the closed cotton mills is Sudarshan Badhe (31), a seemingly well-off third generation sugarcane farmer from Mahakal village.

"My grandfather opened this shop in 1958. The juice is from the cane directly cut from our field," said Badhe. No brokers for him. May be a way to go for cotton farmers.

# Protracted battle for royal kin

SHREYAS UBGADE

DORLI: Relaxing on a cot after a day's work in the field is Sukhdeo Mohite, a marginal cotton farmer, in Dorli village in Wardha district. Old and frail, Mohite rubs fingers across his white beard trying to remember his age. Barely able to see, after having lost vision of his right eye in an accident, he instead shows his Aadhar card.

"Sarve unhave pausale pahile...(I have seen all the seasons)," says the 76-year-old Mohite who traces his roots to Rajasthan and claims to be a descendent of Maharana Pratap. After working for years as a landless labourer, Mohite had bought a hectare of land in 1979.

In 2005, at the peak of the agrarian crisis in the six districts - Wardha, Yavatmal, Nagpur, Akola, Buldhana and Washim-known as the 'cotton belt' of Vidarbha, his village of cotton growers put up banners saying that their village was up for sale.

The Government had encouraged farmers to grow Bt Cotton, a high-yielding variety. Though the yield increased, the input costs also spiked.

Untimely rainfall would destroy the crop before harvest, forcing farmers to buy costly seeds and fertilizers again. Due to the lack of easy access to institutional credit, farmers took loans from lenders charging interest rates as high as 36 to 48 per cent.

Despite repeated crop failures, rising input costs, vagaries of weather and



Sukhdeo Mohite with wife Housa bai | SHREYAS U

instability of income, Mohite and a majority of the farmers in Dorli still stick to cotton. Cotton was cultivated in 2.2 lakh hectares of the 4.1 lakh hectares cultivable land in Wardha this Kharif season. However, the fluctuating prices of cotton market (Rs. 4400 being the MSP on the day) made it difficult for marginal farmers like Mohite who barely earn anything, leading them into a 'vicious cycle of debt'.

According to Mohite, the inputs including seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, diesel for pumps and rented engine costs him Rs. 20,380 for an acre per year. "I have to pay rent even for bullocks," complains Mohite.

Mohite has to pay Rs. 200 per quintal for transport. Like

most other farmers, he does not own a store house or a vehicle.

Today, he is burdened with a loan of Rs. 2.5 lakh. He blames Bt cotton for this mess. The lack of state facilities has tied the hands of the farmers. According to the project-wise statistics of State Agriculture Department for Kharif season, Wardha hasn't even attained 50 per cent of its irrigation potential. Of 1,33,817 hectares, only 42,063 hectares are irrigated by 45,236 projects which include 4 large, 7 medium, 14 small dams, 341 check dams and 44,870 wells.

"We still haven't got a drop of water from the Upper-Wardha dam," he says. His daughters are married, his sons have taken up odd jobs in Mumbai. The question is: Why cotton still?



A pile of cotton at a mill in Wardha city | SHREYAS U

## Sowing the seeds of ruin

AIHIK SUR

Bt cotton which was introduced as a joint venture between Monsanto and Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Co. (MAHYCO), has helped big farmers but has ruined the livelihood of small landholders, according to a farm expert.

Kishore Jagtap, Project Coordinator at M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Wardha, explained, "The production of Bt cotton needs three things - chemical fertilizers, water and good soil. Advertisements by companies such as Monsanto and Mahyco attracted big farmers and they started cultivating cotton."

"The small farmers followed suit, but their production stagnated because they didn't have enough money to spend on water," he added.

Less than 15 per cent of the fields in Wardha are irrigated and the rest of the land is rain-fed. Therefore, it becomes expensive to pump the water needed to irrigate the fields. Even the availability of cotton seeds needed for a new crop is an issue.

Naresh Gowarikar, a farmer in Dorli village in Wardha district, says, "We used to have organic seeds, ones that our forefathers used to cultivate. Those seeds are not with the farmers anymore, they are with the companies." The companies, Monsanto and Mahyco have taken these organic seeds and treated them with chemicals which increased the yield of the crop. They then sold the seeds to the farmers at high prices.

"Nowadays, for 450 grams of BT cotton, we have to shell out Rs. 700 to Rs. 1500," added Gowarikar. Vijay Jawandhiya, a veteran farmers' activist and President of the Kisan Coordination Committee, a coalition of farmers' organization across the country, said "The introduction of BT cotton has enslaved the farmers. We have to buy the seeds every year."

"There is no BT cotton production in America because the cost of labour there is \$8 to \$10 an hour. And this cotton is produced by crossing two male and female flowers which has to be done manually," said Jawandhiya.

Maharashtra has 38 lakh hectares under cotton cultivation, of which 98 per cent is sowed with BT cotton seeds developed by Monsanto.

The cost of production is higher than the return on the investment which has led to numerous suicides by farmers.

# Farming the 'fair' way

TANNU JAIN

A small hut, hidden behind huge farm equipment, carries the board of the MSSRF scheme- Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Yojana. The owner is Sheela Kumre, one of the two controllers of the scheme in Lonsavli village in Wardha district.

Sixty women from the village, divided into groups of four, are enrolled in the scheme. Sheela, along with Shalini Kherkar ensures that the enrolled women are able to work on farmlands with the 18 practices that MSSRF has identified as sustainable farm practices.

The MSSRF project coordinator for Wardha, Kishore Jagtap said the women were trained in agricultural sciences. The training, coupled with their knowledge of agriculture, helped women claim ownership of the land. The sole purpose of the scheme was to make women self reliant and reduce their dependence on the men.

Sheela Kumre's son, Sachin Sudhakar Kumre explained that MSSRF practices were organic in nature. Since, over the years the production levels had become stagnant with repeated use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid seeds; the switch to organic farming resulted in a higher level of production.

"Implementing all practices is not possible. It is time consuming. Chemicals give results much faster," he added. On their 5 acres of land, the family of four grows tur, wheat and cotton.

With the implementation of the sustainable practices, the cost of cultivation has come down thereby increasing the profits.

Along with this, the women are made familiar with the norms of the market thus enabling them to be part of the decision making process.

Sheela Kumre readily listed her duties as the controller of the program. She said that since organic farming was costlier, most farm equipment were provided to the farmers on rent by the MSSRF. Her job was to maintain the record of these equipment and collect the rent from the farmers.

In the scheme, every group of 60 women has a bank account in a local bank; in this case the bank in Wardha. The money collected from the rent is deposited in this bank account and further used to rent a room to store



Sheela Kumre with her son Sachin | TANNU J

the equipment.

Sheela Kumre insisted that the women faced no objection from the men in the family for switching over to the new practices.

This contrasted with the commonly held belief that due to male dominance in agriculture, there was resistance in giving up the conventional norms.

The scheme was initially started to provide support to the widows and families of the farmers who had committed suicide. But none of the women in the Lonsavli group are widowed.

Sheela mentioned Paish Ram Gude who had killed himself some four to five years back following the farm crisis. The scheme adopted his family as well. But his wife, Kamla Bai Gude also passed away in an accident.

Now after Kamla Bai's death, her son and daughter-in-law follow the practices initiated by the MSSRF.

# Vijay Jawandhiya: Not a leader, yet leading a radical movement

ADITHYA KUMAR

Heading the Shetkari Sanghatan that has been fighting for the rights of farmers, Vijay Jawandhiya says he intervenes and raises questions on behalf of farmers to ensure that they get paid the correct prices for their crops.

Jawandhiya admits that he came from a privileged background. His maternal grandfather was a cloth merchant in Nagpur while his paternal grandfather was a landlord who owned 1,200 acres of land in Waifad. His father died when he was barely 18 days old and so he was brought up by his maternal family in Nagpur with very little contact with his paternal family.

At a young age, he noticed that while his maternal grandfather, a trader was flourishing while his paternal grandfather was suffering.

"That time I could not understand this, but when I became active in politics and college at your age, I realized something is going wrong in our system," he says.

Soon, Jawandhiya discovered that there was a system of middle men who pocketed most of the money that should go to farmers.

In 1970 he got 50 acres of land from his grandfather after his uncles got their share. As per the Land Ceiling Act no family can own more than 54 acres. "By birth I have 50 acres of land not 54. I may not be Tata-Birla but I was Bajaj-Kirloskar of the



Vijay Jawandhiya

crops he did not have much to maintain his family.

Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister at the time, had won the elections on the *Garibi Hatao* slogan. "So I asked myself a question, if the wages of the farm laborers and people employed in

village," he says with a chuckle.

The male laborers were paid about Rs. 3 a day while women were paid just a rupee. Even after paying such low wages, he found that a year later, after harvesting and selling the

the unorganized sector are not increased, how can poverty be removed?" he says.

Jawandhiya insists that farm workers also be covered by the Central pay commissions. His argument is that they also contribute to the economy and that they formed a major chunk of the population.

Jawandhiya dismisses as pittance the support price offered by the Government for crops such as cotton. He pointed out that farmers in the US were getting a massive subsidy and could therefore sell their crops in the global market at a very low price compared to what Indian farmers could offer.

In 2006, Jawandhiya invited then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to

Waifad and in the meeting Dr Singh agreed that the farmers were not getting a fair price for their produce. Soon after the support price for cotton went up but it did not change as much as it should, he says.

Jawandhiya joined the Shetkari Sanghatan in 1980 when he read for the first time about Sharad Joshi, an IAS officer who had resigned to fight for the prices of onions.

However, Jawandhiya fell out with Joshi who supported free market and India joining the World Trade Organisation.

Previously, Jawandhiya had started the Wardha District Farmers and Farm Laborers Grievances Committee. It was dissolved when he joined the Shetkari Sanghatan.

# Far from the high cotton

CHANDAN K MANDAL

DORLI: Praful Jadhav (40) and his wife Hema Praful Jadhav (30) have been cultivating cotton every year at Lonsavli village in Wardha district.

This year the crop was good and they got 27 quintal of cotton from nearly four-acres of field, which was more than what they expected. However, they have got no cash in hand nor have they have sold any cotton.

"What's the use of selling my cotton if I don't get money?" asked Praful Jadhav standing next to the tall pile of cotton stored in a dark room.

"They are going to pay me by cheque which is useless these days."

According to Jadhav, even after more than two months of scrapping the old Rs. 500 and Rs. 1000 notes, they are still facing the effects of demonetisation.

"Buyers will pay us in cheque but we will have to wait for the money as we cannot withdraw more than Rs. 24,000 in a week," he complained.

"The maximum amount of money we can withdraw from banks is insufficient. Who will I



**Praful Jadhav (40), a cotton farmer, has not sold his produce because he won't be paid in cash | CHANDAN KM**

pay with that money? Pay labourers or buy stationary for my kids?" asked Hema,

"Some days ago we didn't have even Rs 300 to buy urea, so my brinjal plants died."

Even if cotton has been not profitable enough, it has been the major crop for them and all

the farmers in their village. Dinesh Nagpuri (30), who has a stock of 15 quintal, lamented that nothing worked for poor farmers.

"Some years back a quintal of cotton was sold at Rs. 7,200 but then we didn't have cotton as we had already sold ours. Now, we

have cotton then there is no money in the market," recalled Nagpuri sadly.

Currently, cotton is being purchased at Rs. 5,200 a quintal, which farmers like Nagpuri think is a very good rate. But all of them have put their stock on hold waiting for easy cash. Nagpuri said, however, farmers like him can not wait much longer.

"Prices going up and down don't affect us much. We will have to sell anyway because we have to pay our money lenders," said Nagpuri.

"Situations like this leave farmers with no options than committing suicide," he added.

Local farmers said they did not sell their cotton to the government operated Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC), because according to farmers private ginning and pressing firms paid higher rates.

In adjoining Dorli village, Dharmal Jharunde has 14 quintal of cotton with him.

Like other farmers, he is also reluctant to sell fearing he won't get cash.

"If I sell my product to any vendor, he will pay me in cheque. Then, I will have to

deposit the cheque in the bank. The bank ATM will give me only Rs. 4,500 every day.

For that meagre amount of money, you have stop work and stand in line," said Jharunde.

He said he faced difficulties even while growing cotton.

"I needed Rs. 5,000 for paying farm labourers; then the bank was providing only Rs. 2,000 a day. At the same time, I had to buy seeds and fertilizers. How could I manage? Fertilizer sellers wouldn't give me fertilizers on credit. From where would I get the remaining money? We faced all these problems all due to demonetisation."

Jharunde thinks that demonetisation has brought more problems to farmers though it was intended for a good cause. "Farmers and farm labourers have faced more problems than anyone due to demonetisation. Nothing good to us has happened," complained Jharunde, who also runs a small shop in the village.

"Have you ever seen a politician, doctor or businessman standing in the bank queue for money? Only people like us have waited for hours for money."

## No home for single women

TANNU JAIN

DORLI: "If I go on my father's fields, my brothers will cut me up and throw the pieces away," says the widowed daily wage laborer, Shanta Haridas Mohite, a resident of Dorli in Wardha district.

She has lived on the road opposite the entrance to the village, for the past 15 years. After her husband died of alcoholism, she came to Dorli hoping her brother would help her. All she got was permission to use the bathroom, as support. She lives in a thatched roof hut on the edge of the three acre land that her brothers own. She has no Below Poverty Line card to avail government benefits because she has no proof of residence to present.

However, the whole family has Aadhar cards which were made for them in the village angadwadi, without any verification. The only other documents they have are those certifying them as Nomadic Tribes. These, Shanta got by presenting her brother in law's ration card. She explains that he has a pucca house so he got a ration card. The four Nomadic

Tribe families in the village live closely in a generally harmonious village.

Shanta's neighbor, Kanta Raju Powar's story is similar except for the fact that her husband ran away. Both women work in other fields, picking cotton and doing odd jobs. Making only Rs. 100 a day, they buy food for two days. The rest, they save to buy essentials to maintain their households and for their children's education.

For going to school, Kanta's daughters Kajal and Payal have one bicycle. Kajal's school gets over at noon when Payal's school starts. So, one of them has to walk 3 km to reach their school in Waifad. As for Shanta's sons, they have been sent to an orphanage that takes care of their education. Their helplessness is palpable as they open the doors to their bare homes. The tattered charpoy seems to be the only item of furniture that the families own.

Shanta says that she never kills a snake in her house, due to cultural restrictions.

The house protects them from nothing. Being nomadic women in the patriarchal agrarian society, adds to their burden.

## Healthcare : too far, too dear

SUMEDHA GROVER

For the residents of Dorli and Lonsavli villages in Wardha district, accessing healthcare especially in emergencies can be an expensive and time consuming process. The nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC), in Waifad, is 4km away but lack of transport makes access difficult.

"Autos cost a lot but there is no other option. Calling an ambulance takes too much time," said Pundali Shinde.

The same story resonates across villages which do not have a Primary Health Centre in Wardha and Chandrapur districts. Under the National Health Mission, there must be one PHC for every 30,000 people in general areas and six sub-centres catering to populations of 5,000 each.

Most of the villages though, lack connectivity and in case of medical emergencies the residents end up paying anywhere from Rs. 300 to Rs 400 during the day and Rs. 600 to Rs 700 at night for an auto at Telwasa village in Chandrapur district.

The nearest PHC, about 10 km away in Bhadravati, is almost impossible to reach at night unless a private vehicle can be arranged. Many residents have resorted to seeking private healthcare services. "We have stopped going to the PHC in Waifad. What is the point in going there if there aren't going to be any doctors?" questioned Pradhya Rashtrapal Jarundi (27) who gave birth to both her daughters at private clinics in Wardha.

The PHC at Waifad that caters to Dorli, Lonsavli and three other villages provides medical care to about 90,000 people and is extremely understaffed.

Dr. Praveen Rupaye, Medical Officer at Waifad PHC said, "There is a lack of doctors because nobody wants to come to the villages. I was working at the PHC in Kharanga and was transferred here because both the posts here were vacant. We are so overstretched that we cannot provide service to all the people."

As per the residents, such services may include first time pregnancies. "They simply send us to one

of the bigger hospitals the second they come to know it's the first pregnancy. They say there might be complications and they aren't equipped to deal with it," said Renuka Sathre (22), a resident of Lonsavli.

Calling an ambulance from the PHC is a complicated process where the ASHA worker must be contacted who then calls the headquarters in Pune. The call is then redirected to one of the ambulance drivers in the requisite areas. This can take time and has often led to the deterioration of a patient's health.

"We need a doctor but everybody needs to ask for it," said Nisha Brahmine (28). Her neighbour, the 85-year-old Phalgun Jangle was much more cynical.

"This has been happening for so long, we are used to it. There was a time when it was worse than this. But now we know where we will get help.

If they survive till we get them to Sevagram, they live. Otherwise we are prepared. Especially old ones like us."

In the mining village of Baranj in Chandrapur district the situation has improved only last year with the arrival of two autorickshaws in the village. Before that the quickest mode of transport to the nearest PHC in Bhadravati was by cycle.

"I took my wife to the hospital on the cycle when she was in labour. Most of the women go like this," said Sanjay Tukaram Devgade, a father of three.

The bus service in the area is erratic and mining work in the vicinity blocks shorter access roads to Bhadravati.

A number of healthcare professionals who run private clinics are taking the initiative to visit these villages regularly. While government health camps are set up once or twice a year at the most, private hospitals set up health check up camps every other month.

"They set up camps; tell us things about hygiene and what kind of protection we should take against various diseases. Also, if someone is sick and needs a doctor immediately we can call them on the mobile and they come here. We have to pay money but at least we get treatment," said Praveen Lakshman Rao of Lonsavli.

## Blocked and bloated

ADITHYA KUMAR

Sanitation remains a problem in the villages in Wardha district. Dorli and Lonsavli, which are 15 km from Wardha, have open gutters with stagnant water and garbage lies piled up in corners.

Alka Gayatri, a resident of Dorli village points to the toilet currently being built in her house. Hers is not the only house that has been covered under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan under which toilets are being built in villages across the country to deter open defecation.

In fact, 85 per cent of the houses already have toilets and the ones that do not have toilets are getting them built. Each house that builds a toilet is given a remuneration of Rs.12,000 to cover the expenses incurred.

"Even though people have toilets, a lot of them prefer to go out and do their business as it has become a habit," says Dharmal Jharunde.

Having toilets does not solve their problem because there is no closed drainage system. Also, not all the houses in Dorli have access to the gutter that runs around the village which is filled with rubbish. The residents have dug their own primitive drains outside their houses. In Lonsavli, people have dug their own drains outside their houses and the water that collects here during the monsoon is a source of various diseases. Now though plans have been approved for a drain to be built in the village.

"Last year, there were cases of chikungunya, this year there are



**Improper drainage leading to stagnation | ADITHYA K**

none thankfully," says Nisha Brahmine, a resident of Lonsavli.

On being asked why they never brought these issues up at the Gramsabha meetings, she said that there was no united voice in the place. No such issues were brought up in the Gramsabha. The Gram Panchayat according to the residents of both these villages is not very helpful with holding meetings erratically.

The gutters are cleaned only twice a year by the Gram Panchayat that covers both these villages, that too before and after the monsoons. The coal belt villages of Baranj and Telwasa in neighbouring Chandrapur lack a drainage system. In Baranj houses which do not have proper drainage have built their own primitive sewage pits. These pits are cleaned once a week when full. The pits are uncovered and have become a prime breeding spot for mosquitos and so they form

a health hazard too. During the rains these gutters start overflowing and most of the water flows back into the houses. According to Pallavi Gourde from Baranj, the villagers are unaware of a lot of things and this is the reason for the poor state of the drainage system.

If the panchayat was allotted Rs. 1 lakh for some project, they would tell us that only Rs. 50,000 was given," she said.

The village is not aware of a lot of these programs that are meant to help them. In Baranj and Telwasa only 50 per cent of the houses have toilets and most of the residents openly defecate in the fields around the place. The villagers are not even aware of the program and due to the lack of money they cannot build toilets for themselves. Maya Makhulkar, the Sarpanch of Baranj on the other hand says that she has written letters but there has been no response to them.

THE ONLY POTTER IN TOWN

## At the wheel of life

PADMASHREE PANDE

WAIFAD: Columns of neatly stacked pots lined up outside the front door are the indication that this is Prakash Thakur's home.

Thakur, now in his late fifties, is the only potter in Waifad in Wardha district.

From flower pots — which he finds the easiest to make — to Ganapati and Lakshmi idols during the festive season, Thakur makes them all.

The pots, which still lay in the blazing sun, around the place, unsold, tell a different story though.

The sale in the past summer hasn't been that good and a lot of pots that were meant to hold drinking water lie on the ground for the next sale to begin.

"It's a small village with a small community. Only 500 or so people here who will buy these goods. Most of us are potters here, but only I practise this trade. Others prefer to work as farm labourers," he explains.

As the sale of pots and idols does not bring in enough money to sustain his family, Thakur alternates between working on his farm and the pottery.

He grows cotton, wheat and some vegetables on this farm. His entire family, comprising his elderly mother, wife and three children, support him in this work.

However, he is quite adamant that his children should study and have a stable job, unlike him; they should not be dependent on the weather and the market to determine

their income.

"Two of my children are in Nagpur, studying and working as part-time waiters to get some extra income. My third one is doing BA from Wardha. They are ambitious and I want them to be so. There is nothing in my trade to offer to them," he adds.

Depending on the sizes of the items he makes, the prices are fixed anywhere between Rs. 20 and Rs. 150. But this does not cover his input costs.

"Black soil and white sand, ash from a burning furnace, and horse dung. These are the most crucial ingredients required in making the clay strong. With the right water concentration, the finished goods last a long time," he said.

Thakur has to go all the way to Amravati to buy a sackful of horse dung at Rs 200 a kg.

His earnings in the summer season, when pots are required the most, go up to a mere Rs. 10,000.

Thakur recalls how he went to Bhadravati 30 years ago which is located 50km away from Waifad to learn the ropes of pottery.

The Udyog Kendra there, a teaching centre that helps people learn basic livelihood skills, was the place where he took his formal training in the art of pottery.

"Once my children are settled, I plan to leave this profession. It's really not that profitable and I will concentrate only on my farm then which is about three kilometres away from here," said Prakash with sad resignation in his tone.

## Immunity supplements : need of the hour

PADMASHREE PANDE

BARANJ: Harshal, Om Kartika, Sanchi and Tanmay sit in line at their school, Anganwadi-2 in this village in Chandrapur district. Aged between three and five years, these five are the only students at this school.

Their families are five of the 700 left behind in this small village. The villagers first lost their land to the coal mines and lost their livelihood when the mines got shut down. Blankly, the children abandon their food completely in the presence of a stranger. Panchfula Ghughul, the state-appointed cook for Anganwadi-2, who is also their caretaker, gently coaxes them into eating.

The teachers working in anganwadis are often called for "special meetings" to cities and are absent for most of the week. In her absence, the educational

responsibilities too, fall on her.

"They will return to empty houses, as their parents go out to Bhadravati and Chandrapur in search of work if I send them back," she explains. They also rely upon her to get at least one meal per day. "Three of my children here fall under level two category of malnourishment. If I don't show up, who will provide them with food?" Panchfula says, as the children finish their meal, which was left more on the ground than in their stomachs. They are so undernourished



**Midday meals | PADMASHREE**

that they cannot even find the strength to feed themselves, she says.

Later, she goes around the village and asks for leftover grain from which she makes chapattis to feed the children when the school ends for the day.

Back in the classroom, Harshal, who is the most malnourished stays behind while the others play. Harshal was born with a low Body Mass Index (BMI). He weighed only about a kilo and a half at birth

and contracted a fever that stunted his growth for a year, leading to extremely

poor mental development.

Rarely does a doctor from a hospital at Dongargaon visits the school weekly, which is required of them. The immunity supplements provided once a year is consumed within the first fifteen days. A bottle of iodine serves as first aid for the kids.

Since these children are not acutely malnourished, they do not get eggs, bananas and laapshi, under the mid-day meal scheme which is why she comes up with alternatives. One of them is the 'Baby's Corner' in which the parents are requested to send nutritional home cooked meals which can be given to the children.

As the children forget the number eight while reciting, she sends them in a peal of laughter when she jokingly scolds them by saying, "Arey, are you so hungry that you ate the number eight?"

# A new place, a new life



Khadaki where Navargaon residents have been resettled | TANNU J

ADITHYA KUMAR AND AIHIK SUR

**KHADAKI:** Monetary compensation and plots were awarded to the villagers of Navargaon living inside the Bor Wildlife Sanctuary which was declared a tiger reserve in 2014. They were rehabilitated to Khadki on the Nagpur-Wardha Highway. But life is not the same for them. As per the proposal submitted by the Office of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Nagpur to the Secretary of the Revenue and Forests Department in Mumbai, the shift was proposed to reduce the deleterious effects of the people and their cattle on the fauna present in the sanctuary. The wildlife sanctuary which is around 138 sq.km is home to tigers, leopards and bears. The

herbivores include sambar deer, the Indian bison and barking deer. The shift would free around 223.28 hectares of cultivable land and 373.90 hectares of non-cultivable land for wildlife. Twenty hectares of land in Khadki was made available for the villagers as a part of the compensation for moving them. The new location where the villagers were rehabilitated, Khadki does not have proper electricity or amenities. The site is just open land along the highway where the rehabilitated people live in temporary structures. According to Govind Luche, Range Forest Officer, plots of land measuring 1500 sq.ft each were allotted to villagers and each family was also given a compensation of Rs. 10 lakh. The villagers have to build their

houses on the empty plots given to them at Khadki. Roads, electricity and water connections are yet to be given. The villagers say that out of the Rs. 10 lakh that was supposed to be given, they have received only Rs. 1 lakh in hand and Rs. 5 lakh was put in a fixed deposit account. Out of the remaining Rs. 4 lakh, the government has taken Rs.1.5 lakh for developing power, roads, water facilities in the new village – an arrangement which the villagers were initially unaware of and only got to know of when they started moving to the new location. According to Sahibrao Uike, the keeper of records in the village, "They said that if you don't pay you won't get water or electricity on time." The villagers are still yet to receive the remaining Rs. 2.5 lakh

and the plots provided to them are even smaller than the ones they originally had. Dattu Nihare, the contractor at Khadki, says 200 houses are to be built there. "The government asked them to leave Navargaon; left with no choice they left," he says. Navargaon was a close knit community of tribals and when faced with this situation, everyone left after one family agreed to leave the place. There are three big tanks around the makeshift village. In case these tanks dry up, the villagers need to go 2 km away where the nearest borewell is. The villagers say they will take up cotton farming again, while some have gone to Wardha and Seloo to live in rented homes until their houses are built.

## Happy in school despite the odds

NIDHI CHUGH AND PADMASHREE PANDE

**DOLRI:** A loose, unhinged door leads to the Zilla Parishad Primary School in Dorli. The playground where the school children are playing barefeet is nothing but a dusty ground, full of jagged, sharp stones.

A little further down the road, at the nearby Lonsavli village is the Z.P. Secondary School, which students from Dorli attend too. Worn down monkey bars, slides, and swings, with a broken down wall of the old gram panchayat office are all part of their playground.

The children, however, seem happy with their surroundings, with no dull moment for them at the rundown schools. They surround you, greet and talk to you like old friends.

The Z.P. Schools in Wardha district have three levels of education – anganwadi, primary and secondary schools. The anganwadis accommodate the age group of children between 3 and 5. They follow the system of play schools, Lower Kindergarten and Upper Kindergarten in private schools. The primary school has classes from one to five. The staff is very limited and the government does not allot "peons" to these schools.

The Z. P. Primary School in Dorli has two teachers, a helper who cleans up. When one teacher is absent, the other handles the show. This school has 17 students in total. They follow the Maharashtra State Board School curriculum and all the Z. P. Schools are Marathi Medium, teaching English and

Hindi as secondary languages. Every Z. P. School offers mid-day meal which an assigned cook prepares daily.

The Z.P. Secondary School in Lonsavli accommodates 144 children with only seven teachers, a helper and a cook. When the teachers are absent, the students are left to their own devices to do as they please.

"We are called for meetings regularly, we can't help it," said Vilas Atey, one of the teachers working here.

After the children of Dorli and Lonsavli have finished primary school, they go either to the Z. P. Secondary School or to Yashwant Secondary School (YSS) in Waifad, 4km away from Lonsavli. Most residents call YSS a private school because they have to pay Rs. 100 for their children to write their board exams.

The teachers of the Z. P. schools proudly accept that there are no dropouts. However, they take minimum fees from parents whose wards do not fall into the SC, ST and NT minority category. The education is free up to class four and sets of books and uniforms are provided there. They say the government gives the schools around Rs. 20,000 per annum for maintenance. They complain that they fall short with other expenses to take care of. More often than not, they run out of the teaching material given by the state before the year is out. The children make do with whatever is available then – broken toys, crayons, used notebooks and colouring books in the school. Sometimes, the teachers give



The children with their teachers at the Zilla Parishad School, Dorli | PADMASHREE

out of their own pockets. In the case of the Z. P. Primary School (Dorli), both the teachers there, Padma Giradkar and Pravin Lonare, got a laptop at a subsidised rate with the help of the Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation

(Wardha). They now teach the children basic computer-based activities like paint. Apart from this, they both encourage the children to be creative by making cards for teachers and students on birthdays with

material available. Without sufficient funds, the playgrounds and toilets remain untended – often without any doors. But this is no deterrent; the children smile at visitors without hinting at the deprivation.

## Investing in their girls' education

NIDHI CHUGH

**TELWASA:** We want our girl to be independent," says Usha Madhyo Jhughare, a resident of Telwasa village abutting the Western Coalfields in Chandrapur district.

Her daughter Pratiksha Madhyo Jhughare (18), studying in class 9, started speaking at the age of seven.

"My daughter wants to be a nurse," says Jhughare. She said, "My son failed in 10th and now works in a shop. Girls work harder than boys do. This is why we are investing our savings in Pratiksha."

Like Jhughare, residents of Dorli, Lonsavli and Waifad villages in Wardha district and Baranj and Telwasa in Chandrapur district want to educate their daughters so that they are able to fend for themselves and their families.

Wardha and Chandrapur districts where parents do not stop their girls to dream. Most women are more educated than their husbands are.

In Dorli, Seema Rangari carrying a pot of water stops in her tracks when asked why she isn't at school.

"The school closes at 1 pm and so we come back," says Rangari who is a student of Anand Junior College, where she is in the 12th Standard. She either walks or rides a bicycle to the school, which is 5 km away.

Hoping to do a course in information technology (IT), Rangari says her parents are very supportive when it comes to her education. Both her parents work for daily wages on

the fields in the area. The teachers in the village schools also endorse the fact that the parents send their girls to school on their own will unlike as in other places where the girls are stopped from going to school after the 8th Standard and are married off.

"Mostly boys tend to miss school, I have to go and grab them from their homes whereas the girls happily come running to school," says Padma N Giradkar, Headmistress of the Zilla Parishad Primary School present in Dorli.

According to the teachers, the girls complete their homework on time and are very intelligent. The parents are motivated to make their daughters graduates. The parents are not hesitant to make their daughters professional and are very keen to make their daughters independent individuals.

"If she wants to study more, she can. We will support her. We do not want our children to be farmers like us," says the mother of Nikita Prakashrao Kohadawe (10) in Baranj.

Her daughter goes to Good Child Convent School in Bhadravati which is 8 km away.

Despite the threat of being evicted to make way for more coal mines, the children in Baranj have a vision. They aspire for a better and a brighter future

"I want to be a doctor," Dhanashree Kadhuke (11) said. Her parents gleamed with joy and proudly displayed her certificates saying that she had aced the science quizzes held in her school.

## Giving the milkmen their due

TANNU JAIN

Set up 80 years ago, the Goras Bhandar is a dairy model exclusive to Wardha. Gandhi, Bhawe and Bajaj laid the foundation. With only one factory in Wardha and 11 retail stores all over the district the Bhandar gives dairy farmers a fair price for the milk.

M. N. Kadu, manager, says that even with 18 other milk companies including Mother Dairy, the demand for Goras products hasn't decreased because of its quality standards. Exclusive use of cow's milk adds to this quality. At 4 am and 6 pm the milk reaches the centre. Every container of milk is then tested for its quality and density. The standard payment for milk at the Bhandar is Rs. 35 a litre.

Subhash Bhujare, a farmer from Amla village, travels 10 km everyday to drop off the milk. In a regular diary he would get Rs. 25 for each litre of milk supplied. So, for the higher profits he has been supplying milk here for the past 20 years. He brings about 250 litres of milk in a day. Another farmer,



Subhash Bhujare, Dairy farmer | TANNU J

Gajanan Lokhande of the Nathane village agrees with Bhujare and business model.

Rahul Sarode and Swaroop Magar, who are busy testing the last few samples of milk, say that if the milk is not up to the standards the producers get a lower price.

Sarode tests the milk for fat, protein, solid non-fat and water. The farmers are penalised for varying values. A higher water content signifies addition of

water manually. Swaroop Magar says about 12,000 to 13,000 litres of milk is tested every day. The milk is sold as un-pasteurized milk for Rs. 40 a litre, or as pasteurized milk for Rs. 45 a litre. Suresh Dhamane, the bakery incharge, says wheat and cashew cookies are made out of the milk. About 33 kg of cookies can be made out of a litre of milk. These cookies are sold under the name Goras Pakh for Rs. 440 a kg. Breads,

milk sweets, khoya and other milk products are also made at the bakery. However, Goras Pakh is known to generate the maximum revenue. A packaging worker, Muralidhar Mude says that around 150 to 200 kg of cookies are produced daily in a 5-6 hour process. Kadu says that milk reaches the Bhandar twice a day unlike other dairies. This keeps the milk from the morning fresh at the time of its arrival.

In an otherwise perfect model, there are only two problems, he says. One, due to the high temperatures of the region, the milk often gets spoiled. Two, due to the droughts, the cattle feed was lesser and hence lesser milk. The Bhandar also provides health care for the cattle. The cows are treated regularly for basic illnesses. The treatment expenses are deducted from the farmers' payments. A 50 % subsidy is provided for major illnesses.

Kadu says that the Bhandar works without Government support, with some support from Bajaj. A 10 percent margin on everything generates a profit of Rs. 20 to 25 lakh.

## Organic farms: miles to go

SHREYAS UBGAE

**AAMGAON:** In an attempt to revive mixed-cropping pattern and low-cost traditional methods of cultivation, Mandar Deshpande (33), a small-scale farmer in Aamgaon village of Selu taluk is practising organic farming.

"I wanted to lead a nature-friendly and exploitation-free life. So, after completing my graduation, instead of opting for a job in a multi-national, I bought a piece of land [here] and started organic farming," says Deshpande.

A trained mechanical engineer, Deshpande migrated to Wardha from the Beed district of Marathwada.

Inspired by the philosophies of Gandhi and Vinoba Bhawe, the young farmer chose Wardha, a district with a good average annual rainfall (1,062 mm) and sufficient ground water-table.

Along with cash crops like cotton, Deshpande grows oilseeds, pulses and has invested in horticulture.

"Last year, I got 6-7 quintal of cotton per acre from a

non-Bt, non-hybrid variety of cotton made available by Central Institute for Cotton Research, Nagpur. But, farmers cannot control the market as private operators control the output processing units of the cotton," he adds.

Deshpande claims that he procures 'nothing from the market'. This has helped him cut-down the costs of inputs, he says.

"I use traditional seeds, home-made pesticides and fertilizers. For irrigation, I have installed a solar pump available at 95 per cent subsidy," says Deshpande. This subsidy is available only for the fields without any power connection.

"Organic farming is economically viable and can be practised by other famers [in the district]," he asserts. But the figures for organic farming as well as horticulture do not reflect Deshpande's optimism. His experiment seems to be successful, but it is yet to be practised on a large scale in Wardha district.

"Maharashtra Government ran a scheme from 2007 to 2009 to encourage organic

farming. As many as 12,600 farmers were trained and over 8,000 hectares of land was brought under organic cultivation. Outlets were opened for distribution in each taluk," says Yashwant Murkhe, Agriculture Assistant, Department of Agriculture.

However, due to low yield per acre, lengthy process of certification, absence of nodal agency and a lack of demand, the initial enthusiasm waned, the outlets were shut and the scheme was discontinued.

"Only over 2,000 farmers now practice organic farming. Area under cultivation is down to about 1,500 hectares," says Murkhe. "One needs to practise organic farming for three years to get a certificate. Unlike conventional farming, the yield is less."

"There is no proper market mechanism for organic products in Wardha," he adds.

Horticulture has failed to pick up even with 100 percent subsidy. Out of 4,46,288 hectares of cultivable land in the district, horticulture is practised in lesser than 35,000 hectares. Only 70 hectares were added in 2016.

## Water project remains a dud

A multi-million dollar water project with Japanese collaboration falls short of meeting the requirements of people, four years after its launch

DURGA PRASAD AND  
SIDDHESH VISHNU RAUT

ODDANUR: The Hogenakkal water supply and fluorosis mitigation project, started in 2010, hoped to wean off 57 per cent residents of Dharmapuri and 58 percent residents in Krishnagiri districts from the groundwater containing excessive fluorine, leading to the largest number of deaths from fluorosis related kidney failure in Tamil Nadu.

"The only thing we can do is to let the mud settle in the pot for a few hours," says C. Alghamma, as she shows us a vessel lined with dirt and slime at the bottom of the vessel. "We know that the water has a lot of microbes and other germs in it, but what can we do, there is no water to drink, better this than the other water."

As the afternoon sun perches menacingly overhead, O.L.Palani, Councillor of the village, takes us through a dusty path past thatched huts to look at a dried out well, and a multi-tap borewell, sealed shut long back.

"Once the well dried out, We were drinking the water from the borewell connection until five months back. Or, we also manage to get water from the backside of the mettur dam," he said, pointing towards the sliver of a waterbody around five



Water scarcity a hindrance to fire-fighting in Oddanur | SIDDHESH R

kilometers away from the small settlement.

"It's a little better when you have a vehicle of your own. You would only need to make a single trip a day," but for a majority of the families, this would mean carrying several vessels to and fro, for a water-source whose quality is dubious at best.

But on paper, these problems shouldn't exist.

Technically, this Japan-funded multi-billion dollar project, costing Rs.1928.80 crore, has met its targets, "covering" 7,716 habitations, 17 town Panchayats and three municipalities in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri.

According to previous reports, the project functions on five separate power stations, all

of which do not receive the necessary power supply, causing distribution lags. On elevated terrains, multiple boosting is required and power supply should be available at all pumping stations for synchronised pumping which compounds the distribution problem.

C.Laxmi shows us the empty houses of her neighbors. "This family and two others have had members who died from kidney failure after drinking all that borewell water. They left soon after the funeral."

"There was a fire at the huts over there," says Laxmi, pointing at the large gape where the thatch is burnt at the edges at an abandoned hutment. "Since there was no water supply, we pooled our drinking

water, mixed it with cow dung and put out the flames," she said sadly.

The elderly always bear the brunt of these project failures. "We are old, and cannot walk such long distances, and come back with heavy vessels" said Alghamma. "Once in a while, a family takes pity on us and offers us a vessel or two of water. But there is only so much that we can impose," she says with a sad smile.

As for other sources, she said, "there is an overhead tank where we get hogenakkal water, it comes around once or twice a week."

However, as one gets closer to the Dharmapuri city, the villages of Oddanur say they do receive Hogenakkal water once in three days.

But it is all a matter of choosing between the lesser of two evils, says Vijayadhar (53), a resident of Oddanur village. "Many a time we see worms in the water, as the tank is only cleaned once in six months," he says.

Councillor Palani says that he has complained to the Block Development Office five times, but hasn't received any response so far.

With the new year setting in, marking four years since the project, the thirst of the citizens of Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri has not been quenched.



Children from Nirmal Oringnai Maiyam | SAMUEL M

## Haven in a heartless world

VAISHALI V

NALLAMPALLI: An orphanage, rehabilitation center and school in one campus is doing a tremendous job for the welfare of the abandoned poor.

The Nirmala Leprosy Rehabilitation Centre is located in the Kovilur village of the Nallampalli taluk. Founded in 1974, it was renamed as orphanage centre and later Nirmal Oringnai Maiyam. There are about 46 women and 11 men here. Better medication, with more people shifting to their hometown after treatment saw fewer numbers.

"The centre is completely funded by the Diocese and interested people would contribute how much ever they could. But recently, the maintenance certificate that had to be obtained every year has been an issue," says Sister. They had to pay a bribe to the respected officer to obtain the recognition certificate, costing more funds than they receive.

The institution now has a rehabilitation centre, an orphanage for men and women

and a school for children. The campus is eco friendly and quite far from the village. The inmates of the centre were given training in weaving and tailoring to keep them occupied.

"I joined here when it had initially started about 36 years ago. Back then, there was no medicine for leprosy. I am an orphan and my uncle used to take care of me. Initially I was ashamed of my deformity. I kept postponing the treatment and as the condition worsened, I had to give in. The nurse in the hospital of my village suggested that I join this place. Now I am happy and peaceful," says Bhaskar, a leprosy victim.

The nearby building is the orphanage. It was a dormitory with people laughing and sharing their sorrows side by side. "I love CM Jayalalithaa and MG Ramachandran. I have never missed a single movie of theirs. politics aside," says M.Munnusamy. He is very inspiring and confident person who loves singing and entertaining people.

There were also other people from the nearby villages, either

orphans or people abandoned by their own kids.

Women have a separate block. They were arranging tamarind seeds. "It has been four years since I came here, I heard of this place through word of mouth. After my husband's death, my sons refused to feed me, so I too did not care and came here," says T Jaya.

A cook has been retained to provide them daily meals. The church provided them with new clothing and a feast for every festival to make them feel special.

The school kids were already playing by then. "I want to dance and become an actor like Vijay", said Vijay. The kids beautifully sang the prayer song and enjoyed being photographed a lot.

"We play only during the weekend and we love the school", says P.John. Either they were orphans or their parents worked as laborers and migrant workers in nearby villages.

A haven for those who have none in this world.

## Anger over delays in NREGA payments

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

NALLAMPALLI: More than 30 women await payment for the work they have completed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in the villages of Chinnapangunatham, Thipatty and Podanur in Dharmapuri's Nallampalli taluk.

While thirty-five-year-old Neela of Chinnapangunatham says she has not been paid for one year's work, senior citizen Chinnapapa Gokul says she is owed Rs. 3000 for the work done under this scheme till date.

The MGNREG Scheme, launched across India by the Central government in 2006, guarantees 100 days of employment per year to one adult of a household. It was launched in Dharmapuri district on April 1, 2008. The notified wage rate for Tamil Nadu in 2016-17 is Rs. 203 per day, and is directly transferred to beneficiary bank accounts by the state government.

"I have not received money for the past four months," says Rajamma, a native of Podanur, who claims that this has happened before. "Last time, around 50 of us met the Collector and we were paid."

"I have not received money in the past six months though I have been working under the scheme," says a visibly upset 78-year-old Chinnapapa Mani of Chinnapangunatham. "Ask them to give us our money."

Emotions are running high: in a region where agriculture is getting increasingly difficult with the worsening water crisis, payment delays in the Scheme - in which they have reposed their faith - are wreaking havoc in these women's lives. "I have no other work," says Angamma, an agricultural worker from Thipatty. "I cannot grow anything on my small piece of land (less than 20 cents) because there is no water. This is the only job I have, but we are not being paid for it."

Many are also considering migrating temporarily to other villages and towns to escape the

harsh conditions. "There is no water and now, no jobs. Almost 300 people in these villages migrate to other places in summer, but this time we will have to go earlier," says Neela.

Government sources say that the delays are because of the transfer of funds from the Centre to the state's coffers takes time. "We are doing whatever possible we can to deal with the delay. Shri. Pon Radhakrishnan (Union Minister for Road Transport and Shipping) has presented this problem to the Centre and we hope to have a solution within one month," says R. Shanmugasundaram, Public Relations Officer (PRO) at the Dharmapuri Collectorate. "Affected individuals can also complain on our toll-free number of 1077, may be they do not know about that," he adds.

According to the PRO, schemes like the Indra Gandhi Old Age Pension Scheme (IGOAPS) have been put in place to counter the delays of the MGNREGA payments. However, the IGOAPS, which was launched in 1995 to provide pensions for senior citizens below the poverty line, is not linked to the MGNREGA in any way. Senior citizens like Kolathi Ammal of Thipatty have not received payments from the pension scheme either. "I am old and not keeping well; yet I have to go for the 100-day work scheme," she says, referring to the MGNREGA.

According to data for the year 2016-17 available on the MGNREGA website, delayed payments amount to Rs. 5497.41 lakh in Dharmapuri district alone, out of which Rs. 2160 lakh has been delayed for more than three months. For the entire state, delayed payments stand at a staggering Rs. 3156 crore.

Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam's declaration on January 10th that MGNREGA's 100-day employment will be extended to 150 days to ensure employment in such areas would do little to alleviate their misery if the payment due to the workers does not reach them in time.

## Water woes add to Dharmapuri's agricultural crisis

Failing rains likely to advance customary seasonal migrations

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

PENNARGARAM: With the year's scant north-east monsoon, the agricultural crisis has deepened in the district.

"This year we received only 460 mm of rain in place of the yearly 800 mm," says Shankar M., Founder of the Development Education and Environment Protection Society (DEEPS).

"Even diverting the dwindling water supply to sugarcane got me only 23 tonnes instead of the usual 40," says Arumugam M., who owns four acres in Panaikulam. "Ten months of work has been a loss."

Farmers who have larger tracts of land and access to ground water are now shifting to crops that require less water.

"We used to grow paddy till now. But because of the lack of rains, we are shifting to groundnut," says Santhosh Mani, who helps his father Mani Ponnuswamy farm six acres of land adjoining the Denkanikottai reserve forest. Yet, even here, there is

desperation: groundnut fields are prone to night raids by wild boar from the reserve forest but that is not seen as a problem right now.

In Chinnapangunatham, Jayeshwari Munuswamy's open well has dried up, and it isn't yet summer. The bore well that they installed two years ago has come to their rescue; they are the only ones in the village comprising 60 families who have a bore well. "That's why we can cultivate flowers, which sell for better rates in the market," says Jayeshwari, who works in their three-acre farm where they grow two varieties of jasmine, firecracker flowers and tube rose. "Vegetables are mostly for our use but if we get a good harvest, we sell them in the market."

But she too is surprised at the unnatural lack of rain. "Cholam takes just one month to grow but now, it takes three months," she says pointing to her struggling sorghum field. The drought and heat-resistant sorghum is an important crop in these parts for it feeds both



Ailing sugarcane crop in Palacode | AATHIRA P

man and livestock.

Millet farming has taken a hit too. "There were no rains this year, only a shower or two in December. Last year, it was possible to farm at least millets. This year, there is not even enough water for that," says Meenakshi Umesh, Director of the Puvudham Rural Development Trust in Nagarkoodal village, who runs the Puvudham Learning Center, a school that also focuses on imparting knowledge about organic farming and water conservation techniques.

"Only now do locals think of rainwater harvesting as a good idea," says Meenakshi. "We hope to work with them and the local administration on this. We also hope to find more ways of farming in this dry tract using methods that are eco-friendly and non-poisonous."

"Now I'm trying to farm sorghum because there is less water available, but it has gotten difficult," says Pachiappan S., who owns a two-acre field in Chinna-

pangunatham. "Earlier, I used to cultivate paddy and okra." Pachiappan is fortunate: he also runs a small grocery shop in the village and is not entirely dependent on agriculture.

However, life is much harder for agricultural labourers who have no other means of income. Many of them have very small land holdings or often, none at all.

"There is no rain and farming is impossible," says Rajamma, who owns barely 20 cents of land. "There are fights over drinking water now. Each family manages to get just two pots of drinking water through the Hogenakkal pipeline. Then how will we farm? All our plants are drying up."

Chinnapaapa Mani (60) is understandably bitter and launches into a tirade. "Those who have land are better off than us, who have nothing: neither land, nor jobs now because of the water crisis," she laments. "The only employment is the 100-work days scheme," she adds, referring to the MGNREGA.

"We will have to leave earlier than usual," says Angamma, referring to the yearly summer migration to other villages or small towns. "We usually go to Coimbatore, Bengaluru, Hosur and Kerala." With water-availability likely to worsen with the oncoming summer, local migrations look set to increase.

"Compared to other districts, Dharmapuri's current drought situation is the worst," says R. Shanmugasundaram, PRO at the Collectorate. "The Collector is surveying all areas to report the situation to the Chief Minister."

The resulting declaration that all districts are drought-hit, and the slew of relief measures - compensations for crop loss, increase of MGNREGA work days to 150 and fund allocations for water conservation measures - announced by Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam three days ago will hopefully ease the woes of workers in the agricultural sector of Dharmapuri.

## A mother, farmer, labourer and wife



Karpagam | ANKIT G

DURGA PRASAD

SITHERI: Karpagam's day starts at 3 a.m. with milking her two cows. She carries milk to the collection centre owned by TVS Company, where it is tested for its quality. Based on the fat content, she receives between Rs.10 to 30.

This is her only steady source of income throughout the year; even that depends on the vagaries of the quality of the milk. Karpagam belongs to the Malaiyali tribal group living in Sitheri in Pappireddipatti taluk in Dharmapuri district.

For six months, she works on her family land growing pulses, sesame, avrka, varghu and other minor crops for her fami-

ly's use. During good monsoon, the yield increases and she sells the excess in Harur market.

Her husband, helps her in agricultural work. But failure of the monsoon had reduced the work in the land; so he manages the cattle.

Sitheri is at an elevation of 1000 m, building an irrigation network here is difficult. People with enough money and land dig bore wells, otherwise the village depends every year on average 900mm rainfall. This year there is 50 percent deficit in the rainfall.

In the fallow season her husband migrates to Kerala or Coimbatore in search of construction jobs. "It's a common pheno-

menon here. Except large land owners, at least one person from every other family migrates from the village" said Karpagam.

She works under the MGNREGA Scheme during the fallow season or travels with her husband. In construction work she is paid Rs. 100 per day and her husband Rs.200.

With this income she manages to provide education to her four children. The first two daughters are married another daughter and the son are studying in colleges in nearby cities.

"But what is the use of education? My daughter completed B.Ed (bachelor of education) but didn't get a job and now she refuses to work in the field" she said.



# A district cast(e) in politics

Though the PMK benefitted from the violence in Dharmapuri, they deny being disseminators of the caste rhetoric

SAMUEL MERIGALA

Nothing can happen in this village without the consent of the Vanniyaars, said a drunken man peering through the window of the car as it departed the small village of Nathamedu in the Morappur taluk of Dharmapuri.

His breath reeked of pride and alcohol. This is the bitter aftertaste one is left with while leaving most villages in Dharmapuri district.

Approximately 80% of the people are from the Vanniyaars.

Of course not everyone there is as explicit as the drunk at the window, but caste-pride is an intoxicant there; very much like alcohol - volatile, virulent and capable of inducing violence.

P.Sinraj and Thenmozhi are two examples of implicit caste-drunk people.

The former is a Municipal councillor hopeful from Nathamedu and the latter is from Sellamkottai the mother of Divya of the Divya-Illavarasan case.

Caste dictates and motivates both of their ambitions.

One wants to win an election and the other wants her daughter to marry.

P.Sinraj says that Nathamedu is a PMK stronghold and has a population of 3883. "Chinnaya (AnbumaniRamadoss) frequents the village and has adopted it", he says.

3532 people of the total population are Vanniyaars

Sinraj is an active PMK functionary but has chosen to contest as an independent candidate for the municipal councillor elections which are scheduled for June.

He said that he has the money to contest without the support of any party but only much later did he reveal the real reason behind his running as an independent candidate.

"The PMK has given the ticket to an ST this time", he hissed in disgust.

The crowd which had gathered around the Banyan tree in the middle of the Village were all Vanniyaars and they shared the same disgust.

According to them, PMK had committed political suicide. The idea of a Dalit Councillor in a village famous for rigging every election

except the last one, by casting votes on behalf of its SC and ST residents is far-fetched for them.

"Until the last election we used to stand in line to vote but the Vanniyaars would press the button for us", says B. Annadurai, a dalit resident of the village.

"We have lived here all our life but they are the majority. We have tried to leave for good a few times but we came back with nowhere else to go.", he reveals.

There SC and ST's are called Arundathiars and live in a separate part of the village and they are seasonal migrants involved in unskilled labour. Ironically even the Arundathiars place their money on a victory for Sinraj.

When asked about his profession, Sinraj revealed that he rents out agricultural machines, tractors and JCBs in Nathamedu and the nearby villages and also said it's a thriving business that is especially good for politics.

"I also transport and sell boulders that I pick up and from the nearby hills"

He openly admitted that it is illegal and that he has been caught quite a few times.

The fact that the village rallies behind a shady independent candidate despite its political allegiance to the PMK shows that in some cases caste dictates politics even when political parties aren't the disseminators of that rhetoric.

However in the Divya-Illavarasan case which reeks of caste inflicted hatred that resulted in the burning of over two hundred houses in Natham colony and Illavarasan's eventual suicide, there is only one winner - The Pattali Makkal Katchi.

Whether the PMK instigated and was involved in the violence against the dalits of Natham colony in November 2012 is debatable.

However villagers from both Sellamkottai and Natham colony agree that the violence did benefit the party's dwindling vote bank in the 2014 general elections which sent Anbumani Ramadoss to Parliament from Dharmapuri.

The PMK had capitalized on the suicide of Divya's father, a Vanniyaar and helped in securing bail for those arrested in connection with the house

burning.

Four years on, Divya still lives in the same house with her mother and is enrolled in a B.Ed course in PMK's college in Dharmapuri.

"After things calmed down, I was working as a kindergarten teacher in a private school and was saving up money to study", Divya said.

"I didn't want to associate with the party. I knew they were using me"

After being cheated of her father's settlement and having to make do with the compassionate appointment given to her mother in the Cooperative society where her father worked, Divya was forced to accept

PMK's help.

As 24 year old Divya opened up to us, her mother interrupted with her primary concern - marriage.

"Divya should get married. It's been four years since the incident"

Allegedly, the PMK had even sought alliances for Divya on behalf of the family.

"They even offered me well-paying jobs in Chennai", Divya claimed.

"I refused. I didn't want to leave my mother alone"

Though her mother had refused to speak to her during court proceedings in the aftermath of the violence and despite having resorted

to nothing less than emotional blackmail to get her daughter to leave her dalit husband, the mother-daughter bond seems to be strong.

Divya hints at the emotional blackmail beginning again but this time in favour of a marriage unlike the last.

Women like Thenmozhi, are forced by society to protect their own and end up feeding caste based discrimination, a vice that consumes more than just their household, village, district or state.

When political parties see that people are intoxicated by caste and that they pride themselves of being

instruments of intoxication, they capitalize and burn existing bridges between rival castes beyond repair.

PMK's notoriety for cast based politics, said Anbumani Ramadoss, the son of PMK founder, S.Ramadoss, "Is the fabrication of the Dravidian parties who paint a false picture of the PMK in the press".

Cases such as these are an example of the the harsh rhetoric of many such villages, towns and hamlets across the country, despite spending several years in an independent India, where the rights and freedoms of every citizen were inalienable, but only in the pages of a dusty tome.

## Lost in the web of caste and politics

APARNA DHANASEKAR

Throughout the conversation she stares down at her feet as she speaks.

Divya reassures this reporter that she's comfortable speaking about 2012.

"I leave home for my classes at 7:30 a.m. and come back by 4:30 p.m. I don't go anywhere else."

Divya, a Vanniyaar girl married a Dalit, which triggered the 2012 caste violence in Dharmapuri. She is now pursuing B.Ed after completing a B.A. in Literature through a correspondence course.

"People point fingers as I walk down the street even today," she says.

Four years after the incident the stigma has not faded. Divya is surrounded by relatives who refuse to acknowledge her existence.

"I don't speak to anyone except my mother, brother and cousin Kumar. Kumar *anna* is a big mouth and so he's my link to the outside world."

In 2012, Vanniyaars torched houses in three Dalit colonies - Natham, Anna Nagar and Kodampatti in the district. The suicide of R. Nagaraj, Divya's father, provoked the mob violence.

A month after Divya married Illavarasan, a resident of SC Colony

(Natham), she refused to return home whereupon her father allegedly hanged himself. A few minutes after his death, an agitated mob entered the three colonies and set houses ablaze. Divya returned to her mother after the death and violence that punctuated her short-



An inconsolable Divya after the court proceedings. | THE HINDU

lived marriage.

"I was scared something would happen to him (Illavarasan) because of me."

Illavarasan was later found dead on the railway tracks. A CBI probe was ordered into the death, which was pronounced a suicide.

"If anyone comes home, I would refuse to come out until they are gone. For two years after the incident, I never went out."

It is no different today. The self-imposed social imprisonment continues.

The incident has left the two villages loathing each other.

Ravi (name changed), a resident of Natham Colony says, "My Vanniyaar friends would come home, eat and stay with us. It used to be different. Now there is nothing but hatred and vengeance."

"Recently when I met with an accident the Vanniyaars at the site left me to bleed on the road after verbally abusing me," he adds.

There have been many inter-caste marriages over the years. But what changed with Divya-Illavarasan's case?

"The incident was definitely planned in advance. It's not possible to get petrol, weapons and everything ready in minutes within he (girl's father) died," says A. Murugan another colony resident.

"It's the PMK's plan to gain votes. How else do you think they won the election?" he adds, referring to the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) is one of the most prominent parties practising caste-based politics in Tamil Nadu.

The party which won the elections for three years in a row, lost to DMK in 2009 with a vote difference of 1,35,942. Two years after the violence, in 2014 with Anbumani

Ramadoss, the president of PMK's youth wing, as its candidate it won the election with a 77,146 majority.

The party in Vanniyaar dominated districts of Villupuram, Cuddalore, Dharmapuri, Kancheepuram, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai, Krishnagiri, Salem, Ariyalur and Perambalur gained a foot hold after the 2012 Violence in Dharmapuri.

Responding to the allegations, Ramadoss says, "It's all rumour mongering. The Dravidian parties are to blame. They turned against us after our alliances with them were scrapped. My party draws members from all castes and religion"

The former union health minister also blames the Press, "If you say a lie ten times it doesn't become true."

However, residents like Palaniyamma of Sellamkottai, the Vanniyaar village claim that Dalits torched their own houses, while others believe that it was Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK), a Dalit party that instigated the violence.

"After that violence, PMK gained a lot of votes from our area. It's not because they incited the violence, but people started identifying them with the caste," Divya's cousin explains.

Divya didn't leave the village after all this, "I want to be here. I feel I'm with them (her father and Illavarasan) when I'm here".

Such is the story of Divya, lost in the turmoil of caste and politics.

## Deaths of 'Sumangali' sisters shrouded in secrecy

APARNA DHANASEKAR

SINTHALPADI: On a Thursday morning, Vadivel, 42, an agricultural labourer in Sinalthapadi left for the fields only to return that evening to find two of his three daughters missing. The sisters aged 19 and 24 had left home to work in a cotton mill in Avinashi, in Coimbatore district.

"They learnt of the job through flyers distributed by the mill," said Rani, the girls' mother.

"The mill had arranged a vehicle to pick up the girls it was recruiting from the area."

Sumangali, a scheme forbidden but practiced by cotton and textile mills in the western districts of Tamil Nadu, is a contract based employment of young girls. The mills agree to pay the girl's parents a sum starting from Rs. 30,000, either in the beginning or at the end of the contract period. The contract is not less than a year. Once signed, the girls are under

the management's control. It is likened to "soft trafficking."

The economic and social conditions combined with emotional blackmail from parents push the girls to work under harsh and exploitative conditions. Some mills coerce them into resigning days before the contract ends, so as to avoid the payment of the promised sum. The young girls are often subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Despite awareness created by voluntary organizations, an increasing number of girls from Dharmapuri still sign such contracts.

Months after they left home, the two sisters Selvi\* and Shenbagam\* were to return home for the Pongal festival.

The evening before they were to come home, Rani received a phone call from the mill. She was told that Shenbagam had attempted suicide and was being taken to Ramachandra Hospital in Coimbatore. Vadivel immediately called his brother



The youngest sister writes in her diary "I miss you both".

Dhandapani, who works at Ganga Hospital there.

Shenbagam was declared "brought dead."

The parents stayed back as some relatives left to bring the body home.

"A day after Shenbagam was cremated, I cleaned the house and went to dump the garbage in the backyard when I heard women from the nearby fields screaming - 'Your sister drank pesticide. Go call someone!'",

the youngest of the three girls Kayalvizhi\*, 16 recalls.

"She died on the way to hospital." Less than a day after Shenbagam's death, Selvi committed suicide.

"Selvi was ridden with guilt for she had persuaded her sister to go to the Mill," said a relative on condition of anonymity.

"Only after she committed suicide we figured something was wrong," Vadivel explains.

What had happened to Shenbagam? The question draws a blank look from Vadivel.

"She was raped," the father replied.

It is a custom to bathe the body before it is buried or cremated. "That's when we noticed her head injury. And then we figured," a relative explains.

A woman from the village who sells vegetables in the train told the parents that she met a girl from the mill who knew that the vendor was from the same village as the sisters. She said

that the "the owner's son and a north Indian guy had raped Shenbagam". Soon after the incident, she phoned her father and asked him to take her home.

The girl could not be traced. The only information known about her is that she is from Tirupattur, a district 40 km away from Krishnagiri.

"At the time of death they (the mill) gave us Rs. 50,000 as compensation and promised to give some more after the death. That's the last time we heard from any of them," Rani says.

The parents have neither seen the mill nor the owners. Vadivel says, "We went only once. Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) took us to Coimbatore. The party members said they'll take care of it and asked us to stay back in the hotel".

Shenbagam's post-mortem report was not delivered in full. Only three out of the five reports were given to the parents. The report findings of the uterus were not given.

"The doctor at the Dharmapuri hospital was going to give us the full report. But something changed after the police spoke to the doctors."

The case is now in the Erode district court and the parents are unaware of the case details and the lawyer prosecuting it.

"It is totally handled by my brother Dhandapani," the girls' father said. Dhandapani was unavailable for comment, and Vadivel is not willing to share his contact details.

The immediate family members evade important questions which leaves the case with many loose ends.

"The word around is that the family got Rs.8,00,000 compensation. But somewhere between the party and the girls' uncle, the money was swindled," a person from a local organisation commented under conditions of anonymity.

"It's three years since", Rani chokes as her eyes well up.

(\*Names changed)

# The Covert Kilns of Dharmapuri

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

PALACODE: Thin wisps of smoke spew out of numerous bastion-like brick kilns dotting the landscape in Panaikulam village. It is 3 p.m. and rest time for Mukundan S. (name changed), who has just finished a grueling 12-hour shift on the brick kiln that he operates on his land.

"Work begins at 2 a.m. and ends at 2 p.m.," says the tall gaunt man, who has been making bricks for five years now during the dry months. "There are one lakh bricks in this kiln alone," he says proudly, pointing to the kiln smoking nearby. "A kiln this big takes six months to build. It requires at least two tons of rice husk and 20 tons of firewood."

The brick kiln he points to is spectacular: a three-meter-tall square 'clamp kiln'. Traditional clamp kilns are built by stacking unbaked bricks to create cavities into which fuel is placed and set afire for baking.

"First, we carve out a small patch of earth and place firewood in it," says Mukundan. "We place firewood above and around this and throw in tamarind husk. Molded bricks are then arranged around this, one at a time."

Each kiln is a work of art: every brick is painstakingly



Bricks in the making, Sankar's wife helps out at the GKM kiln | AATHIRA P

stacked one on top of another.

The returns from the kilns though, are far from spectacular. "Rates have dropped. We get only Rs. 3 or 4 per brick," says Mukundan.

Yet, it is better than farming, he says. Many farmers with small land holdings are turning to brick-making to escape the agricultural crisis in the district. "I cannot farm because there are no rains this year," says Mukundan, who was a small-time ragi farmer and agricultural laborer before turning to brick-making.

Shankar Bodiappan (name

changed), a worker at the GKM brick kiln in the village of Samanur in northern Dharmapuri's Marandahalli Panchayat says, "I get Rs. 600 for every 1000 bricks I make."

However, kilns require huge amounts of raw material: water, soil, rice or tamarind husk and firewood. Small-time kiln owners like Mukundan who have no savings depend entirely on local money lenders. "It takes around six months to pay off these debts. Now because of demonetisation, money lenders are refusing to give us money and this has affected us

terribly," says Mukundan.

"No one is willing to give us loans. There are around 90 big kilns in this area, we have all been affected," says Sheela (name changed), who works in a brick kiln nearby.

This unorganized sector in Tamil Nadu comprises more than 2000 big and medium kilns. With more than 100,000 brick kilns across the country, India is the second largest producer of bricks globally.

Child labour is common in these brick kilns, as in the case of Shankar, who began making bricks at the age of 12. Twenty

years later, he still does the same thing. His wife pitches in too, as their 10-year-old son Karthik tends to his two younger siblings.

While his father asserts that Karthik studies in a school and has vacations right now, Karthik is not sure which grade he studies in or which school he goes to.

To make matters worse, many kiln operators have no licenses for their kilns. "It is illegal. But what do we do," asks Shankar.

Mukundan doesn't have a permit either. Won't he get into trouble with the authorities? "No one comes to check," he murmurs, but he is uncomfortable now. Clamming up, he doesn't want his or his kiln's pictures taken.

Initially, Sheela too refuses to talk about her work. But she relents. "Brick making is dependant on weather conditions. The losses due to rains run into almost three to four lakh," she says. Breakage is common and skill is crucial to make the perfect kiln, the daily wage worker adds. "My legs ache all day, but what can we do? If I had gone to school, I could have found another job."

"What we earn is not enough to live on. But we have to do this because we don't know anything else," adds Mukundan, a father of three.



Forgotten village of Erimalai | SIDDHESH R

## Erimalai Irula tribe in a limbo

SIDDHESH RAUT

ERIMALAI: An eight km trek up the Erimalai hill-top in the morning gives way to picturesque views of the surrounding greenery. A misty fog envelops the buildings and fields down below. It takes an hour for the average person to scale to the top.

The fastest time recorded is by the Irula tribesmen, who have been living at the summit for three generations now - a flat ten minutes, precarious shortcuts included.

Elders of the village talk of days when they were born and lived in caves nearby, surviving on the honey formed in honeycombs on top of the walls and the hard eri root that grew below-soil, to which the hill lends its name.

All that changed once the Forest department chanced upon the Irulas in 1988. They built hutments out of thatch and mud for them which marked their entry into mainstream society.

"The Government made these pukka houses in 2003," says Rajappa (42), "But they are still not enough. We need atleast 22." But it is water that is the main issue here he adds.

The large upward slope of the region makes for no chance of water storage. "We have been living here for three generations and there is still no water supply, let alone toilets. The government does provide us with 100 units of free electricity every month for our houses, but we always end up using around 25 units itself," a tribal says.

Open defecation is still a commonly prevalent amongst the Irulas, a practice that has previously known to attract wild animals towards their native tribal settlements.

Rajappa, along with 200 hundred others, is living the reality of a neglected people, remembered only during the time of elections where a voting

booth has been placed at the foot of the hill. This being closer than the well, their primary source of water, which is a further two kilometers away.

"I managed to have an education till the 12th grade, in the hope of looking for a Government job," says Rajappa. "But that wasn't possible as I was the sole bread-winner of my family. So we had to manage on 100 rupees a day working in the fields nearby," he says.

Women are also forced to work under such conditions, earning fifty rupees for similar labour work.

Asked about whether they received pattas for the land that they cultivate, Rajappa silently shakes his head.

Ragi and other dry crops are grown on the land held by forest natives, a community distinctly acknowledged by the Forest Department apart from the other tribals.

"We have made provisions for the Irula people under several schemes to use the Tamarind plantations for foraging purposes," says Chief Conservation officer R Priyadarshini, Forestry Department, Government of Tamil Nadu.

"We do not keep track of how much they are taking, but rather, how much output they are getting after selling the items in the market"

"The forest people told us that they were giving us a concession for the forest permit."

"We paid and were expecting to get the money back in six months," this was in 2006, when the Erulas pooled in their savings and paid Rs. 25,000 as a deposit. Money that is yet to be returned.

That was their last foray into selling their products at the mainstream markets.

For most of the year when there is no water for their crops, the Irulas manage to live on rations from the government, in a state of limbo that sees no end.

## Rowing against currents

MANIKUNTALA DAS

HOGENAKKAL: Under the hazy-hot rays of the sun, a group of boatmen sit in a circle, waiting for their next passenger. "The flow of tourists slows to a trickle during the off season. It is only the sixth boat that is leaving since morning," said R. Krishnamurthy, one of the eldest boatmen in the community.

The coracles, also known as *parisal* in Tamil, are the heart of the tourism in Hogenakkal Falls in the Dharmapuri district and the boatmen are the ones who breathe life into it. Though it is a tiring and painful task, the boatmen paddle the coracles carrying four people for about an hour and a half.

"Initially when I began working here, the fare was around 25 paise per boat, but now it is Rs. 750, out of which Rs. 150 goes in taxes," said Krishnamurthy, who has been a boatman for over 35 years.

"People might think that the amount they pay is a huge one, but when it comes to us, it is barely anything. Our policy is to divide the entire day's earnings among the number of boatmen in order to reduce competition. Since it is the off season now, we hardly make Rs. 100-200 a day; the maximum we get is Rs. 300. The pay scale is good during the main tourist season and we sometimes earn upto Rs. 700 a day," he added.

Krishnamurthy is reminded of his earlier days when he used to come here with his father. "My father got me here once



Parisal boatman ferrying tourists | MANIKUNTALA D

and in a single visit, I learnt the art: the art of paddling. I had to practice after that to master it. It has been in our family for generations," he said.

Most boatmen, who, like him, come from the nearby Ootamalai village, pursue two major occupations, boating and fishing. "But these days, we do not even get much fish to catch," said R. Venugopal, another boatman from Hogenakkal.

Their wives also supplement the household income by selling fried fish in the stalls outside the falls but the decline in the catch has greatly affected their livelihood business.

There is a major downturn in the business during the monsoon months as they are not allowed to boat in the strong currents. There is no income for two months of the year. Despite these hardships, it is the

boatmen who make the Hogenakkal a special place for the tourists to visit.

But this profession, at present, is at risk. No youngsters are interested, and the government has stopped issuing licenses to work as a certified boatman.

"We are already a community of more than 400 people. Even if a single person joins now, our share of money will be further divided and we cannot afford to do this at the moment," said worker Krishnamurthy.

"Moreover, there is no growth or prospect in our occupation. I do not want my son to deal with what I have faced in my entire life. I would like him to study more and get a better job," he added. The only thing he wants from the government is help in his children's higher education to carve a better future.

## Dying stone craft

SAMUEL MERIGALA

HOGENAKKAL: Two men chip away at small boulders by the side of the road in B. Agraharam, a village on the Dharmapuri - Hogenakkal stretch of road.

Rudimentary tools surround these small-built men with strong forearms while their young wives take care of their small children.

K. Elumalai (27), whose hands are as hard as the boulders that he carves into grinding stones tell me that this is the chief profession of his caste. He is a Boyar, a Scheduled Tribe who live in parts of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

"Business is down," Elumalai says.

After the introduction of the free 'mixie' scheme by the Government of Tamil Nadu, they are left with just enough to buy rations.

They bring in a load of boulders every two months and carve them for grinding stones completely by hand. "Each boulder costs us Rs. 40 and we can make one large grinding stone from one boulder," Elumalai explains.

The large grinding stones fetch Rs. 500 while the smaller ones are about half the price.

The ten-fold profit margin amounts to nothing without the buyers.

"We manage to sell only ten stones a month," Lakshmi, Elumalai's pregnant wife says.

The family is forced to travel around Dharmapuri in search of buyers to sell their hand-crafted grinding stones.

Stone chipping is the only skill the Boyars have and with the demand for their craft on the decline.

"We will send our children to school," Lakshmi says.

"We practice a dying craft with a little hope"



Life at rock bottom for the Boyars | SAMUEL M

proof for training the youth.

When officials from the District Collectorate visited the hamlet a year later, the people were told that youth from the hamlet were working in Hosur as per the bond, after training for a few months. But in reality nothing of the sort happened.

About 15 years ago, 36 tribal families living in Panapatti Hamlet in the forest near Hogenakkal were relocated to Koothapadi. The people were provided with houses, schools, drinking water and electricity but no alternate employment opportunities. So they went to the forest to collect wood for fuel, minor forest products, rear their cattle and pluck tamarind seeds for their livelihood survival.

But five years ago forest officials 'banned' collection of fuel wood and cattle rearing in

forest. "Whenever we get caught collecting fuel wood, they put 'fuel wood case' and collect Rs. 50 as 'fine'" said M. Manivel (25) resident of the village. Tribals carry the load on their head for a few kilometers to Hogenakkal and sell it for Rs. 100 to 200 based on the season.

In cases of rearing goats, forest officials collect Rs.100 per goat as 'fine'. "If we don't collect wood for one day, we will not have food for the next day" added Manivel.

During Tamarind season, forest department allots community land for the people and they tender it to highest bidders. The income is shared between the people and the forest department.

The development programs relating to women were implemented through the self-

help group. The officials helped the SHG to open bank accounts and taught the members to sign their names.

"Officials have our bank accounts number, when it reaches a certain amount they call us or give us some training and get money from us" said S. Nagarani, treasurer of the SHG.

The members were given training in chicken rearing for a week. At the end of the training, each person was given seven chicks for Rs. 500 per chick. "We didn't ask for the training. They force us to sign in the check leaf and they don't even fill the amount" added Nagarani. The rate of chicken per kg is around Rs. 200 in the surrounding area. The chicks rarely grow to more than 2kg according to the villagers.

In another case, each household had received

Rs.8000 as a loan at very low interest rate from BDO. In one of the regular visits from the collectorate, officials insisted that they had signed for a loan amount of Rs. 10,000.

On being asked, the officials in the BDO informed that while dividing the amount it got reduced to Rs 8000 and they were allowed to pay only that much. "When we were unable to repay the amount they (BDO officials) take our passbooks," said one of member of the SHG.

"Even for the meeting in the collector's office we were not given travel expense and food. After meeting they ask us to sign in the check leaf for Rs. 200 or more" said Nagarani.

"We should stop signing in the check leaf. People don't come to officials if we need something but they are ready to take if something is given."

## Koothapadi hamlet caught in the clutches of heavy corruption

DURGA PRASAD

KOOTHAPADI: Under 'Pudhu Vaazhu', a World Bank-funded project to eradicate poverty, the State government had allotted Rs. 1,40,000 for employment training in welding to a

group of young people from the hamlet. The training had to be given in the village and a welding shop would be opened later, closer to the village.

Promising participation in the above scheme, officials from the Block Development

Office (BDO) in Pennagaram got signatures from beneficiaries on bond papers. Instead of giving training, they were taken to a welding shop in Pennagaram for a day to take photos of them working there. These photos were later used as



Hamlet of Koothapadi, in the phase of corruption | DURGA P



# Underage marriage, Caesarean section rampant

APARNA DHANASEKAR

DHARMAPURI: "There are mothers as young as 17 here," staff nurse Usha Rani says as she begins her morning shift in the Dharmapuri Government General Hospital (DGGH). She opens the register and points out names of the young girls.

"Of course, they don't give their real age. No one's going to check their documents."

The names are registered with false ages to avoid trouble, as most of the girls are married before the legal age of 18.

The number of teenage pregnancies in the hospital has come down over the past few years according to House

Surgeon R. Suji. But the hospital still sees a lot of women having their third or fourth child at the young age of 20.

T. Ranjitham (23), a native of Mangalakkottai near the town of Nallampalli, is at the DGGH for the delivery of her fourth child. She was married off at the age of 15 and had her first child at 16.

Asked why she did not protest, she says, "I was not interested in going to school and so couldn't give any valid reason to stop my marriage." Ranjitham's eldest daughter is six now.

"If the first two or three children are girls, the families don't allow the mother to go for family planning operation," says

Shenbagam, a nurse at the hospital.

Underage marriage and teenage pregnancies result in various complications during pregnancy and childbirth.

"Most of these young women are weak and anaemic," Rani explains. Multiple pregnancies and short intervals between deliveries are major reasons for complications. "They do not take the iron supplements provided by the village health nurses."

Lack of awareness and side effects such as constipation from the tablets are the main reasons.

Consequently, infants born either have a low birth weight,

*Women who have undergone C-sections are at higher risk of early post-partum depression in the first few months.*

or are premature.

Ranjitham lost two children, one to complications during childbirth, and the other when the baby choked to death with the umbilical cord around its neck. Such complications force

doctors to opt for Caesarean sections, Dr. Suji explains. But these are not the only reasons for C-sections.

"There will be 32 to 40 deliveries in a day out of which 10-15 are C-sections", she adds. But the women have a different story to tell.

Muniamma (21), pursuing her Bachelors in Education in Dharmapuri says, "Almost all the women here have undergone C-sections."

Only three out of the 35 women spoken to have had natural deliveries. As she waits for the doctor to remove her stitches, Muniamma complains, "I did not have pain and my contractions were at irregular

intervals. So I asked my doctor to give me an injection or a tablet to induce labour, which could've prevented the painful operation."

But she refused saying it wouldn't work and that eventually I'd have to have a C-section." The women are ill-informed and not free to choose.

Complications during C-sections are common. They include excess blood loss, infections and clots. They also cause adhesions: the binding of scar tissues when the incision heals from the surgery. This may lead to problems in bowel movements or fertility if they block the neighbouring organs.

Women who have undergone C-sections are at higher risk of early post-partum depression in the first few months. The operation also causes breathing problems in babies.

Eight of the 35 women had to have Caesarean as they had done so for their previous delivery.

Common reasons for the doctor's choice to operate are lack of pain at the time of labour, lack of dilation and overweight babies.

The option of injections and tablets to induce pain is overlooked. Caesareans are opted for less time consumption and more profit for the benefit of doctors.

## Open defecation still the norm

AATHIRA PERINCHERY

NALLAMPALLI: Despite implementation of Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), open defecation is still the norm across many villages.

Chinnapapa Mani (78) of Chinnapangunatham village in Nallampalli taluk has no toilet in her house, and the need for one has not occurred to her, she says. According to mother-of-two Aruna Pachamuthu (23) of Nagarkoodal, relieving herself in the fields nearby is normal.

"Town people have got used to using toilets," says Chinnapapa's neighbor Saalamma. She got a toilet built in her house three years ago through the SBM, but keeps it under lock and key. "The process will happen only if we sit outside in the fields," she laughs. "I cannot relieve myself in the toilet, it is like defiling my own house."

Apart from the apparent cultural stigma still associated with using a toilet built under the roof of the same house, the question of pouring down three or more litres of water down a drain is unthinkable for these women, who receive just 20 litres of drinking water per family per day. "Even the Hogenakkal drinking water has decreased, we now receive only two pots of water," says Rajamma, of the adjoining Thipatty village. Kala, a farmer at Ootamalai in Pennagaram taluk, says she does not know about the Scheme or government-funded toilets. "If we knew, we could have done it too," she says.

According to the State's 2016-17 budget, 7.66 lakh household toilets and 50 public sanitary complexes were to be constructed under the aegis of the SBM (Gramin). At Rs. 9000 crore, fund allocation from the Centre for rural sanitation has also been the highest ever. However, in the absence of a program to raise awareness about health and hygiene and an assured supply of water, many of the structures built under the scheme are likely to fall into disuse or become storage rooms for firewood and coconut husk.



Kids of Thenkaraikottai during the daily class hours |VAISHALI V

## Carving a path towards education in the hills

VAISHALI V

THENKARAİKOTTAI: Selfless service by the Catholic church of Thenkaraikottai brings a ray of hope to a lot of aspiring and needy children.

Thenkaraikottai, about an hour journey from Dharmapuri, has a large church at the entrance to the village.

The bell rang and the kids were all reading their lessons loud. It was a primary school with Tamil as their medium of instruction and has a good strength of girls and boys (155).

The classrooms had all kinds of play items and visual materials for better understanding.

A separate session in the evening is meant to focus on kids with special needs like reading problems. Among them was a John, whose growth had stunted but had the magic to make people smile. Most of them have been diagnosed having lower intelligence level.

There are four teachers for each class and a head master.

Father Joseph headed the school with the help of Sister Rita. Although the government had provided them with slippers, they would wear out in a month or two in the rough terrain. The girls were the object of teasing by drunken men standing around tasmac shops. However, despite the complaint, the police refused to take any action. And the harassment continues even now.

Most of the parents of these kids are daily wage workers or labourers. Also a majority of them were sent to Goa as a part of the church programme to provide employment. So the children were left with their grandparents. Some of them did not have parents and they were taken care of by the church.

Each child is special and talented. Some could mimic actors, sing film songs and dance. They were very confident and innocent. They were fond of sports like gilli, goli soda, kabbadi, kannamoochi, iceboy.

These kids were given

healthy mid day meal and evening snacks every day. All of them were from BPL families and belonged to scheduled caste. They were all accepted without any attempt at conversion unless they requested the church.

The children were taken on a trip every year with whatever money they could contribute with the rest was from church making up the difference. This year they are planning to go to Yelagiri.

They also had a habit of dropping a coin everyday in their piggy banks as a part of their saving.

"All kids are special and everyone deserves an education. We are doing whatever we can. We not only impart education but also good habits and discipline. Although there are private schools, this is the most preferred. We also have higher secondary schools and most of the kids pass out and go to college. Many are successful now", says Sister Rita.

## Education in the hinterland Teacher battles child labour

SIDDHESH RAUT

HOGENAKKAL: Amidst the Hogenakkal village lies a solitary building facing the road to the waterfalls. The high-pitched squeals of school children pass through the walls as the lunch break is announced.

Inside, clad in a faded, yet prim and clean sari, a frail woman quietly clears any stray reading and school material off the floor.

Since joining the National Child Labour Project as a teacher in 1996, what hasn't faded is P. Ambika's quiet sense of determination about her vocation.

A native of the nearby Ootamalai village, she is one of the three teachers who run the school for children who come from underprivileged families, forced to send their children to work in order to survive.

Ambika cajoles two small girls, Madhubala and Kili, to go for lunch. "We found them herding sheep not far from here. They just joined this term," explains Ambika.

Every year, she and her colleagues get the latest details of the families living in and around the town from the Block Research Coordinator in Pennagaram before making their way to their homes.

"We keep an eye for any child on the street. The main thing is to see if they are interested, then we will go to their families and convince them to send their children to school."

Jiva, a seven-year-old boy, plays quietly with a ball under the lone tree in the NCLP vicinity. "Before coming to study here, these children were diving off the Hogenakkal waterfalls for five to ten rupees a dive," a practice that still continues, despite repeated banning.

"They were also working as masseurs at the falls," a common profession, well-paying during the peak tourism months during December to March.

The NCLP guarantees a monthly allowance of 150 rupees from the UNICEF and 500 rupees yearly scholarship from the Government of Tamil Nadu for each student. This amount is deposited in a special account and handed over to the families only after the child completes the two-year programme.

"The uniforms, textbooks, geometry-box are all free though. Drop-outs do happen in drastic cases. But they are very rare."

So far, according to records, 393 students have successfully completed the course from the school.

On being asked how many had cleared school with Ambika ma'am when she was a student, she said, "There were around eight children in our class, though I was the only one who cleared." Completing a B.A in Tamil, she later went on to complete her Masters in



P. Ambika in her element |SIDDHESH R

Pondicherry on a scholarship.

"The first three months are spent in teaching them the basics. They are then divided according to age and learning ability and are then taught in batches to make sure they reach the eight grade level."

The children are then sent off to study till the secondary level at schools in Pennagaram and Ootamalai.

"One of them has joined the army, done B.Sc and other degrees. One of the girls also did B.Com (Gold medal) and is now doing her Chartered Accountancy."

With the current strength at 25 children, Ambika ma'am says that the attendance varies yearly. The largest batch that she had at a time was during 2013-2014, when she taught sixty children.

According to the NCLP mandate, the children are taught by "volunteers" who are paid Rs. 6000/- monthly. Ambika P has been taking care of her two parents and her sister with this amount for twenty years.

"Sometimes, the collector doesn't give the amount for the school expenses, like paying the Aayah, or the rent," she says. "The money comes from my pocket once in a few months," she says without hesitation.

Her dedication is not only restricted to the school however.

When the 40-year-old was congratulated on her getting married, soon to take up a new name, she said, "Till my death sir, my father's name will stay with me, always."

## Ray of hope for Madhubala



Madhubala and Kili |MANIKUNTALA D

MANIKUNTALA DAS

HOGENAKKAL: From the age of five, she used to walk miles herding the cattle, but now the 12-year-old K. Madhubala attends school after being rescued from the bondage of child labour.

She goes to the school started under the National Child Labour Project in the neighbouring Ootamalai village. P. Ambika and G. Revati, teachers of the NCLP

School, saw her working during the day in the nearby hilly terrains and intervened to free her from the burden.

"Being a family of ten, my parents' earning by cattle rearing is not sufficient hence we were forced to work from a very young age," said Madhubala matter-of-factly.

"We visited their house at least five times to convince her parents to allow her to study. Her nine year old sister Kili was also forced to work along with her," said Revati.

Unlike her two elder sisters who got married at the very young age of 13 and 15, Madhubala along with her two younger sisters joined the school in 2016.

With her work-hardened hands that had lost its childhood softness, Madhubala took out her notebook and started noting down the things taught by her teacher. "I want to be a doctor when I grow up," she said, "I want to give tablets to the patients and cure them of their illness."

Even now, she has to walk a long distance to fetch water for their household. The dinner preparation in their home is also divided among all, and that does not leave much time for her to study after school.

"There are days when the three girls cannot leave home because there are elephants out in their region. Despite these hindrances, they try their best to attend school," said Ambika.

## One and only lifeline for Sittilingi

VAISHALI V

SITTLILINGI: Amidst the spreading forest covers, out of nowhere, an initiative like the Tribal Health Care is veritable lifeline for the villagers around the area.

A journey of about 105 km from Dharmapuri brings one to the Tribal Health Initiative of the Sittilingi village. The health centre is housed in an exquisite designed wood and bamboo building depicting tribal art. It has a separate building for every service and is surrounded by a rich garden. This was started in 1983 by a Gandhian couple, Dr Regi and Lalitha Regi. Tribal places in Jharkhand and Bihar were also considered before settling on Sittilingi. The workforce is divided among maintenance, administration, and health superintendent and community health department. They also provide two year course and a Diploma in practical training for the nurse.

The hospital has a

registration desk at the entrance, a pharmacy that gets stock of all medicines every week and gives a concession for tribals up to 65%.

The centre boasts of injection room, laboratory for blood and urine tests, X-ray room, Dentistry and vision, medical ward, scan and endoscopy, a surgical ward, maternity and operation theatre with all the requirements.

Apart from this they also have a mess that supplies food throughout the day. The duty doctors and interns stay in separate cottages inside the campus.

The doctors are all specialists in general medicine and come from Bangalore and Kerala. They follow a schedule and a fee pattern for every service.

In case of big amounts, there is time given for settlement on monthly basis.

This is the only hospital for Sittilingi as well as the llages of Kalrayan hills. There is one ambulance for emergencies.

However mobility is still a major concern in remote areas. Fortunately, there are inspiring doctors like Dr Ravi Kumar rendering continuous service for the past five years along with his family.

"I completed my studies and travelled across India. After working for two years in Orissa, I came here to Sittilingi and decided to stay for a year. Days went by, but the decision never changed. Now I cannot stay in Bangalore for more than two days. I am extremely happy with the job and the living conditions here. The people here are so trusting and believe every word of ours, says Dr Ravi Kumar.

According to the Survey for Revitalisation of Tribal Practices, tuberculosis and hypertension were the two commonly observed diseases. Pneumonia and diabetes are starting to appear. Malnutrition is yet another highly prevalent issue. There is also a big decrease in home deliveries and female infanticide although sex

determination is still prevalent in some places.

Tribal culture, however, is trying to mimic the habits of urban centres is losing many traditional traits like physical work and home-made food. Lately, mental illnesses like depression and psychosis are becoming known but there is a noticeable decrease in AIDS. There is active surveillance to report all types of ailments in the villages on a regular basis.

Mostly treatment is given here, in case of serious illness, the patients are sent to the government hospital.

"We have come to admit my brother's wife for removal of extra flesh from the intestine. The doctors here are very dedicated and the hospital gives a good concession for the tribal population after verifying the Aadhar card.

"They also give us time to pay money in case of huge sums", says Kasthuri, a patient. This is such a relief to us in case of emergency and fatal illness.

# Irula: A language on the verge of extinction

SIDDHESH RAUT

**PENNAGARAM:** Two men stand in a clearing in the grass and talk animatedly with each other, their spindly arms making expansive gestures, as if trying to encompass everything in their reach. Their faces, wizened by exposure to the harsh sun for decades, shift from looks of concentration in one moment, to amazement the next. The Irula villagers gather around and smile, as the men point, and express a moment of shared happiness in an unknown tongue.

Dotan and his nephew Citya are among the last remaining speakers of their native Irula language.

What they were carrying on at one point, was a mundane conversation between the men-folk of the tribe. Dotan was talking about the state of the

beehives that would be sprouting during the winters – the mating season for bees. He was wondering whether the new hives would produce honey – a staple food of the Irulas, still a mandatory part of every household – for long.

At this point, Citya has his doubts. He states that the bees are not mating enough, or there are fewer honeycombs formed, with many withering away since last year. While they express sadness and worry about how they are going to survive until the next season, Dotan sees a glint of honey shining through a crack in the cave, which makes them celebrate. They will make it through comfortably this year.

“I was born and brought up in a cave not far from here. Me, my nephew here and a few others are the only remaining people from the cave-living days,” he says matter-of-factly. “The

language started to take a backseat when Nanjappa, a Member of the Legislative Assembly, started securing rights for the tribal people, getting us into the city. That is when they also discovered us.”

By “they”, he refers to the Forest Department that chanced upon the Irulas on Erimalai, in 1988. “I have six children and Citya here has one. None of them know the language as they began mixing more and more with the non-tribal folk. All of them have migrated from the village in search of better prospects.”

Dotan and Citya do not regret these new developments and are unsentimental about the impending death of their tongue. “Sad? Why would I feel sad? It is because our children began to learn Tamil that their true lives have begun. A whole new world began to open up to them, or they would still be languishing in their caves. They have moved on, thank god for that,” he says, folding his hands, looking heavenward.

No government officials, anthropologists or linguists have come to record the language, he says. “What script? Our spoken tongue is all there is! I think what really matters is that the useful, practical knowledge of our ancestors, like that of the various medicinal plants and herbs, is passed down from generation to generation. And our customs and values, which are already being handed down. So I have no complaints.”

He takes our leave to chat with the elders, walking off to the caves that they once called home.



Dotan claims to be one of the last speakers of the Irula language in Erimalai. | ANANTH S.

## The Bharwads of Wardha

AIHIK SUR / CHANDAN KUMAR MANDAL



Picking her way along an earthen dike using a herding staff as a balance beam.



“There is no money,” he said explaining why he is not in school.



The family's youngest girl - already engaged to a boy from a village nearby - will be married off when she comes of age.



“We go back to our native village once a year. We travel for two days straight: walk and take many buses,” says cowherd Moti Bhuwan's wife.



Moti Bhuwan: “Before you leave come have tea with us again!”

# From Kanchi to Colombia: *therukoothu's* dramatic journey

AMBIKA RAJA

**WALAJABAD:** Tamil Nadu's *therukoothu* is a traditional folk theatre that combines dialogues with songs and dance. Although literally translated to mean ‘street theatre’, the performance is usually done on a proscenium. Rich vibrant costumes that blend with the powerful background music make the acts adapted from Indian mythologies more expressive. Purisai Duraisami Kannappa Thambiran Paramparai Therukoothu Mandram, situated in Purisai village of Kancheepuram district, has been fostering the art form for five generations.

*A folk song plays in the background. A middle-aged man clad in an orange dhoti walks along the length of the stage. Three men adorned with jewels, crowns and gaudy attire enter, dancing to rhythmic music. They go in circles: singing, chanting, jumping with ecstasy. The audience welcome it with laughter and a round of applause.*

“Our journey has never been a cakewalk. We have had our struggles and we still fight battles in our daily lives,” says Kanappa Sambandam, the head

of the theatre group. Having taught at Delhi's National School of Drama and France's Théâtre du Soleil, he recalls that his father never wanted him to

take up this profession. “Money was tight in those days and several of my relatives had passed away due to starvation and poverty. Father hoped I would opt for a proper occupation.”

During the revival years of the art form, there were only five theatre groups in Tamil Nadu performing *therukoothu*. The team from Purisai performed in other villages during festivals and slowly gained a provincial recognition. The freedom struggle witnessed actors spreading social messages through their *therukoothu* performances, during which several members of the Purisai group were imprisoned. After

the 1960s, Kanappa Sambandam took over as the head and revolutionised the way *therukoothu* was being performed. Shifting from Mahabaratha adaptations, he began including stories from the Ramayana such as Vali Vatham, Hanuman Doothu, Raavana Vatham etc. Until then income was quite low for the 20-strong crew. A switch in tale ensured greater opportunities for performances. It also secured him the Sangeetha Nadaka Academy Award for best actor and the Kalaimamani award.

In later years, Kanappa Sambandam along with N. Muthuswamy, a contemporary playwright, adapted stories of

Bertolt Brecht and Gabriel Garcia Marquez to deliver social messages through his plays. With international adaptations came international fame. “We have performed in almost all the major cities of the world; Singapore, Chicago, Paris, Reunion Island. On January 28 and 29 we will be staging The Caucasian Chalk Circle in Colombia.”

Despite the laborious training they undergo, the crew conduct performances for the public for only six months of the year. The remaining 26 weeks are allotted for agriculture and artisanal works. “We do not have any sponsors and people join the art group merely out of interest.

The money is not enough to sustain their livelihood. Hence we have to pursue other occupations too,” says Muthukumar, a disciple of Sambandam.

Although the theatre group has broken several rules of traditional *therukoothu*, it hasn't swerved from the gender distinction that the art imposes. Women are still not allowed to be a part of their crew owing to their restricted entry into temples (where *therukoothu* was traditionally performed) during menstruation. “I do offer training to female students. Yet I cannot let them take part in the performances,” adds Sambandam regretfully.

## Growing is injurious to health

B. PRADEEP



Bamboo racks and two-week-old tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) plants in a field en route to Undavalli in Andhra Pradesh's Kurnool district.



Country tobacco leaves - with their flower heads and seeds fastened to bamboo sticks - begin to ripen as they are sundried. Within eight weeks, the leaves' colours change from lime green to lemon yellow and then to orange-brown.



Very often under these ripe leaves (which are known for their high nicotine and sugar contents) lurk deadly red scorpions whose stings can even cause heart failure.

## Disappearing cows

B. PRADEEP

**KALLUR:** After a five-minute walk into the heart of Salkapuram village, look to the right and one can find its historical *thoranam* or gate into the radial routes of the village. Facing the crown of the *thoranam* is the animal pound or *pasu bandhi*.

Villagers here believe these *bandhis* are a way to discipline straying cattle and curb the menace of herdsmen. N. Maddhileti (60), a farmer all his life, recalls: “At one time, the fields yielded a good produce and controlling cattle was a big problem.”

Disputes over cattle damaging crops were resolved at the arch by pound-keepers, the custodians of the impounded cattle until they are released after the owner pays a fine.

D. K. Reddy, a landlord and later an employee in the Road Transport Corporation was a pound-keeper in the 1980s. He says, “The *bandhis* ran housefull; so busy that the *kaavalivaru* (pound-

keepers) made smart money through easy settlements on the side.”

Reddy and another keeper had to leave the job when they detained two cows for damage caused to the produce. Asked why, Reddy replies, “We can't impound cows.” Interestingly, under the 1871 Cattle Trespass Act, cows are not ‘cattle’.

There are hardly any cattle visible in the village streets now. “No rains, no fields, no animals,” says Maddhileti.

*Pasu bandhis* display important indicators in the culture and daily life of Salkapuram village. With the over-exploitation of groundwater, which is now fluoride-ridden, potable water is scarce.

By replacing cattle with mechanized diesel motors and depending on rains for agriculture, the *pasu bandhis*, the few livestock, dry lands and old farmers slip into the role of a village's chronicle. These are not outdated but essential in understanding the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of a village.



The *pasu bandhi* at Salkapuram village, now under lock and key. | B. PRADEEP

# Acute power shortage dims life in Theni

BECHU S

THENI: Negligence by authorities have pushed the tribal and backward villages of Theni district into acute energy shortage.

Residents of Arasaradi, Anakkarapatti and Solaiyur complained that half the street lamps and solar panels of the villages are dysfunctional and no steps have been taken to repair them.

The problem has become very intense in Arasaradi, an infamous illegal settlement inside the Meghamalai forests, as none of the solar panels meant to electrify the 350 houses of the village function.

Residents have either bought big batteries with their own money, or are dependent on kerosene lamps as their only source of light. The children of the village are also affected as they are unable to do their homework after sunset.

"Even the diffused bulbs are not being changed. We buy new ones and change them ourselves," said S. Senan, a resident of the village.

Bulbs, table fans and black and white television sets alone can be operated with batteries. The live wires running inside the houses are hazardous, espe-

cially for children. Those who cannot afford to



Not enough light | SHOMIK SEN BHATTACHARJEE

buy a secondhand battery for their homes use their kerosene supply both for light and for cooking purposes.

"Some even extract an electricity line from the streetlight panels to their homes illegally," said Vijayan, another resident of the village.

In the tribal village of Solaiyur, the computer and pro-

jector of the high school do not function anymore as there are voltage issues. Many of the panels lighting the roads are not operational as well.

Normal electricity lines cannot be introduced in these villages as they are located within ecologically fragile forest areas. Forest laws restrict the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) from installation of poles and transformers in reserved forests.

"Papers moved in 1972. Poles were installed inside the forests. But then an elephant got tangled in the live lines. The project was immediately dropped," explained Kaja Moideen, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Meghamalai Hills Range.

Except for FM (Frequency Modulated) radio, the villagers do not have access to any mode of communication.

Replacing fluorescent bulbs with the brighter LED bulbs can make a difference during pitch dark nights in the forest range.

A little attention and timely maintenance would cost no more than a few crores to the government.

It could make a huge difference to the lives of these largely illiterate and unskilled people.

# The Enterprising Kale Family

NIDHI CHUGH PADMASHREE PANDE

WARDHA: The smell of fries hits you as you enter Kunda Kale's house in Lonsavli village.

Kunda squats in front of the wood-fired stove frying long, yellow, acylindrical fries that go out of shape as soon as they are dropped into hot oil. Once they turn lemon yellow, Kunda takes them out, dries them on paper and puts 10 pieces each in plastic bags and staples them.

Kunda Kale, an entrepreneur, sells each pack of potato fries for Rs 5. She buys a 16 kg sack of the raw ingredients *nadde* for Rs 510. Once they are packaged, her nephews sell it in their shop, which they run out of their home.

Her husband, Vishnu Kale used to work at the Mahatma Sugar and Power Limited (MSPL), a sugar factory at Jamni. When the factory shut down, more than 400 workers including her husband lost their jobs.

Mrs Kale then started the finger food business a year back, as a means of supplementary income. The Kale family cultivates wheat, cotton, dal and vegetables like brinjal, okra and beans. Keeping aside some fresh produce for themselves, they sell the rest to the markets.

The Kales have also set up a

small shed on their farm where they breed silkworms. They grow mulberry bushes for the worms on a patch nearby. The couple ensure that the temperature of the shed where the worms are bred is well-

maintained. There is a huge market for raw silk thread. Traders from Bangalore and Hyderabad buy from such small-scale breeders. This has proved to be a profitable venture for the

family. "We don't boil the worms to remove the cocoons from their bodies, which is a regular practice in big machine-run factories. Instead, we have a sieve that does the trick, without harming the worms," explained Kunda Kale. The worms that are left behind are in turn sold to the poultry farms to be used as feed.

The family earns between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 (minimum) per month. When the harvest is good, they can even earn between Rs 25,000 and Rs 30,000 a month.

During their infancy stage, which lasts two months, the worms cannot be of economic use.

For these two months, the family manages with the earnings that come from the sale of fried food, puffed rice and 'chewda', a snack made out of masala and flour.

With this income, they have been able to manage the educational needs of their two children. They study at a boarding school in Wardha: one in Class 10 and the other in Class 11.

Boarding school education is expensive but Kunda's motivation to see them through is evident when she remarks: "I don't want my children to be farmers," she said.



Kunda Kale making fries | PADMASHREE PANDE

# THE FISHERMEN OF RAMANATHAPURAM



UTSAV TIWARI

This fisherman returned from the hospital few days ago following an accident when he scalded himself after falling into the hot sea.



ARITRY DAS

Freshly caught crabs, mackerel, barracuda, etc are sold from 6 am at the Pamban marketplace.



UTSAV TIWARI

Silvery shoals of fish being sent for cod liver oil extraction at the Rameshwaram jetty.



ARITRY DAS

A fisherman shows off a recently caught crab at the marketplace.

## Spiriting away spirits

PARTH KHATAU

VAIPA: Vaipa: In a dark and dingy hut here, he cleanses the souls of the 'possessed,' cures those with 'chastity problems' and rids businessmen of spells put on them by their rivals. He can read your future also, claims 53-year old black magic practitioner Ponraj Sami. The walls are painted with pictures of various Gods and of a dog, who he claims is the God's vehicle.

"Do you know many businessmen in Kerala cast black magic on their enemies who are more successful than they are? Such people come to me and I undo the spells," says Sami, who has been practicing for 25 years. 'Clients' from all major cities in Tamil Nadu, including Chennai and Coimbatore, visit him to get cured. Sami first chants mantras before he is possessed by the God. At that moment, he cannot even recognise the person in front of him, he claims. In his possessed state, Sami whips himself and then, whips the 'spirit' or 'disease' or anything else that is harming the client.

"Whipping myself does not hurt at all," says Sami. He offers the evil spirit whatever it demands, like a coconut or an egg, and ends his puja by tying a black thread on the client's wrist which he or she has to wear for 41 days.

"If it is a serious case and the



Practising black magic | PARTH K

puja requires more time, I will conduct it in the [local] temple." Sami claims patients who cannot be cured even in hospitals and with medicines visit him. "I can see that they are in an incurable condition. Then, the God possesses me and tells me whether or not he'll cure the person. Once God says OK, I will beat my udukai (membranophone used in prayers), and God's blessings will descend on me. It'll hit me on the centre of the head and ask me to buy an egg. I'll get one and circle it over the client's head and throw it away. The person will get up cured." How did he acquire his 'power'? Sami says it was God's grace ('kadavul arul') that he got this when he was working as a

woodcutter. He was also taught by his father, the late Selvasamy. The older of his two sons, aged 28, has knowledge of the cure "and is gradually learning his father's practice." The younger son is also interested. Explaining how the dog became the God's vehicle in his practice, Sami said, "Once some robbers stole my goat and the animal was taken to another village 20 kms away. The villagers told me that it was a dog which saved my goat. It was after this incident that I drew a picture of this dog from the villagers' description." For all his claims about the size of his 'clientele', the local youth laugh away Sami's cure. "Today's youth laughs at me but I

## "I don't want to work in the fields like my father... better I don't grow up!"



Named after the singer Madhushree, she too aspires become one. | ANINDITA B



Deepak, 5, smiled the widest and said he never wants to grow up.

ANINDITA BANNERJEE

ARASARADI, THENI: Alakeswari did not tell her parents when the older boys started grabbing her hand and shouting "kiss me" on the hour-long bus ride to school from her home in Siraikadu village — because she knew she would be blamed.

She was right. When her family found out, they banned her from going back to school, worried about their 'honour'. The plan now is to get her married. She is 20. Her dream of becoming a policewoman

seems distant. In Arasaradi village, 50 percent of children alone complete class 5, and of those, only less than half can comprehend a simple paragraph and less than 10 go to high school.

Overcrowded classrooms, absentee teachers and unsanitary conditions are common complaints in government schools, influencing parents to take their wards out of school. Some of the smaller government schools

have bare-walled classrooms with low benches and desks. In others, little children sit on the floor with books in their laps. In some, no teacher is present; one woman appears to be responsible for most of the anganwadi schools.

The most important reason is that most of the schools in the village provide education up to only class 5. The schools for higher education are all almost twenty five to thirty kms away; colleges even further away.

The school in Arasaradi village

which teaches students till class 5 has a student strength of 100. But, only seven from the entire village were pursuing higher studies by travelling twenty kms in a bus. There was only one college aspirant.

The children of these villages have high aspirations of becoming doctors and teachers. Deepak B, studying in class 4 remarked: "I don't want to work in the fields like my father, Miss... Better I don't grow up!"

## Thai is here but whither harvest?

ASMITA NANDY

Ramanathapuram: Thai piranthal vazhi pirakkum, goes the ancient saying, meaning our sorrows will end with the advent of the Tamil month. "But this time there won't be a new beginning for us because of poor harvest owing to shortage of water," sighed Shenbagavalli, waiting in queue to fill her fourth bucket of water from the only pond at Sevalpatti village in this district.

Ironically, the Tamil Nadu government declared the entire State drought-hit on the eve of the harvest festival of Pongal in hope of bringing relief. The State was pushed into this situation following the poor North East Monsoon.

Among many other districts, Thoothukudi and Ramanathapuram have been worst hit by water crisis. The poor yield of chillies, onions, corns, coriander and millets – the only crops that grow on black soil within 6 months of rain – have pushed farmers



Empty pots kept in queue as water continues to be scarce | ASMITA N

into debts and distress. "I used to get Rs 200 a day when I worked on fields but since there is no harvest I now work in the nearby seafood factory where I am paid a lesser amount. I have to cut down expenses on my children's food and education," sobbed Uma Muthuswamy on her way back home from work

with her 12-year-old son, who had missed school to go in search of their goats which had gone astray into the forest.

"I spent Rs.10,000 last week to bring two lorries of water from Vilathikulam. Now that the onions have grown a little, I will buy more water worth Rs.10,000. But I will have to

pledge my wife's jewellery to raise the money," said S. Muniswamy, watering a portion of his 10-acre land with pipes drawn from a truck.

With dry river beds and fast depleting groundwater, villagers of both districts are forced to buy drinking water at high rates.

Borewells can't be dug in all villages because water is salty owing to their proximity to the sea. A Rs. 35-crore desalination plant near Narippaiyur in Ramanathapuram district, which had been supplying water to 150 villages since 2001 was shut down two years ago because its employees had not been paid for over five months.

In a few villages where groundwater is available, the owners of wells supply drinking water to nearby places at a cost of Rs 5 per pot.

"If the Government builds a dam on the main Malatar river to store rainwater during monsoon, the villages will not only get adequate drinking water but will also be able to irrigate their fields during dry periods," said Palanisamy, a farmer at Narippaiyur.

A team led by Dheeraj Kumar, Managing Director, TWAD Board, who recently visited the drought-hit villages, said: "We wanted to ensure that district officials are taking steps to write a relief proposal."

## A wild goose chase for jobs

ASMITA NANDY

Ramanathapuram: With agriculture collapsing in the absence of adequate monsoon rain, farmers in Ramanathapuram and Thoothukudi districts are looking for alternative sources of income. While some of the educated farmers join co-operative banks in villages, farm labourers work as helpers of fishermen in coastal villages, others work in salt pans or charcoal units. Women work on prawn farms or peel cultured prawns in seafood industry.

Landless labourers now have to toil harder and settle for wages lower than what they got as farmhands. They spend much of their earnings on buying water, while depending on free rice, subsidized pulses and kerosene given at ration shops. In villages like

Thulukankulam, brick kilns are an alternative source of livelihood for farmers. However, their grievances are deep-rooted in the drought that has hit the State. House building activity has taken a beating and demand for bricks has declined. People who were earning Rs. 300 for making 500 bricks now complain of loss of income.

"We have given requests at the Taluk office for relief funds but there has been no response," said Kalliamma, who works in a brick kiln with her husband.

Did she follow up on her request with the Taluk office? "We don't know how to read or write. To even get a relief proposal written, we need to spend Rs.100 to hire a literate person. We can't afford to spend so much every time," she says.

## One doctor for 10,000 villagers

PRIYA SRIVASTAVA

Vembar: There is only one doctor for Vembar, says Sahaya Karunahari, Panchayat Administrator. There is one primary health centre at Vembar catering for 38 villages.

There is a pharmacy but medicine is not available 24/7. Sahaya Karunahari says that the panchayat has filed a petition to get more doctors. The doctor, Akila, stays at the PHC till noon.

In emergencies requiring major operations or deliveries, villagers have to travel for about two hours over 40 km to the Government Medical College Hospital at Thoothukudi, she says. Every day around 180 patients visit the PHC, the size of a typical clinic in the city, with an adjoining 10-bed ward.

Fishermen report with fish thorn stuck in their person or scorpion bites which are very common. But "funding falls short and many a time I have had to get samples of basic medicines like antibiotics and analgesics from the clinic in my home-town," says Dr. Akila. Staff are also in short supply.

In all, there are six village health workers and two sanitary workers. There is no operation theatre. Apart from an ECG (electrocardiogram) and USG (ultrasound sonography), there is no equipment. Even though there are health sub-centres in every village with nurses employed, they provide only vaccinations and first-aid and have rooms for pregnant women.

## Dropout syndrome after Plus-2

SOHINI GHOSH  
PARTH KHATAU

Vembar: In a renewed focus on education, Vembar in Thoothukudi district reports a literacy rate of 86.16% among its 6,307-population, according to the Census of 2011. The Government Higher Secondary School in the village has huge playgrounds, four academic buildings and one under construction. Girls at 424 outnumber boys 358 in enrolment, and they also do better in attendance. Of the 154 students who took the state-conducted Class XII examination, the school recorded 98% pass.

At nearby Melamanthai village, the high school is one of the four government schools in the vicinity and has boasted 100 per cent pass since 2007. It offers special coaching for students with learning disability.

While there are no government pre-primary or primary schools at Vembar, there are five private primary schools funded by the local churches.

The district has recorded third highest in the literacy rate (86.2%) among the districts. However, there is a 50 per cent drop in the number of students enrolling for undergraduate or professional courses after Plus-Two.

Reasons attributed are lack of incentives and of free resources – free books and notebooks, bus passes, scholarships, free cycles for class 11 students and free laptops for class 12 students, free midday meals etc, provided in schools. Increasing financial



Students at the Government Higher Secondary School | ASMITA N

demands of professional courses also make higher education unaffordable to many. These courses, along with food and lodging, may cost up to Rs. 2 lakh for a duration of three years.

The private Thevanesam Erudhaya Ammal Polytechnic College at Vembar has only 18 girls compared to 732 boys. Principal M. Srinivasan explains: "Hailing from fisherman communities,

most girls are married off. Child marriage is quite rampant and even otherwise, girls get married by the time they finish school."

There is also a marked disinterest among both girls and boys in education, says vice-principal Maria Sesuvadiyu. "Many threaten their parents with suicide and running away from their homes, if forced to study.

The parents invariably back out." Though the polytechnic has reported placements of up to 90

per cent, many fail to take up the offers, say the teachers.

The reason attributed is that the first son of any fisherman family is always dedicated to the sea. Educated or not, he is bound to continue the familial tradition of fishing.

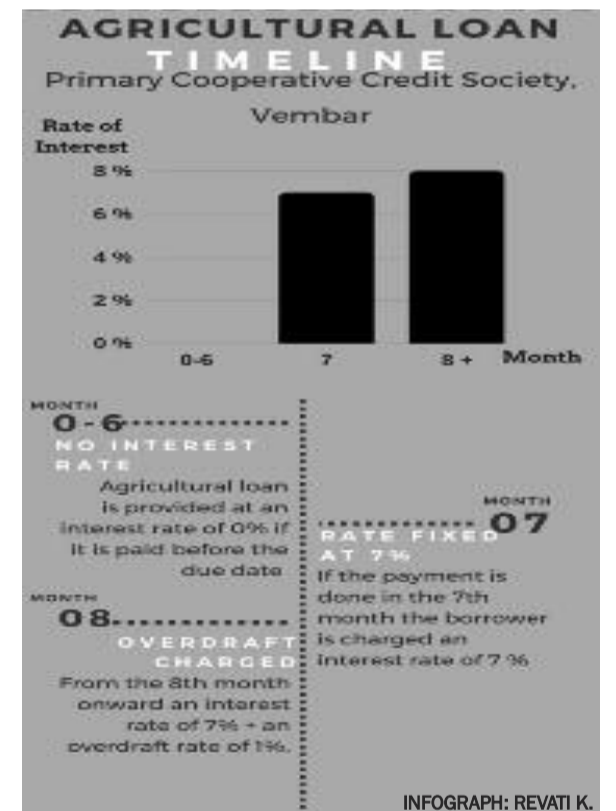
As for girls, those who complete undergraduate courses are often discouraged from moving away from home for jobs. Those who do, often leave their jobs within a few months. The most commonly quoted reason for this is homesickness.

In this district, there are nine engineering institutions and four institutions awarding degrees in other professional programmes, besides arts courses.

**The district has recorded third highest in the literacy rate (86.2%) among the districts. However, there is a 50 per cent drop in the number of students enrolling for undergraduate or professional courses after Plus-Two.**

## Farm friendly & self-sustaining cooperative

REVATI KRISHNA



Vembar: The Primary Cooperative Credit Society at Vembar is a cut above the rest. It runs solely on its deposit base, says CEO S. Jetamalaraj, adding that primary cooperative credit societies elsewhere usually run into losses.

In the 2004 bank rebuilding process, the government decided to refill the coffers of all such banks but the amount sent to the Vembar branch was sent back as it suffered no loss. There have never been any defaulters. In case of no cultivation and no yield, the bank waives off the loan amount.

Himself a farmer owning 13 acres of land, Jetamalaraj has confidence in the borrowers. He said, "If they have money they will return it."

Fishing, jaggery farm workers, agricultural workers and small businesses like basket weaving and tea shops: these are some of the occupations and sections of people at Vembar heavily dependent on bank lending.

At the Primary Cooperative Credit Society, an agricultural loan of Rs 50000 is provided at 0% interest if the money is repaid before the due date, which is the sixth month after loan was issued.

Jetamalaraj says 2004-05 was an unusual year for the society, when only five agricultural loans were issued, all of them outstanding. It happened due to a huge drop in

agriculture as occupation at Vembar.

With respect to the government bank in Vembar, the Pandyan Grama Bank has just introduced ATMs and Rupay cards. A total of 33 persons are Kisan Credit Card holders.

The loan sought here, amount, ranges between Rs 50000 and Rs 1, 00,000. Up to 3 to 4 lakh, the loan can be applied for without collateral. Around 800 persons have applied for old-age pension.

Approximately 20 fishing loans were taken f-or nets, around 20 for dry fish and 30 loans were taken by palm jaggery workers.

As for the private bank at Vembar, the Tamil Mercantile Bank, set up in 2013, has 4,240 accounts, 3000 account holders being women. Men in the village do not have bank accounts; most of them are working for daily wages. Around 1200 people have debit cards and five or six merchants or shop owners have credit cards.

Father Sahayaraj notes that saving habit at Vembar is below nil. Meyappasamy at the local TASMAC shop said that if fishermen earned Rs 400, half of it would go for two-quarter bottles of brandy.

"People had bank accounts mostly for swift transfer of government subsidies, scholarship benefits and other such schemes, said Father Sahayaraj.

## Families totter as men hit the bottle every night

ASMITA NANDY

Vembar: She stealthily walked out of the living room and sat on the doorstep of her house Suparna Fernandez says: "I feel vulnerable. I know he is my uncle but he sends a chill down my spine when he comes home drunk every evening."

The class 11 student in a nearby Government school at Vembar has one wish: shut down TASMACs in all neighbouring villages. "They should allow only one TASMAC per district."

Even as the shutters of the only TASMAC store in the village opens at 12 noon, there is a long queue with people jostling over one another to get their bottle. Some even make repeated trips to the shop. "We earn about Rs. 93,000 every day. Each person spends Rs.300-Rs.400 and sometimes

even more," said Meyappasamy, co-owner of the TASMAC shop.

"People have earnings but no savings because if they earn Rs.500 a day, they would hardly keep anything for their homes and spend it on alcohol," said Father Sahayaraja of St. Sebastian Church at Vembar. "Sometimes they don't even have savings for their daughters' marriages so the girls usually go to work in the seafood factory."

Wastage of money apart, about the the behaviour of the inebriated men, the less said the better. Herself stricken with fear, Suparna emphasizes with the plight of the children of the other victims. "We were having class when [classmate] Anjali's father barged into the school compound and created a ruckus because he wanted her to guide him back home. After a prolonged argument when the school authorities let her go, he



Men buying their daily dose at TASMAC | ASMITA N

could hardly walk on his feet." In the village everyone looks down upon the kids of the addicts, says Suparna. "Anjali couldn't look up because she

was so embarrassed. I feel the same when my uncle comes home drunk and creates nuisance for my aunt and the rest of the family."