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COVERING DEPRIVATION

LAB JOURNAL OF THE ASIAN COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM

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Towering issue for farmers

Row over land acquisition for high tension power project

ANUSHKA DEEPAK & DEEKSHA SHYAM

SALEM: Farmers across Salem district are protesting against the Power Grid Corporation's high tension wire project, saying they will lose their land and their crops.

The 1,765-km project running from Tiruppur to Chhattisgarh, will cross several districts in Tamil Nadu.

Transmission towers are being established on thousands of acres of farm land. The requirement being roughly 20 cents for the four legs of a tower to stand on.

Athneri Arumugan (68) said, "No information was given to us regarding the construction of the towers and our crops were pulled out."

However, when the local political parties got involved and farmers protested, the construction was put on hold.

"The work started a year ago without prior notice, so we stopped it," said Athneri, owner of five acres of land on which one of the towers is being built.

Out of the total project cost of Rs 24,000 crores, Rs 6,000 crores is for Tamil Nadu's 365-kilometre stretch alone.

P. Perumal, district secretary of the Tamil Nadu Farmer's Association said, "For a 400-kilowatt line, the high voltage towers will produce an electromagnetic field of 32 mg. This emission will affect farm yield because the crops won't mature properly."

A transmission tower coming up on farmland | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Another farmer, Gopal Ramaswami (54) said there were also restrictions on farmers using their land located under the transmission lines. So, the land would lose its market value.

"We cannot cultivate in an area of 30 feet around the tower; we can neither plant trees taller than 10 feet, nor deepen the borewells to irrigate our land," he said.

"The lines cut through my land because of which both sides will no longer be fit for cultivation."

According to the World Health Organisation, a maximum of 2 mg of electromagnetic field emission can be withstood safely by humans so long as they are 100 metres away from the high voltage lines.

P. Parthiban, an engineering graduate and affected farmer, said, "Living closer to the lines which emit fields stronger than the safety level can lead to a lot of health problems, especially skin cancer."

Various groups formed by farmers have urged the Centre to take the power lines underground and provide them ample compensation, or scrap it altogether.

Rohini R Bhajibhakare, Salem Collector, said, "The government is ready to provide adequate compensation for the properties. It can be done properly only if discussions are held case by case. For the land to be acquired, farmers could get 225 per cent higher compensation than the government guideline value or market value, whichever is higher."

On compensation, Anandan Raji (44) has an issue. Earlier, differing with other farmers, he agreed to the construction of a tower on his land, but he is opposing it now when the construction is already halfway through.

"They [government] had promised Rs 1.5 lakhs for the foundation alone, but I was only given Rs 42,000. They'd promised money for every coconut tree removed as well but the officials from the Power Grid Corporation have blatantly refused compensation for the same," he says.

Perumal is clear. "We welcome electricity projects. We never obstruct development for our country. We just want underground wires for the safety of our livelihood."

Child labour is the norm

SHREYA BASAK

KALIMPONG: His back bent and his face worn with fatigue, 13-year-old Sajal Tamang walks uphill with a big bamboo basket loaded with cow dung, hanging from his head. He does it "on his own will" to buy school books.

Well-built and moderately tall Tamang, a student of class 7, wears a sky-blue t-shirt, ironically with the UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) logo on it.

Like Tamang, there are many children working for Rs 200 a day.

"This is called 'Khaitala' in the hills and is not considered as an act of forced labour here", said Subeshna Thapa, Director of Bal Suraksha Abhiyan Trust (BSA), Kalimpong district, (a Child Care Unit and a CHILDLINE sub-centre).

Much as Tamang and locals might deny it, what children are doing here falls under the textbook definition of child labour which has been banned by the Supreme Court under the Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.

It was eventually amended in 2016 allowing children to engage in 'home-based' work and adolescents to employ themselves except in hazardous professions, which are listed under the Act.

Locals often justify children engaging in hard labour for increasing family income.

Sajal carrying a load of cow dung | SHREYA BASAK

According to Vikash Pradhan, Consultant and Principal Investigator of BSA, hard labour isn't meant for children in any situation.

"Sadly we all are a part of this system and this is how it works/doesn't work," said Vikash.

Belonging to families of farmers and wood-cutters, Sajal along with 12-year old Ganit Rai and 9-year old Suman Tamang, find work during their three-month winter holiday.

"We don't employ them throughout the year; they do this on their own during their breaks. It also keeps them fit and none has any objection to this," said a young woman in the family these children work for.

Life here has been affected since last year's Gorkhaland agitation in Darjeeling. Elections to the Gram Panchayat have been suspended since 2001.

Children have dropped out of schools. Poverty has increased and returns from farming have fallen. All these factors have helped normalise 'khaitala'.

"When we had started off in 2006, child labour was rampant in the Kalimpong district," added Vikash.

Since then BSA has been striving to make 'child-labour free' zones in each municipality ward of Kalimpong.

Understaffed PHCs hit maternal care

TANYA KHANDELWAL

MYSURU: No doctors or skilled professionals are available for delivery at the Primary Health Centre, which caters to around 14,000 people and is located at Neralakuppe village in Hunsur taluk, according to an official.

Though India has seen a significant reduction in maternal mortality rates (MMR) over the years, the state of maternal health in the rural areas remains questionable, according to the latest Sample Registration System data.

Socio-cultural determinants, lack of proper healthcare facilities and infrastructure, understaffed Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and unwillingness of doctors to practice in the rural areas have contributed to the problem.

Chandrashekhar T.S., Health Inspector at the PHC at Neralakuppe, said that for deliveries, patients from Neralakuppe have to be taken to the Hanagodu hospital due to absence of trained professionals at the PHC. The auxiliary nurse midwife also shuttles between the facilities.

According to Mamata P.A., an Anganwadi worker at the village, a greater percentage of deliveries now do take place at the PHCs and other health facilities, with the help of skilled professionals.

This is also reflected in the trends in maternal care indicators for the state as per the National Family Health Survey, highlighting an increase in the percentage of deliveries at healthcare facilities in the rural areas (from 56.7 per cent in 2005-06 to 95.4 per cent in 2015-16).

However, among tribal communities in the region, many still resort to deliveries at home in the presence of elderly women and midwives. "We do visit the PHCs for post-natal care but the deliveries mostly happen with the help of elderly women in our hamlet," said B. Sharda, a woman belonging to the Lambani tribe.

Despite various schemes to increase institutional deliveries and reduce MMR, coverage remains an issue. Mamata said benefits in cash and kind were available to pregnant and lactating mothers under various Central and State government schemes .

But tribal women were unaware or unable to get the benefits due to lack of necessary documents like Aadhaar and BPL cards. Also, since the benefits were available only to mothers aged 18 years and above, a lot of women were left out, especially tribal girls who often married young.

Awareness drives against early marriages and outreach programmes to inform people about the schemes and benefits available have been launched to ensure better coverage and inclusion.

"In cases of underage pregnancies, we inform the authorities or call the police who take up investigation as per the norms," said Dr Jogindranath, Medical Officer at the hospital in Hanagodu.

A man behind every woman sarpanch

RAJAT THAKUR

KHAMMAM: For the residents of Krishnapuram village, the real Sarpanch (village head) is nowhere to be seen. But the elected Sarpanch is there. But no one cares because she is a woman. Her husband, Keshava Reddy is the "Sarpanch".

Having been elected to the post for five years, M. Nirmala (60) is still treated as wife of "Sarpanch".

The 73rd Constitution Amendment Act, 1993 reserves one-third of the seats in Panchayats for women. But often elected women representatives are just dummies, with their husbands wielding power.

"I did not expect to win, and I was so happy after hearing the poll results because I became the second woman Sarpanch of the village and the first woman from the general category," she recounted the day she got elected with a smile on her face.

M. Nirmala | SABITRI DHAKAL

On National Panchayati Raj day, April 24, 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that "This business of Sarpanch-pati is going on. Law has empowered women. When law has given them the rights, they should also get an opportunity. Bring to an end this SP culture. They (women) should be given the opportunity. They should be promoted."

Her husband, a local political leader and a retiree from the Postal Department, continues to take "care" of the Panchayat.

"Since my childhood I did not go out. Now my husband helps me in running the village," she said.

Nirmala said "I attend various meetings but the decision making I have left to my husband."

The village had no problems at all, she claimed.

The Panchayat has built toilets in every house for which she was awarded the 'Best Sarpanch' prize in Khammam district under the 'Swachh Bharat Mission'.

Nirmala added, "We have built soak pits and CC roads under MNREGA and 16 girls from the village got financial assistance for marriage under 'Kalyana Lakshmi Scheme'."

On the condition of anonymity, a villager said, "We don't get good drinking water from the tap water connections."

"Those who can afford to have mineral water, they go for it. Those who can't will drink pond water," she added.

Instead of coming to Nirmala, the villagers go to the Sarpanch-pati for redressal of their grievances.

"My husband wants me to contest again this time, but I want to give chance to others. Wait and see," she said.

After deluge, Naxals haunt tribal villagers

SANAL SUDEVAN & MANJIRI CHITRE

WAYANAD: Armed Naxalites have started looting tribals in villages which are still recovering from the ravages of the August 2018 floods.

The Naxalites have been trying to establish a foothold in Wayanad district for the past six years. According to the Vythiri division police, the ultras threaten villagers and loot their rice and pulses.

According to villagers and the police, a group has been trying to influence locals to join it. In November last, a gang distributed leaflets and put up posters and banners at the Wayanad Veterinary University at Lakkidi.

Tribal people are living in fear every day. One of them said, "As this is a Naxal-affected area, there are great chances of their knowing about your visiting us."

The police, along with the Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat, have started a public campaign against Maoists.

"We have started public interaction sessions with the tribals so that they come to us and inform us about the Naxalites, and not live in fear," said N.C. Prasad, President of the Gram Panchayat.

It was in 2013 that the first case against the Naxalites was filed at the Vythiri station, the police said. However, no one was arrested.

In December, another case was filed after an armed group snatched kits from flood relief camps.

Irulars crippled without land patta

N SINDHU

TIRUVALLUR: A narrow muddy path from the Satharai Sivan Koil leads to a small settlement of the Irulars, a traditionally snake trapping and wood cutting community. Around 35 families without land pattas live here in small 10X10 feet huts lacking proper electricity and water supply.

These issues remain unresolved despite repeated petitions to the district collector and promises made by political parties.

With traditional occupations of snake trapping and wood cutting banned, Irulars initially worked as bonded labourers in brick kilns and rice mills.

Around ten years back they were rescued by a group of officials. They settled here after they were promised land pattas and employment by the officials.

Though most of them are now employed under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), which guarantees them work and income for 100 days a year, they await land pattas.

The community initially lived in the nearby area called Satharai. Gauri (65), who is currently employed under MGNREGA says, "Our forefathers lived on small pieces of land, in the backyards of the Iyer households in Satharai. Few years back when the Iyers moved out, these lands were bought by the Naickers, who pushed us out. Since then we have been living on this land which used to be part of the burial ground."

Only after repeated complaints did the government build a concrete wall to separate their land and the burial ground.

"This place is like a bird's cage," adds Gauri referring to the land patta issue which has not been resolved. "Even if we can afford to build a small house, we don't, since we never know when we might be asked to move from here. Patta is the only thing that will save us," says Gauri. The people live in thatched huts, under the constant fear of further displacement, with no safety during natural calamities.

They are forced to defecate in the open along the Cooum River, as the toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Mission have been rendered unfit due to lack of water supply.

Jayabalan, district coordinator of the Sarpam Thozhilalar Sangam, an NGO that works for the welfare of Irulars in Tamil Nadu said, "Most of the people belonging to the Irular community do not even have their community certificates. Each time we file a petition or organize a protest, the officials state this as the primary reason for not giving the pattas."

MGNREGA - a boon with some bane

Meenakshiamma...still on the job | ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

ALAPPUZHA: Sickle in hand, 80-year-old Meenakshiamma cuts grass and yanks out stubborn weeds in Illimala ward of Pandanad village.

She is one of the 9,674 workers in Chengannur employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for a daily wage of Rs 271 for eight hours of work. She lives with her son, but feels the need to work. "Otherwise, the children will say something. How can I go home without any money?" she worries.

Around 22 per cent of the MGNREGA workers in Chengannur are between the ages of 61 and 80. The MGNREGA provides 100 days of work to one member of every rural household registered with the panchayat.

After the floods in August, the Ministry of Rural Development allowed Kerala to provide up to 150 days of work in flood-hit districts for rebuilding fences, clearing weeds, making land suitable for agriculture and desilting irrigation canals.

Meenakshiamma and around 30 others in Illimala were given work till March this year. They mark their attendance on a weekly muster roll. On that week's muster roll, there were only two men.

Bharathi Balan (62), Illimala's project supervisor, says, "Only older men who can no longer do hard labour take this up. Younger men will work at a construction site for Rs 1,000 per day."

Of the 916 active MGNREGA workers here, 801 are women.

She added that agricultural labourers are increasingly taking up MGNREGA work.

For the third year in a row, Illimala's 'viripu' season paddy, harvested in September, has not been grown, since- an irrigation canal remains unrepaired.

"The viripu fields would employ at least 80 agricultural labourers. Now most of them have registered for MGNREGA work," said Bindu Kaladharan, member of the Chengannur block panchayat.

Getting 100 days of work is rare in Pandanad.

"Of the 30 workers in Illimala, two or three may manage to get around 70 days by March if they have not been absent. Others get around 50," Bharati said. "However, work has increased after the flood."

According to the Ministry of Rural Development, Kerala provided an average of 47.71 days of work per household in 2017-18.

Bharati attributes the shortage of work to delays in preparing muster rolls.

"The panchayat office delays the muster roll for days or weeks. After they have closed the accounts in April, we don't get work till August because they need to plan for the next financial year."

According to Jayashree KP, Pandanad Panchayat Development Officer (MGNREGA), muster rolls get delayed because attendance data and progress of work need to be updated on the system before a new roll is issued.

Wages have to be paid within 15 days of the muster roll being submitted.

But workers in Illimala say they have not been paid for five weeks. For delays in payment, workers are entitled to a compensation of 0.05 per cent of the wage per day.

"We don't get any compensation. We just wait for the money to come into the account," said Ramya M (35).

N Vinodini, Joint Programme Coordinator, MGNREGA said that since the wages were paid entirely by the Centre, the state government could not ensure timely payment.

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FLOOD FACTS

POPULATION

23 million people were affected across the State due to flood-related incidents. In a span of 30 days in August, 339 lives were lost and 3.4 million people took shelter in 12,300 relief camps .

LOSSES

Economic damage worth Rs. 21,000 crores was estimated in the State. A total of 60,000 hectares of agricultural crops were destroyed. 10,319 houses were fully destroyed and over 1 lakh partially damaged. More than 2,22,000 people were left homeless.

*Source- KSDMA, NDMA & Media Reports

Flood victims face PTSD

VIDUSHI SAGAR & ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

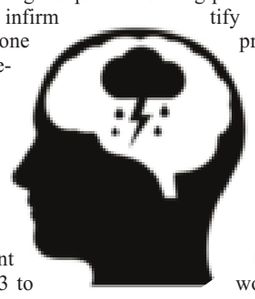
ALAPPUZHA: Jayshree K. P., a 40-year old MGNREGA development officer in the Pandanad Panchayat office in Chengannur taluk, locked herself in her room for a day after hearing an announcement about the possible reopening of dams, a month after the August 14 Kerala floods. "I narrowly escaped death that day," she said. She recalls the disastrous flood, when water rose to about six feet in her home, within a couple of hours.

She and her mother, who did not know how to swim, were rescued along with Jayshree's two children. They spent two days at their sister's two-storey house, nearby.

Jayshree felt depressed after a few weeks of the incident, and also developed a phobia towards water; fearful of the flood reoccurring. Although she did not visit a counsellor, Jayshree has been relying on the help of her friends, family, and colleagues to pull her out of this state. Many others victims of the flood, suffer from psychological effects such as fear and anxiety. However, if the symptoms persist, they may take the form of more serious psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression.

"After the floods, three counsellors started visiting the community health centre (CHC) daily to help victims recover mentally. A psychological officer also visits the Primary Health Centre weekly, from the DMO office. If someone is diagnosed with a psychiatric problem, they are referred to other hospitals for better treatment," said Harikumar, secretary at the Pandanad Panchayat office.

According to Dr. Sangeetha, who works at the Pandanad CHC, about 50-60 people come for counselling every month. "There are mothers who have lost their children, children who have lost their parents. Families have got separated, and elderly and infirm people who lived alone have lost all their belongings and property. Along with this, the trauma of the flood triggers grave psychological reactions in the victims," she said.



Around 4 per cent of children in the 13 to 18-year-old age group in the affected areas had PTSD, since they were most vulnerable to anxiety, stress and grief, according to Aathira S, counsellor at the Government Girls Higher Secondary School in Alappuzha. She is registered with the state government's Social Justice Department and was part of a 31-member team of counsellors who visited relief camps after the flood.

She said that teenagers faced the anxiety of water levels rising again. The water rises every year in the villages of Kuttanad; so, the children there are used to the ordeal more than the ones living in Chengannur and areas closer to Alappuzha town, which rarely got flooded before.

Mallika, a counsellor at Ala Higher Secondary School, Chengannur, said that the shock manifested as a lack of interest in their daily lives, as they had lost all their precious belongings such as books, uniforms, toys, and so on.

However, the post-flood counselling process helped them identify children with pre-existing behavioral and mood disorders, even though these conditions were made worse by the floods, according to Aathira.

Anju Phillip, a counsellor at Snehitha Help Desk for women and children, Alapuzzha, mentioned that at first, people had to be approached to seek therapy at relief camps, due to a lack of awareness about mental health.

Group discussions were the method for counselling at relief centres and schools due to the large number of people, recalled Mallika. "The process reminded them that they were not alone," she added.

UNICEF also organised district level training programmes for counsellors, in which they were trained to use cartoons and puppets to treat school children. However, lack of initial follow up still plagues the situation, as both children and adults become busy completing the activities brought to halt due to the floods.

After the initial counselling session in relief camps, there was no time for individual follow up. "We hoped that they would recover more easily since grew up around water," said Malini Satheesh, a community counsellor in Alappuzha.

Another adverse effect that the flood brought was the relapse of alcoholic and drug abuse victims. At the de-addiction centre at St. Joseph Mission Hospital, located in Champakulam village, there are currently 15 patients. The government hospital offers 30 to 90 days of free treatment depending on the severity of the case.

According to Liju Thomas, a senior counsellor at the centre, the loss caused by the flood affected the patients, some of whom have discontinued with the treatment after the centre was re-opened a month after the catastrophe.

He said that the rates of suicides and the number of people suffering from depression had gone up, with poor farmers losing their jobs, and so on, which made them vulnerable to alcohol or ganja (weed)."We offer psycho-social support to the patients and their families. The treatment offered is diverse - we employ yoga, exercise, and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings to help the victims," he said.

Public libraries suffer losses

LEAH THOMAS

ALAPPUZHA: Before the waters hit, R. Balan had been reading the works of the Malayalam novelist, Benyamin. Five months later, all he can think about is bringing his library back to life. "Every time I pick up a book to read, I remember the books we lost in the flood," said the 48-year-old librarian of the Anandapradayini Grandhashala (public library).

Located near the State Water Transport dock, the library overlooks a canal filled on a regular day with line boats and shikaras. "We had books mostly in Malayalam, English and Hindi. We also had a number of Malayalam translations of literature from different places," said Balan.

On the morning of August 14, realizing that the water was rising, Balan called a few members of the library and tried to salvage whatever they could. "The library has two rooms, one of which was recently built. We shifted as many books as we could to the newer section which is constructed on a slightly elevated platform."

When he came back after the waters receded, the library had lost close to one lakh rupees worth of books. "What used to be a collection of more than 80,000 books is now only 20,000. We lost most of our furniture, too," he said. Pointing to the cracks in the walls, Balan says that the whole structure needs to be rebuilt.

More than 200 libraries were affected by the floods. "This number only includes the state-affiliated libraries. A number of private libraries, including school libraries, were also destroyed," said Mohanan Pilla, Kuttanadu Taluk Library Council Secretary. "In Alappuzha district alone, 51 libraries were affected".

Sanmarghadhayini Grandhashala, a smaller library in the Kainakary islands of the Kuttanad taluk, was also hit, leading to "losses that would take years to rebuild," according to librarian Vishwanath Kurup. "We had close to 7,000 books here; now we have nothing," said Kurup.

Kurup and his family did everything they could to stop the water from entering the library situated behind his house, "But, after a while, it was too dangerous for us to remain on the island. So, we left"

Started in 1966, the library had an attached reading room kept open throughout the day. This was one of only two libraries on the islands where there were once five libraries. "But with fund cuts, the libraries were shut down. Only two remained," he says. Both were ravaged by the floods.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Trying to rebuild the libraries has not been easy, said Balan. Although the State Library Council had sent a team to evaluate the damages, no compensation has been given yet. "The Government had promised us 15 lakhs to rebuild the library. But we haven't received anything."

Apart from compensations, the Council had announced a 'Jagradajaadha' or an 'awareness rally' to collect books from homes and distribute them among libraries, says Kurup.

Although the rally had taken place in the month of October, none of the libraries has seen these books yet, he said.

According to Pilla, books collected during the rally are to be distributed by the end of January. "About the compensation, discussions are going on at the moment. Only when the State releases the funds can the Council distribute the amount." While a percentage of the education budget is used for the upkeep of the libraries along with an annual grant, the State has announced additional funds for the rebuilding of flood-damaged libraries, he said.

Meanwhile, publishing houses, including DC books, have stepped in to help. "They have been sending out boxes of books," said Kurup.

The reading room in Sanmarghadhayini Grandhashala. | ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

It takes a village to raise a school

SAMANTHA SHAJI

CHENGANNUR: The perfectly tiled walkways and fully functioning classrooms belie the fact Swami Vivekananda Higher Secondary School was one of the worst affected schools in the district during the devastating Kerala floods of 2018.

"It is a miracle that we did not lose any important school documents in the flood," Smitha Pillai (40), an English teacher at the school, said as she recounted the events of 15th August. During the Independence Day celebrations in the morning, the school received information about an impending weather change. Though basic precautions were taken such as sending everyone home, no one anticipated the magnitude of the approaching disaster.

"Instead of worrying about his home, one of our professors ran to school in the heavy rain to shift all important papers from the headmistress' office on the ground floor to the higher floors. We were, however, not able to save our library books in the same way. We were able to salvage only 500 books (after the clean up) of the 10,000 books that our library had before the flood. We are trying to collect books now, by borrowing from our ex-students, other departments and others who will donate books," P. K. Bindu (48), the librarian said.

The level of water in the River Pamba rose and entered the school premises, as the school is situated on its bank. Desks and benches were washed away and were later found floating in a pond opposite the school gate. The hall, which is closest to the river, was deemed unfit to use due to water damage and hence, lies vacant. The water also brought with it wet mud, silt and other rubbish and deposited it all around the school.

By the time the water receded, the school was covered ankle deep in muck and sludge. It took almost three weeks to clean the school of all the filth the flood had brought in. Teachers and other school staff would come in during school hours and help in the cleaning up process. Though concentrated efforts were made to reopen the school on 29th September, as per their schedule, more time was needed to clean up the school premises. However, the school has now been reconstructed much better than it was before the floods.

Students in class 10 and 12, who are preparing for their board examinations in 2019, also faced a huge setback due to the floods. "Many of the children who study here come from BPL (Below Poverty Line) families. So when they lost their books, we provided them with a new set of books. We also gave them the mental support they needed to come back to studying after such a traumatic experience," Pillai said.

The teachers at Swami Vivekananda Higher Secondary School. |SAMANTHA SHAJI

"It's all because of will power and a collective effort on the part of everyone in school that we were able to revive so quickly," Pillai said.

The damaged computer and chemistry labs on the ground floor are now up and running, 10 new bathrooms are being constructed to replace those destroyed in the floods and students have been given new textbooks and uniforms to replace the ones lost or spoiled in the floods.

Additionally, the school received monetary help from different sources like the State Education department and other officials from Trivandrum, who came forward to help. Pillai also proudly pointed out that the entire faculty had given up a month's salary to revive the school. "We never thought of ourselves as just teachers; we are part of this school, this is ours," she beamed.

Take me to the Church

BHARAT SHARMA

CHENGANNUR: During the floods, churches in Pandanad West housed people before formal rescue operations and rehabilitation arrived.

Jubin K. Jose, a parishioner of St. Mary's Orthodox Syrian Church in Pandanad, explained how the church building suffered structural damage and sacred objects like the vessels, robes and bibles worth Rs. 1.5 lakhs were rendered unusable.

"It took us two months to replace everything. The diocese has reinstated lost material goods. The entire community came together, collected and donated money and also helped rebuild multiple homes in the poorer areas nearby. The struggle for money is getting worse as the time passes", he said.

Jason Varghese, another parishioner, gratefully admitted that his family survived because of the church efforts.

Due to a defect in the Thottapally Spillway, which drains 600 cu.m per second instead of the planned 19,500 cu.m., the water clogged Pandanad for five days before submerging Kuttanad for 10-15 days. People had to be rescued in helicopters from a bridge nearby.

The rescuers who were not rescued

VIDUSHI SAGAR

CHENGANNUR: Ritish Kumar (39) and Biju Gopal (35) are just two protagonists in a story of gallant community rescue efforts carried out in Pandanad village in the Chengannur taluk. However, despite their efforts, they have received only meager compensation for the damage that the flood caused to their houses.

"I realized that the water had seeped into our house by the sound of our dog crying at two in the night," says Ritish, a paddy farmer, who lives with his wife and two children.

After rescuing his family, he immediately got to work; acting as one of the co-ordinators who gathered willing helpers and mobilized effort.

"There were 30 of us who made a group and decided to help everyone. Together we rescued around 600 people. We also made traditional banana shaft boats to carry people off to safer places," he recalls.

According to Ritish, the traditional boat is made by cutting the strong parts of the shafts of banana trees and tying them together with rope.

Biju Gopal (35) is a labourer who was a part of Ritish's rescue group. After the water battered his house, Biju came to help the people in his area, making sure to rescue all the children and the elderly.

"We took the electric wires and tied them from pole to pole as a support to wade through the water and reach secure places. We made use of everything we could," he says.

Ritish and Biju share not just a story of bravery and selflessness, but also ruined homes. While Ritish currently survives with a tarpaulin roof and dangerously cracked walls, Biju lives at his nephew's house due to the complete destruction of his own. Ritish's name has not even yet figured on the three lists that have been issued by the Pandanad Grama Panchayat office for house damage compensation despite repeated appeals, and Biju has only received a meagre amount of Rs. 10,000.

Mr. Sivankutty Ailarathil, President of the Pandanad Grama Panchayat, acknowledged the community rescue operations, calling them the force behind keeping everything running and active. Talking about the delay in the distribution of compensation funds, he said, "People are out on rounds, inspecting the house damage and taking photos. However, we have received many applications, and some names are unfortunately being left out."

"A week after the floods, students from nearby engineering colleges came along with technical aid to do a survey of the levels of house damage. According to the survey, five levels of damage were identified - 15%, 16 to 29%, 30 to 59%, 60 to 74%, and above 74%. The money decided for compensation respectively was Rs. 10,000. Rs. 20,000, Rs. 1 lakh, Rs. 2.5 lakh, and Rs. 4 lakh. However, there have been some conflicts with the higher authorities on the authenticity of the survey, and thus, the government decided to release only Rs. 10,000 for all levels of damage for now. People have appealed to the district collector for the disbursement of the remaining amount and once this process is completed that would be done," says Mr. Harikumar, Pandanad Panchayat Secretary.

According to him, 40 families in the area are eligible for full house damage compensation as of yet, and there are over 140 applications for proper inspection by the Secretary Engineer and the Zilla Officer. He says that most of the applications will be dealt with soon, once all lost office documents are put to order.

Livelihood under threat on islands

BHARAT SHARMA

KUTTANAD: Lack of road connectivity continues to halt the post-flood recovery process. Boats are the only way to travel to and fro these islands, through which potable water is also procured. It is one of the most low-lying regions in the state.

The floods intensified here in mid-August (17th), after which the island was partially submerged. No casualties were reported owing to the rescue operations undertaken by fishermen, the government, and volunteers.

Anamma Joseph, who has lived here for 30 years, said that connectivity had always been a major issue, but its absence was most fiercely felt after the floods. "If there had been a road flyover connecting us to the mainland, it would have been easier to rescue us. Now we're stuck on an island with no means of livelihood". She lost her savings in the flood and receives money from her son who works in CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force).

"One man here died of a heart attack as soon as he came back to his home [after the flood]. He could have been saved if we had had even a single road here", she added. An hour long boat ride from the Chennamkary jetty, the islands receive utilities from the mainland or use the public boat service to cross over.

Basic items like food, clothing, construction material arrives to the island on boats, adding to their expenses. "Since there is no water pipeline, we pay Rs. 50 for one can of water. We need four cans everyday. To bathe, we simply use the [Pamba river] backwaters- which is mostly dirty, even more after the flood", said Beena Kumar, a resident of the island. Others shared similar experiences while some simply store the river water in big containers, wait for it to sediment, and boil the water from the top layer to drink it. Sometimes they also add bleaching powder.

According to the census (2011), Venattukadu island has a population of 2,108. Most residents are dependent on the State Water Transport for commuting.

"This water still makes us sick, we get nausea and diarrhoea regularly. Some even get jaundice.", said Suresh Sukumar, a paddy farmer who currently has no source of livelihood and owes Rs. 60,000 to loan sharks. "I cannot spend on water and electricity when I can barely get food", he added.

Electricity companies insist on recovering the amount due before and during the flood, which people simply cannot afford. Additionally, setting up a new power connection requires the people to show proof of an electric circuit.

"This takes a lot of money, so we draw power directly from the lines. We might get fined, but we cannot live without electricity", said Tobin Abraham, who is unable to pay his Rs. 4000 electricity dues.

The floating dispensary comes along the bank once a week. Many people in need of immediate medical attention are unable to get it.

In the absence of roads, electricity and potable water, the recovering population lives in potentially unsafe conditions and remain susceptible to diseases.

Page Editors: Himanshi Lohchab and Vidushi Sagar

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Wooden boats struggling to stay afloat

NIKITA SINGH

CHENNAMKARY: The resounding hammering of copper nails against wood has been an innate part of the lives of the Asari caste men of Chertala village in Alappuzha district— most of them engaged in the traditional art of wooden-boat making for generations.

This clinking sound of woodworking tools reverberated on the shore of Chennamkary island as six artisans from Chertala repaired a 100-feet-long wooden boat. "I have been making and fixing wooden boats for over 30 years," said Venny Babu (52), one of the artisans.

Sitting beside the boat, Babu was hurriedly peeling coconut husks which are used as coir to make wooden joints stronger. He said, "Wooden boat making comes naturally to me. My father was a boat maker too." Babu had willingly taken up his family's traditional occupation of wooden boat making like the other five artisans- Varghese Chacko (50), Mohanan (51), Dasappan (52), Santosh (50) and Sabo (48).

Varghese Chacko, who was fixing a joint of brown anjili wood planks, said, "Demand for wooden boats have dipped over the years. We work at construction sites for at least four months of the year to earn enough. Although wooden boats last longer, fibre boats and metal boats have become the rage."

"High maintenance cost and the need to repair wooden boats every three years are the major factors that have resulted in the decline of its demand," he added.

Dr M.P. Damodaran, assistant professor (Anthropology) at the University of Madras, who has studied caste and traditions of Kerala, said, "Artisan communities such as Asari, placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are faced with greater social and cultural stigma if they continue working in their traditional occupations.

Other occupations outside the caste system are more attractive for them in terms of both financial security and social status. Moreover, the scope of work for Asaris is shrinking with the shift in boat culture from wooden boats to fibre glass boats. Mechanised boats are being preferred by fisher communities.

However, preserving, documenting and supporting wooden boat making is important for its cultural relevance and to promote indigenous methods and knowledge. The government and non-government organisations must work towards it, but no one except the academicians are doing anything about it."

With diminishing demand for wooden boats and the resulting decline in work opportunities for traditional artisans, younger generations of the Asari caste are coerced to look for other means.

"None of our children are learning the art of wooden boat making. My son is enrolled at a degree college in Alleppey," Chacko said. "With the onset of modern boat making techniques the social status of the artistic and scientific skill of wooden boat making has also declined," he added. Chacko, who makes just Rs. 850 per day does not want his children to take up the same occupation.

With new generations of Asari caste men breaking the shackles of caste occupations and in the absence of formalization of the traditional art, the art of wooden boat making is struggling to stay afloat against the storm of modernity.

Among the people who left traditional wooden boat making to try their fortune in fibre glass boat manufacturing is Bijoy Sebastian (41), a Chennamkary businessman, who has been in the business for the past 20 years.

"Fibre glass boats take four days to build, compared to ten to twelve weeks taken to build large wooden boats. Even as wooden boats are smoother to drive, especially on windy days, and can last for about 100 years, compared to 50 years longevity of fiberglass boats—manufacturing and maintenance of wooden boats is too expensive," Bijoy said.

Varghese Chacko fixing a joint of brown anjili wood planks, while repairing a wooden boat at Chennamkary island. | VIDUSHI SAGAR

V.J. Jose (47) began working on his father's duck farms in Mannar village in Alappuzha's Chengannur taluk, at the age of 14. He only recently recovered from the losses he incurred during the 2013 and 2015 bird flu epidemics, only to be hit by tragedy again in the form of the 2018 floods whence his entire farm was submerged. He lost 10,000 out of the 15,000 ducks he owned. On a regular day, around 15 ducks are sold, each costing Rs. 300. The ducks are bred on one farm and at four months, the ducks are shifted to another farm for business purposes. Men are hired to breed the ducks while women are employed for killing and dressing them since they demand less money. | VIDUSHI SAGAR

Traditional 'madas' stand nature's fury

NEETHU S.

KUTTANAD: Dotting the vast stretches of paddy fields in Kuttanad are remnants of the past which were once sure markers of the agricultural system here. With farmers beginning to employ new and time-saving farming methods, old practices have been forgotten and unemployment has been on the rise.

One such method was the art of natural bund making. A unique feature of farming in Kuttanad is cultivation below sea level. And these bunds, called 'madas,' were built to maintain optimal water levels in the fields and to prevent sea water ingress.

"Building madas is an art. Experts belonging to Dalit communities were employed to make them," said Jose T. Thevari, a farmer.

"In order to build these structures, people dig trenches three to four metres deep and then build a framework using bamboo or coconut stem. Its insides are then filled with mud dredged from the river. Building structures out of bamboo was called 'Mallu kettuka' and it was a big part of the tradition," said 70-year-old Thevari.

Construction of madas was the primary source of income for many Dalit families in Kuttanad.

However, with the government pushing schemes for artificial bund construction, thousands lost their livelihood. Many have opted for other jobs.

Babu Cheriyan, once a mada maker, followed in his father's footsteps to take up the job.

"My father was famous for his quick way of making strong and flood resistant bunds. I used to observe him and was fascinated by the way he made the bunds. I joined him and we were happy with our earnings," said the 65-year-old.

But soon, many of the richer farmers started opting for free artificial bunds that the government offered and many like Babu lost their source of income.

However, they did find a way to help other people with their traditional skill.

"The islands of Kuttanad face the problem of rising water levels from time to time. It was these madas which gave people some respite. We would ask the mada makers to build natural bunds and those helped hold the waters back at least for some more time. It gave us enough time to move from the islands," said Thankamma Babu of Chennamkary.

The Kuttanad package recommended by the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in 2007 suggested a new 'pile and slab system' of bunds instead of natural bunds. This includes building an outer granite and concrete bund at a cost of Rs. 836 crores.

The Kerala government tried to popularise this system across Kuttanad from 2011 onwards. This, in turn, led to traditional mada builders losing their jobs.

"When we built madas, we ensured that the passage for fish between fields was not blocked. Selling grown up fish from the fields was also an income source. However, cement bunds completely block the passage of fish," said Kunjariyan Chacko, a 60-year-old who started mada making in his early 20s.

As he lost his job with the implementation of pile and slab system, he became a part-time agricultural labourer and pesticide sprayer.Meanwhile, government officials are adamant that the concrete system is superior to the natural ones.

"Granite blocks provide more strength to the bunds and thus it can protect the fields during adverse conditions," said Geevarghese P J, panchayat member of Ward 13, Pandanad.However, environmental experts claim that promoting artificial bunds and granite boulders will affect the lives of the Dalits, leaving them unemployed. It also would affect the balance of the ecology in Kuttanad as well as the area from where it is quarried.

According to lawyer V. Mohandas, the secretary of Chithira Kayal Padasekhara Samiti, piling of bunds is not sustainable or durable. "Many natural bunds withstood the recent floods in Kerala while the artificial ones were destroyed," he said.

Harvest melodies: A thing of the past

SAMANTHA SHAJI

ALAPPUZHA: The advent of the harvest season is no longer welcomed by a chorus of women in the fields. The traditional singing and rhythmic clapping of hands has now been replaced by the whirring of the engines of farm machines.

Mechanized farming has rendered folk songs of yesteryears obsolete. Meant to keep up the morale of the workers in the fields, songs sung during harvest time usually reflect the circumstances in which workers lived in.

"*The dreams we sang of yesterday have now become a reality ... we are all one, let's sing together.*"

Sajiama Balakrishnan (52), from the island of Kandangiri, explained that the lyrics of these songs were usually dreams that the women in the worker classes harboured. They shared their joys and sorrows with each other through songs like these. Most of the songs sung speak of a better tomorrow for themlseves.

She then beams while mentioning how what her ancestors could only dream and sing songs about, it has become her reality today.

Bindu Sateesh, also from the island of Kandangiri, pointed out characteristics of folk songs which have resulted in them becoming almost extinct today.

Folk songs were always spread orally from generation to generation. Theu weren't formally written down. They are now performed only during festivals more as tradition, rather than because of a necessity.

Since harvesting crops was primarily the prerogative of women from agricultural working class families, a large part of the Malayalee population knows of these songs only by virtue of their ethnicity instead of knowing the reasons behind the songs themselves.

According to all the women at the kudumbashree at Kandangiri, it was their mothers and other older female family members who taught them the folk songs they know.

The women learnt these songs directly from the women who sung it on the fields while working. However, children of women from the current generation won't know these songs as there is no need for the singing of these songs.

The women acknowledge that agricultural machinery reduces the physical labour. But it also points to the corrosion of the community identity which was once very strong amongst the women. This change is new and has taken over the population rather quickly. Many women don't even remember the songs that were sung during their childhood.

Folk songs are a dying art in today's constantly evolving and progressively homogenized world. It is hardly a matter of time when such songs, markers of culture, will become memories of the past.

Chundan Vallams: Commerce wins over Culture

SAMIKSHA GOEL & ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

ALAPPUZHA: Beneath the spirit, prestige and cultural significance of the Nehru Trophy Boat Race, lies money and cut-throat competition. On the second Saturday of August every year, Kuttanad's Punnamada Lake turns into a battle field for snake boats.

Participating in the race has become increasingly expensive. Around Rs 1 crore is spent on hiring and training the 100-member crew of each boat.

A rower is paid approximately Rs 1000 per day and a total amount of Rs 40,000-65,000 is spent on their training every day. Every club aims to select the best rowers for their chundans (100-feet-long snake boats) while the rowers look for the clubs that offer them the most money.

According to Josekutty John (65), a retired Army Subedar Major who used to participate in the sport, the competition began to evolve when clubs started pitching to companies and NRIs to invest in the game.

In recent years, companies with advertising ambitions have started investing enthusiastically on the condition that rowers wear their jerseys during the sport. People from the village, who now live abroad, invest in the race mainly out of affection for and attachment to the tradition.

John's two sons work as engineers in Dubai. John laughs when asked if he did not ask them to row. "They were not interested in rowing so they studied and went abroad; nevertheless they form part of another important body of NRIs who invest money in the sport," he said.

According to John,"Betting takes place, but nobody talks about it outside the clubs. There is a seven person committee, however, that keeps a check on corruption and other unethical activities in the clubs."

Though the race was traditionally held with local rowers representing their villages, the high level of competition is compelling teams to hire professional rowers from the army and navy. Sunil Padmanabhan, Secretary of the United Boat Club (UBC) Kainakary team, said, "Earlier, people from the village would come after work for practice. Bringing professional rowers has made the race more expensive. Each professional rower is paid around Rs 30,000 for the season."

Competition trumps tradition in Kuttanad waters. | SUJITH BHAKTAN

According to Lalu Kainakary (30), one of UBC's rowers, the month-long training camp has become more intensive.

"We are trained by R. K. Pillai, an ex-army rowing coach. The training is disciplined and difficult so most of the rowers need to takean off from work for nearly a month. Not everybody is willing to do that so we have a shortage of around 20 to 30 rowers every season," said Lalu, who is a medical representative.

"Professional rowers are more skilled because they practice every day," said Balu S, Secretary of the Pallathuruthy Boat Club, winners of the 2018 race. "After UBC added professionals from Manipur to their team in 2011, clubs started hiring around 50 professional rowers every season.

Smaller clubs that could not afford this, like the Chennamkary Boat Club, began to die out."

In 2017, the Nehru Trophy Boat Race Society, which organises the race, capped professionals to 25 per cent of the number of rowers.

Sunil said that it is impossible for team to win which does not have professional rowers.

In spite of the flood and a shortage of funds, the 2018 race was conducted in November.

"The prize money is not much. It was increased from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 2 lakhs this year. But teams will go as far as to file complaints against other teams to get them banned from the race," Balu said.

"The race is not a tradition anymore. It has become a competition and teams will do anything to win," he added.

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Overuse of pesticides - a hazard

Chennamkary villagers face illnesses from contaminated drinking water

AISHWARYAA. R & ASHNA BUTANI

KUTTANAD: The floods of July-August 2018 have exacerbated Kuttanad's perennial problems with drinking water.

These, however, have been compounded by two sources of pollutants - the tourist boats that dump their waste into the backwaters and the excessive use of chemicals and pesticides in rice cultivation which the District Health Department identifies as the cause of contamination.

(From Left to Right) : Rajiv Joseph's father; Pennamma and Sumathi - a few of the many victims affected by the pesticides in the water. | ASHNA BUTANI

THE ROAD TO ILLNESS

Rajiv Joseph's home is perched on a scenic route, sandwiched by backwaters on one side and paddy fields on the other. But in this mesmerizing blend of land and water, he is caught in between pollutants from both the sources. His father and grandfather died of cancer. He and his wife, Shaiba, voice their drinking water woes.

The river water is impure and the only water source is a kilometre away and costs Rs. 10 a litre. Of his three daughters, two go to a school around six km away where there is ample water supply. This, however, is not the case once they reach home.

The pesticides from the paddy fields infiltrate their only water source and the fumes from houseboats make matters worse. "The polluted water causes cancer. In the 10 houses in this locality, every family has had one cancer patient," he said. His request for cheaper and readily available water was addressed by the panchayat.

Not too far down the road, Pennamma.K (74) is ailing from spinal cord weakness, joint pains and breathing troubles. She has been taking medication for all of her ailments for about 26 years now. However, none of the medicines are from the local government hospital or even the private hospital in Chennamkary. She goes all the way to Alappuzha to visit a doctor, at his residence, for treatment.

The doctor, Suresh, charges Rs. 200 as consultation fee. The same service costs Rs. 2 at the Alappuzha government hospital where he works. "It is very crowded at the hospital. The medicines I got from there are not that effective either," said Pennamma, "I take a boat to Cherthala and a bus to Alappuzha."

The Healthcare Department of Alappuzha said that they are trying to solve the issue of crowding by adding Referral Centres in the villages, so that medical facilities reach the villagers.

Pennamma works at the shop owned by her family. Her husband owns half an acre of land on which her younger son farms, while her elder son works in Dubai. He can barely contribute to the family. Given her conditions, her visits are becoming tougher by the day.

"Doctors don't have time to look at every patient in the bigger hospitals, and I can't afford the health facilities offered by the private one [hospital]. By visiting the doctor at his own residence [clinic], I get my ailments sorted better," Pennamma pointed out.

Toxicity and Waste

Excessive chemical usage in farming and waste dumped from boats, contaminate the water, making it unfit for consumption.

Usha.M (45) was a farmer who was affected by pneumonia and died 15 months ago. Usha's daughter, Monisha.M (24), a nurse in Andhra Pradesh said that she was initially diagnosed with only breathing difficulties, but later discovered that it was pneumonia. Usha eventually succumbed to it due to the improper medication taken previously.

Her sister-in-law, Sumathi.R, has been battling asthma for many years now. "We have stopped drinking the contaminated water, in recent years. Some families still drink it," said Monisha.

Well-off families have switched over to RO water over time. Nidhin Kuncheria (25) said that they were told not to consume this water ever since they were children as it caused diseases. But for the poor who cannot afford fresh drinking water, and for the aged who cannot walk to fetch it, life is a constant battle between pollution and pesticides.

Garbage - at whose disposal?

HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

ALAPPUZHA: Lack of a centralised waste management system in Alappuzha district of Kerala is an added burden for the locals who, on their part, also contribute to the pollution in the area.

In November 2017, Alappuzha was recognised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as one of the five model cities in the world for successfully and sustainably managing solid waste.

In 2012, a decentralised plan was formulated to push for 100 per cent segregation in all 23 wards of the city. However, on ground, the situation is different.

"Most people in villages own land. So they either burn their domestic waste or dump it. We put it at the base of a coconut tree in the backyard and it decomposes by itself," said Sosamma Jose, a resident of Pandanad village in Chengannur taluk.

According to a report by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi, Alappuzha has a population of 1.74 lakhs which produces 58 tonnes of solid waste per day.

Managing non-biodegradable waste is a bigger problem for inhabitants of the islands because of the lack of road connectivity. The canals connecting the backwaters to paddy fields in Chennamkary and Kainakary islands are clogged with plastic waste.

Saudamini Gopi (62) lost most of her sarees when her almirah collapsed during the August floods. The torn clothes still lie unburnt in her backyard because of the fabric which is non-flammable.

As part of the Nirmala Bhavanam, Nirmala Nagaram (Clean Homes, Clean City) campaign launched by the Kerala government in 2012, non-biodegradable waste is supposed to be collected from households periodically and handed over to private contractors for recycling.

However, the residents of islands complain about their inability to participate in the cause.

"We have been segregating plastic waste for three months but nobody comes here to collect it. Sometimes, the rains wash it away and it accumulates in our fields ," said Thankamani Babu.

SANITARY WOES FOR WOMEN

Women in Pandanad village who are conscious about the environmental hazards of burning waste on a daily basis face a bigger challenge.

Because of the menstrual stigma, women must take the responsibility of dumping their sanitary napkins themselves. Girls as young as 12 or 13 years of age find it cumbersome to dig pits every month.

"During the floods, around 200 menstruating women were stuck in relief camps for almost 15 days. After the water receded we had to dig a six-feet-deep pit to dump everything," said 52-year-old Sabu Krishna.

FOR A NOBLE CAUSE

The students of Swami Vivekananda High School in Pandanad village collect stationery such as used pens and broken rulers. The non-biodegradable dry waste is sent for recycling every month during what is called 'Dehydration Day.'

The lingering past : Saudamini Gopi shows the muck-covered clothes which do not burn and stink up her entire backyard. | ASHNA BUTANI

Adulteration sends patrons directly to the toddy tappers

BHARAT SHARMA

ALAPPUZHA: As toddy consumption in the state spikes, potential threats from poisoning have increased as well. Toddy (*kallu*) is a traditional alcoholic beverage tapped from the fermented sap of coconut or palm trees. In Kerala, toddy is consumed directly and used in preparing food items.

In 2010, twenty five people died after consuming poisoned toddy in Malappuram. When Kerala enforced strict anti-alcohol laws in 2014 and consequently shut down 730 bars, the toddy industry witnessed a revival. Currently, there are around 4,300 toddy shops across the state.

Sebastian Joseph, who works at a dispensary in Chengannur said, "Cases have reduced since the floods. But even now, at least two cases of toddy poisoning show up every week." Sometimes, toddy is mixed with diazepam and alprazolam, which are highly addictive anti-depressants. Magnesium and aluminium are also sometimes added to the concoction.

Kochumon K., who has been tapping toddy in the Kuttanad backwaters for 15 years, said that poisoning has increased revenue for tappers. He said, "The poisoning of liquor is carried out by people who want to create problems. Everybody knows that a tapper will never do anything like this. Sometimes, shopkeepers do it too. Because of this, people buy directly from us, helping us make more money." Another tapper, Srihari, suggested that even in the face of rampant poisoning, demand for toddy has increased over the last few years. "See, people are smart to know which vendor to trust. These days, most toddy shops have a family seating area where women also come. The stigma is also coming down," he said.

In fact, many tappers said that owing to an uproar in the media around cases of poisoning, many foreign tourists have suddenly become interested in witnessing toddy being tapped. "Everyone is a toddy fan now. Foreign tourists who come here pay us more. They pay us for the liquor and for the spectacle… It feels good to be recognised for the craft," said another tapper. They regularly earn Rs. 100 for a litre.

The union of toddy tappers and sellers addresses their grievances. Tools required for tapping, including knives and clay, are also provided by them.

Suresh Sukumar, a waiter at the Subash Hotel in Chungam, which has been serving toddy since 1963, explains that when people visit shops that are not licensed by the Kerala Excise Department, the chances of being served poisoned drinks are greater.

"The police occasionally visit and check if the liquor is adulterated. Additionally, regular drinkers have started speaking up. If the toddy tastes funny, they create a scene at the shop and report them," he said.

Poisonous toddy also poses a threat to the livelihood of tappers in case of a ban. The state government has constantly promoted toddy as a health drink, and enforced more regulations and raids to curb the poisoning.

> *A tapper will never do anything like this. So, people buy directly from us helping us make more money.* - KOCHUMON K, TODDY TAPPER

Worst affected, least compensated

NIKITA SINGH & NEETHU S.

ALAPPUZHA: Five years ago, Mohanakumari.R (69), and her husband, Rajendran.K, converted their five- acre-paddy field into a fish culturing area in the hope of better profits. They barely knew that all their efforts would be washed away soon. "Flood waters destroyed the field just before the harvest season. Everything was lost as my entire field was ruined," she said. A resident of Champakulam village in Kuttanad taluk, she lost her husband three years back and was solely dependent on pisciculture for her livelihood.

"We used to rear Catla, Pearl Spot fish and shrimp on our farm, which we would harvest in November every year. However, now I am only left with my old age pension," she said. "Three workers were employed at my farm, but I haven't been able to pay their wages till now." Mohanakumari received Rs.10,000 from the government by way of relief, but the amount, she says, is insufficient to rebuild her fish farm.

"We have sent our assessment report to the authorities, proposing Rs. 160 crores as compensation. Rs. 40 crores has been sanctioned in the first phase and we are beginning the distribution as per the extent of damage. Fish farmers will be allocated maximum of Rs. 2.5 lakh, of which 60 per cent will cover infrastructure cost and 40 per cent operational cost," said a senior official at the Fishery Department, Government of Kerala.

Joseph Kunnathara (63) another farmer in Kuttanad taluk recorded a loss of over Rs. 4.5 lakhs as the flood water washed away his 1.5-acre fish farm at Chengannur. "I've never faced such loss in my 12-year-long fish farming career. Luckily, we survived it as my son has a construction material supply business and fish farming isn't our sole means of income," he added. According to Joseph, small fish farmers are the worst affected. "It's been over five months, no substantial relief has reached the fish farmers who have lost their main source of livelihood," he said.

Joseph reared Katla, Rohu, Tilapia, Red Belly and Pearl Spot fish at his farm, however, after the floods, foreign fishes such as the Catfish as well as turtles have entered his farm. "Although these foreign breeds sell for a higher price, they destroy the environment for the other cultured fish in my farm," he said.

Duck farmers await flood compensation

SAMIKSHA GOEL

ALAPPUZHA: While Jose V.S .(47), a duck farmer in Alappuzha, was in the process of recovering from losses incurred during the bird flu epidemic in 2014-2016, the floods in 2018 augmented it further when he lost 10,000 of his ducks.

His family has been in the duck business for generations. Jose has seen his father and grandfather working on the same farm in Mannar, Chengannur. Jose joined them when he was 14 and has since taken over.

"Business had already dipped after the bird flu. When we finally came out of it, the flood hit us hard, leading to a tremendous loss of income," he said.

Out of a total of around 15,000 ducks, he was left with only 5000 after the floods. Except for the Rs 10,000 given to all households as compensation for the damages, the government didn't help in any other way, he said

Small duck shop owners were promised an allowance, which never arrived.

Marching along the muddy lanes. | SAMIKSHA GOEL

Sophie Jose (45), who owns a duck shop on the highway about seven kms. from Nedumudi, lost 300 ducks in the floods with a total loss of Rs 75,000. "This was a big loss. We couldn't even afford food for 10 days," she said.

Jithin Jose (15), Sophie's son, said that they were given a form by a counsellor who assured them compensation, but there was no response after.

O.C. Chacko (64) who keeps ducks in his house at Chegannur is a famous name in the business there. As many as 200 of his ducks died during the floods. He also received a form from the panchayat assuring compensation, but nobody responded. "We are trying to pick up the pieces, but it's hard when you've lost everything," he said.

The Kerala government duck farm in Niranam village, 36 kms from Alappuzha town, witnessed a massive blow when eight machines in the farm and the hatcheries were completely destroyed by the waters.

"It is difficult to keep the ducks in the incubators and maintain the required temperature. The humidity in the air makes its way inside through every corner," said Dr. Thomas Jacob, Assistant Director of the duck farm.

"Water remained in the shed for six days and because of the lack of elevation, the ducks gave in. We lost around 2000 of them," he said. However, despite the huge loss, the government duck farm is not worried as the process of rebuilding has already begun. They have maintained accounts of the damages caused by the flood and are untroubled by the loss.

The cost of repairing comes to Rs 80 lakhs while the total revival cost will be around Rs. 1.03 crore.

"We need immediate repairing. Since it is a government body, the process takes time," Mr. Jacob said. "The government gives compensation to duck farmers, only if the authorities have killed ducks, for instance, if the ducks died when they were culled during the bird flu epidemic in 2014-16," said Jacob.

Post-flood silt causes breathing problems

AADITHYAN J.P.

CHENGANNUR: The residents of Pandanad village in Chengannur taluk are facing health problems even four months after the disaster because of the silt deposited by the floods. Kuttanad's water pollution problems have been in the making for a long time now.

Writing in the magazine Down to Earth in 2015, Ajith Kumar, an environment journalist, pointed to a study by the Kerala Pollution Control Board (KPCB) in collaboration with an Indo-Dutch group which found that, "25,000 tonnes of fertilisers and 500 tonnes of highly toxic pesticides are used in the region's 55,000 hectares of paddy fields annually. A considerable portion of this enters the water bodies when the water drains from the fields."

Pandanad is a low lying area and silt and other industrial waste have been draining into its water bodies for some time.

This silt, which had become sediment over time, had turned into a thick, dark-coloured mud that landed in the fields, the buildings and the homes in the days following the flood.

It would trap carcasses and other dross which would solidify unless removed quickly. The residents have been trying to clean this mud and silt with very little success.

Remnants of Time

The silt would trap carcasses and other dross which would solidify if not removed quickly. Residents are trying to clean it but with very little success.

Rajan (35), a carpenter and handyman whose well was rendered useless by the silt that has buried it and damaged its inner walls said, "This well had been dug deep, many decades ago and its walls have strong reinforcements. The slush has completely contaminated the ground water," he said.

Five attempts have been made to clean the well, but the water is still unusable; it has a pungent smell and tastes bitter. "The flood brought with it a lot of silt. It causes health issues, and also makes the ground infertile, even after it has been cleared. However, we are trying our best to deal with this. A particular machine is used for clearing the silt, and it can take around three months for the whole process to be completed," said Shikhabuddin Srikumar, an agricultural assistant at the Pandanad Grama Panchayat.

"Even after the silt is cleared out, its residue still covers the surfaces. This layer of silt does not easily get washed or scraped off, and causes health issues," said Arjun.T (23), a final year Economics student at Christian College, Chengannur.

According to him, the most affected are the children and the elderly who have been suffering from acute wheezing and dry coughing due to the fine dust.

Some people were also diagnosed with bronchial asthma. At the hospital, traces of fine cemented dust and industrial grit was found in their bodies.

"We can only hope that everything will get better in time," he said.

Page Editors: Aishwaryaa. R and Leah Thomas

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Assam workers of Pandanad

Better healthcare and education attract migrants to Kerala

NIKITA SINGH

CHENGANNUR: Shaidur Rahman (26), one of the 139 million internal migrants, set out of his village in Darrang district in Assam in pursuit of a better livelihood six years ago.

Despite owning a seven-acre farm land in his native village, Rahman has been working as a driver for the past six years in different places across India. "Farming is not very profitable at my native village in Assam. We barely make any profit. My father looks after the farm but my elder brother and I work as drivers," he said.

Rahman has worked in Bangalore, Coimbatore, Madurai and even Rajasthan. "I go wherever I get better pay. I cannot afford to get bothered by language or cultural differences. I know how to speak in Tamil and I am slowly learning Malayalam here. However, all these challenges and uncertainties have compelled my wife and my three-month-old daughter to stay back in Assam," he added, while clearing a paddy field of grass in Pandanad village.

Rahman has been working as a farm labourer and driver at Sabari Farm Milk near Pandanad village in Chengannur taluk, for the past five months. His days start at around 1 a.m. in the dead of the night. He starts his work by bathing about five cows.

"There are no fixed work timings. It is like our own farm. We stay at the farm and work all day. After milking and then feeding the cows, we cut grass in the paddy fields until evening," he said.

Dr. Sangeetha, working at the Community Health Centre in Pandanad said, "There are thousands of migrant workers in Alappuzha district. At our centre, we regularly do tuberculosis and leprosy check-ups for migrant workers, and also guide them in case of other health issues. With the help of the District Committee Officer here, we conduct classes on healthcare and hygiene for migrant workers in their native tongue. We make sure the advice on pre-natal care, child care, vaccinations and breast feeding is provided properly." While these facilities keep the spread of diseases in check, they are also wooing migrant workers to make Kerala their home.

(From left to right) Shaidur Rahman, Jainal Abdil and Hijur Rahman taking a break from cutting grass. | NIKITA SINGH

Why Kerala?

- Better healthcare services
- Higher daily wages
- Greater availability of work
- Friendlier on the pocket
- Agricultural losses at home

Jainal Abdil (24) another Assamese migrant worker at Sabari Farm Milk, had come to Kerala two years ago to work at a tea plantation in Munnar.

In these past two years, he lived in Delhi for a short while and then returned to Kerala to work at the dairy farm ten months ago. "This place is friendly on the pocket, and that is one of the reasons why I came back," he said.

Abdil earns a daily wage of Rs. 500, stays at the farm and gets two kgs. of rice from the farm owner every month.

"In Assam, we get about Rs. 350 per day for the same work. With a lot of our friends and family there, the expenses are also much higher. We visit our village once in over a year or so," he said.

Although, his parents and brother-in-law work at tea plantations in Munnar, his 9-year-old brother and 20-year-old sister still live at their village in Assam. "Besides the lower wages, the availability of work is also less in Assam," Abdil said.

His wife, Fariya (21), works as a household help near the farm and earns around Rs. 400 per day and their son Riyaaz (3) goes to the Anganwadi of the village for his nursery education.

Abundance of labour intensive work and better availability of healthcare and education have been a driving factor for workers like Abdil to migrate to Kerala and stay back here.

"Most of the children in my village study at the mosque to learn the Quran and skip formal education," said Abdil, who dropped out of school in 9th standard. "I was also unaware of the benefits of education."

"Besides providing nursery classes, the Anganwadi has been very helpful in taking care of our child's health. My wife and I too have had health check-ups there. I want my son to study here, so he does not land up where I am today," he said with a smile.

Waterborne delivery of medical care

HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

ALAPPUZHA: With most islands in the district disconnected from the mainland, floating dispensaries were a boon during the floods, especially to those who needed regular medication.

"Diabetic patients and those who receive palliative care needed attention every day. If they could not be brought back to the camps, boats ensured daily medical care was given during the floods," said Agnel Joseph, Junior Consultant, National Rural Health Mission.

Boats were hired according to the need of the day. "Normally there are three boats that go around the district. But, during the floods, we hired boats according to the need," Joseph said.

Each boat had a doctor, a pharmacist and a nurse on board," he said. The boats were used for both rescue and relief.

Boats were also used after the flood during the clean-up of the houses. "A number of volunteers came to help with this. A major concern were the snakebites, so boats equipped with anti-venom were posted near the docks of different islands," he said.

As part of the National Rural Health Mission (Arogyakeralam), mobile floating dispensaries were introduced in 2013 to compensate for the lack of primary health centres on remote islands in the interiors of the district.

Currently, the dispensaries serve an approximate population of 50,000. They provide free healthcare services to 11 islands and eight panchayats in Ernakulam and Alappuzha. Two doctors, two nurses and one attendant work in shifts and visit each island in the district twice a month.

Finding 'ASHA'

NEETHU S.

ALAPPUZHA: While the hard work and dedication of doctors and nurses during the outbreak of communicable diseases is well respected, the diligence of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) in balancing the local healthcare system is forgotten.

From registering the name of pregnant women at the sub-centre to giving vaccination to children, the role of ASHA workers in spreading awareness is important.

"We go to houses in our respective wards three days a week and collect the health status of each household. Hence, tracing the possibility of an outbreak is easier," said Salomi Mathew, who has been an ASHA worker in Ward 6 of Kainakary panchayat for over ten years.

In Kerala, the salary of an ASHA worker was Rs. 2,000 a month till April 2018 when the state government announced that the workers would be given a monthly wage of Rs. 4,000. However, many have not been receiving it every month and the workers still find the money insufficient to meet their needs.

"We receive payment once in three months or six months and the amount is not at all satisfactory. We work hard without complaining, but we are still not getting respectable wages," said 52-year-old Salomi.

As these workers inspect the houses once every week, locals are more open to them and share their concerns without hesitating. Hence, the ASHA workers can give proper guidelines to them to tackle any sort of health situation.

They also have a good supply of medicines and natives contact them during emergencies.

During the outbreak of chikungunya and malaria, ASHA workers visited affected areas and provided people with medicines.

Work of Asha members important for the local healthcare system | THE HINDU

"When leptospirosis (rat fever) was reported in Nedumudi panchayat in Kuttanad, we went to all houses, spread awareness and gave them preventive medicines," said Molukutty K. who has been an ASHA worker for nine years in Ward 4 of Ponga village in Champakulam.

According to Geevarghese P.J., panchayat member of Ward 13, Pandanad, the Kerala government has paid attention to the worries of ASHA workers and increased their salary from Rs. 2000 to Rs. 4000. "No other state provides this much," he said.

In the aftermath of the flood, they went to many homes to provide disinfectants and were involved in several relief initiatives. However, they did not receive any additional money for the services they rendered.

"Although the salary is not enough, we are not demanding more. We just want the current salary to be consistent," said 54-year-old Molukutty.

Women alone

VIDUSHI SAGAR & HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

Saudamini Gopi's home damaged after the flood. | HIMANSHI LOHCHAB

KUTTANAD: "The loneliness is hard sometimes," said Thankamma Joseph (60), a single woman living in Chennamkary island. Previously a nun at the nearby St. Theresa convent, she lives alone in her now flood-damaged house, abandoned by her relatives after her father's death.

"My mother died when I was two years old, and my father remarried and had a son. He returned after my father's death four years ago, to stake a claim in our ancestral home," she said.

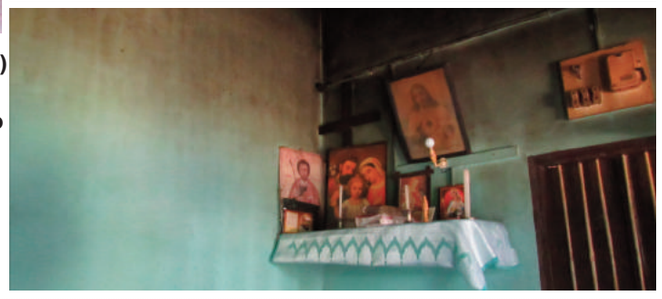
Suffering from a knee problem, Thankamma struggles to complete her daily chores with no help from her neighbours. "They are too busy for an old woman like me. It's a hard life," she said.

"I get my food from ration and a small pension that does not pay for my medicines," she said. Her house now stands with a tarpaulin roof and cracked walls but she has only received Rs. 10,000 as compensation. According to the 2011 Census, about 12 per cent of India's total female population includes single women- divorced, separated, or unmarried. A 39 per cent rise occurred in their number from 2001 to 2011, and yet, many such women still suffer- either socially, professionally, or even at the hands of their families.

Saudamini Gopi (64) faced serious losses due to the floods; her home was damaged and her belongings were washed away. A resident of Chennamkary, she was widowed in 2014, and was about to get her daughter married soon. However, their current situation has resulted in the groom's confidence in the alliance to falter.

Whatever expensive wedding apparel Saudamini had purchased now lie torn away and destroyed beyond use in their backyard.

"They have postponed the wedding and we are uncertain if this *kalyanam* (marriage) will ever happen. The situation would not be so difficult if my husband was alive," said Gopi.



Thankamma Joseph (above) scales her fish. She has trouble bending down to do these tasks because of her knee problem. Thankamma's altar (right): her only refuge in her loneliness. | VIDUSHI SAGAR

Lack of funds dim Kudumbashree's lure

LEAH THOMAS

CHENGANNUR: For over three years, Kudumbashree members of Ward 13 in Chengannur taluk have not come together for a single meeting. "A few years back, our ward used to take up *krishi pani* (agricultural labour) on other people's fields. Now, we are not active," said 62-year-old Bharathi Balan, a CDS (Community Development Societies) representative from Pandanad village.

The last three years saw a massive water shortage in the area due to the rupturing of an irrigation canal that passes through the fields, this leading to an agricultural crisis. "The floods in August further delayed the repair of the canal," she said. As a result, most of the members eventually stepped away from Kudumbashree and took up work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). "It ensures a wage, however little it is," said Balan, now a MGNREGA worker herself.

Although, the panchayat has promised to repair the canal in time for the coming harvest, she believes it will take time for her ward to get back on its feet. "At the moment, there are five members in the ward. The others have either left or have passed away. Nobody new wants to join either," she said.

Started in 1998, the mission was framed and enforced by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala. With Self-Help Groups (SHGs) at its centre, the scheme converges with other government schemes to provide training, loans for micro-enterprises and other help to women.

A three-tier structure- the first or basic unit is the Neighbourhood Groups (NGs). Several such units within a ward are together networked through the Area Development Societies (ADS) and all ADS members, in turn, are federated through the Community Development Societies (CDS). Committee members or coordinators are elected directly at all three levels.

A few kilometres away, Valsala Suresh works in her husband's small restaurant and is a Kudumbashree member (Ward 8). The 15 members in her group sit together whenever they can to make soaps and sambrani (Benzoin Resin). While they started with vegetable farming, they slowly moved on to making soaps because of the water shortage. "We are supposed to meet once a week to do this. But most members cannot make it because of their full-time jobs," she said.

They sell their products to local shops and put up stalls during events. "When we started selling the products, we did make a small profit but not enough to sustain ourselves," she said. She, now, finds herself in the kitchen all day and goes when she finds the time.

According to Usha Sasi, CDS Chairman at the Pandanad Panchayat Office, the reason for the scheme not working in certain wards is the lack of funds. "Most SHGs in and around Pandanad had taken up farming. But with the water shortage, it has been difficult to continue to do so," she said. The panchayat office itself is facing a shortage of funds. "Among the panchayats in the district, ours is the poorest."

Due to the crisis, members in wards that took up farming moved away from Kudumbashree. "For those in desperate need of money, MGNREGA became an option," she said.

That is not to say there have not been successful examples of micro-enterprises started by wards in the panchayat, she added. "We have wards that have taken up other small businesses. This includes two catering units, a curry powder unit, a stationery shop, two tailoring units and a small bakery."

But, to start such a unit, members need to apply for a loan. "While applying for a loan, one of the major requirements is land or a space to start the enterprise. Most of the members in our panchayat cannot meet this requirement because they cannot afford it," said Sasi. But Balan has not given up hope yet. "Maybe when the water shortage ends, we will try starting up the unit again."

Machines and labour face off

SAMIKSHA GOEL

ALAPPUZHA: "We women would harvest the crops when there were no machines," said Vaidehi Prabhakara (84) who had been working as an agricultural labourer since she was 15, till she hit the age of 79 and quit because of old age, illness and shortage of work.

Vaidehi from Venattukadu island, Kuttanad taluk, talks about how her job underwent drastic changes when farmers started turning to machines to harvest their crops. "It felt very sudden to my people and we had to struggle to find jobs. We would spend days just looking for work," she said.

According to the Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) data of 2011, out of the 76.99 lakh households in Kerala, 63.19 lakh households (82.08 per cent) live in rural areas. The census tells the tale of how 30.33 per cent of the total rural households are deprived. When different indicator-wise deprivation rates among the rural households are considered, the highest deprivation was recorded in the indicator—'landless households deriving major part of their income from manual labour' (18.86 per cent).

Vaidehi Prabhakara, an agricultural labourer. | NEETHU S.

P.R. Nayar, a Trivandrum resident of Trivandrum, said that wages for casual unskilled labour range from Rs. 750 to Rs. 1000.

"We constantly face a shortage of labourers. It has been some years since harvesting combines have become the norm. They are rented out to the village farmers for a roundabout price of Rs. 2200, from the people who own them," said Shivankutty Ailarathil, President of the Pandanad Grama Panchayat.

Monichan K.G., a paddy farmer in Chennamkary island in Kuttanad taluk of rents a harvesting combine from a person in the nearby village for Rs. 1600 for an hour. "Sometimes, labourers from Bengal and Andhra come to work on the farms (sic)," he added.

Vaidehi said that she found satisfaction in her work, despite its difficulty and the occasional hardships. "Men used to sow seeds, while women would pluck the seedlings after 28 days. We would all sing while harvesting the crops; it somehow made us get lost in our work," Prabhakara reminisces. The owners, she recalls, would hire singers for this.

Vaidehi could not cope with her old age illness and everyday battle with this "new farming" which eventually forced her to quit work. However, she continues to do odd jobs, taking care of animals and cleaning weeds. She is not planning to stop working anytime soon. "Since the time I can remember, I have never been dependent on anybody and now that I'm close to death, I don't plan to change it," she said.

Biju Gopal (35), a labourer living in Pandanad in Chennangur taluk said, "I earn about Rs. 500 to Rs. 600 in a day doing odd jobs like weeding and carrying loads. It's not enough since I have to take care of my parents who are old and cannot work anymore."

Page Editors: Samiksha and Abhinaya

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On a ticket rides a fortune

Kerala State Lotteries bring in the second largest revenue

ASHNA BUTANI

ALAPPUZHA: Kurien (28), a tourism agent, buys lottery tickets every day. His beaming face is reflective of how happy he is to have won Rs. 12,000. "Everybody in Kerala wants to win the lottery but some just do not believe in luck, so they get nothing," he says. He owes all his lottery winnings to belief and consistency.

The Kerala State Lotteries programme, the first of its kind in the country, was implemented in 1967. It was aimed at providing employment to the unemployed, namely the aged, disabled and uneducated. The region of Alappuzha has 5552 lottery ticket sellers. "So many of the big houses that you see in the region, belong to lottery winners," says Kurien.

The government has also taken steps to enable the disabled. Disabled persons, identified by the Kerala State Handicapped Persons' Welfare Corporation, are given financial assistance to start selling tickets. Across the State, there are around one lakh retailers. Anil Kumar, the Alappuzha district lottery officer, believes that the lottery system thrives because all activities starting from the sale of tickets to the disbursement of cash prizes are planned and implemented meticulously by the State.

While central Alappuzha is densely populated with lottery sellers, there are fewer in the smaller villages. In such areas, a designated lottery agent makes an appearance twice a day- early morning and late evening.

Williams' (left) lottery ticket store with lottery winner Kurien Matthew (centre) and two other customers (right). | ASHNA BUTANI

B.G. Babu (58), a lottery agent in Alappuzha, sifts through the different decks of lottery tickets, while explaining to his customer how buying higher priced tickets increases his chances of winning more money. After working in the factory for 34 years, Babu left his labour-intensive job to sell lottery tickets. He works for 7 hours a day, and earns Rs. 15,000 a month. Even though his sons do not favour the job, he continues to do it. The ease of the job coupled with the high profits is what appeals to him the most.

Critics of this system say that it exploits even the poor who invest in lottery tickets day after day. It makes them dream and ends up stealing both hope and money. It is not uncommon to see headlines such as 'Lottery winner wages battle to claim prize money of Rs. 1 crore.'

Others think that the system is addictive because sellers and buyers are reluctant to engage in physical labour. The shift from farming and industry to lottery retailing is inevitable. Depending on where they are located, lottery agents can earn up to Rs. 45,000 to 50,000 a month.

While some wait for their efforts to bear fruit, others believe that the lottery is a voluntary form of taxation. The total turnover for the sector is Rs. 11,000 crore per year. Rather than viewing the system critically, most in the State have come to embrace it. It is filling the void created by the lack of job opportunities in other sectors.

B.G Babu shuts his lottery ticket shop for the night. "Business and industry do not thrive here. We need this. The lottery system is Kerala's jackpot," he says.

Hartal leaves migrant workers in the lurch

BHARAT SHARMA

ALAPPUZHA: Hartals in rural Kerala continue to wreak havoc in the lives of migrant daily wage labourers. Ever since Sabrimala opened its doors to women in September 2018, protests, riots, and economic shut downs (hartals) have engulfed the streets of Kerala. The seventh hartal in a series of many against the Supreme Court order was held on 3rd and 4th January across the state. Last year there were 98-100 hartals alone.

More than two mobs paraded the Alappuzha streets until 6 pm making daily life hard and leaving tourists stranded. The most affected from these hartals are the daily wage labourers who work in fields and construction sites across the region. Most of them earn between Rs. 500 - 700 a day, making each day pertinent to their survival.

Sandeepan Roy works at a commercial construction site for a company called Jyoti in Kandankary and moved from Malda, West Bengal a month ago. "We work for only six months. We collect the money, and then send it back to our families. So when we lose money for even a single day, it affects the money that my wife and two girls receive… the ones participating in the hartal get paid by different parties while the rest of us lose money", he said.

Besides money, it delays their work by 20-30 hours because transportation of materials and goods is intrinsic to their daily work. Lasit Phukan, who moved

Bengali migrant labourers at a construction site in Pandanad. | BHARAT SHARMA

from Silchar in Assam to Pandanad in the hopes of making money said that he only gets Rs. 500 a day and no money for extra work. Last time there was a hartal, him and five of his fellow sugarcane farmers had no means of getting food or water for a day. "My boss, who usually gives us money for food, refused to provide us cooked meals because we were outsiders", he added. There have been other similar instances of discrimination.

All shops are closed during hartal hours and the ones that decide to remain open are attacked by protestors. In such a situation, it is very hard to find food and medicines. Furthermore, they complain of being harassed on account of their ethnicity.

'HARTAL FREE YEAR'

Even in the face of strong political support for hartals, a counter movement to end hartals is brewing in the state. In December 2018, more than 35 trade organisations met in Kochi to jointly observe and declare 2019 a 'Hartal Free Year'. Kerala saw 97 shutdowns in 2018. Of these, according to the campaign group 'Say No to Hartal', the BJP organised 33, the Congress-led United Democratic Front 27, and the ruling Left Democratic Front 16.

Hartals affect labourers and employers alike. It affects the economy of the state, resulting in losses. It also hits the tourism industry and leave tourists in a lurch.

Local scrapdealer: A bridge over troubled water

Thevar carries waste material for recycling to his hometown in Tamil Nadu every month. When the floods hit Kerala, he took 13 people home instead. | ASHNA BUTANI

ASHNA BUTANI

CHENGANNUR: Tucked in a small corner in the village of Pandanad, Rajindran Thevar's dust-shrouded workshop is a museum of waste material. It hosts a wide range of Pandanad's scrap, starting from cardboard boxes to dilapidated refrigerators.

Referring to the two Bengali workers who help him with his waste-collection, the 40-year-old scrapdealer said, "I couldn't leave them behind during the floods." Hailing from Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, he was returning to Kerala after transporting waste to the Shubham paper mill in Tirunelveli, when the floods hit. He returned to a submerged workshop and a month's worth of business, washed away.

Even in the midst of the dust and muck, he wears his brightest smile. He reminisces about the days of the flood, with a smile on his face and a welled up throat. He explains how his group of 13, including truck drivers and other helps, had nowhere to go. They swam to Swami Vivekananda High School, where they received shelter for two days.

He lost wooden furniture and refrigerator parts in the floods, but he was thankful that the people around him were safe. While most victims received financial aid from the government, his migrant co-workers did not.

"You know the tiny bags where we keep our change? That's where I collected money from. I took my companions home with the money," said Thevar. With nothing but community efforts, Rs. 5,400 and a boat, the group left the troubled waters behind. They began their journey towards Thevar's home in Tamil Nadu. His wife, and his two daughters who are studying nursing, welcomed them unquestioningly.

After returning, Thevar's business reached new peaks due to an abundance of waste material. But that did not give him satisfaction. "Even the crorepatis would stand in line begging for one more roti, just like us. It was very sad," he says. He prays that history doesn't repeat itself.

He makes a few hundred rupees in a day. The locals are in reverence of his helpful nature. He sets off on another journey in a truck, laden with bags of waste, while ensuring that he buys the young truck drivers lunch.

Instead of recycling waste material this monsoon, he remodeled his friend's hopes, who believe that they will not be the same after the incident.

Waiting for the cows to come home

AISHWARYAA R.

ALAPPUZHA: 'I am For Alleppey' is a Facebook campaign started by V.R.Krishna Teja, the sub collector of Alappuzha, to rebuild the district that was devastated during the floods.

About 75 dairy farmers in the district have received cows through the help of different donors. Cows in their later stages of pregnancy are donated to farmers since they cannot afford to wait for the birth of a calf.

Suresh Umacheni(57), a farmer from Pandanad, Chengannur Taluk, received a 4-year-old cow from MILMA (Kerala Co operative Milk Marketing), through the campaign. "I had five cows initially and apart from the floods, two other calves had died due to another illness," he said. "I get 12 litres of milk per day," he said. "We are completely dependant on this cow for livelihood."

Mr.Dyanasudhan, the Chairman of Dairy Flood Relief, is the main co-coordinator for the Donate-a-cattle campaign. He has distributed 86 cows around the district as compensation for the people who lost their cattle.

Around 160 goats were given to the wives of fishermen in order to give them livelihoods. The women need to give one goat free of cost back to the campaign after a year, which will be given to another family.

"We do not have any bank account, all funds go directly to the people either as money, goods, property or services," Teja pointed out.

The last in a line of Farming traditions

AISHWARYAA R.

CHENGANNUR: Muralidharan Pillai (64) hails from a long line of farmers in Keezhaveedu, around six kilometres from Parumala Hospital in Pandanad. He owns two- and- a-half acres of land and cultivates two types of paddy on one side of his field. The rest is used to grow banana plants, tapioca, pearl millets and green vegetables like bitterguard and cucumber.

"I sell the rice grains to the government market for about Rs.40-45 per kilogram. I get Rs.25 per kilo[gram] for tapioca. Previously there used to be two harvest seasons. Now there is just one which falls during the Kumba maasam [between March to April]. This is mainly because of the lack of labour and climate change," he said. The other harvest season is during the Kanni maasam (between September to October) known as Kannikkoythu.

"Tractor farming and using chemicals against pests are also a major reason for the decline in food quality," said Murali. "It costs Rs.400 as rent per day for a tractor. They say it is easier, but this ease leads to pollution."

Murali said that traditional methods remain the best way to cultivate. "An example is the use of an ox. The pressure applied by an ox on the field, loosens the soil better than that applied by the tyres of a tractor. But, a tractor not only adds to pollution but also the distrupt the strength of the soil."

Another example is the use of a decompost pit where domestic bidegradable waste can be thrown. "When it decomposes, it is heated in a chamber to take away excess moisture and the remains are used as manure," he said.

> *My children are settled in Kuwait. They have no interest in farming and have no plans to settle down here.*
>
> - MURALIDHARAN PILLAI

Murali's family has owned the land for more than three generations now. But the land's ownership is about to take a drastic shift after him.

Many traditional practices are dying due to a shift in occupational preferences; Murali's son being an example.

"My wife passed away nine years ago. My children and grandchildren are settled in Kuwait. They have no interest in farming and have no plans to settle down here. I can sell it to the government or to one of my relatives who could continue farming in the land. Not many other options,[sic]" Murali said.

Floating plastic, sinking ecosystem

ASHNA BUTANI & SAMANTHA SHAJI

ALAPPUZHA: Coconut trees, calmly flowing rivers and green paddy fields are what one expcets to see when visitng Kerala. However, what one doesn't notice is the pollution and the contaminants that are fed into River Pamba everyday when tourists come to experience the famous backwaters of Kerala.

Houseboats which cruise on the river emit poisonous gases into the water which makes it unfit for use. This is a huge problem for residents on the islands as their lives revolve around the river.

The fish die because of the poisonous water and this has had an adverse effect on the fishing activity of the locals.

Even the birds who prey on fish from the river are affected as they also become prey to the contaminants inside them.

Plastic and other effluents released into the river are difficult to clean up.

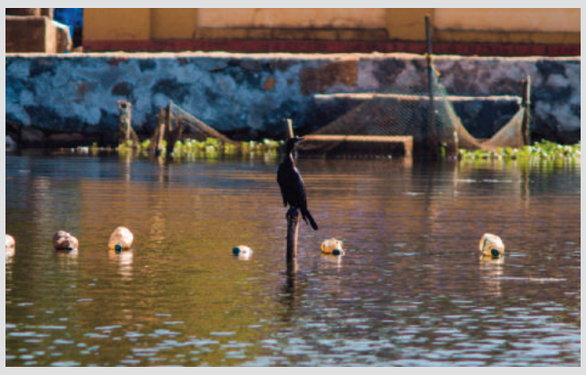
Though the Kerala government has specified the number of houseboats that can be on the water at any given point of time, this rule has consistently been flouted.

But, since the industry helps with the economy, people have come to accept it as a part of their lives.

Boiling and the sedimentation are used to treat the water.

The villages of Kuttanad discard their plastic waste into the backwaters. Small contaminants affect the fish which are consumed by residents. The contaminated water causes water-borne diseases.

Chemicals found in the backwaters. Human activity poses a threat to the flora and fauna of the region.



The Black Egret consumes plastics. The bird features in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Page Editors: Neethu S and Nikita Singh

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Muck the Flood Leaves

Ponnamma Joseph, (54) who lost 30 years of her savings to the flood currently lives in a shanty with her two sons and husband in Chengannur. Her husband used to drive an auto-rickshaw before the floods but they currently have no source of livelihood. Their valuables are long lost in the floods, including an auto-rickshaw - their sole source of income. Banks no longer give them loans on account of pending payments. Unable to rebuild their home properly, they use clothes to partition rooms and to protect themselves from adverse weather. | NEETHU S.

Most homes no longer have adequate flooring and roofs. Ponnamma's tin sheeted home now has potholes and cracks. While the flooring was damaged by floods, the tin roofs were blown away by strong winds from rescue helicopters. Currently, they use clothes to shelter themselves. "We feel like we'll freeze to death," she said. | NEETHU S.

Justin Joseph, Ponnamma's son, is currently pursuing BBA. He lost his school certificates and documents in the flood. Pictured is the remnant of one of his trophies. They are unable to fund his education further due to outstanding debt. Out of Rs. 10,000 they received from the government, Rs. 5000 was spent on buying a stove to cook. They currently have no source of livelihood. Ponnamma's husband now does random labouring jobs just to get by. On a good day, he earns Rs. 300 to 400. | NEETHU S.

Migration: Not a dream

BHARAT SHARMA

ALAPPUZHA: Migrants who work in sugarcane fields at Chengannur face a multitude of hardships everyday. Most of them come to Kerala for only six months a year and spend rest of the year working back home. They earn Rs. 600 on a daily basis here as opposed to Rs. 400 in Assam and nearby states.

Mutibur Laxman (21) moved from Guwahati in December 2018 in anticipation of work but has been forced to sit idly. "The floods ruined all the machines. So we have to wait for 2-3 more days", he said. Owing to this, they are receiving lesser money- Rs. 500 a day. "Boss says he'll pay the leftover amount at the end of every month, after the machine has been fixed... We'll find out", he added.

Muhammad Abdul (22) shed light on the differential treatment they receive that he believes to be on account of their ethnicity. "One of my co-workers died in the Pamba River while bathing on December 20. We were given no money to send his body back home. In fact, one of us went home [Assam] to get the money back and then had his body sent from here", he said. On the contrary, he reveals, the government gave Rs. 2 lakh local labourer's family after he died in a similar accident.

None of them receive extra money for working after hours. According to Abdul, they work for 8 to 9 hours during day time and then for 2 to 3 hours at fields near their boss' home in the evening. "Doesn't matter if it's 8 hours or 12, we still get paid the same," he said.

The workers were also promised liver cod supplements to help keep them healthy but haven't been provided with it or any substitute of the same.

Both, Laxman and Abdul, work and live together. "We are 10 people huddled into one room at his [the employer'] home. Even if we fall sick, we have to pay our bills from the salary and receive no assistance from our boss", Mutibur added.

Sandeep Ghosh from West Bengal who works at a construction site is happier here than at home. Health care is included in their wages.

"Raju sir accompanies us everywhere. He gives us foods, takes us to dispensaries if the need arises... Company gives him extra money for our hospital bills if anybody falls sick", he said.

"I treat them kindly because I need them to work as much as they need money", said Raju Madhavan, his employer.

Mutibur Laxman (right) and Muhammad Abdul (left) resting near the sugarcane fields where they work in Pandanad. They have no work on account of broken machinery. Behind them is a room where they sleep when working late. They are from Assam. | ISHAN GHOSH

Broken machines near fields awaiting repair. | ISHAN GHOSH

Tales of Rescue, Relief & Recovery

AISHWARYAA R

CHENGANNUR: Pandanad, a village almost five kilometers from Chengannur, was one of the worst flood hit areas in Alappuzha.

The National Health Mission sent 12 ambulances and 16 boat ambulances to rescue around 4500 people from this village alone.

"I rescued a three-month-old child from an isolated home in the middle of the floods," said Azad, the Pain and Palliative head of the District Health Mission and Alappuzha General Hospital.

"Four dead bodies were recovered," he said. "And we took them immediately and discreetly to the morgue, since the sight [of bodies] might have had a psychological impact on the survivors," he added.

The locals who lived on the upper side of the village took in a few people and helped them.

"Around 26 people moved into the first floor of our home to take refuge," said K.G Pillai, a retired army official and a Rotary Club member.

The locals said there was a desperate shortage of drinking water and dry clothes and people implored drivers of passing vehicles for supplies, said Azad.

> *In the past water has never reached up to five and six feet during floods. People are not used to this.*
>
> COL. K.G.PILLAI

Drinking water was supplied through water trucks contributed by neighbouring states.

E-toilets from Namakkal were built around the village after the water had receded. The toilets had mobile waste management systems to cope with the shortage of water and other basic sanitary amenities.

"Sanitary napkins which were distributed were collected temporarily in a dump dug out by the locals and later burnt in incinerators," Azad added.

Gender gap persists in wage disparity

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

ALAPPUZHA: In the 23 years since Kunjamma Francis began working in her neighbour's paddy field, her life in Kuttanad taluk's Chennamkary village has remained unchanged in two ways – the exhaustion from standing bent at the waist to remove weeds and a shortage of money persist.

"When my husband died of cancer 23 years ago and I was forced to work in the fields to bring up our three children. I am paid Rs. 400 per day for this. But if my husband was working in the field today, he would have been paid Rs. 700 to Rs. 1000 per day," 58-year-old Kunjamma said.

Women sow seeds and remove weeds. Men spray the crop with pesticide, feed the soil with fertilizer and build bunds and canals. Both men and women work from 8 a.m. to around 5 p.m.

According to the Labour Bureau's data on average daily wages for agricultural labour in October 2018, Kerala pays the highest wage to both men and women – Rs. 758 for men and Rs. 538 for women. But it is also the only state to have a wage gap of over Rs. 200 between men and women for the same job of planting, transplanting, and weeding.

"The owners of the land say that men carry heavy bottles of pesticide and dig, which is why they are paid more than us. But bending to sow the seed and plucking weeds under the sun is hard work too," said 62-year-old Annamma Joseph.

Since her husband died 19 years ago, Annamma has been working on the field to support her two children. This 'puncha' (crop harvested in March) season she has worked for 29 days after the seeds were sown in November and is only expecting another six or seven days of work.

Women begin weeding around the 30th day after the crop has been sown. "In one season we may get around 20 to 30 days of work on a single field if we are lucky. If the land is small or the owner hires people from other villages to work, we may get around 15 days," Kunjamma said.

According to 68-year-old Marykutty Xavier, who hires agricultural labour for an acre of land, men will not work for less than Rs. 600 per day. "Operating the harvesting machine and spraying pesticides are recognised as jobs women cannot do. If you pay the men less, they will work elsewhere. Most young people in the village have already moved away and found other jobs. Very poor women still depend on this work," she said.

On paper, the gap between the wages of male and female agricultural labourers is not as steep as it is in practice. According to a notification issued by the Government of Kerala in May 2017, the minimum wage for eight hours of agricultural work of "hard nature" like digging and building bunds is Rs. 490. For work of "light nature" like weeding and sowing seeds, the minimum wage is Rs. 410.

In Chengannur taluk's Pandanad village, 55-year-old Omanna has been working in the fields for 15 years since her husband, 67-year-old Kuttappan Papi, was diagnosed with a urinary disorder and had to quit work as a construction labourer. Omanna depends on around 20 days of work in the puncha fields and domestic work in a house from where she gets Rs. 1000 per month. She takes Kuttappan to the hospital in Kottayam every fortnight and cannot take up additional work.

"The wage gap affects families where only the woman earns to support her children," said Krishnaveni G Sharma, President of the Kerala State Committee of Women Workers, affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress. "As it is, the gap is unfair. Labour is divided based on traditional ideas of what women can and cannot do," she said.

Inefficient ferry transit system plague waters

LEAH THOMAS

ALAPPUZHA: Inefficient ferry system plagues the backwater islands of Chennamkary and Venattukadu, Kuttanad taluk.

With no higher secondary school on the island, students find themselves rushing to catch the 7 a.m. boat to Nedumudi. "Our school has classes only till the 10th std., so our children have no other option but to travel to continue their studies," said Jolly Joseph, Principal of Deva Matha High School in Chennamkary. Taking the line-boat is the easiest way to reach. "But, because of its irregular timings, most end up taking the bus or if they can afford it, they buy a scooter", she said.

Rahul S. (17) just about makes it to the jetty to catch the boat to Nedumudi from Chennamkary. "It's the fastest way to get to school. If I miss it, I will have to catch a bus which takes twice as long to reach… It will be an hour before the next boat leaves. And that would mean missing the first few classes," he said.

The fastest way to reach islands is by the line-boats run by the State Water Transport Department (SWTD).

Despite a system that has been in place since 1968, according to a 2015 performance audit on Inland Water Transport in the state by the Coastal Shipping and Inland Navigation Department, the number of passengers travelling by SWTD boats decreased from 242 lakhs in 2000-01 to 144.16 lakhs in 2014-15.

The study further stated that the department was losing money. Reasons for this included inefficient fleet management, increased cost of operations and a decreasing number of passengers.

Lack of line-boats causes life-threatening situations during emergencies. "During both my pregnancies, I admitted myself to the hospital well before my delivery date to prevent a situation where I would have had to wait for a boat," said Jeena Chacko (32), a school teacher and resident of Venattukadu. Although the hospital bill went up, she did not see another way out. "It's better to pay a little extra and be safe," she added.

While there is a lack of an efficient local ferry system, there seems to be no dearth of houseboats in the district.

According to Joshit Rayathan, a Police Official at the District Tourism Promotion Council in Alappuzha, there are close to 1,600 houseboats currently operating in the district.

"With increasing tourism, there is an increase in the demand for houseboats", he said.

Meanwhile, Sathyanan Madhavan, Traffic Superintendent at the SWTD, said that there were around 80 boats in the state out of which only 53 ply regularly. "The remaining boats are either under repair or are kept as spare boats," he said. The ferries also run in Kollam, Ernakulam, and Kottayam.

Within Alappuzha, the boats take close to 120 trips and carry almost 20,000 passengers per day. "Boats reach the jetties at one-hour intervals regularly.

In case of emergencies, there are ambulance boats that can be reached using the '108' service," said Madhavan.

To handle the demand, a new fleet of boats is planned. "We launched six boats made of fibre-glass for the district on the 5th January…These boats can seat up to 75 passengers. Apart from that, we are also planning to introduce water taxis," he said.

Testing times: In the absence of books, students cling to hope

SAMANTHA SHAJI

ALAPPUZHA: Many school children lost their school books in the 2018 Kerala floods which has affected their academics.

Mrs. Jeena Chako, the mother of Anumol, a class three student, described her experience of the flood on the Venattukadu island on the backwaters of Kerala. "We thought that we had saved everything of importance like the television and other electrical appliances. We managed to save certificates and documents. But we forgot about Anumol's books... we came back to a half submerged house and found her books floating around, completely damaged", she said.

The government was supposed to issue new textbooks but it never happened. Anumol's old, damaged books emitted a foul stench and hence her teacher asked her not to bring them to school. She also had to re-write all her class notes.

In Pandanad district, the situation was marginally better. Retnamma C. said that the books and textbooks had to be laid out on the road to dry in the sun. "We had to throw away many books because they were soiled. Luckily, the school provided the children with textbooks to replace those which were lost," she said.

Books damaged by the flood. | MEGHANA KURUP

Teachers from Swami Vivekananda High School lost their personal notes in the floods. Manu M., a standard seventh student of the school revealed that the teachers borrowed notes from students who were able to salvage their notes, to help those who didn't have any. The school also postponed the mid-term examinations from September to December which was beneficial to the students and teachers alike.

This rescheduling of examinations, however, posed an unprecedented obstacle for students of 10th and 12th standards owing to their board exams preparations. Mrs. Smitha Pillai (40), a teacher at Swami Vivekananda High School, explained how the teachers went to every home and convinced students to come back to school, despite their losses. They were then provided with the mental support they needed to cope with trauma.

The students' resolve to not let the floods affect their academics is real. As eight year-old Anu Maria from Chennamkary puts it, "I wish me and my friends had our clean books back. But we are all working hard and are helping each other make new notes. Ammachi (grandmother) says that when we all help each other, things will be fine."

Page Editor: Bharat Sharma

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No SSC, no unemployment; a host of untrained teachers 9 | Elderly in the hills are unable to access their pensions 10 | Mountains echo with the melodies of simple living 11

1907 Hillmen's Association of Darjeeling demands separation

1980 Birth of Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF)

1986 Riots kill 1200 people

1988 Formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC)

2011 Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) is formed

2017 Shut down for 104 days

Healthcare in the hills is hard to reach

MUSKAAN SHARMA

SAMALBONG: Sanjay Limbu, a 29-year old resident of Lower Samalbong recalls the night his elderly aunt fell ill and needed immediate attention. The nearest hospital, over 45 km away, is connected to the village through steep stairs that run for a kilometre uphill. His family members carried her on a makeshift stretcher. She passed away before they could reach the top.

Almost every village here reports a similar absence of proximate medical centres and emergency services. For a population of 4,405 in the Samalbong panchayat, only one government health sub-centre at Sinji exists. It focuses only on maternal health and provides medicines but has no emergency services.

Samthal Tamang (56), a resident of Pabong, says that many prefer going to the Kalimpong district hospital as they are diagnosed by a doctor there.

The villagers report that the doctor at the Primary Health Centre is often unavailable. A visit revealed that three out of the four nurses were unavailable. The construction work had rendered the health centre beds useless.

The only other healthcare is provided by a missionary-run dispensary in the Upper Tanyang village. For 65-year old Marmik Lepcha of Lower Samalbong, a car trip to Kalimpong is easier than the climb to the dispensary for her medication. Hiring a car to the hospital is the only option which costs Rs. 600 to Rs. 2000.

Records are maintained in a register | MUSKAAN SHARMA

Pemu Sherpa (29), the Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) at the sub-centre, helps organise health camps every month where free check-ups and medicines are provided. She said, "The goal is to convince people to come here for medical needs and to motivate pregnant women for institutional deliveries. According to Dr. Nirupam Biswas, the Chief Medical Officer of Heath, Kalimpong, the camps are not a permanent solution to the problem. "In hard-to-reach villages, the government's criterion of one sub-centre for every 3000 to 5000 people does not work as the population is scattered and each health centre is at some distance to the other. The hills need a special criterion based on area, not population," he said.

Apart from being hard-to-reach, Dr. Biswas said the medical services in the hills suffer from poor roads, unavailability of ambulance and most importantly the lack of doctors.

"Last month, seven doctors were appointed to join the district health services. However, only one was posted in the rural area. Appointment of doctors remain a big issue in the hills as facilities available are limited here. The only way to attract them to remote areas is to provide better remuneration, quick promotions and more allowances. Currently, out of the six PHCs of the district, only one has a doctor. Expectant mothers turn to the (district) hospital in such cases and there have been cases of complications in the deliveries due to delays in arrival," said Dr. Biswas.

Kalimpong in numbers

It is the largest district in West Bengal and comes under the GTA

14 Announced as a separate district on 14 February, 2017	**4** Number of subdivisions in the district
12 Major landslides in the area since 1950	**3** Number of languages spoken- Nepali, Hindi and Bengali
11 Floods in the region since Independence	**0** Number of police stations in Kalimpong sub-division-I

Road from Sinji to Tanyang lies neglected | SRINJOY DEY

Rocky roads on the hills slow development

SWAPNAJIT KUNDU

SAMALBONG: Transport is sparse in the Samalbong region, with few jeeps available.

It is not possible for big buses to ply on the narrow mountain roads which makes it difficult for the local people to go to Kalimpong and Siliguri.

Unreserved cars are available twice a day at 7 a.m. and 2 p.m. The unreserved cars take Rs. 200 to go to Siliguri and Rs. 100 for Kalimpong. But the reserved cars charge as high as Rs. 1000 during the daytime, and it increases to Rs. 3000 to Rs. 4000 in the night depending on the urgency of the situation.

Sushma Chhetri, a resident of Lower Samalbong said, "We have to reserve cars in case there is a necessity. There is only one car in our village. If that remains unavailable during an emergency, then it becomes very difficult for us."

Santakumar Chhetri, another resident of Lower Samalbong village, said, "Unlike the plains, we do not have a busy transport system."

Major roads like the one from Pabong to Sinji, the road near Khaikhola have an uneven surface. The 100 km road from Pabong to Siliguri has big potholes which double the duration of the journey.

Kamal Kumar Sharma, a school teacher living in Pabong said, "We have complained to the local Executive Officer about the roads, and also appealed to the higher authority. Landslides and rains have made the condition of the roads miserable. It is risky to drive in the night. No work has been done on most of these roads."

According to Additional District Magistrate of Kalimpong, Panicker Hari Shanker, "The National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation (NHIDCL) is building a four-lane highway connecting Bagrakot and Kaffer, and another one between Kaffer and Rangpur."

The NHIDCL has also approached the State authorities for their co-operation. While the state highways are well maintained by the Public Works Department (PWD), the condition of roads in rural areas is not satisfactory.

"Tenders for the Teesta- Rangpur and Kalijhora-Teesta stretches have recently been floated." Panicker added.

Biswajit Das, Additional Regional Transport Officer of Kalimpong, said, "There is no point in launching buses on mountain roads. There will not be enough passengers, and it will also be risky to drive on those narrow roads." He also said that 25 buses and 40 taxis make a round-trip to Siliguri daily.

The Transport Department is planning to introduce more cars in the rural areas and a 25 seater bus for tourists.

Under the 'Gotidhara' project, 215 cars have already been introduced covering Kalimpong, Siliguri and Darjeeling. "2000 transport officers have been included in the Samajik Surokkha Yojna, giving them free medical treatment facilities," Das added.

No country for pregnant women

NEHA MALARA

Matriyan Van | NEHA MALARA

The Matriyan ambulance takes two hours to get to the patient and then two more to get to the hospital making it impossible to pick up two patients at once. The women have to arrange for their own transport which costs Rs. 2000. Pregnant women are carried on stretchers to the nearest ambulance pick-up point. This point is usually Sinji where the panchayat office is also located.

SINJI: Reshma Mangal began walking up the hill towards the town centre where the ambulance stood. It was an hour's walk on uneven roads and farmland. A stretcher followed her in case she would be unable to make the climb. She was eight months and two weeks pregnant. This is a common scene in Sinji where the nearest delivery centre is two hours away.

Pregnant women suffer an acute lack of proper medical facilities in Samalbong of the newly formed Kalimpong district of West Bengal. The gram panchayat, as it is called, has seven constituencies that share one health sub-centre at Sinji.

Two nurses and a male doctor administer basic medicines but it has no beds or treatment facilities. Simple functions like X-ray, sonography and blood tests have to be done at the district hospital at Kalimpong, two hours away. The nearest primary health centre is more than an hour away.

The lack of accessibility has also led to some women taking up rented rooms in Kalimpong, near the Sub-division hospital. There have been instances where the health sub-centre staff have recommended pregnant women to stay close to the hospital.

There is no government ambulance in the area. Only one emergency van under the Matriyan scheme which is at the disposal of three gram panchayats - Samalbong, Samthar and Yangmakum, each two hours away from the other.

The Matriyan van is a public-private partnership. Through a government tender, a private taxi driver is given a government van and a fixed income of Rs 5000 to run the ambulance across three gram panchayats day and night.

Suraj Pariyar, who drives the van says, "There are times when there is more than one delivery in a day and I am unable to go to all the places. Even when I do reach, it takes atleast two hours before I drop the patient at the hospital." This ambulance is free for pregnant women but not for patients with other emergencies. Sometimes accident victims are taken on payment. However, the abysmal condition of the roads delays medical help to the patients. "I've delivered corpses to the hospital," he said.

Dr. Nirumpam Biswas, Chief Medical Officer (Health), Kalimpong District says that while the van is enough, it does not address the main issue. "The biggest problem is the hard to reach areas where ambulances cannot go. Just by increasing the number of vehicles, we cannot reach the interior villages."

He admits the need for a government ambulance in the region. There have been only discussions but no concrete plan has been finalised.

Elections not held in the GP in 18 years

AKSHARA SRIVASTAVA

SAMALBONG: Gram panchayat elections in Samalbong have not been conducted since 2001.

In 1988, an accord was signed between the Union government of India, the West Bengal State government and the Gorkha National Liberation Force (GNLF). It led to the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC).

The three-tier gram panchayat system was redesigned. Thus, the gram panchayat of Samalbong, came under the DGHC. It was later dissolved due to internal clashes between the members of DGHC.

Harka Bahadur Chhetri, founder and chairman of the Jan Andolan Party (JAP) said, "The rural areas were starting to suffer as the party (GNLF) started randomly deputing a local as the Pradhan."

"We need an elected representative who understands our problems. People who live here will be more proactive," said Pemu Sherpa, a nurse at the Sinji Health Sub-centre. "We need more facilities and a doctor. Even for minor issues like stitches, people have to go to Samthar, an hour away or to Kalimpong, a three-hour drive," she added.

People allege that the government does not listen to their demands. "Major issues like electricity and irrigation can be solved if elected bodies function properly, but they don't have the power to do so," said Kamal Kumar Sharma, principal of a primary school in Sinji village.

For road tenders that were awarded in the late 1960s. Work on some roads began only two years ago and is incomplete due to funds crunch, said Pramit Tamang, a MGNREGA worker in Samalbong.

The panchayat currently functions under an Executive Officer, Mani Kumar Thapa who oversees two villages. He said, "When people retire or transfer, their posts are not filled. I have to do the work of 11 people, which hampers development as important issues are not addressed."

The panchayat workers now limit themselves to authorizing birth, marriage and death certificates.

Every step of the way

More than 80% of Kalimpong depends on agriculture. Produce includes maize, paddy, potato and millet and cash crops like ginger, cardamom and oranges. The famed mountain chilli, Dalle Khursani also originates here. Cultivation of crops loosens soil and makes it prone to landslides. The landslide threat is heightened during the harvest in the monsoon months. The hills have seen 12 major landslides since 1950. However, production of the cash crops has decreased over the years. Following this, GTA has proposed a Rs 2 crore project that aims to introduce coffee plantation on the hills. It will benefit 407 farmers and 35 villages and be spread over 345.72 acres of land. | SRINJOY DEY

Small jars, big dreams: an inspiring tale of gumption, grace and glory

SRINJOY DEY

KALIMPONG: "I often told them to call me bhaiya, aunty, didi whatever they would call a shopkeeper whenever the 'customers' came to my shop," says the 61-year-old businesswoman recounting her childhood roleplay. Renu Pradhan trods across the longish room, dusting shelves stacked with 6-inch, pickle-filled plastic containers.

To safeguard her six daughters from a broken marriage, her mother left home and became a vegetable hawker. Years later, Pradhan would inherit her mother's entrepreneurial ability. "We had a small *jhopri* (mud house) in Bijanbari, Darjeeling in 1968 – when the floods came," she says. Caused by over 1500 mm of rainfall, the 1968 Teesta Flood was one of the biggest natural disasters in Darjeeling, Sikkim and nearby regions. When the landslides followed, over a 1000 people were reported either dead or missing. "Our house was crushed under the boulders. My father died there."

Having experienced loss early in life, she has developed an unflinching sense of courage. She runs the homemade pickle shop all by herself, selling over 20 varieties and 40 variations of pickles. Bitter gourd, ladyfinger, chilli, bamboo chute are some of her bestsellers.

She recalls the time she was forced to give up her belongings - " They took everything away." She was unable to sell the five kilos of tomato she had borrowed.

A few sleepless nights later, she decided to take matters in her own hands. She set out for Melli Bazaar, bought cauliflower and tomatoes and decided to sell them. However, the men from the last time pillaged her shop and threatened to kidnap. Sensing danger, she fled to Kalimpong.

She got married but later discovered that he had another wife. They separated and she raised the three children with her mother's help. When her son got married, more trouble followed. Her in-laws began forcing her to register her land under their name, claiming that it was tribal land. "They falsely accused us of being mentally unstable and abusing our daughter-in-law," she recounts.

She and her family were jailed but were adamant to prove their innocence. Persistence took them to the High Court, where she won.

She opened one of the first vegetable stalls in Kalimpong. While running the stall, she took the initiative of collecting the leftover vegetables at the end of the day. "My mother said, why throw them away when you can make use of it?" she points to the shelves. By 2011, she bought the pickle shop for Rs. 18 lakhs.

Ms. Pradhan makes pickles every evening after the vegetables are chopped, dried under the sun and marinated. Sometimes, she travels for eight hours to Kolkata for special deliveries. Having been recently featured in the West Bengal government's 'Biswa Bangla' initiative, her pickles have gathered a greater fan-base.

Renu Pradhan in her shop at Kalimpong | SRINJOY DEY

Page Editors: Srinjoy Dey and Neha Malara

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SSC still a far cry in hills, unemployment looms

AINDRISHA MITRA & PRIYANKA KAUL

KALIMPONG: When Sanjay Limbu (29) did his diploma in elementary education, he had hoped to get a teaching job. But five years down the line, he finds himself working as a volunteer teacher. Teachers like Limbu, who work at the Darjeeling District School Board in Lower Samalbong, and come from rural areas of north Bengal have to face unemployment problems in the hills. The School Service Commission (SSC) board that recruits teachers has been long lying defunct in the hills of Bengal.

Like panchayat elections, the stalling of SSC exams since 2003 due to the persistent political turmoil has invariably led to the ailing status of education in the area. In 2017, the School Service Commission had recommended 274 teachers, which is yet to be approved by the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). The GTA, which is in dispute with the West Bengal government demands an alternative SSC to be conducted by a regional board, independent of the State government.

In a recent statement, Soumitra Sarkar, the newly appointed chairman of the State SSC Board talked about filling up vacancies of 42,000 teachers, non-teaching staff and Group D employees in schools right from upper primary to the higher secondary level by March in upper primary and higher secondary schools so as to solve the problem of unemployment.

With no standardised process of enrolment on one hand and vacancies being created on the other, voluntary teachers were appointed on meagre salaries. The internal power struggle between the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and the State government has made the common people bear its brunt. The last exam for primary school recruitment was held in 2001, the appointment for which came only in 2011.

Sri Sanchabir Subba
Member of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, The Board of Administrators
| SIMRRAN GILL

> **It is not possible to accomodate everyone in the post of teachers. Moreover, we need to verify if all of them are even deserving in the first place. The agitation has slowed down the process of recruitment but we are trying to rearrange everything.**

"This is due to political pressure, which is resulting in back-door entries of several teachers who are not well-versed in their respective subjects," says Puran Kaldan, a faculty at the St. Roberts Higher Secondary School in Darjeeling who also added that in missionary schools, the process of recruitment is a lot more transparent and systemic.

A B.Ed Degree has been made mandatory by the West Bengal SSC Board to get recruited as a teacher in the upper-primary level. Ironically, in the hills, teachers get hired based on qualifying the Higher Secondary exams only with 50 per cent marks.

Tshering Dahal, Chairperson of the District School Board, sympathised and said, "Voluntary teachers in the hills till date are the worst sufferers in the state of education right now. No rules or deadlines are being followed and nothing is being done systematically. It is the ignorance of our people and non-cooperation from the government."

According to Dahal, the reason for not conducting interviews is unclear. "The Gorkhaland Territorial Administration [previously DGHC] could not frame the recruitment rules advised by the primary education board. Now, we have submitted fresh rules as per the State government's norms. As soon as I get the signal, we will be holding the new recruitments process," she said.

Citing the real reason for DGHC to abandon the SSC, Amar Singh Rai, a State government legislator from Darjeeling Hills said, "There is a certain set of norms under SSC to get appointed. But DGHC had their set of candidates who did not qualify to get appointed." Rai has proposed two solutions for the crisis, "Firstly, if there are vacancies, the voluntary teachers should be regularised. Secondly, continuing the SSC as it had already been there and worked fine."

"The nepotism is highly ingrained which continues to restrict the educational reforms" says District Inspector Rajeev Pramanik who is considering sending the proposal of recruiting permanent teachers for the second time, only with the hope of getting it sanctioned this time.

No peace, no tourism

SHREYA BASAK

SAMALBONG: Peace has to be established in order to develop tourism in a politically disturbed place where the State government and people never work unitedly, according to Sanchabir Subba, member of Board of Administrators, Gorkhaland Territorial Administrator (GTA).

Surrounded by the Himalayan range, in the Kalimpong district of northern Bengal, a cluster of villages spread around Pabong can be a refreshing getaway. In these hills with echoing bird songs, pretty vistas to look at, tourism has not been an option yet, even as the locals say that they cannot make enough through agriculture. There are a few homestays but most are unregistered.

Not more than 70 kms away from the New Jalpaiguri Railway Station, the toursim of this region has been unable to flourish as much as the surrounding places like Darjeeling, Lava, Lolegaon have flourished. "There's a wide angle view of the Kanchenjunga and birds like varieties of Thrush are seen here," said 36-year old Ashok Thappa, a worker at Chitrakoot Farm House, Pabong.

According to 34-year old Gautam Gising, founder of Living Stone Academy and a tourism enthusiast living in Pabong, the first step to develop tourism is to properly build roads and transport but ever since 2001 the Samalbong gram panchayat elections have stopped. Hence, lack of local representation has made this impossible.

A broken milestone welcomes you to Pabong | SHREYA BASAK

Agriculture and farming are the primary occupations here.

"Farming alone is not enough to run livelihood. In recent years, there have been quite a few homestays cropping up on lands previously used for farming to make visits here easier," said 60-year K B Thappa, a villager in Baidar Gaon (3 kms north to Pabong), who is soon to work in an under-construction homestay beside his house.

In Gising's opinion, this has compelled locals to initiate an alternative economy; develop tourism in little ways they can as many young men are interested in the tourism business.

Investment on building homestays costs around Rs. 6 to 7 lakhs and the return is difficult to estimate. "Workers' wages also depend on the rate of tourists coming", said Thappa despondently.

While better-off hotels and resorts in Charkhole village, (a tourist spot 4 kms away from Pabong) can afford to associate themselves with private tourism agencies in Kolkata and have online advertisements, many can not afford such external sources.

"We don't even receive proper network services to access the internet here and no help is received from the panchayat or government to help in the development and promotion of tourism," said 30-year old Anish Tamang, owner of Marry gold Resort, Charkhole village.

Seldom, agents from tourism companies in Kolkata, buy the agricultural lands of the natives for building resorts and hotels. The natives, who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of such business deals, are often fooled into accepting the contract for insufficient money.

"Two men from Kolkata have taken a part of my land where I grow cardamom and they will reimburse the cost of one year's plantation whereas cardamom takes nearly two years to be grown", said 64-year old Padang Pakhril Tamang, a farmer from Lower Samalbong.

The shift towards tourism as an alternative economy, despite lack of infrastructure, tends to raise the question of the declining revenue from agriculture.

"Low quality of the soil only lets limited vegetables to grow and in order to have roads built properly for their transport, we don't get permission from many villages to let us work on the roads", said Subba.

Horticulture not in full bloom

The flowers of Lower Samalbong, which never make it to Kalimpong | SHREYA BASAK

SWAPNAJIT KUNDU

SAMALBONG: The Godavari flower pots were being taken from Lower Samalbong to Kalimpong market but they broke on the way beacuse of miserable road conditions. According to Sundar Lama, a resident of Lower Samalbong, this incident shows the problem that the people of Lower Samalbong face, when it comes to promoting their horticulture.

People generally associate the mountains with football, their unique culture and cuisines. But when it comes to horticulture, the recognition is still far from available. The villagers have been practising this art since ages, in order to decorate their homes and also to sell in markets. Lack of promotion has reduced it to just another hobby. The government has not helped in promoting it as a local attraction to the tourists. The major hindrance to this venture is the lack of communication.

"There are no roads here," said Lama. "Can you see any proper road here? No. If someone from the outside wants to come here, that individual will have to travel through risky paths. Why will anyone make that effort when they can see horticulture elsewhere?" he added.

Accessibility to roads is a major requirement for its promotion. With better roads, more tourists can visit the place.

There is a wide variety of flowers in the village. Saipatra is one of the foremost when it comes to importance. The flower is used during Deepavali and its garland is used during the Bhaitika. It is also used for throat pain.

"These flowers are only for seeing and we cannot sell these in other villages. They have all these, why will they ?", he said.

It is difficult to take them to the market. Other than saipatra and marigold, there are orchid, joba, geranium, which is a Christmas flower among the others.

Flower seeds are bought from specific markets in Kalimpong. There is a shop on the Rail road and one shop in front of Kalimpong District Police Station.

"Kalimpong is two hours away from here. So we travel that far to collect seeds for something, which is not economically profitable. We do it wholly out of our own interest", said Sunil.

Sanchabir Subba, a member of GTA Board of Administrators, said, "Road is not a big problem when it comes to promoting horticulture. Here lands are small where not much horticulture can happen. But GTA is planning to develop it for tourism. First, we will see which flower is suitable for what condition, which flower can be taken to the plains as majority of our tourists come from there. Then, we will look for investments."

Herbs as alternative medicine

SRINJOY DEY

SAMALBONG: Apart from the one primary sub-centre under Samalbong Gram Panchayat jurisdiction, a private Christian missionary dispensary is the only source of allopathic medicine in this area. In such conditions, the villagers have constantly turned to their handed-down knowledge of traditional, herbal medicine to treat small illnesses.

The herbs are not necessarily grown at their homes, but can also be found growing naturally along the hills, therefore making it accessible to the villagers. Many of them are also used as components of ayurvedic medicines and tablets that the pharmaceuticals have recently ventured in.

"For us, who live in the villages, this is not the alternative, this is the only form of medicine we can rely on," says Satish Lama (62), a resident of Lower Samalbong. He points to the popular marigold flower saying that in the villages, people make tea from the flower to treat a sore throat. "It might seem strange, but it works," he says confidently.

According to Binod Bhattarai (32), a history graduate living in Pabong – "We have grown up with these household medicines. Look at this for example," he tears a leaf from a sapling on the walls of the hill and chews it, "This is Tite pati (*Artemisia vulgaris*), which is chewed because its juice is good for the stomach, it prevents diarrhea and cures pain." It can also be used as an antiseptic. Its paste is used to stop bleeding. "If we ever had a nose bleed, our mother would apply it for the bleeding to stop," he says. It is only found along the sides of the hills at elevations of 300 meters or above.

Tite pati used to stop bleeding | SRINJOY DEY

Pukhanbed (*Bergenia ciliata*), another commonly found herb in this is used for healing bones and reducing joint pain. The leaves and the stems are boiled in hot water and the broth is used for soaking. The roots and rhizomes, on the other hand, are anti-inflammatory and are applied as a poultice to cure boils, abscesses and skin infections.

"We grow Okhati (*Astilbe rivularis*) because of its gastric properties," says Pinky Chetri (27), a resident of Sinji, "After pregnancy, women are fed this to prevent diarrhea and dysentery." Its pulp is also used as a remedy for sprain and swelling. Chipley, another plant, is used to the same effect. The paste of its leaves is used for healing cuts and wounds.

According to a research study that lasted for four years and was published by the Nepal based Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology (RECAST) in 2007, both Okhati and Pakhanbed were found to have "exhibited anti-influenzal viral activity", which could lead to "the discovery of a new component for the anti-viral, anti-bacterial and anti-fungal medicines."

According to Renu Pradhan (61), a shopkeeper in Kalimpong market – "Herbal medicines are quite popular in these regions. People also eat parts of these plants as their cuisines. Sometimes they also put them in pickles and consume them." She sells small packs of Timur (*Zanthoxylum alatum*), which people grind and consume to solve gastric problems as well as to treat skin diseases. "People also buy packets of Beyd Dana – a dried berry, which is sucked on. Its juice reduces sugar and is effective for patients with high blood pressure," she says.

Okhati used for gastric pain problems | SRINJOY DEY

According to Manas Chakravarty (51), a doctor working in Kolkata, "Herbal medicine is affordable, time-tested, effective, environmentally safe, has few side or ill effects and is used by 70 to 80 per cent of the people living in developing nations and is approved by WHO. It's good, but it should be under control. Some people believe that traditional medicine is safe, which is not always true. Several factors should be taken into consideration when using traditional medicine, especially for patients with chronic diseases. It's important for the physician to be informed about this medicine used by patients. The dose of the plants should also be under control because of their toxicity in large doses."

Locals cry foul over bill cost

AKSHARA SRIVASTAVA

SAMALBONG: In Lungeli village of Kalimpong district, 64-year old Pasang Pakhril, who had been paying Rs. 250 per quarter, has suddenly received a bill of Rs. 447 for the last quarter. "It must be some mistake, I will have to travel to Kalimpong for a complaint and a reimbursement," he says.

People across Samalbong have noticed a sharp increase in their bills. Uma Thapa of Sinji, who has been paying Rs. 300 per quarter, received a bill of Rs. 500 for the recent quarter.

"There has been an accumulation problem. People were not paying earlier and since it is a remote area, meter readings have been incorrect in the past. We are now rectifying those and the bills have risen," says Ramit Lepcha, office executive at West Bengal Sate Electricity Distribution Company Limited,, Sinji. Locals however allege that the company is now recovering unpaid money during the years of Gorkhaland agitation in the State. Pasang Pakril had received a bill of Rs. 9000 for two years during the agitation and half of the money was returned to him after rechecking. He feels even the remaining paid amount was inflated.

"The amount unpaid during the agitation was locked by the government. We take that amount only when the meter is returned or the ownership changes," says Ramit Lepcha.

According to 37-year old Gautam Tamanag, a farmer in Lungeli, the new generation is burdened with the family's early dues and the deteriorating returns on agriculture, make it difficult to repay the pending amounts.

Folk artists of the Tamang community performing a love song with Damphu and Tungna | SRINJOY DEY

Folk *Selo*

Situated on the Kalimpong-Santhar route two hours from Pabong, is Tanyang. Here folk artists group 'Tamang Selo' is widely popular. Clad in bright clothes, they dance and sing depicting the love and sorrow of everyday life. Although earnings are not enough from this profession, the rhythmic beats capture hearts as the melodious music resonates in the hills.

Sanitary pads beyond reach

PRIYANKA KAUL

SAMALBONG: For Ekta Tamang (22), a villager in Pabong, her menstruating days are spent washing the blood-stained cloth, which she uses as a sanitary napkin. "I have been used to this since menarche. My mother and grandmother did the same," says Tamang.

Local shops do not stock it and its unavailability has forced women to travel for two hours to the city. Pemu Sherpa (29), one of the two Auxiliary Nurse Midwives at the health sub-centre at Sinji said that they encourage girls having menarche to use napkins. Instructions on how to use the cloth, how to wash it etc. are given to those who are uncomfortable with using napkins.

According to Sherpa, the government on its part supplies sanitary pads, but only to women having postpartum menstruation. "We distribute pads to women having postpartum menstruation as per their socio-economic condition," she said.

Surijit Kumar, Medical Officer at the primary health centre in Samthar, points at the lack of facilities at the sub-centre level. "They are not well equipped to provide sanitary pads to local residents. Neither funds are available, nor do they have any plan. To be able to deliver this, we are required to visit every house, which is impossible," he said.

Nirupam Biswas, Chief Medical Officer Kalimpong, agrees that free distribution of sanitary pads is a viable solution, but points at the lack of infrastructure for their unavailability in shops. With Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers expected to come on board soon, there is hope for some improvement.

The government had initiated a community level care by deploying ASHA workers, who were responsible in providing primary level health care facilities to women. But that was shelved due to problems in the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA). Even after interviews were conducted and candidates selected, no one was appointed.

Biswas, however, confirmed the approval and said, "We have got letters to finalise the results of the ASHA candidates and we will take people on board within the next one to two months."

Page Editors: Shreya Basak and Swapnajit Kundu

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Elderly starved of pensions

Red tape, difficult norms and poor accessibility bother them

SRINJOY DEY

SAMALBONG: Prem Singh Tomar (82), a retired teacher, lives in a small, one-room cottage at the foothills near the Sinji market. He owns three goats and two cows whose milk he sells to cover his daily expenses. His son, who now lives in Pune, sends him Rs. 3000 every six months which averages to exactly the amount of money he would have gotten under the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS).

"I am content with whatever I have, it's a hassle for old people like us to visit the post office or the bank which is so far away," Tomar points out. Most people who do not avail IGNOAPS and its state variant – West Bengal Old Age Pension Scheme (WBOAPS) – state difficulty in mobility as their prime barrier.

In IGNOAPS, elderly below the poverty line are entitled to a non-contribution pension where the beneficiary does not have to contribute any amount to receive the pension. Those aged between 60 to 79 years are entitled to Rs. 200 per month, whereas those aged above 80 receive Rs. 500 per month. Similarly, the pensioners aged 60 and above receive Rs. 750 a month under WBOAPS.

However, the real story lies in the ground realities of these schemes. According to Tularam Bhattarai (62), the secretary of the Darjeeling Cooperative Society Bank – "It's not really the officials' fault, the procedure is so slow that it takes months for the money to reach the post office and the banks. Sometimes the departments that administer the schemes themselves do not send the money through the post office. They insist on opening bank accounts." Most people in these rural hamlets have post office accounts where their pension is supposed to be collected from. Still many allege that the officials themselves do not receive the money that needs to be distributed.

Though Santha Kumar Chhetri and his wife are eligible for pension, they are denied it | SRINJOY DEY

"I recently had to spend Rs. 4 lakh for a heart surgery in Kalimpong. Though I would've had to take a loan regardless, it would've been easy if I had some of the pension money," says Santha Kumar Chhetri (72), a resident of Samalbong. He has not been paid pension for over a year now.

Bhattarai also alludes to several systemic problems in the scheme – "Most people here have altered their age, meaning if they actually are older, their identity cards pronounce them a lot younger. Which becomes a barrier for the people when it comes to availing schemes like this."

He also talks about the drawbacks of relying on Census data to determine those below the poverty line. "When the 2011 Census happened, a lot of people who are actually below the poverty line throughout the year were shown to be above the poverty line because of productive harvests," he says. Nuisances such as these are often missed by officials at district and panchayat levels.

According to him, about 30 per cent of the villagers who are registered under the scheme do not receive pension despite their name being on the list. "These issues are something that the officials of the state must be open to understanding, researching and amending. Each place has its own unique problems that must be resolved – that's why we have a multi-layered government," he remarks.

Govt medical scheme is yet to climb the hills

NEHA MALARA

SAMALBONG: Ganga Thapa's nine year-old son is paralysed from the left side. He can neither walk nor speak and spends his days in his worn out wheelchair. After countless visits to the hospital and mounting bills, Thapa has given up hope. He is an agricultural labourer who supplements his earnings through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme. He is also the target audience for the Swasthya Sathi programme but even after two years of its launch, the scheme is invisible in the hills of Samalbong where he lives.

There has been no awareness drive in the seven constituencies of the Samalbong gram panchayat which includes a large number of STs and seasonal workers who would benefit from the scheme. Dr. Ankan Simlandi, Superintendent, Kalimpong District Hospital says, " There is a lack of awareness and education of this programme in the rural areas. The result is that the very people it is supposed to benefit do not even know it exists." The hospital is the only one in the district that is empanelled in this scheme. Simlandi adds that despite its extensive coverage, the scheme has not gained popularity even after merging with the national Ayushman Bharat scheme.

Pemu Sherpa (29), a nurse at the Health Sub-centre at Sinji, the main government hub of Samalbong panchayat, says, "We have no knowledge of this scheme. No awareness camps for this have been organised." Out of the seven constituencies, four had no idea that such a program existed. Anu Rai, head nurse at the nearest Primary Health Centre at Samthar was also unaware of any such scheme.

Ganga Thapa with his wheelchair-bound son, Sudarshan Thapa (9) and daughter, Shreja Thapa (12) | NEHA MALARA

The Swasthya Sathi scheme provides medical cover up to Rs 1.5 lakh in secondary and tertiary care and Rs. 5 lakh for cancer and orthopaedic diseases per family annually. Launched in December 2016, it includes those who come under the deprivation criteria as stated in the socio-economic and caste census. Following the launch of Ayushman Bharat, this scheme was merged with the Central programme.

There have also been reports of private clinics refusing to acknowledge the card. Neeranjan Rai, Joint BDO, Kalimpong-1, says, "Even after making the Swasthya Sathi card, many private hospitals and clinics will refuse to honour it. We have had cases where the doctors have refused treatment with the card but are willing to admit the patient if they pay the full fee." He also adds that there is no provision under the scheme that allows the government to take any action against the health facilities that deny treatment.

No grain of fair play at PDS shop

PRIYANKA KAUL

SINJI: Bhawna Lepcha (40) has been coming to the Public Distribution System (PDS) outlet in Sinji for the past 22 years and facing the same problem. "Sometimes they give extra grains to people of some communities or to their own relatives. They make excuses by saying there is lack of supply," she says. The fear of total expulsion from any subsidy keeps her from complaining.

Lepcha echoes the problems faced by villagers who are entitled to free monthly supplies based on a quota under the public distribution of daily household grains like rice, wheat and sugar.

According to the residents of Sinji, ration shop owners have been selling them less than the allotted amount of grains. The PDS distributors, or ration shop owners, tell a different tale. They claim that the compensation they get, i.e. 54 paise per kg, is not sufficient for their survival.

"For every 200 quintals we sell, we are given Rs 10,000 as compensation. With that, we have to manage our office and pay the six hired workers. We do not get any additional funds from the government," says Suresh Lakhotia (52), dealer at the PDS shop at Sinji.

According to Lakhotia, with such low compensation based salary, they are often forced to pay out of their own pockets. Lakhotia, whose family has been running the PDS shop for two generations, now wishes to surrender his license and not continue any further.

Hari Shankar Panicker, Additional District Magistrate, Kalimpong, believes that after the digitisation of ration cards, the number of fake account holders has come down drastically and this has created problems for dealers. "We used to have 4.64 lakh ration cards with a population of just 2.5 lakh. Now that a lot of fake cards have been removed, the dealers are facing the heat," he says.

Panicker says that 100 per cent PDS coverage is ensured by the district and periodical review visits that are carried out regularly. "The people get double the allotted food grains as per the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) scheme which is going quite well as per our inspection," he says.

"They (the ration shop owners) have been given enough compensation. If they have complaints, they are welcome to bring their issues via their associations and we will listen to their grievances," he adds.

Lone high school in the GP

NEHA MALARA

SINJI: The newly instated district of Kalimpong boasts a literacy rate of 90.19 per cent, higher than the State average of 76.26 per cent. However, in the gram panchayat of Samalbong in the district, the number does not ensure quality education to its children. With just one high school, no school service commission and inadequate infrastructure, the high literacy rate does not present a complete picture.

The Shankar Higher Secondary School at Sinji caters to the seven constituencies that make up Samalbong. With 413 students and 18 teachers, the school offers classes from the fifth standard to the twelfth. However, it only offers the Arts stream and has no facility for a laboratory. The school has a Boys' Hostel but does not have the funds for a Girls' Hostel.

B B Kalden, Principal of the school, says, " I have been asking for funds to have a lab in the school and to provide any kind of vocational training. Some kids are not interested in studying Arts and have to either drop out or get poor grades and are unable to do anything more with their education." He also adds that the government has proposed to add Home Science to the curriculum this year.

With no technical institute in the area, academics is the only profession that the students can pursue after completing their school. For those who want a different path, the panchayat has no alternative but to fall back on skilled labour.

Shankar Higher Secondary School in Sinji is the only high school in the region | SRINJOY DEY

Pranay Thapa (28) left the school after class ninth and has been working as a carpenter in the village ever since. He says, " I did not like Arts, so the only option for me was to leave. Those who can afford it go to Kalimpong College but many like me have to find odd work in the area. The sad part is that we want to study but have no place to go."

While government schemes like the mid-day meal are working efficiently, some of its schemes strike at the heart of the Gorkhaland agitation. A scheme to provide textbooks to the girl students in the State provided textbooks in Bengali. Mukesh Sharma, a journalist with the Kalimpong Press Club elaborates, " It is no secret that the government is against the Gorkhaland issue. I feel that it is purposely not working towards education in the hills as they opposed the imposition of Bengali in the schools till class tenth."

Rajeev Pramanik, District Inspector, Higher Education, Kalimpong maintains that the education facilities are in line with the demand of the place. " We have received no official communication from the gram panchayat to increase the curriculum at the school," he says.

To burn or not to burn?

AKSHARA SRIVASTAVA

SAMALBONG: Along the roads of Shukrabaray, the only market in the area, lie packets of the much loved Wai-Wai noodles and Lays potato chips.

An eyesore in the scenic mountains, the packets will remain lying there or will be collected by locals themselves only to be burned or buried. These are the only two ways that are known to them, as government action in disposal remains unthought of.

Traditional methods of disposal; incineration and burying have been in practice in the area for long, but the nature of waste has changed. Apart from plastic packets of chips and noodles, bathroom waste like sanitary napkins, which have replaced pieces of cloth, have also been introduced to these piles of waste being buried or burnt.

"Earlier we used to just throw the used sanitary napkins down the hills, but the animals started to try to eat them. Since then, we burn them," says Monica, a housewife from Lungeli village.

Sweta Pradhan who runs a no-waste community called Petrichor in Gorubathan, Darjeeling, has tried to form a collection point in the hills by mobilising locals. A difficult initiative, it soon fizzled out, as the collected garbage could not be taken anywhere and had to be eventually incinerated or buried. She has also partnered with NGOs and local institutions like *samajs* (society) and schools to raise awareness in the hills regarding the perils of wasteful living, burning waste, littering, dumping waste in *jhoras* and just bringing home more plastic.

Semi-burnt plastic waste dumped in Sinjee | SWAPNAJIT

"There needs to be an accountability of waste which can start with segregation at source. Massive awareness campaigns need to start to teach people that with plastic there is no away. A blanket ban should be imposed on single-use plastic," she says.

A senior official from the Block Development Office (BDO) under the strict condition of anonymity, expressed confusion over whether packets of chips and sanitary napkins even constituted plastic waste.

"In Kalimpong town, we have banned use of plastic bags. We only offer paper or cloth bags now. In the rural areas, waste production is not much and concentration is sparse which is why there is minimal government intervention in the way waste is disposed and the need for a collection truck does not arise," he says.

When pressed to talk about measures taken by the government, he adds, "The gram panchayat is responsible for making people aware about waste disposal but we have room for improvement."

With the efforts of some NGOs and the gram panchayat, people have started using tin boxes as dustbins. The ball remains in the court of the government officials to scheme out a plan for the right disposal of waste.

Proper water supply still a pipe dream in hilly hamlets

MUSKAAN SHARMA

SAMALBONG: A common sight when driving through the hills of the district are the green and black plastic pipes running along the sides of the roads. Down the slopes and over the trees, these pipes make up the majority of the water supply system in the hills.

According to Ashok Tamang (28) of Tanyang, there has never been a proper system of water supply in the hills. "Before the pipeline connections, we used to fetch water from the lower regions of the hills where the rainwater gets collected. My family used to fill whatever container we could find to carry water back home," he says.

Sunil Chhetri (39), another resident of Tanyang, says his family used to get water delivered to their house through a neighbour's car and pay around 500 rupees per day for the water.

Even though the new pipelines have reduced the manual labour for the villagers, they are not without issues. From 2009 to 2016, water tanks were constructed under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) for a drinking water scheme for villages under the Samalbong gram panchayat. The tanks were connected to natural water streams uphill and the collected water was supplied to households through plastic pipes.

However, the duration for the water supply varies from place to place. In Upper Tanyang, the water is available for two hours a day while in the market town of Sinjee, some households say they receive water for only half an hour per day. For the farmers of the villages, limited water supply results in using water meant for household consumption to irrigate their cardamom fields.

Arbitrary timings have left the villagers to look for alternate ways of procuring water. While some have resorted to fetching extra water from natural sources in the lower areas, others have connected private pipes from the streams to their houses at a cost of 15,000 rupees for a 24 hour non-stop supply.

Pipes are often inserted into hollow bamboo logs with an attached tap to fill buckets or pitchers | MUSKAAN SHARMA

"In the summer and during the rainy season, the water in the pipeline is muddy and smells rotten. We filter it with a cloth and then boil it to make it fit for drinking," says Basil Lepcha, a resident of Sinji. According to him, the pipelines also require frequent repairs after rains or landslides for which every household has to pay on its own as the panchayat refuses to help out.

Mani Kumar Thapa, the Executive Assistant (EA) at the gram panchayat says, "Repairing or maintenance cannot be done by the panchayat. We do not have a budget allocation for small repairs. The residents have to take care of that through their own beneficiary committees."

While the villagers say that they have in the past asked for repairs in the pipeline the EA states that he has not received any written request as of yet.

Dipen Kalden, secretary of the beneficiary committee at Sinji says that the residents do not have any alternative to paying for their own repairs. "Private lines are expensive and not everyone can afford one. We collect money among ourselves to repair leaks in the lines", he says.

Kalden also mentions that the villagers had to use their own money to complete the water tank construction project due to the insufficient material provided but they did so happily as they gained an "asset".

According to the EA, the lack of water in natural sources is to be blamed for the limited supply of water and not the private lines. "We have no objections to the private lines. The households with private lines offer their water to their neighbours so everyone benefits from the connections," he says. However, he admits that he has no record of how many private lines exist and that there are no plans to create an alternate water source.

WITH INPUTS FROM SHREYA B.

Page Editor: Muskaan Sharma

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A forlorn monastery

SWAPNAJIT KUNDU

SINJI: The road passing through the Sinji bazaar bifurcates into one leading to Sonargaon village and the other is flanked by the Tashi Yang monastery.

Small white flags fluttering in wind deck its compound. In the middle of it, there is a structure known as the *Ashtasheel*, which shows Lord Buddha in four different postures.

A Shiva temple is situated on the left side of the monastery while a large statue of Lord Hanuman is located at the back.

Established in the year 1976, a period of great political and social turmoil in India, the monastery was built on a piece of land donated by a local farmer, Tashi Yang, which is where it gets its name from

The Secretary of the Managing Committee, Man Bahadur Chhetri said, "This place shows the spirit of *Sarva Dharma* or all religions. We do not discriminate among people. and embrace everyone as our own."

Better roads and development in the area have increased the crowd in the monastery from what it was a decade ago. The crowd swells up the most during the 'Purnima' (full moon) festivals, the most prominent being the Buddha Jayanti. This is followed by a ceremony known as the 'Boom' which includes reading a scripture for seven days. Besides that, Hindu festivals of Diwali, Dussehra too are celebrated in the monastery. Inter-caste marriages are also performed.

Despite being a registered monastery, it receives no funds from the Government or other Buddhist Monasteries due to delay in submission of documents. The Gorkhaland agitation had further delayed the process. The tourists seldom visit it due to no promotion by the government and therefore, there is not enough money to run the place. However, they hope to get funded someday.

For 42 years now, Tashi Yang Buddha Monastery has been serving as a place of religious harmony and continues to be a symbol of peace specially at a time when the country is divided on religious basis.

The Tashi Yang monastery | RISHI SHRESTHA

Locals won't let language die

MUSKAAN SHARMA

KALIMPONG: Bahadur Lepcha (72), the oldest member of the Lepcha community in Tanyang believes that even though his community is increasing in size, its culture and language are slowly dying.

Only a few Lepcha households in the district speak the language today as the majority speaks Nepali. The Lepchas consider themselves to be the aboriginals of the region and the community hinges on animistic beliefs where places and creatures are worshipped.

Tshering Lepcha (63), a teacher at the Lepcha Academy, believes that the language declined due to religious conversions. "Our people converted to Buddhism and Christianity and our customs were lost to religious teachings," he said.

Lepchas were introduced to Buddhism in the 7th century by the Bhutanese and to Christianity by the British in the 19th century.

Meherman Lepcha(49) of Lower Samalbong, however, has a different reason for not teaching his children the language. "It is not practical. Lepcha is of no use to them when they have to communicate in Nepali at school and elsewhere," he stated.

Hence, to keep the language alive, every village constituted a Kyung Sezome or village society where children are taught the Lepcha language and customs. One member is appointed to teach at night schools, attended by residents of all ages. Their efforts were boosted by the state government's Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board.

Along with the construction of night schools, the Board also founded the Lepcha Academy last year in Podung, now attended by 27 students from age groups 9 to 14. Apart from the language, they are also taught folktales, songs, musical instruments and the history of the Lepchas' motherland, Mayel Lyang.

WEAVING DREAMS

Prashant Tamang shows his traditional basket called 'Doko' used to carry leaves and other items | MUSKAAN S

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF FOLK MUSIC

Tone deaf state neglects folk music

SRINJOY DEY

KALIMPONG: Despite the musical talent that the people of the hills possess inherently, evident by the fact that 520 artists since 2012 have been promoted under the Kalimpong Hills Rural Welfare Foundation (KHRWF), an NGO working for folk artists, there is a dearth of government funding and initiatives to promote them.

The presence of an Information and Cultural Department(ICD) does not amount to much, admits Suman Pradhan – the secretary of KHRWF, and a former artist of the ICD. Even though the 'Lokprasar Prakalpo' project introduced by the West Bengal government in 2014 is implemented in the district, Kalimpong ranks as the second lowest in the number of enlisted artists among the 23 districts in which the project has been operating.

Under the project, which is a brainchild of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, folk artistes between the ages of 18 and 60 receive Rs.1000 per month as a retainer fee. Senior artists who are above 60 receive Rs.1000 per month as pension. Apart from that, the active performances receive Rs.1000 performance fee per programme.

Along with it, health and sanitation messages and awareness against evils of dowry, child marriage and trafficking etc. are also transmitted through the performances of these artists.

Damphu, a traditional instrument, being played at a Tamang music performance | SRINJOY DEY

> *There is no appropriate platform for the artists. The musicians who have reached a certain stage, have done so on their own.*
>
> - SUMAN PRADHAN
> SECRETARY, KALIMPONG HILLS RURAL WELFARE FOUNDATION (KHRWF)

However, Pradhan said that the system is plagued by many problems. "There is no appropriate platform for the artists. The musicians who have reached a certain stage have done so on their own," he added. There are no recording studios in Kalimpong and with the nearest one being in Darjeeling, only a select few get the opportunity to record their songs. "If you see in Nepal, they have 'musicnepal.com' and other such online avenues where the local artists get some exposure. It would be beneficial if we have something like that here," he remarked.

There has been a lack of initiative both from the state and the local administration, the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) to promote arts and culture in the region. "I had approached the GTA officials with a proposal for a marketing system where our music reaches every corner of the country but none of them were interested. The local parties, the local government nobody really cares about pushing our culture forward," said Pradhan.

"There have been certain benefits of the Prakalpo project," he clarified, "like people often have to wear their traditional clothes while performing. So, when they go to other parts of the state or people from outside come to see them, they are made aware of our traditions too." In 2018, as a part of the project, 57 shows were carried out across the region for the promotion of folk artists. Folk artists from the region are also sent to other districts as part of the programme.

However, not all artists receive an equal chance of performing in these events. "The District Information Officer selects a cultural team of five-six people that perform at these programmes," Pradhan added. Most of these artists are senior artists who are skilled both in traditional folk music and other genres. "When the teams go out, they are also expected to sing Bengali or Hindi songs, so only those senior artists who have the capability to do so are sent," he said.

Sangini and Maruni folk music are among the most promoted art forms in the region. The hills also have distinct forms of Tamang music and Gurung music that are well known.

"The influence of western music has been huge. Of course, it is important to assimilate other art forms into yours but without forgetting one's own roots," he lamented, worrying that their small group might get carried away.

A leap of faith over fame

AINDRISHA MITRA

TANYANG: Sardius Lepcha (21), is a dreamer and a believer. He plays the Accordion, a box-shaped musical instrument at the United Church of Northern India (UCNI)in Tanyang village and considers his music to be too pious for the outside world.

With the verses of the Bible deeply entrenched in his mind, Sardius is merely following in his father's footsteps and aspires to become only better at the choir.

"I do not want to be famous. My only purpose in life is to glorify the Almighty through what I play," said Sardius who had his first taste of music once he joined the keyboard classes in his school, St. Stephen's Academy in Lolegaon.

Pursuing a diploma in elementary education (D.El.Ed) from an institute in Kalimpong, Sardius makes time from his busy schedule to attend all the fasting prayers on Mondays and Tuesdays besides the mass on Sundays . He also looks forward to the youth gatherings where several ideas on development in the hamlet of Tanyang in terms of roadways, transportation and healthcare are exchanged.

According to him, the church has always been a symbol of community welfare. It has and continues to serve the needy with food, medicines and other resources that comfort the poor people inhabiting the hills.

An Accordion for the Apostle | AINDRISHA MITRA

"Music to me is like a healer. Playing for the church especially gives me peace and tranquility. All the emotions that I'm unable to convey as a person get translated into the accordion's bellow," says Sardius who is born an introvert.

Soft-spoken usually, sometimes he also lends his voice for recording songs from the Book of Pslams in Nepali language. His friend, Salmon Lepcha, also associated with the church, testifies for his unique vocal quality that makes Sardius the church's favourite.

"He has a voice for devotional songs. But at the same time, he should not restrict himself from trying out in other places such as concerts and competitions," comments Salmon on Sardius's distaste for commercializing his music.

Sardius also has very strange ideas of promoting tourism in his village. In partnership with his father, he started a pig farm with two pigs and works towards expanding it so that people from other villages visit the place in order to buy them and appreciate the natural reserve of his village. "It pains me to see that this beautiful village and its people go unnoticed since it is situated in rough terrain," says Sardius who initially faced discrimination in his institution for belonging to a scheduled tribe but claims that things have normalized now.

Sebastian Lepcha, Sardius's uncle who runs the community kitchen at the church feels that his nephew is an undiscovered talent with a potential to do more for this village than most others.

"We don't restrict him from doing anything since his ideas are noble and his mind service-oriented," says Sebastian whose family solely stands for their integrity towards the Holy Spirit.

HAPPINESS AMIDST HOPELESSNESS

AKSHARA SRIVASTAVA

SAMALBONG: "It's not a problem" or "Things are fine" are the common responses one gets when people from the villages are questioned about their problems.

The problems however, are many. The village does not have a hospital. In case of an emergency, people have to drive to Kalimpong town, an hour- and- half long anxiety-inducing drive through a narrow, serpentine, and broken road.

The roads in the village are full of pits and are repaired only when the elections approach. Gautam Ghising (34), who frequently drives to and from Kalimpong said, "The condition of roads worsen every monsoon." He smiled and further added that the villagers have worked their way around the broken roads.

Pregnant women in the state of labour are forced to endure an hour- long ride to reach the nearest hospital in Samanthal. They also have the facility of using the "Matriyaan"- another vehicle provided by the government but owned and run privately. "There is not a single doctor at any of the health sub-centres, they are all run by nurses like me with the help of two other subordinate nurses and a male help. "We run full check-ups on expecting mothers and refer them to the District hospital in Kalimpong for further check-ups," said Pemu Sherpa of the Sinji health sub-centre. The area has recorded only one case of maternal mortality in the past five years. Talking of infant deaths, Parvati Thapa (34), a mother of two from Lungeli village proudly said, "A mountain child is very strong. Fortunately, no cases of infant death have been reported." She also added that most women in their final months of pregnancy are sent to a relative's house either in Kalimpong or Siliguri. Nobody ever talks about the pain of an expecting mother.

Smiling through hard times | SRINJOY DEY

The hilly areas of Samalbong are secluded from the world as the state transport does not reach there. There are no state-appointed officials to look after maintenance issues. Any electricity-related problems in the area are looked after by only one light man. The locals complain that the government representatives do not pay heed to their problems. "The MLA sits in Kalimpong and MP in Delhi. They show their faces only when elections are around the corner. Until then, we are on our own," Ghising said. Small community banks have cropped up to solve problems of money in a place where ATMs are too far and the lone customer service point shuts down early.

Finding happiness hasn't been difficult for the community. Umesh Tamang, a journalist, said, "During the blockade last year, the villagers were happy and satisfied by themselves. They grew their own food, fetched water on their own, and had each others' back," added Umesh.

This abandonment has pushed the hill community to come together and has given rise to a strong sense of community and unity. Hopelessness is a state they have been forced into from where grew anger and a desire to be their own heroes.

After having been pushed to the brink and robbed of any sense of identity, the people locked horns with the government in a 31-year long movement, only to be quelled by those in power.

They have perfected the art of living; living with lesser income, lesser space, and lesser hope. A sense of hopelessness does not give rise to any expectations, and the lack of which helps them live in the peace that they have become so used to.

Content in their own nook of the hills, the people have learnt to curb their demands, are learning to stay silent, and move on with their lives. It is afterall the smart thing to do,

A LONG WAY TO GO

This road leads to Shukrabaray bazaar- a major source of income for the locals that remains devoid of visitors on most days as transportation proves to be a hindrance due to lack of good governance, a milestone yet to be achieved | SRINJOY DEY

Page Editors: Akshara S. and Aindrisha M.

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RED, HOT, AND RUINED

HARSHITA MISHRA

KHAMMAM: The air around the chilli market yard in Khammam is pungent and asphyxiating. However, faces covered with frayed gamchas, workers tirelessly load massive gunny bags stuffed with red chillies on the waiting trucks. This year, the number of bags are markedly less, a worker remarks.

It has not been business as usual for chilli farmers across the district who have been fighting a multi-edged crisis for two years now.

"The rate keeps falling because of the quality of chillies, we don't even know what is happening to our crops," says Ramesh(30), who lost half an acre of his crop this year in Kusumanchi.

Until 2016, chilli had a lucrative market and was the second most grown crop after paddy in Khammam. This year, while the demand remains the same, the decline in quality of chillies is common across the district.

Farmers have been complaining about viral crop diseases that have surfaced just two years back and grown frequent since then. In 2016, crops worth over Rs.50 crore were damaged as two brands, Green Era and JCH 801, duped over 1500 farmers across the district by selling spurious seeds. While the two brands were soon taken off the market, other disease-prone varieties of seeds were still being sold.

Chillis brought for sale are separated according to quality at the Khammam market yard | HARSHITA MISHRA

The area under chilli in the State has declined by over 35,000 acres since 2016 because of the continuous fall in prices.

New pesticides and anti-viral crop medicines have come up in the market, making an already cost-intensive crop costlier. Even as input per acre ranges from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 1 lakh, the return depends on the quality.

Shankar, a worker at the market yard, explains that each day, good and inferior quality produce are separated according to the size of the chillies.

"The good quality is usually exported and gives around Rs.10,000 per quintal, while stunted ones are bought at around Rs. 8000 per quintal," he explains.

The government policies are also unfavourable, say the farmers. Since chilli is a commercial crop, its price is subject to fluctuations in the market and unlike other crops like paddy and wheat, there is no 50 per cent guarantee or Minimum Support Price for chilli. Hence the produce is sold at prices determined by traders and the market.

Farmers with small and moderate land holdings bear the brunt. "We spend around Rs.1000-2000 per acre on just pesticides. Anti-virus medicines cost between Rs.1200 and Rs. 3000. Good seeds are growing costlier, and bad ones catch diseases," says Bhadru(45), who owns 3 acres of land in Pinjaramudugu Tanda in Kamepally mandal.

Even as the rampant crop failures continue to endanger livelihoods across the district, the administration has done little to stop the rot, the farmers say.

Anuraj Jayanthi, sub-collector, Khammam district, says "It is all very over-publicised in the media [the quality of seeds]. Farmers can grow other things. We are all about educating the farmers to cultivate less water-intensive crops."

Protests by farmers have become a routine occurrence in the State. Last year, hundreds of farmers marched to the Khammam market yard and burnt their produce after prices nosedived to as low as Rs.5000 per quintal.

The farmers continue to fight an uncertain battle against the State, middlemen, and the erratic market dynamics. "Last year I earned Rs. one lakh on half an acre of produce, this time it's just Rs. 40,000. How are we to survive?" asks Veeraiyya (45), a farmer.

A chilli farmer spraying pesticides in his farm at Nacharam village. Each cycle of pesticides gives an additional financial burden to chilli farmers. | SABITRI

A bandhu only for land owners?

ANAND JC

KHAMMAM: The Telangana government, under Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, in May 2018 introduced Rythu Bandhu (RB) scheme, under which farmers get Rs. 4,000 per acre twice a year per crop season. This scheme has gained a lot of accolades but has faced flak for excluding the tenant farmers.

RB also known as the Farmers' Investment Support Scheme for the kharif and rabi seasons to farmers. This scheme benefits around 58 lakh farmers in the state, covering around 1.42 crore acres of cropped area.

According to the District Agricultural Office, there are 2,85,348 farmers in the district and 2,65,352 farmers are enlisted under the Rythu Bandhu scheme.

A sum of Rs. 259.47 crore has been given out in 2018 for the kharif season in almost all villages of Telangana with Thatupudi, Pammi, Kusumanchi, Kammepalli and Mudigonda being some of them.

This scheme was launched to rescue farmers from private moneylenders. Yet the farmers still depend on them.

R. Nageswar Rao, a farmer in Kamepalli has availed himself of the RB but still took a loan from a private moneylender. "I grow chillies. My minimum input cost per acre exceeds Rs. 75,000 every year. Rs. 8,000 is not really a lot."

The basic cost of cultivating cotton per acre is around Rs. 25,000- 30,000, paddy per acre costs Rs 30,000- 35,000, which exceeds the money provided by the government.

Vishweshwara, a farmer in Kusumanchi, said, "The cultivators should've gotten the benefits in kind like tractors or cheaper fertilizers and pesticides. Our land owner gets the money because he has the land papers, but we don't. At least our wages should be increased."

The Hyderabad High Court in June 2018, when it received a petition by a tenant farmer, had asked the Telangana Government why it had excluded tenant farmers from the scheme and further asked the wealthy farmers to be excluded from the scheme as well.

Rythu Swarajya Vedika (RSV), an organization that works for the benefit of tenant farmers, teamed up with Tata Institute of Social Sciences in June 2018 to study the plight of tenant farmers and various suicide cases. There were seven suicides reported in Khammam and six of them were tenant farmers.

D. Ramakrishna, District Agricultural Officer, said, "Government is working hard to include the tenant farmers under the RB scheme, but it is difficult to ascertain the exact amount of tenant farmers."

"RB is for landowners, crop cultivators are saying that they are not getting enough benefits. Tenant farmers actually enrol themselves at the Mandal Revenue Office and get a tenant card and a land lease card. They can also get benefits of subsidised seed distribution and many other schemes," he adds.

A 20 year battle for land rights

SHUVABRATA GARAI

KHAMMAM: A 66-year-old farmer from Kamepalli has been continuously fighting for his land for 20 years now.

Rangaram, a resident of Maddulapalli, has been cultivating paddy for the last thirty years in three acres which belonged to his father. But there is no patta. Since, the land was not registered before 1959, it has been declared as the land of the tribals.

Rangaram's land was not registered before 1959. So it has been declared as a tribal land.

The then State Government to protect the tribal land rights in the Scheduled Areas of Telangana passed the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Areas Land Transfer Regulation, 1959 which prohibits any kind of occupation on land belonging to the tribals. As a result, he had to move the Mandal Agriculture Office to get his land registered; but he comes back empty handed every time.

"I have complained at the Mandal (Block) Agriculture Office and even spoke at the District Agriculture Office, but not a single time they paid any attention to my problems as I belong to OC caste (Open Category). I too approached the District Collector but he said this land belongs to the tribals and since you are not a tribal, we can't help you out," said Rangaram.

There are drawbacks if a farmer does not have a patta. He can't get agricultural loans, he isn't eligible for Rythu Beema and Rythu Bandhu schemes. Therefore, he has to approach middleman in the village who lend money at high interest rates.

"The money lender knows I have no option other than borrowing money from him and so he charges me a high interest rate. For every Rs 100, he charges two to three per cent interest a month. The interest rate goes on increasing each month," said Rangaram.

Rangaram thought of approaching the court, but thinking of the legal expenses, he stepped back.

"I was making a profit of Rs 5,000-Rs.20,000 and that is not enough for court expenses." ..

He still visits the Mandal Agriculture Office once in every two-three weeks with the hope that one day he will get back his land.

Virus cuts chilli output

SABITRI DHAKAL

WYRA: Gemini, Peanut Bud Necrosis, Little Leaf and Tospo are some of the viruses that have significantly limited the production of chilli and affected their quality in Khammam.

Chilli plants that are infected generally suffer from growth retardation; the leaves curl up and turn yellow, and the flowers wither away and fall.

Chilli farmers say the Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Wyra has failed to solve these problems of the chilli farmers as it lacks a laboratory and necessary equipments. "We have been facing problems because of such viral infections in chilli plants. Gemini virus has been a serious threat. When the plants are infected they are stunted, fruits are small, discoloured and distorted. We don't get a good price for such produce," says K Chiranjivi, a 30 year old chilli farmer.

Whiteflies are vectors of Gemini virus and are quite difficult to control.

P Sri Ranjita, Agro-Scientist at Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Wyra, says "The white flies usually attack cotton and as this is the season for cotton picking they flies have been migrating to the chilli plants." Viral infections potentially reduce yields by 20-100 per cent. We have been telling farmers to spray neem oil in the fields so as to get rid of the virus and the vector, she added.

The farmers however say that the viruses have become resistant. "Neem oil doesn't work at all. We need to spray pesticides from the third day of sowing until the yield is harvested," said Chiranjivi.

"The cost of pesticides is high.

A yellow trap for insects in a field (above) and diseased chillis (below) | SABITRI

For an acre of land it costs around Rs 3,000 and this needs to be done on every five days," added G Nagesh another farmer.

The farmers say that when the insects feed on plants, the plants start leaning and the flavour of the chillies too goes away. "So as to keep the insects away and stop their breeding I have been using yellow and blue sticky traps. Thirty such sheets are necessary for an acre of land. The price of a sheet is Rs 25," said Bonda Sri Niwas, a 40 year old chilli farmer.

The Little Leaf virus leads to malformation and proliferation of auxiliary buds. "The flower buds are upright instead of pendulous. As the disease progresses all the freshly produced flowers become phylloid and leaves become progressively smaller.

The infected plants do not bear fruits and early infection causes often 100 per cent yield losses," said Sri Ranjita, adding that these viruses soon develop resistance to pesticides.

"There is no laboratory in the village where we can do the necessary tests and examinations of the virus and recommend controlling measures," Ranjita explains.

D Ramakrishna, Agriculture Officer at District Agriculture Office, Khammam said "No separate funds are given to the farmers for controlling of pests or for the losses made."

Making money, the organic way

ANAND JC

KHAMMAM: Bandi Nageswar Rao, 63, had been practising traditional farming for around 25 years, until he switched to organic farming recently.

Organic farming is an alternative farming practice wherein the farmer does not use chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides to grow his crops. The chilli farmers in the district spend a lot on chemical fertilizers and pesticides to ensure a decent yield and to keep crop diseases away.

Even in times like these, Nageswar uses natural products like brahmastram, which is a mix of various fruits, cow urine and neem paste and neemastram, which is a combination of cow dung, urine and neem leaf paste for his chilli and paddy fields.

Nageswar is a big believer in intercropping as he grows tomato, marigold, brinjal and maize from time to time to ensure that his soil stays fertile.

Nageswar found an advertisement by Rythu Nestham, a farmer's group, propagating organic farming in 2016. He later attended a meeting, where he saw many other switching to organic farming. Following this, with the help of Bhagyalakshmi, his daughter he took up organic farming.

His daughter, who lives in the U.S., watches YouTube videos and reads books to help her father with new techniques.

"You cannot expect good yields after immediately switching to organic farming. We need to work on it for two-three years and give it time to acclimatize to the new non-chemical condition," says Bhagyalakshmi.

He received two kilograms of vermi-compost from the Farmers Foundation. "I also make my own variety of concoctions to ensure that the crops are healthy. Cow urine is an ingredient that I use on a regular basis."

Nageswar guides other farmers who seek to take up organic farming. "People here haven't switched yet but they ask questions. A few from other villages have taken it up and I often advise them."

The cost of cultivating chillies in the traditional manner is Rs. 80,000 per acre; but Nageswar spends below Rs.10,000 per acre. Similarly, growing paddy would cost around Rs. 25,000 per acre but Nageswar spends below Rs. 5,000 per acre.

The going rate for paddy is around Rs. 45 to Rs 50 a kg but since his produce is organic, Nageswar sells it for Rs.60. "Essentially, the amount of yield is no different. I am still waiting for the chilli harvest this season; I have high hopes for it."

"Everyone is happy with my decision. But my wife doesn't like the fact that I put my hands into cow urine and cow dung," he says.

D. Ramakrishna, District Agriculture Officer, Khammam said that since the introduction of the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana scheme in 2015, many have shifted to organic farming.

"It is a three-year plan. In the first year we provide them with all the inputs, training and practices. Last year it was implemented via 800 farmers in around 16 clusters. One cluster is around 50 acres."

Nageswar has plans, but commercialization isn't one of them. "We look at it as helping out society by providing it with healthy crops rather than it being just a business."

Bandi Nageswar Rao, the farmer (above), organic paddy (below) | ANAND

Farming no longer profitable

RAJAT THAKUR

KHAMMAM: Farmers in the district say that agriculture is no longer a profitable occupation with high input costs and low returns.

"We do farming because we can't do anything else," says Nageswar Rao (45), a paddy farmer in Krishnapuram village in Kusumanchi Mandal.

Three-fourth of the Telangana's rural population is dependent on agriculture, says Telangana Social Development Report (2017).

"The cost of one bag of seed is Rs. 900 and labour cost is Rs. 250 each labourer per day. Each cycle of fertilizer and pesticide spray costs more than Rs. 2,000. But the return we get is barely higher than what we invest, making agriculture just a means of sustenance."

A small farmer (owning 5 acre to 10 acre) earns a monthly average of Rs 4,637 from the farm and Rs 1,319 as labour, according to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report Income, Expenditure, Productive Assets and Indebtedness of Agriculture Households in India, 2012-2013.

"Per acre input for chilli is Rs. 60,000 to Rs. one lakh," says R. Kiranmayi (32), a chilli farmer near Dharmatanda village in the Mandal. Moreover, as the market value of chilli is depends on the quality, the prices fluctuate.

In December 2018 Cyclone Phethai devastated the area.

"The cyclone destroyed most of the crops and then I had to take money from a private moneylender," says M. Uday Kumar (24), a cotton farmer in Nacharam village of Enkoor Mandal.

Tenant farmers constitute about 75 per cent of farmer suicides in Telangana. These farmers are affected more because they get little benefit from the Government.

SOURCE: RSV/TISS STUDY

"Farmers take private loans at interest rate of five to ten per cent," he adds.

In 2018, Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao inaugurated agriculture investment support scheme named Rythu Bandhu. Under the scheme, farmers are provided with a grant of Rs. 4000 per acre each season for purchasing inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides.

However, farmers in the district allege that the scheme does not benefit them because of the high investment cost.

B. Santhu, 35, a cotton farmer from Kepten Banjara village in Kamepalli Mandal, says that, "He owns two acres of land, and got Rs. 8000 in first season from Telangana government under 'Rythu Bandhu' scheme."

"Over 89% of rural agrarian households in Telangana are in debt, the second highest proportion in the country after Andhra Pradesh," says Telangana Social Development Report.

Many farmers are buried under debts as high as Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 3 lakhs. The most affected are the tenant farmers, who are not provided any support under the scheme. M. Sheshu, 41, a tenant farmer from Pammi village says, "We do farming with a lot of risk, not having own land makes it too hard for us to live. Government won't do anything for us."

According to National Crime Records Bureau data (2015), Telangana has the third largest proportion of debt-related farmer suicides 632 (20.4 per cent) of 3,097 debt-related suicides after Maharashtra and Karnataka respectively.

Page Editors: Anand JC, Harshita Mishra and Rajat Thakur

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High cost, crop failure hit cotton

SIDDHARTH SHARMA

KHAMMAM: Bleak future lies ahead for cotton farmers in Telangana due to high input costs and risk of crop failures.

As many as 1.10 lakh farmers in the district grow cotton, producing more than two lakh metric tonnes.

The basic cost of cultivating cotton per acre is around Rs. 25,000-30,000, with the ideal yield being eight to ten quintals per acre. The selling price of cotton depends on its quality.

Hanuma Nageshwar Rao, 64, cotton farmer from Pammi village, Mudigonda mandal has been growing cotton all his life. He spends Rs 1,500 on cotton seeds and Rs 2,500 on fertilizers for his one acre cotton and half acre paddy farm.

"I spend Rs 3,000 as wages for ten labourers for two days, including the transport costs," said Rao. Growing cotton is a risky job as it only yields once a year. If there is a crop failure they lose an entire year's hard work.

Heavy rainfall in December 2018 damaged most of the standing crop, but the farmers say that they did not get any compensation. "I did not get any compensation," he said.

Rao harvested four to five quintals per acre this year. He got Rs 5,500 per quintal. "We are hardly breaking even let alone earning profit", said Rao.

"The only insurance I know of is Rythu Bima. I have never heard of crop insurance", said Rao. It is a government-insurance scheme which provides Rs five lakh cover for every farmer in the state.

Unpredictable yield leading cotton farmers nowhere |ANAND

Traditionally, the land gets divided as the generation passes, at times, leaving farmers landless. Nageshwar Rao is one of the farmers who have a small amount of land to pass on to the next generation. "I had three acres. I gave one acre to my son and half to my daughter as dowry", said Nageshwar Rao.

M. Sana, a tenant farmer from Konaigudem village in Nellakondapally mandal, has planted cotton on the four acre land that she leased last year.

"We pay Rs 10,000 as rent every year", said Sana. Her farm yielded five to six quintals of cotton per acre last year. She got Rs. 5,000 per quintal this year for cotton, whereas last year, she had made a profit of Rs. 15,000.

Last year more than a 100 plants were damaged and she received no compensation.

Sana is a tenant farmer, government schemes such as Rythu Bandhu, under which the government provides Rs 4,000 per acre every season to farmers, does not apply to her.

"Money under this scheme is credited directly to the land owner's bank account. We incur the losses but he gets the money", said Sana.

Duggidevarla, 30, another farmer in Mallaram village, Thallada mandal sells his produce at the cotton market on Kothagudem road. Many mills here are primary buyers of cotton.

As much as 2,000 quintals of cotton comes in daily at the market during peak season. Farmers, from various districts of Telangana and Maharashtra come here to sell their produce.

According to Nizamuddin Shiekh, who manages the cotton market, farmers prefer to sell their produce at the market because selling it directly to the mill requires many documents and has to wait for at least 15 days to get the money in their bank account.

"We pay them in cash, but 50-100 bucks less than the mill price. It depends on the quality of cotton. They don't have to wait for two weeks for the payment," said Nizamuddin. The cotton mills buy the produce from the market management.

Duggidevarla, farmer with a bank account said that most of the farmers at the market have a bank account yet they prefernot to sell directly to the mill.

"I prefer losing Rs. 100 to waiting for two weeks."

According to D. Ramakrishna, District Agriculture Officer, Khammam, the farmers who sell their produce at the market instead of selling directly to the mills usually come from far off districts. "The mills take two to three days to check the quality of the cotton and then buy it. Instead of waiting, many farmers sell their produce at the market for a lower price," said Ramakrishna.

Low returns from cattle farming

SOHEIB AHSAN

KHAMMAM: The high cost of investment and low returns are making livestock farming a difficult occupation for people in Thettelapadu village, despite it being the primary source of income.

Ramchandraya Echyot (45), a livestock farmer, owns two cows. His difficulty in maintaining the cows starts with the high cost of cattle feed. Since the government has not provided any land to livestock farmers for grazing, grass and nutrients have to be bought separately.

The difficulty in maintaining the cows starts with the high cost of the feed.

He also cultivates crops and therefore has to hire another person to tend to the cows in his absence. These expenses amount up to Rs 2,500 a month.

The money earned from selling cow milk barely covers their maintenance costs. If there is a shortage in his earnings, Ramchandraya depends on bank loans to cover the costs.

Crop farming on the other hand does not provide much relief. There is no organic farming. Water intensive crops cannot be cultivated here as the village has no water reservoir. Rainfall and groundwater are the only sources of water for the people in this village.

Cash crops are cultivated here more often as the loss incurred by the farmers is much less in comparison to losses incurred due to paddy.

All these problems have made the farmers in the village encourage their children to pursue jobs after their education and refrain from working in the fields.

Aruna and her husband are both farm labourers in the same village who are educated till 10th standard. They have two children, both of whom are studying for a bank job.

"They have never gone for farm work and I do not want our children to suffer in agriculture the way we have. We worked hard so they could prepare for a government job" says Aruna.

Paddy farmers moving to cash crops for better returns

BHAVINI MISHRA

KHAMMAM: Paddy farmers are shifting to cash crops such as chilies and cotton because of sustained losses and poor incentives from the Government.

Inadequate water supply for irrigation is also a problem for farmers wanting to grow paddy.

According to M. Ramchandraya, 45, in Thettelapadu village of Thirumalayapalem mandal, since there are no reservoirs near this area the farmers depend on rainwater and groundwater.

Then the loss due to failure of cash crops is not that high.

"Unlike as in paddy, the loss from cash crop is minimal," says Ramchandraya.

For cotton, he says, the input cost per acre including labour is Rs 30,000 but the harvest has not been good last year. "Due to excessive rain we lost a part of our produce."

The fertilizers are also expensive. "While a bag of urea only costs Rs 200, the high quality fertilizers sell for as high as Rs 2000 a bag."

The village has also been using drip irrigation system for 5 years now but it has been facing problems from rodents and sun damage.

"Earlier the pipes (drip irrigation) used to last a long time but now I have to change them every year," he says pointing to the fields. "Changing the entire system is very expensive."

The farmers have been practising sheet farming. The plastic sheet they use is to protect the crops from weed and grass thereby saving extra costs on labour and other tasks.

Ramchandraya says that the government has only given 50 per cent subsidy for mechanized farming for 3 acres of land to other castes while farmers from the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes get 100 per cent subsidy per acre of land. "The subsidies given to the farmers were in two terms. In the first term farmers didn't use the subsidies much. It is only after the second term that they are using it."

Maintaining livestock is difficult since the average cost per cow is Rs 1000 and there are the labour costs. "There are no government lands for grazing so we have to purchase the fodder ourselves."

In villages that have ample water, sugarcane is being grown in addition to paddy. Gandu Satish, 35, one of the candidates in the upcoming Panchayat elections of Ammagudem village in Nelakondapalli mandal says that sugarcane farming began some 10-15 years back in the village.

"Sugarcane farming began when a sugar processing mill was established. Since paddy farming gives little or no profit, a lot of us have moved to sugarcane here."

D. Ramakrishnan, agricultural officer, Khammam says that the government has been providing subsidies to farmers for quite some time now. "We have a scheme where we give a subsidy of 50 per cent on the purchase of tractors."

Farmers, animals get electrocuted

SABITRI DHAKAL

KUSUMANCHI: A red coloured tomb welcomes the visitors to Krishnapuram village. The epitaph says K Venkateshwara, a farmer, got electrocuted and died on the spot in 2009.

"We received no compensation. The burden of the family shifted to the wife," said Nageshwara Rao brother of the deceased farmer.

On March 24, 2018, Gunda Laxmi, a resident of N K Pally in Kusumanchi Mandal, lost her life while cutting grass in a paddy field. She accidently cut the service wire, got electrocuted and died on the spot.

According to Telangana State Northern Power Distribution Corporation Limited, Khammam 12 electrocution deaths of farmers were reported in the year 2018-19, ten each in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

Rentala Deepika, Assistant Engineer, Electricity Circle Office, Mamillagudem, said, "The most common risk of electrocution is contact with an overhead power line. This can occur when farm equipment hits the non-insulated lines. Even if the lines are insulated, the insulation may have worn away."

"The farmers are uneducated. Sometimes they hang wet clothes on the electric wires, accidentally touch damaged service wires. Any elevated equipment, especially equipment that is mobile, may come into contact with overhead power lines. Stealing of the electricity is another reason," she added.

Not only the farmers but animals also get electrocuted in the villages. A total of 151 animals were reported to have been killed so far in 2018-19.

As many as 144 and 129 animals were electrocuted respectively in the year 2016-17 and 2017-18.

"The animals die while grazing. They accidentally touch the Low Tension cables. Heavy gale and wind damages the poles and the animals touch them and get electrocuted and die on the spot," said Deepika.

"There are chances of 0.5 per cent of these deaths being the result of department faults. In such cases action is taken," said Deepika.

An epitaph for a farmer who got electrocuted |SABITRI

The Government of Telangana has the Farmers Group Life Insurance Scheme (Rythu Bma) to provide a financial aid of Rs 5 lakh to the family in the event of his/her death to any unfortunate reason. There is also a compensation for the animals' death.

"A government veterinary doctor will decide on the compensation for loss of the animals," said Deepika.

D Ramakrishna, Agriculture Officer, Khammam District, said "Every day two to three farmers die due to accidents in the villages,most go unreported."

Deepika said "Many farmers don't approach us; even if they do they don't submit required documents such as death certificate, post mortem report, photos of accident victims and recommendation letter from Panchayat which are mandatory for claiming compensation. Without them the procedure can't be taken further. This is why there are five pending cases of farmers' death".

Landless take over forests for farming

JAYAKUMAR MADALA

KHAMMAM: Everyday, Udaya Kumar starts his seven kilometre trek into the Enkoor forest. Armed with a pitchfork, he sets out before the sun rises. He does not hunt animals or collect forest produce. Udaya Kumar (24) is among the many farmers in the Nacharam Village in Enkoor mandal who continue cultivation of crops mainly cotton in farmlands created by cutting down the forest.

Podu farming, known as podu boomulu in Telangana, is a practice of agriculture followed by the Scheduled Tribes, who cut down trees in the forest to create cultivatable lands. It is a form of slash-and-burn cultivation method. More than 2000 acres under the Forest department of Telangana are currently cultivated by the podu farmers.

"Every year, the forest officials try to stop us from clearing lands, but once the seeds are sown, the forest officials never disturb us till the harvest is over," says, Udaya Kumar, showing his five acres of cotton field, which is ready for the first harvest.

Though recognized as farmers by the government of Telangana, they are not eligible for any subsidy or benefits under government schemes. "The only benefit we get is that our harvest is valued equally with the rest of the output from other regions," he added.

Farmers in the Telangana who have a patta for their lands are eligible for the Rythu Bandhu Scheme.

Ramesh (35), a Podu farmer in the Pinjaramadugu Thanda, Kamepally mandal says, "During every election, we are promised a patta(a title deed to property) for our lands on which we cultivate. But once the elections are over, no effort is taken to even help us." He added, "We are not allowed to implement any methods of irrigation, so the only crop we depend on is cotton, for which no external irrigation is required. Natural rainfall is enough for cotton."

| JAYAKUMAR MADALA

Udaya Kumar is among the 6,000 podu farmers in India

Lack of funds for investment is a major problem for podu farmers.

Rajesh (29), a podu farmer in the Nacharam says, "As we don't have patta for our lands, we aren't eligible for any bank loans. We invest in farms by borrowing from moneylenders. We are charged an interest of between five and ten per cent while banks charge 0.5 to 1 per cent for agricultural loans".

Mr. Narasimha Rao, Agricultural Officer, Enkoor mandal said, "We are trying to give them lands through the land distribution scheme for SC and ST. If we can provide them with farmlands near their villages, the utilization of forest lands for farming can be curbed completely." .

In search of greener pastures

Construction pays more

SIDDHARTH SHARMA

KHAMMAM: Farmers are moving away from agriculture and taking up other jobs, according to a study published in March last year by the Centre for the Studies of Developing Societies (CSDS) in New Delhi.

Nearly 76 per cent of farmers preferred to leave agriculture to find jobs in cities.

One such farmer is Raghavendra Rajput, a 23 year old from Badera, a village in Datia district in Madhya Pradesh, who is now working as a labourer in Ajmera Thanda district of Kusumanchi mandal in Khammam.

"I work at an under construction flyover nearby and get Rs. 18,000 per month, which is much better than working at a farm back home," said Raghavendra, who has been in the village for the last six months.

Back home, his family has about six acres of agricultural land, which is shared among four brothers.

"Dividing such a small piece of land among four people is a problem, each of us gets a little more than one acre to farm on," said Raghavendra who comes from a family of farmers.

One major reason for migration of people from agriculture to other professions is that the returns in farming are highly unstable.

"Why should I go back to farming? Here I work for 8 hours a day and get a fixed income."

Raghavendra was married at the age of 15 and is father to two children 5 and 8 year old sons.

According to him, if villagers like him want to progress, they should leave the villages and move to cities for better job opportunities.

"People are nice here; it feels like just like home. Except I can't understand their language, and they don't understand mine," laughed Raghavendra.

Sriramulu, 30, lives in Yerragadda Thanda with his wife and three children. He also works as a driver and a waiter at a restaurant in Khammam city.

"I have only one acre of land and growing paddy on it hardly earns me a profit of Rs. 10,000 in one season. That's why I do other jobs in order to sustain my family", said Sriramulu.

He had worked in Hyderabad as a waiter for one year, leaving his family and farm.

"Half of my land will go to my son, and the other half will be divided into two and given to my daughters. How will they continue with agriculture if there is no land left to farm on?" asked Sriramulu.

'It's hard work on the field'

ANAND JC

KAMEPALLI: Around 55 per cent of the people of Telangana reportedly are engaged in agriculture and related activities. This number may go down as the younger generation is moving away from this occupation.

Many blame the unpredictable climate, uninterested government or lack of money in the occupation. School and college students no longer feel the need to take up the occupation that has fed their families for generations, nor do their farmer-parents.

Staring into a hazy future... Vamshi and his parents |ANAND

Vamshi Santhu, 12, studies at the Zilla Parishad High School in Kalampalli. "My father does not want me to work here as there is no future. My sister is currently studying at a Junior College and I intend to become a police officer. It is a lot of hard work *bro*," he says

Vamshi says he was in a private primary school which has improved his English language skills. His father owns two acres where he cultivates cotton. Coming from an SC background, he found it difficult to send both the children to private schools.

Srinivasana, 16, is pursuing his intermediate education at the Government Junior College in Mudigonda mandal. His parents are agricultural labourers and he too doesn't want to continue farming.

"I tried farming but I don't feel like I will have a nice life if I continue doing it. I want to complete my education here and work as a secretary," he says.

One of his professors feels that although the students have technical knowhow of farming, they are not interested in studying courses related to agriculture because of low returns.

"A lot of students here do not want to be farmers as they don't feel it is worth it. The practical courses like typing and stenography give them more options and a better chance at life," said the professor who declined to be identified.

D. Ramakrishna, District Agricultural Officer, Khammam however insists that the government is working hard to bring back those who are seeking other occupations.

"There is a course on Agri-Polytechnics. Many people are opting for agriculture-related courses. The employment prospects are good so far. Actually in the last two years, 2600 agriculture-extension officers were enrolled, a high in more than ten years," he said.

Agricultural Extension Officers (AEO) disperse official information among the rural farmers. "Half of them (AEO recruits) are from the Agri-Polytechnics background. Because of the Rythu Bandhu scheme, they are again thinking of agriculture. I know of software and engineering people who are coming back to agriculture and practising things like organic farming and horticulture. The results so far are encouraging. We have to wait for some time for the exact result to show."

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No land, little money for anganwadis

CHIYA AHUJA

KHAMMAM: Anganwadis in the district are being forced to operate from rented offices as they don't have their own land. For the past one year, the anganwadis haven't gotten money from the government to pay for rent and gas, say Anganwadi employees.

The Anganwadis are rural child care centres which were started in 1975 by the government as part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) to combat hunger and malnutrition.

The district has 1605 main anganwadis and 232 mini-Anganwadis. Of these, 689 are run in government premises and 510 are in government schools. The remaining 638 of them operate from rented spaces.

A revenue officer is responsible for finding a place for a centre. People using the Anganwadis are always uncertain as to when and where they will be asked to shift. The building owners ask the staff to vacate the place if they do not get rent which in some cases has been due for 10 months.

While the government gives city-based Anganwadis Rs. 13,000 a month, the mini-anganwadis get Rs. 2500 and the ones in villages get Rs. 700.

"It is becoming difficult for us to arrange money from outside and run the centre," said N. Vijaya (23), an Anganwadi teacher at Maddulapalli village, Kamepally Mandal.

Teachers are forced to run Anganwadis in rented buildings | CHIYA AHUJA

The room rented to run the Anganwadi does not have enough space to accomodate 30 kids. There are no toilets and the kitchen has become a storehouse.

"We are forced to shift places every 2-3 months, the expense of which comes down to about Rs. 400," she added.

The bills for vegetables, gas and other retail items also remain unpaid and salaries have not been paid to some of the teachers and helpers, the employees say.

K. Lakshmi (32), another teacher in the village said, "We have to pay for gas, which comes to about Rs. 500 per month and the rent is Rs. 1000." The anganwadi employees have not received their dues from the government for the past one year which includes unpaid salaries for the past six months.

Anuraj Jayanthi, Sub-Collector of the district said, "The majority of the Anganwadis have their own land and in the centres that don't have their own land, we are trying to shift them on a periodic basis. Regarding the payment of rent, we try to pay them on a quarterly or half-yearly basis."

Apart from non-payment of rent, some Anganwadis also fail to provide basic healthcare facilities and nutrition supplements.

The children, mothers and other beneficiaries said they were not able to consume the food due to its inferior quality.

B. Kalpana (38), the Anganwadi teacher at Rajeshwarapuram village, Nelakondapally Mandal, said that, "Pregnant and lactating mothers are unable to consume the rice we have as it is thick and of inferior quality."

Akalaratha (44), the Anganwadi teacher at the village said that they are not able to provide milk to children everyday.

At some centres, there is no proper drinking water supply and toilet facility.

K. Manjula (32), an Anganwadi helper at Ammagudem village, Nelakondapally Mandal said that there were no toilets or water connection.

"I have to walk a kilometre everyday to fetch water from the tank. Children have to go and relieve themselves in the open," she added.

Teachers here also provide milk to the children on some days and eggs are provided daily.

Over 9.5 Crore children enjoy mid-day meals in 11.34 lakh schools in India | SABITRI

Mid-day meals an attraction

SABITRI DHAKAL

MUDIGONDA: As the bell rings students rush to the tap to wash their plates and then line up to get their plates filled with food — rice, vegetables and eggs. The food is provided as part of the mid-day meal programme to improve the educational and nutritional status of school children in the village.

> **"School meals have been a boon for maintaining regularity and improving educational quality of children."**

Mid-day meals have helped in raising enrolment rates in Pammi village in Mudigonda, particularly among children from low socio-economic backgrounds.

"There is a 20 per cent rise in the number of students in the school. We have been able to enrol students from backward class. Drop out has decreased," said, P Ramesh, Headmaster, of Mandal Parishad Primary School, Mudigonda.

The school currently has 101 students from Class one to five. From among the 101, 29 students belong to the backward caste and 69 students are from scheduled castes. Most of the students are always regular in the school," added Ramesh.

"Students come willingly to school as they get free food along with education. The regularity too is well maintained. The students are provided eggs thrice a week with a varying menu each day. To increase and maintain regular attendance, we provide a nutritious mid-day meal to all our students. Food plays a pivotal role in attracting children to come to school," explained Ramesh.

P Ramamohan Rao, Headmaster, Zilla Parishad High School, Mudigonda, says "School meals have been a boon for maintaining regularity and improving educational quality of children. Mid-day meals nourish them and draw them to school. It improves their health too."

Out of 112 students, each day 105 students are regular in this school.

For the students, the daily meal keeps their concentration and energy levels up.

"I like the food they give me at school. It tastes good and stops me from getting hungry," says A Rupa aged 8, a class two student at Mandal Parishad Primary School.

M Kavya another eight year student says, "I come to school regularly. The food is good here."

The Government of India launched the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) on 15th August 1995 with a view to enhancing enrolment, retention and attendance and simultaneously improving nutritional levels among children. The Mid-Day Scheme now covers children studying from Classes 1 to 8.Over 9.5 crore children in 11.34 lakh educational institutions were provided mid-day meals in 2017-18.

Keeping them fed, educated

JOYDEEP SARKAR

KHAMMAM: Reducing the dropout rate and increasing awareness about the need for proper nutrition, especially for children and pregnant women, have been major achievements, according to a worker at the Anganwadi Centre in Ammagudem village in Nelakondapalli Mandal,Khammam district.

A.Kalavathi,44, who has worked at the Anganwadi for 20 years, said, "When I began, there was hardly any awareness about how pregnant women and newborn children should be taken care of and what they should eat. Nutrition wasn't properly taken care of. Now, the appreciation for education has gone up."Children between three and five years of age come to the centre. As of now, there are 20 children in the Anganwadi. Each day they get eggs for breakfast at 11am. At 3 pm, they get snacks. At 4:30 pm they are served rice, dal, sambar and sometimes leafy vegetables.

K Manjula Rani, 32, who has worked at the centre for eight years called Balamrutham, the "poor people's horlicks." It is a preparation which consists of wheat, dal, milk powder, sugar and oil. It is given to children between 3 months and 7 years old.

Records of pregnant women and lactating mothers are preserved at the centre.

Under the Arogya Lakshmi scheme, they are daily provided rice, dal, 200 ml of milk and an egg. Dudipala Triveni, 20, who is four months pregnant, said, "The people working here are very good. Parents are happy about the information that they get here, and what the children learn."

Penti Nageswara Rao, 45, a teacher at the Mandal Parishad Primary School said that "play way" method of teaching was used to educate the children. "It engages the student and encourages him to use his expression.

For example, the teacher makes a statement, which the student is to repeat. They are encouraged to act it out, and it is very informal. In Telugu it is called ata, pata, mata. That is, conducting games, singing and telling stories."

Another parent said the children also learn habits of personal hygiene as well as personality traits such as speaking properly and dressing well.

"Lack of English hurts our future"

JAYKUMAR MADALA

KHAMMAM: The absence of instruction in English and sometimes its omission as a subject in the government primary schools of Telangana has affected students' prospects for higher education. English not being their mother tongue, the children require a lot of effort and resources from their side to learn the language.

A majority of the Government primary schools in Telangana are run in Telugu medium and the students are taught English from their middle school.

Priyanka (18), a student at the Government Junior College, Pammi, says "In my primary school I didn't have English as a subject. But when I came to high school, English was a compulsory subject. It was very difficult learning the language because the words were very tough and I couldn't pronounce any of them".

A major problem faced by various students in Junior College and Undergraduate Colleges has been the inability of the students to pronounce words and write in English.

Venkatesh. B (20), a student at a Private College in Kamepally says "I learned English for the first time when I came to this college. In the first year, it was very difficult because I hadn't known the language before as I was never taught in it. A lot of us used to fail in every subject and it took me almost a year to get adapted to it".

A lot of students shift from the English medium junior colleges back to Telugu medium Junior colleges because of their inability to cope up with the curriculum.

Bukaiyamaniya (30), parent of Naveen who shifted to Telugu medium junior college, said, "We thought he would learn English once he goes to the Junior college. But after he started his classes, he wanted to shift back because he couldn't understand anything."

Due to lack of teachers and training, a lot of parents are now enrolling their children in private schools. "My parents knew that we wouldn't be taught English in the government school, so they enrolled me in a private school, though it was expensive. But now I know how to read and write in English and can also converse in the language," says, Rahul, a seventh standard student in a private school in Pinjaramadugu Thanda.

Anuraj Jayanthi, Sub-Collector, Khammam district, says, "The state government has started a lot of residential English schools in the state. Special classes are being given to junior college students so that they can do well and crack eir exams".

Government schools are seeing less enrolment as private schools are being preferred by parents | SOHEIB AHSAN

Preference for private schools

SOHEIB AHSAN

YERRAGADA THANDA: Government schools in the villages of Khammam district have been losing students to private schools . One of the major reasons is the preference for English medium education over Telugu medium.

Four years ago the Mandal Parishad Upper Primary School in Yerragadda Thanda village had 70 to- 80 students. This number began dwindling after a majority of the teachers quit their jobs unsatisfied with their salaries and shifted to teaching in private schools. Today the school has 11 students in Classes 1 to 7 with only three teachers.

As the school falls under the Telangana Board of Education, the state government should have sent a few volunteers to assist the remaining teachers in the school. The volunteers have not been provided till date and in the absence of an English teacher, the school shifted from being an English medium school to a Telugu medium one. As a result, most of the parents, except for the ones who could not afford it, shifted their children to private schools.

G. Ramachandra Rao, is also the headmaster of the school. He says that in the last few years parents have stopped enrolling their students into this school.

"It is the parent's passion for English that makes them send their children to private schools."

Another reason for the parents sending their children to private schools, according to Mr. Rao, is the lack of access to safe drinking water. The school gets water from a single tank for cooking the mid-day meal, drinking and cleaning. There is a new tank being constructed inside the school which is expected to provide access to clean drinking water.

The preference for English medium over Telugu medium was visible in other villages as well. The Government school in Thettelapadu village near Thirumalaipalam Mandal provides both English and Telugu medium education. Out of 90 students in Classes 6 to 10, 60 students study English medium and the remaining 30 study Telugu medium.

School hit by Government's negligence

JOYDEEP SARKAR

KHAMMAM: Lack of government support is a major problem for the Mandal Parishad Primary School in Pammi village, Mudigonda mandal in Khammam district.

"It was established in 1960. Even the land was provided not by the government but by the local Scheduled Caste population. And they didn't take any money for it," said G.V. Ramana Reddy, a Secondary Grade Teacher (SGT).

Most students belong to poor families comprising of agricultural labourers. "Of the 101 students , 69 belong to Scheduled Caste(SC), 29 to Backward Caste(BC) and two to open category. There are 52 boys and 49 girls." he said.

"Recently a donor helped us get 20 benches for Rs.50,000. Classes 3, 4 and 5 have benches. Students in other Classes sit on the ground."

There are four teachers. One is a headmaster, two are SGTs and two are volunteers.

Teaching English is often a problem because not all teachers are well versed with the language.

S K Brahmam Saheb, an SGT, said. "Funds are spent mostly on disbursing salaries. Even then the adverse teacher to students ratio leads to teachers being overworked.". " We are yet to receive a response to the District Information System for Education (DISE) report we sent to the Central government last year. ," he added.

Primary schools with more than three classrooms get a grant of Rs 10,000 annually. The school hasn't received it for 2018.

Though mid-day meals have helped reduce dropouts, after fifth standard many students discontinue education.

"Social support is a must for education"

JOYDEEP SARKAR

KHAMMAM: Omshi,16, should have gone to school where he is studying in Class 9. Instead, he is working on his parents' farm in Chirumarry,Mudigonda Mandal, Khammam district, Telangana.

"The village fails to provide a facilitative atmosphere for education. The school timing is from 9am to 5pm. After this they go back home and show no concern for their studies. Repeatedly we even call their parents for meetings to discuss their studies, but to no avail," says Nagalakshmi, 41, who is a teacher of Hindi at the Zilla Parishad High School(ZPHS) in Chirumarry.

"This can be contrasted with the conditions in Gurukulams. These are residential schools. Even after the classes, the students have to stay on the campus. They constantly stay under teacher's guidance. Only during the holidays do they go back to their homes," she adds.

Gurukulams are residential schools run by the Telangana Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institution Society.

Nagalakshmi says that these schools not only have better infrastructure, but the students also get money for monthly expenditure as well as food for breakfast, lunch, dinner. On the contrary, at the ZPHS, the students have to buy notebooks and pens with their own money. For library books, she and other teachers have to go Khammam city.

Nagalakshmi (second from right) with Renuka (first from left) and Omshi (third from right) | SURAIYA

Like Omshi, many children at the school end up missing classes and working on their family's farms. The school mostly caters to children of farmers and informal workers, Nagalakshmi says.

This problem is compounded by the fact that farming is hardly profitable.

"If I bring another person to work with me, I have to pay him or her Rs. 200 for the day. Instead, I can save money by having Omshi working with me," says Renuka,33, Omshi's mother.

In 2013, she says a Rs. 30,000 loan was waived. In 2017, Ravikumar, her husband, took a Rs. 50,000 loan for buffalo purchase and Rs. 10,000 for insurance. In 2003, he purchased an auto which he now drives in Khammam city.

Another farmer, Vijaya, 38, says "We have 1 acre of land. To some extent the Rythu Bandhu scheme has helped us. The paddy that we produce costs us about Rs 25,000 and its is almost at the same price that we sell it."

Nagalakshmi can testify to the importance of social support for education from her personal experience as well. Married at 17, she was 21 when she decided to learn Hindi. "My father himself was a teacher. Due to bad health, he got me married early".

" But I made him promise me that even after marriage he will support my education. Even my husband was supportive. So at 21, when my youngest child was 4 years old, I went to Paralakhemundi, Odisha for a nine month course for learning Hindi. It was conducted by the Hindi Prachar Sabha."she added.

To encourage girl students, the school has started providing sanitary napkins, hair bands, soaps, shampoo and hair oil. It is provided when the girls start menstruating.

Page Editors: Joydeep Sarkar and Siddharth Sharma

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Govt girls' school lacks basic facilities

SHUVABRATA GARAI

WYRA: The Telangana State Residential School (Girls) Wyra lacks proper infrastructure and basic facilities, according to the students and teachers.

While schools in other parts of this mandal (town) have smart classrooms and adequate facilities, the students of this government residential school, 24 km from the Khammam city is a picture of neglect. Around 620 girls, mostly from dalit families belonging to Khammam district study here from Standard V to XII.

No care for books |S. GARAI

Most of the classes don't have benches and the students are made to sit on the floor and write their exams. The students of Standard V and VI have their classes in the playground.

"The last two years we had most of our classes in the playground. We face a lot of problems, especially while writing. We complained about it to our teachers but they didn't pay any attention to it," said Reshma (12), a student of standard VII.

V. Nagabhushanam, the headmaster of the school, denied all the allegations and said that there were enough benches and the students were not deprived of any facilities.

Though the classrooms had blackboards there were no desks for teachers.

Teachers staying on the campus also complained about their rooms not being spacious enough.

"Since this is a residential school, some of the teachers have to stay on the campus itself. But the room for the teachers is very small; it's hard for four to five teachers to stay in a single room," said Somali, an English teacher at the school.

There are no security guards at the school entrance. Anyone can enter and leave the school premises.

The compound wall was totally broken on one side. A few years ago some local boys had entered the campus; but the management hasn't learned from the past incidents.

V. Nagabhushanam accepted that some boys had previously tried to enter the campus though there were no security lapses from their side. A few house maids and watchmen took care of the security of the girls.

He added that the management was very concerned about the safety of the girls.

"That's why only male teachers aged above 50 are allowed to teach here," he added.

Low wages, a heavy work load

Women suffer social oppression, economic exclusion and gender violence

CHIYA AHUJA

KHAMMAM: For Kameswari, aged 40, a 17-hour day is the norm as she gets up before dawn to cook for her five children, wash clothes and also contribute to the family's income by working on a cotton farm in Rajeswarapuram village, Nelakondapally.

With men shifting to better occupations, feminisation of agricultural labour does not translate into economic empowerment as women are not equally paid.

According to the Census 2011, 55 per cent of women workers were agricultural labourers and 24 per cent were cultivators. However, only 12.8 per cent of the operational holdings were owned by women, and 25 per cent of this land belonged to the marginal and small holding categories.

G. Satyavati, aged 38, a daily-wage labourer from Kristapuram village, Kusumanchi Mandal who engages in fodder collection and plucking, earns Rs 150-200 every day. She works from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., after which she completes household chores.

While women do 80 per cent of the farm work, they own only 13 per cent of land, according to a fact sheet released by Oxfam in 2013.

D. Rajeshwara, aged 42 who owns 50 acres of land, said that women were unable to do more physical work as compared to men. Women also take days off usually to help with their household chores. It (wage difference) has always been like that.

The work of a woman agricultural labourer or cultivator is limited to less-skilled jobs like weeding, sowing, transplanting and harvesting, which are low paying. Many of them also participate in agriculture as unpaid subsistence labourers.

According to the Census 2011, 55 per cent of women workers were agricultural labourers and 24 per cent were cultivators in India |CHIYA AHUJA

"We don't get work on the fields for most days and get only a meagre amount of Rs 100 per day through MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act)," said Kavita N.

Women are unable to step out of the house and work in cities as they face cultural barriers within the household. They are usually hired for construction work or catering jobs where they are again paid less than men.

Anumula Bhargavi, aged 27, from Pammi village, Mudigonda Mandal said, "We don't have a say in the work we do. Men decide everything for us, including what we eat and wear. They have rights to the land that is passed down in the family by law. We don't have any land in our name and hence, when required, we are forced to work as casual labourers."

Women cultivators face a bigger loss without land titles. They are not recognised as farmers and are unable to access credits, insurance, and government benefits.

Kotayya Rayabarapu aged 30, who collects firewood from the jungle and fetches water by walking three kms every day, earns only Rs 20 for every packet of chilli she grinds. She is a resident of Pammi village, where most women from the Scheduled Tribes are working as subsistence labourers.

"We do not have a choice. All the women from our tribe have to work," she added.

While the wage disparity is apparent, the kind of work is also distributed across the genders.

Paddy transplantation, a strenuous task, is done by mostly women. Govindamma (40), said that since women are shorter and agile, it is easier for them to do this process. "Men cannot do such a task because it is prolonged and back breaking."

The women workers face the triple threat of social oppression, economic exclusion and gender violence.

Chandar Bai, a daily wage worker from Bihar, has been working in the cotton mills for three years. Despite a daily wage of Rs 250, she was unable to rent a house and was living off her landlord's garage.

Things were at their lowest when Chandar Bai was offered a job as a coolie in the nearby railway station. While she still faced a money crunch, this extra source of income helped her get past many debts.

"The lack of a fixed income was forcing my husband to think of getting my teenage daughter married in return for dowry, to a man double her age. I had to save her life so I decided to give up my extra time," said Chandar Bai.

"Female labour participation is higher in Southern states. The wage gap also depends on the agro-ecological conditions. For instance, wet-rice farming, which employs female labour is largely prevalent in the South," said Sangeetha Rajeesh, Research Uptake Manager and Communication Specialist at M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation.

"High-caste Hindu women do not take part in cultivation as compared to tribal and low caste women, who traditionally indulge in farming. Women labourers are always at the mercy of landowners which are mostly men and are rarely part of decision making process," she added.

Women shifting to other jobs in search for better pay

SABITRI DHAKAL

KHAMMAM: Women working in agricultural fields say they have started migrating to other jobs as they are getting more income and suffer no wage discrimination.

They now work in brick kilns, cotton mills and construction sites. Less working hours, indoor work and more wages attract these women.

Many of such women have even been migrating to other states as they are given more wages.

"I migrated to Chennai to work in a construction site. I got Rs 600 per day," said A Anjama aged 55.

She then shifted to picking cotton in a nearby cotton collection centre in Wyra where she gets Rs 60,000 a year by selling the cotton she picks.

"I pick the left out cotton, mostly the ones thrown away and sell them at Rs 40 per kilogram in the market. I would not get that amount if I was an agriculture labourer," said Anjama.

She has been doing this since the last three years. I shifted to picking cotton as there is not a secured future working as an agriculture labour. The wages are minimal," said Anjama.

Having been working as an agricultural labour for 15 years B Annapurna, aged 50 decided to come and work in a brick kiln in Wyra as there is more money in it and there is no wage discrimination. "I have been getting Rs 600 per day working here," Annapurna said.

Women working in cotton mills for better wages and job security |SABITRI DHAKAL

D Ramakrishna, Agriculture Officer, District Agriculture Office, Khammam, said, "The women working in the agricultural fields are given wages of about Rs 200-300 per day. But the current wage for men is Rs 500-600 per day. There is wage discrimination. The land owners themselves decide the wages. They want the jobs to be done at minimal cost. And it's the women who suffer."

In addition to wage discrimination there is no guarantee of work in fields. The work is seasonal.

"When you can get a higher income in other jobs and there is no job security in agriculture, then why should we work in fields?" asks K Kumari aged 50, another brick kiln worker.

There are women from Maharashtra working in cotton mills. They have migrated in the district as there is higher pay than in their villages.

"There is more work in fields but we get less pay. Also there is no guarantee of the job. The women are paid less and have to work long hours. But here one just has to work for eight hours and is given more money. It is Rs 350 a day. It is easier here to work. I just have to sweep the floors. It is an indoor job. If it was in the fields then one can't make an excuse stay away because of rain or heat. One has to do it," said D Ujjwala, a migrant working in The Cotton Corporation of India Limited.

Sunita Sidram Gaikwad aged 25 migrated with her children to Wyra from Nagthana, Maharashtra three months ago.

"I migrated because here is more pay. I am sending money to my in-laws so that we could get rid of the Rs 25,000 loan we have taken," Gaikwad said.

Girls get a raw deal in villages

SOHEIB AHSAN

KHAMMAM: Anjum (18) is currently in the first year of her Bachelors in botany and zoology, but her future is not in further studies or some gainful employment. After she finishes the course she is expected to get married right away.

Gender discrimination is very common in villages. One form of this can be seen in education. Girls are often made to drop out of school and get married at a young age. Even if they are allowed to study further they are married immediately after their education is completed.

Another form of discrimination exists in the tasks assigned to both genders. In Konaigudem village near Nellakondapally mandal when the cotton crops are ready to be harvested, the women alone are assigned to this back-breaking task.

M. Sana (29) is a farm labourer working in a cotton farm for the past three years. "Men have broad shoulders so it is difficult for them to bend their back and work in the field but we women have smaller bodies so it is easier for us to do this work," she says.

Men are assigned the task of taking the cotton to the market in Khammam.

The discrimination is also visible in the wages paid to both genders. In Anjanapuram village near Konijerla mandal during the harvest season, women are paid Rs 200 for plucking, collecting and packing the chilli. Men on the other hand are paid Rs 500 for taking the chilli to the market.

Nevertheless there are women wanting to be free. In the same village there is a self help group for women run by Nagrati Kamalamma (50). There are 10 members in this group.

Initially, they collected Rs 2,500 with which they purchased livestock. The milk and eggs produced by the livestock are sold in the nearby market.

The women keep the profit made and do not give it to their husbands. The money is also used to pay for the education of their children.

EMPOWERED WOMEN

|SABITRI DHAKAL

|ABHISHEK VIDYARTHY SINGH

As more numbers of male agricultural workers are migrating to urban areas for better job opportunities, women have started working on the fields for economic independence and positive changes in their lives.

Women learn employable skills

HARSHITA MISHRA

KHAMMAM: Sarita, 30 has been tailoring clothes since the last 15 years and is earning about Rs 40 for each blouse. She has never been to school. But she learnt tailoring from another woman in the village before her marriage. The women of Ajimera Tanda village in Thirumalayapalem work either as farm labourers or tailors while their husbands migrate to cities for work.

"We don't know any other work," says Saraswati, a farm labourer. Lack of skills is a major constraint for these women in finding other jobs.

According to the 2011 district census, over 70 per cent of the agricultural labourers in the state were women. Only 57 per cent women in the district are literate, and in below- poverty-line or SC/ST-dominated villages, female literacy rates decline sharply to just 40 per cent on an average. As farm labourers, the women earn around Rs 150-200 a day and are employed on contractual basis.

Women who can afford learn stitching to work on their own |H.M.

Lack of education prevents these women from secured and well paying jobs. Padma (35) and Kamla (54) have been working as ASHA workers in Kamepally for eight years now. While Padma has studied till 9th, Kamla is illiterate. They were selected by the village panchayat for the Anganwadi.

Social factors also play a deterrent role. Lavanya N., a Professor at Government Junior College, Mudigonda, points the dropout rates for girls and boys in the college are comparable, but while men drop out to find jobs in cities, women quit college or do not enroll as they're married off around the age of 16.

According to a survey by the Ministry of Human Resource Development only 38 out of every 100 women enrolled for higher education across the State from 2012 to 2016.

Financial constraints also play a huge role. From among the siblings studying in the same college, it's often the sister who has to quit," Lavanya said.

Even graduate women are not free from such social barriers. Polaponguchilakamma (25) who has a degree in nursing is not allowed to work.

Lack of regulatory policies for informal labour workforce has rendered a large number of women open to exploitation. "I worked throughout pregnancy and could not avail myself of any benefits apart from the maternity kit from Anganwadi. Once nine of us (of 14 labourers) caught a viral fever at once and we had to spend Rs 30,000 from our own pockets," said Shanti (20), a farm labourer in Kusumanchi mandal.

Some women also pay to learn skills like tailoring and gardening. Parveen, 24 from Nelakondapally paid Rs 4,000 to learn sewing, and her friend learnt gardening.

Although rural development schemes are functional on paper, like the Centre's Swarna Jayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojna and Deendayal Upadhyay Antyodaya Yojna, the benefits haven't reached the village women. Skill development schools and colleges are far away in towns. Anuraj Jayanthi, district sub-collector, said, "The government has started a lot of residential schools and training centres for junior college students so they can crack the exams."

Struggle for reservation

BHAVINI MISHRA

KHAMMAM: Members of the same family have been getting elected to the Panchayat for the last two terms in Ammagudem village in Nelakondapally mandal.

The village is dominated by the Naidus. Jamna Rani, 45, the previous Sarpanch of the village said that the party members wanted a female sarpanch last time but now they want Gandu Satish, 35, who is her brother-in-law, to contest the elections.

Gandu Satish says, "There is no representation for them in the Panchayats because there are no members from the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the village."

Out of the eight ward members in the previous years only one member belonged to the ST category. In the previous term, the Panchayat had eight ward members out of which four were women, who belonged to the general caste.

Anjanapuram village of Konijerala mandal which is an SC and ST populated village has an all ST Panchayat of which women constitute about 50 per cent. However, there are no SC ward members in the Panchayat.

Potta Jayaamma, 40 belonging to the Madiga caste in the village says that the SCs do not have adequate representation in the Panchayats. "In the last two terms of the Panchayat there have been no representatives from our community."

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts state that seats are to be reserved for SCs and STs and chairpersons of the Panchayats in proportion to their population. Also, according to Article 243D of the Constitution, one-third of the total number of seats are to be reserved for women, one-third of the seats reserved for SCs and STs also reserved for women and one-third of the offices of chairpersons at all levels reserved for women.

While half of the ward members in the villages of Tatipudi in Wyra Mandal, Chegomma in Kusumanchi Mandal and Rajeswarapuram in Nelakondapally Mandal are women, none of them belong to the SCs or STs. Chegomma has had two female sarpanches in the previous years.

Pammi village in Mudigonda Mandal, which has the largest SC population of 615, has five female members from the SC out of the 11 ward members of the Panchayat.

M. Rajini, aged 29, the Panchayat Secretary says that up till now there have been two women sarpanches from the Backward Castes (BC) in the village. "The CPI (M) has been winning elections for the last 35 years in the village. Most of the women Sarpanches are from that party," says Rajini.

This year she says there are two female candidates from other castes and one female candidate from BC. "Sottari Devi, 40, is the current sarpanch. This year we are likely to get a female sarpanch," she adds.

Page Editors: Sabitri Dhakal and Soheib Ahsan

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Graduates struggling for jobs

CHIYA AHUJA

KHAMMAM: Ram Kumar (23), an engineering graduate, has been on a job hunt for almost four years now. He has completed many professional courses in the interim, but all of them have failed to increase his employability quotient. His parents are landless farmers growing chilli, cotton and paddy on leased land. The yield this year has failed to give them any profit as the crop was destroyed by contaminated water.

"What is the whole point of doing B.Tech. if I have to struggle to secure a constable's job?" he asked. He completed his degree in Mining in 2014, after which he went through an Apprenticeship Program to enhance his resume.

"I have been looking for a government job since then, but to no avail. While I take up any odd job that comes my way to support my family, it is seldom enough," he added. The engineering graduate struggles to earn a sum of Rs. 5000-6000 a month.

Ram Babu (45), a Physics professor at Government Junior College, Mudigonda said, "The wave of liberalisation and privatisation has made it harder for people to secure government jobs. While the sources of jobs are few, universities are creating 'idle graduates.' Creating more jobs then becomes the responsibility of the government and the corporate sector."

He further added that there is no incentive for students to opt for vocational courses. Parents, who are daily-wage labourers, force the students to stay back home to help with household chores.

Ram Kumar (L) and Ram Babu (R), college graduates with no jobs | CHIYA AHUJA

Bhukaya Dev Singh (25), who graduated in Commerce three years back, said "Colleges do not give jobs." He helps his 60-year-old father in farming and sometimes fails to recover even the cost of investment.

Only some graduates from Mechanical and Computer Science branches were able to secure private jobs, he said. "Even the job melas conducted by the government only serve people hailing from cities," he adds.

49.59 per cent of the district population is unemployed

Like Ram, 49.59 per cent of the total population in the district remains unemployed while the literacy rate stands at 64.81 per cent. Most of these graduates and postgraduates have completed their schooling from government colleges which are in Telugu.

"We struggle the most in the first year, after which we try to catch up with English in college," says Ram.

Concurring with Ram, Satish Banoth (24) who completed his graduate degree in Mechanical Engineering from S.N. Murthy Polytechnic lamented, "Irrespective of what my qualification is, I am willing to settle for any job that assures a steady pay. I am even ready to work as a library assistant, constable or a caterer but even those jobs are hard to secure owing to stiff competition."

Nallamala Venkateswara Rao, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) Leader, said, "There are few government jobs and more people angling for them; that is a situation we can't change. There are only so many jobs we can create."

"The best solution to end the current state of unemployment is to encourage farming and ensure that the farmer is sufficiently paid for the crop that he/she grows."

Ashok Kumar (24), who is also a drop-out engineer, felt that the lack of skill development and the poor quality of education failed to prepare them for jobs in the private sector.

Shri Ram, District Employment Officer (DEO) said, "Every day at least 200 people register with hopes of landing a job. The engineering graduates are not well-equipped with skills. After elections, we have come up with the unemployment allowance scheme, to pay Rs. 1000 to each eligible youth. We came up with the initiative to ensure that the graduates will also start putting in more efforts from their side."

Tapping toddy all his life

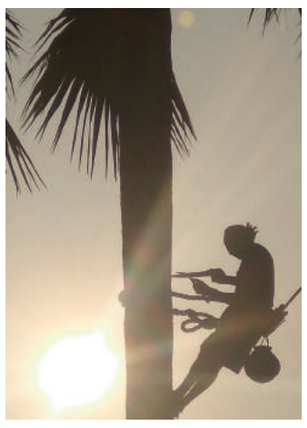
ANAND JC

KHAMMAM: Climbing a 25-metre tall stumpy palm tree, under a scorching sun, is a tough task. But not for Venkatesh Marulu, 63. A toddy tapper he has been climbing ten palm trees, twice every day, for the last thirty years, here in Sonia Nagar village.

Venkatesh climbs these palm trees which act as windbreakers to protect the expansive and thriving red chilli and cotton farms. He says he collects palm wine, or toddy from palm fruits, or golas as he calls it. He works as a toddy farmer between December and March.

Venkatesh owns four long sharp knives of different shapes, each serving its own unique purpose. To latch himself on to the palm tree, he ties himself to the trunk using a thick entwined pink-rubber wire as a belt. He grabs the trunk and moves up the tree with two round earthen pots, using the rubber wire belt for support. Once he gets up there, he lacerates the neck of the fruit, thereby letting the juice trickle into the pots.

This non-alcoholic unfermented beverage is called neera. The toddy farmers initiate the fermentation process. Most of the times, Venkatesh maintains a layer of yeast in the bottom of the pot.



Venkatesh Marulu has been climbing palm trees for the last thirty years | ANAND

Every day, a thin and strained Venkatesh begins climbing the tree at around 7 a.m. and works till 9 a.m. He finishes working on one tree in approximately 15-20 minutes. He repeats the same process at 3 p.m., working till 5 p.m. He says that the best time to consume toddy would be not after more than two days. Because of the yeast, the toddy gets stronger and pungent and tastes like vinegar if left unconsumed for too long.

Venkatesh does not own the land these trees grow on. He has to pay Rs. 5,000 for four months-worth of tapping every year. Ideally, Venkatesh can earn around Rs. 30,000 a year for his product but the earnings fluctuate thanks to the unstable demand. He sells the toddy at Rs. 30 a litre. He has a heavy demand for is toddy during festivals.

His wife helps in selling his toddy. He has three daughters, who are now married. He paid a dowry of Rs. 5,40,000 for his daughters. Venkatesh owes private money lenders Rs. 3,00,000. When not climbing trees for a livelihood, he works as an agricultural labourer in the nearby fields.

At the beginning of the season, he has to leave the pot on the tree for three days for the natural fermentation process to begin. If he messes up this process at the beginning of the season, he says he might as well forget toddy from that tree for the entire season.

People from his community, Geetha Karmikulu which aids the Gauds, help him out when he can't climb the trees during the season. He also earns a pension of Rs. 1,000 from his community every month.

Climbing trees for 30 years has taken a toll on his body. Venkatesh suffers from body and joint aches every day but hesitates to take medication.

"We have been doing this for so many years. My great grandfather began doing this. My body can take it for a few more years, I hope."

Farm workers fish in 'troubled waters'

HARSHITA MISHRA

KHAMMAM: Most people in Erragadda Thanda Village in Thirumalayapalem work as farm labourers. However, in the off season, some of them belonging to a small fishing community of about 100 eke out a living by rearing and catching fish from the nearby Palair reservoir. But in the last two years, fishing has become unsustainable due to mounting debt and losses.

"We earn just Rs, 20,000 to Rs. 30,000 in 6 months, it's only an additional source of income," says Sriramul (32), who works as a driver in Khammam and supplements his income as a fisherman and an agricultural labourer. On an average, he can catch only half a kilogram of fish a day.

Bukya with her fishing net that she bought on loan | HARSHITA

While fish-breeding is looked after by the government, the fishermen must buy their own equipment for catching the fish.

Bukya (52) bought a fishing net for Rs. 20,000 with a loan of Rs. 6000 five years back.

But after the loan was waived once, her family took a loan again, which now amounts to Rs. 30,000. Several families in the village have taken loans for buying fishing instruments.

In addition to the huge debts, the community is also hit by the authorities' decision to stop issuing or renewing fishing licences due to excess fishing leading to a surplus in the Khammam fish market.

"Earlier we used to get a licence for a small fee of Rs.3000. Now even if we pay Rs.10, 000 they won't give it," says Bukya. Moreover, one household is entitled to just one licence, even though the whole family is sometimes engaged in the activity.

The fishermen pay an insurance premium of Rs. 225 every 6 months. However, only licensed fishermen get the insurance benefits.

In the face of mounting debt and discontinuation of licences, the community has been hit with a dual crisis which seems inescapable. "The loan keeps increasing but we are not getting licences. If the authorities catch us, they punish us. What are we to do?" asks Bukya.

Changing jobs with the season

RAJAT THAKUR

KHAMMAM: Everyday, with bare hands, V. Venkateshwarulu puts mud into brick moulds and arranges them in a straight line. This cycle goes on, till he reaches the target of 1,000 bricks. Venkateshwarulu (46) is one of the 60 workers working in a brick kiln near Tatipudi village.

Many landless agricultural labourers work as seasonal contract labourers in brick kilns due to lack of sufficient agricultural work in their villages.

"Our village does not have sufficient work and we can't sustain ourselves there, but for six months we stay in the village because our children have to appear for exams," says Venkateshwarulu from Mangapuram village.

Venkateshwarulu says that he gets Rs. 300 per day and accommodation on the site for six months, but he cannot leave the work before the end of season.

M. Daviru (45), a worker from Wyra, says "We work for 10 hours every day."

Every worker in the kiln has to make 1,000 bricks a day. And each batch of bricks takes 15 days to bake and process.

"We get a minimal amount on arriving here, and every week we get paid in part for household expense and after one or two month we get the rest of the payment," Daviru says.

These landless agricultural labourers do not get any help from the government because most of the schemes are formulated only for the landed farmers.

Some of them have debts ranging from a few thousands to lakhs of rupees, which they have taken from private moneylenders at high rates of interest..

"We don't own any land and it makes it hard for us to benefit from schemes like Rythu Bandhu. And we don't get work in our village," says P. Shantaiah (40), who is among 40 workers in a brick kiln near Nacharam village and a resident of Enkuru.

Availing themselves of health facilities is also hard for the workers here in brick kilns. Most of the workers complain about severe joint pain.

"Brick kilns are situated few kms away from the villages, so we face a lot of problem in travelling if we have an emergency," says M. Raju (41), another worker from Enkuru.

School going children are also affected by their parents' seasonal work.

Every day, they travel to their villages and come back to the kilns. They don't go out to play nor do they have friends outside the kilns.

"Our kids travel to our village to attend classes, they travel by bus and they come back in the evening," he further says.

"Survival is our primary concern. We don't have the luxury of making a choice. We do what we get," he says.

V. Venkateshwarulu making bricks | RAJAT THAKUR

MGNREGA: A better deal than farm labour

JAYKUMAR MADALA

KHAMMAM: People in the district prefer working under the MGNREGA scheme instead of toiling in the fields because of the shorter working hours and equal wages

Under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) the Government provides at least 100 days of employment in a financial year to every household in a rural area..

Charan (23), residing in Pinjaramadugu in Kamepally Mandal says, "I have been working under this scheme for the last four years. The type of work includes road building, tank construction, and cleaning."

Though the work is supervised by an employee from the State administration, lack of on-site presence and accountability have allowed the workers to work for just one or two hours and then take a break. In Telangana, a worker is eligible for a wage of Rs.180 for a day's work.

"The supervisor will be there only for one hour in the morning. We collect our wages, work until he is there and leave the work site looking for a different job in the village," says, Venkatesh, a resident of Adavi Maddulapalli, Kamepally Mandal.

The MGNREGA work has affected the farmers of the Khammam district. The farmers need labourers to harvest their major crops such as chilli and cotton. There has been an acute shortage of agricultural labour because people are not willing to work for long hours and they want wages more than that paid under the MGNREGA scheme.

"Earlier we used to pay Rs. 150- Rs. 200 for one day's work in the fields. But now the labourers are complaining that they will earn the same wage without any hardship under MGNREGA. So, we are now forced to pay at least Rs.250- Rs.300 for one day of work, which is very high," says, Udaya Kumar, a farmer in Nacharam, Enkoor Mandal.

On an average, a two-acre chilli or cotton farm requires 15-20 labourers to harvest all the yield in two days. The farms are not mechanized since the crop is considered delicate and has to be handpicked.

Chella Venkateshwara, 30, a labourer in Pinjaramadugu says, "This is the only time we can demand more wages. We need to work from morning to evening in the scorching sun in the farms. Heat isn't the only problem, bending and plucking the crops also creates a lot of backpain and other aches" The high demand for wages and the shortage of labourers has forced a lot of farmers to leave their farms untouched even after the crops reach the harvesting stage.

"My chillies are ready, they need to be harvested. But I'm not able to pay Rs 250 a day. So, I'm just hoping they will reduce their rates and come to pluck my harvest," says Ramesh Kumar, a chilli farmer and land-owner from Ajmeri Thanda, Thirumalayapalem Mandal.

Away from bad crop, soaring debt...happy with kids in a school

CHIYA AHUJA

KHAMMAM: A bright pink saree with yellow patches draped around her, 30-year-old Jamuna Saini sweeps the floor of the classroom, where she herself never got a chance to study.

In the parched and cracked lands of Ammagudem village, Nelakondapally Mandal which is an hour away from Khammam, water, land and income are scarce. Every morning at 7 a.m., Jamuna opens the gate of Mandal Parishad Primary School (MPPS) and cleans the premises before the children arrive at 9 a.m.

The school is located at the heart of the village where less than 100 families reside, all interconnected through the daily struggles and woes of physical work. On a small plot of panchayat land, accessed through narrow and ruptured roads, lies the school, attached to an Anganwadi.

Jamuna is the school caretaker. Her duties extend to cleaning the occasional mess the children create, and when the time comes, serving them mid-day meals.

The food is prepared in the common mess where helpers distribute the staple diet of most households, yellow dal and rice to the kids for lunch.

A hint of contentment marks her face as the children join in a circle to have their lunch. The mid-day meals have helped lower the dropout rate in the school as told by Professor Nageshwar Rao, who teaches English.

Jamuna Saini (30), Ammagudem Village | GAURAV NORONHA

Cleaning the primary school grounds was not a conscious choice for her, as she suffered from unbearable knee pain while working on the farm until she had no other recourse, but to stay at home.

Jamuna and her husband grow cotton instead of sugarcane as harvesting the crop and transporting it to the factory where it is crushed to make sugar, costs more money. Growing cotton is also not easy as the seeds that are often plagued with worms and other pests have to be replaced by expensive hybrid seeds from Nelakondapally which cannot be used for re-plantation. They grow cotton to barter it for food and other basic necessities rather than selling it in the market.

Jamuna's crop circle often resembles a hamster's wheel, where she has to go back to the local moneylender to procure a fresh batch of hybrid seeds. Out of the 1400 kg harvest on the one care of land she owns, half of the produce is used to meet the household expenses, while the other half pays her long standing debt.

Even though she earns a meagre amount of Rs. 2000 a month as a caretaker, she cannot shift to other jobs in the market due to her poor health condition. "Since I am not educated or skilled, I am offered only labour-intensive jobs," she added.

Jamuna with Primary School students | GAURAV NORONHA

However, Jamuna still hopes that her sons are able to break this vicious cycle of debts and unyielding crops. Both her elder son who studies in the 9th standard and the younger one, studying in the 6th standard, want to be policemen, she says.

Page Editors: Bhavini Mishra and Chiya Ahuja

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Hospitals need more care

RAJAT THAKUR & SHUVABRATA GARAI

KHAMMAM: Absentee doctors, no emergency wards and inadequate drinking water supply are some of the problems that plague the Khammam District Hospital run by Telangana Vaidya Vidhan Parishad , according to patients.

"It took half an hour for a doctor to come and treat my injuries, after my bike accident," said K. Chinna (27), a polytechnic student.

Shabeer Ahmad (52), an auto driver said, "The doctors here don't treat patients properly; whether you suffer from cough and cold or diarrhoea, they provide same medicines for all types of disease."

Alhough the hospital has ambulance service, not all vehicles are functioning. There was no doctor in the blood bank of the hospital. Only a staff nurse and a technician were present.

"The assigned doctor for the blood bank comes only for ten minutes, that too twice or thrice a week. He runs a private clinic," said a hospital staff.

No one was present at the help desk.

"It took me a lot of time to search for a doctor, as there was no one to assist me," said B. Ramaiah (30), a physically handicapped person who came for checkup.

However, Dr. Shobha Devi, Medical Supervisor of the hospital, denied all the allegations and said, "Unless there are written complaints against any services provided here, we cannot take any action from our side."

Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and Sub Centres fare no better.

There is a 24×7 PHC at Wyra but it does not have any permanent doctor, rather it is dependent on two doctors on contract. "Instead of treating us here, doctors suggest we get treated in the nearby private hospital, where these doctors also work," said G. Phullaiah (41), a farmer.

Despite being a 24×7 PHC, doctors are not available after 4 pm. There is no blood bank facility in the hospital.

N. Nagamani, Medical Officer Wyra, said,. "In case of emergency patients are referred to the district hospital."

Villagers in Kamepally complained of not getting proper treatment at the Kamepally PHC. Only one doctor is available there. In case of her absence there is no one to look after the patients.

The centre lacks basic facilities like emergency wards, and the pediatric ward is dirty with empty medicine cartons and bleaching powder sacks lying around

Dr. V Sravanthi, Medical Officer Kamepally said, "Around 30 per cent of the cases here are related to diabetes, but we don't have a glucometer. Despite asking for it constantly, the demand has not been fulfilled."

K. Ravindranath, Office Superintendent of District Medical and Health Department, Khammam said, "There is a shortage of doctors. Since, appointment of doctors is done through a process, we can't do much about it,he added.

Waste piled up the paediatric ward at the Kamepally PHC | SHUBOVRATA GARAI

Villages still wait for water

BHAVINI MISHRA

KHAMMAM: Jamuna Saini, 30, with a knee injury, has to walk a kilometre to get drinking water because of the high fluoride content of the groundwater in Ammagudem village, Nelakondapalli mandal.

The Bhagiratha scheme, launched in 2016 promised drinking water for all villages by December 2018. But pipelines have not yet been laid to most of the villages in the district.

The scheme, which is the brainchild of Telangana Chief Minister K Chandrashekar Rao is to be completed in three stages.

The first stage is the establishment of primary grids for water supply. The second stage is the filtration process and laying pipelines to major villages and the last stage is to lay intra village pipelines. The main source is the Nagarjuna Sagar, Palair and Wyra reservoirs.

A. Madhu, working for the Gram Panchayat in Chegomma village, Kusumanchi Mandal, says, " A new tank has been built in the village under the Mission Bhagiratha scheme."

There have been talks of diverting water from the main pipeline to the village after the panchayat elections. "

In Kristapur village of the Kusumanchi Mandal, the pipeline has been broken for almost two months now. The villagers have to get drinking water from the borewells.

Mahinder Reddy, 40, a cotton farmer, says, "Even the borewells are failing now. The water for irrigation usually comes from the Nagarjuna reservoir via canals, but since the pipelines have not been laid, we have been drinking water from the borewell."

| ABHISHEK VIDYARTHY

Pumping tanks in Palair

Although the tank has been built under Mission Bhagiratha in Pammi village in Mudigonda mandal, pipelines and taps have not been provided to supply clean drinking water to every household in the village.

R. Naga Babu, 30, a farmer in the village says, "We mostly rely on borewells for drinking water".

However, M. Rajini, Panchayat Secretary, said, "Clean drinking water has been supplied to most households in the village. Almost every household in the village has clean drinking water."

In Anjanapuram village of the Konjerla mandal, a hose is attached to an old tank through which drinking water has to be collected for the households. No new tanks or pipelines have been built yet under this scheme.

"While they could manage to get drinking water from the old tank, obtaining water for other household chores is difficult. I sometimes have to make 20 trips to the common borewell outside the village to fetch water," says Potta Jayamma(40), a farm laborer.

Villepu Ramayya, 34, from Paleru, said "Water from the main pipeline has to be diverted through the village which could take up another three months to be inaugurated."

P. Samrao, Executive Engineer, Mission Bhagiratha, said that almost 80 per cent of the tanks under this scheme have been built.

"The entire target is set to be achieved by 2038. Till now 300 tanks out of 519 have already been built", he added.

Elderly left to fend for themselves

SABITRI DHAKAL

KHAMMAM: Samrajyam, a 65 year old resident of Anjanapuram, Konijerla Mandal walks slowly balancing herself with a stick. Her name means empire, but she has nothing more than a single room to live in.

Samrajyam is among the several elderly widows living a miserable life after being abandoned by their children.

K Ramuluamma, 68, in Krishnapuram has been living on her own in a hut in the village.

"My sons migrated to other places searching for jobs as they didn't want to do pottery here. I have been left out," she said.

The women manage with the pension given for elderly people. They use the Rs 1,000 for daily items such as milk.

"I buy a small packet of milk in a day. Tomatoes and rice are basically my food. I have stopped celebrating festivals as there is no money," said Samrajyam.

The elderly women say that the pension is not sufficient.

"If we are healthy we can manage somehow. But what when we fall ill? The money is not sufficient to buy the necessary medicines," Samrajyam said.

"My stick has been my friend after the death of my husband," she added.

Some find it difficult to even fetch water to drink

. "The tap water here is salty. Those who are physically fit carry water from other areas. As I can't walk I have to drink the same salty water," said Ramuluamma.

B Rangama aged 60, a resident of Kusumanchi, is working as an agricultural labourer. Her husband died ten years ago and the daughters got married.

"I am very unsure about my future. Though I am working in the fields and am making a living now I don't think I can work for long in the fields when I get old.," she said.

Samrajyam sits with her friend- the stick |SABITRI

A third generation weaver working on his handloom | PALLAVI MAJUMDAR

Weaving through generations

SIDDHARTH SHARMA

KAKARAVAI: An 18 year old warehouse-like building stands in the middle of Kakaravai village in Thirumalapalem mandal of Khammam district.

This is where the weavers spin out Panchalungis, a traditional cloth worn by men in Telangana.

The village has seen three generations of weavers from the Chenetha community, working 9 hours a day.

As many as 120 weavers live in the village and only eight of them can work at a time in the warehouse.

J. Venkamma, 51, is among the many weavers who work in the warehouse that was built by the government in 2001, after which the weavers have received no help from the government.

"The government gave us the handlooms and a place to work in, after that no effort has been made from their side to check on our condition", said Venkamma.

The weavers spend Rs. 800 on making one Pancha and sell each lungi for double the price. However, the number of lungis sold per month by a weaver is not more than 8.

"During festive season we get large orders, but usually the demand for lungis is not much," remarked Venkamma.

The weavers here also make shirt cloth for a cloth manufacturer in Yadadri Bhuvangiri district.

The company pays them Rs. 2000 to make 26 metres of shirt cloth.

In a month, the weavers make about four lengths of shirt cloth which fetch them Rs. 8000.

The old and worn out warehouse allows more moisture inside during the rainy season, downgrading the quality of the cloth and making it more susceptible to damage.

Thus during monsoon, the weavers have to stop working. A lot of them work as agricultural labourers when they are out of work.

Since there is no electricity connection given to the warehouse, the weavers are often forced to work in the dark, causing them eye problems.

K Sriramulu, 62, has been working as a weaver for the last five decades. According to him, the weavers have been asking for recognition from the government since 1969, but till now the government has failed to show its support.

"In 1970, more than 200 people used to work here, but due to the lack of support from the government, many of us had to migrate to bigger industrial towns like Surat," said Sriramulu, who himself had worked in Gujarat.

Sriramulu's family has been weaving for the last 3 generations, but according to him, he will be the last from his family to be a weaver.

"This profession of weaving will be extinct soon. Mine will be the last generation doing it. I wouldn't want my children to continue it", said Sriramulu, whose two sons are working as software engineers.

Sriramulu, who himself has studied till 3rd standard, wants to keep weaving all his life. Like all the others weavers, he also respects his handloom, called Maggam in Telugu.

D. Suryanarayan, another of the last generation Chenetha weavers, said "This Maggam is like God to me. I have fed and educated my children with this."

No toilets, No rations: Govt

CHIYA AHUJA

KHAMMAM: The Telangana Government does not provide sufficient money to build and maintain proper latrines, as promised by Swachh Bharat Mission, thus reducing them into abandoned storehouses, say villagers.

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs requires applicants to register for Individual Household Latrines (IHHLs) if they need the Rs. 12,000 subsidy from the government.

Soujanya (21), from Pinjaramadugu village, Kamepally mandal said, "Even though the government scheme promises Rs. 12,000, the actual spending to build latrines with proper roofs and a continuous water supply is Rs. 20,000. We have to add the remaining Rs. 8,000 from our own pockets. Even after this, we only have one hour of water supply in a day and receive no financial assistance."

K. Bhaskar, Sarpanch of the village, speculated that more money was going into Mission Bhagiratha to provide safe and sustainable piped drinking water supply.

The focus had now shifted from implementing Swachh Bharat to fixing the water scarcity problem, he added.

Referring to the way the subsidy is distributed, he said "As the money passes through too many hands, it is hard to keep track of it and maintain records."

Anuraj Jayanthi, Sub-Collector of the District said, "In some villages, allocating funds might be a problem. It depends on the budget and the technical aspects."

The payment was made in stages, with the first instalment being at the basement level and then another being given when the roof was complete. Every stage was monitored, he added.

In a bid to declare the district as Open Defecation Free (ODF), the district officials threatened the villagers that their power supply would be cut and ration cards seized if they did not build the toilets.

Govindamma (55) from Rajeshwarapuram village, Nelakondapally mandal said that the government had credited only Rs. 5000 out of the Rs.12,000.

"We do not use the latrine as it is uncomfortable and unsafe at night. It is half built with no roof or cementing and a broken door. We have no money to complete the construction," she lamented.

Bhadru (29), another resident of Pinjaramadugu said that since the August of last year, they hadn't received any money in their bank accounts. "We have registered for the scheme and yet the government has failed to deposit the money. We built the substructure, which is a pit with bricks or cement dug into the soil eight months back. At that level of construction, only a few people got the money as the officials pointed out problems with the pit, depending on the different construction ideas," she said.

Bhadru had to get a loan from a private moneylender at 3 per cent interest to build the latrine. "We did not receive any money but were forced to build the toilet or else our ration cards would have been seized. And they even warned of cutting our electricity lines. Considering that we earn only Rs. 50,000 a year, not incurring a loan would have been a better situation," she added.

A toilet used as storehouse in Pinjaramudugu | CHIYA AHUJA

In Konijerala , STs prosper but SCs don't

BHAVINI MISHRA

ANJANAPURAM: Tractors with Hindi songs blaring from speakers mounted on them kick up the dust as they trundle past the house of Banaut Ram Lal, 42, a Lambada farmer who owns 50 acres of land in the Anjanapura village of the Konijerala mandal.

Ram Lal says there are 500 Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) houses in the village. The land-owning Lambada tribe farmers dominate village panchayats as opposed to the SC members who are predominantly farm labourers. Each ST farmer has a minimum of 50 acres.

Ram Lal says that their village is one of the few that has an all ST panchayat. While his four brothers are civil servants, he is the only one doing farming.

Most people living in the ST section village have their own borewells and live in brick and mortar houses.

On the other side of the village where the SCs live, houses mostly have mud walls and thatched roofs.

Belamconda Sooramma (55) belongs to the Madiga caste. It has been 7 years since Sooramma's, husband died. She works as an agricultural labourer and receives Rs 1000 a month under old age pension scheme. But her earnings are spent on medicines and travel to Khammam for her diabetes and blood pressure checkup.

Her 25-year-old son, who dropped out of school after the intermediate level because of financial pressures at home, works as a farm labourer now.

Along with other members of this part of the village, she has pooled in money for a common borewell which is two kilometers from the village.

They make 20 trips a day to meet their needs. They usually get the drinking water from the old village tanks. She paid Rs 20,000 for her own borewell but it didn't work.

Potta Jayamma (40) spends Rs 3300 every month on medicines and consultation with a private doctor in Khammam. She says that the Primary Health Centre has not been helpful.

"The government doctor said that we aren't even employees. Why do we even need glasses?" said Jayamma, describing her visit to a health camp for an eye check-up.

Jayamma's daughter studies zoology and she is planning to get her married soon as they do not have money for further studies. Her husband is a labourer, whom she cannot join everyday because of her thyroid problem.

Jayamma says members of the ruling TRS had disappeared after the elections. "They promised land but they only gave those to the upper castes."

"We do not have a say in the decision making process in the panchayat," added Jayamma.

"Where are the jobs after studying?"

SOHEIB AHSAN

ANJANPURAM: Unemployment and school dropout rates among SCs and STs are on a rise in villages in Khammam district. There are approximately 500 families belonging to SC and ST in Anjanapuram village near Konjerla mandal.

Most people in the village are educated only till 10th standard. Many students find it difficult competing with students in urban areas after this stage. The dropout rate among girls is higher as they are married off at an early age. People who have degrees also find it difficult to get a job because of lack of competence.

Ram Lal, a Lambadi farmer who has only studied till 9th says that his brother Ramakrishna (29) has a degree in BA but is currently working as a farm labourer.

Nagrati Kamalamma (50) is the owner of a self help group for women. She says children in the village study as long as their parents can afford it.

The economic pressure on families forces children to work in the unorganized sector. "Even if they are able to study till BBA or BA, where are the jobs after that?" she asks.

Boda Rambabu, who completed his B.Com in 2016, is another resident of Anjanapuram who works in the forests for a living.

Indira Pavni (28) is a mother of two. She was made to drop out of school by her parents after completing her sixth standard as her parents felt there were no useful opportunities for her.

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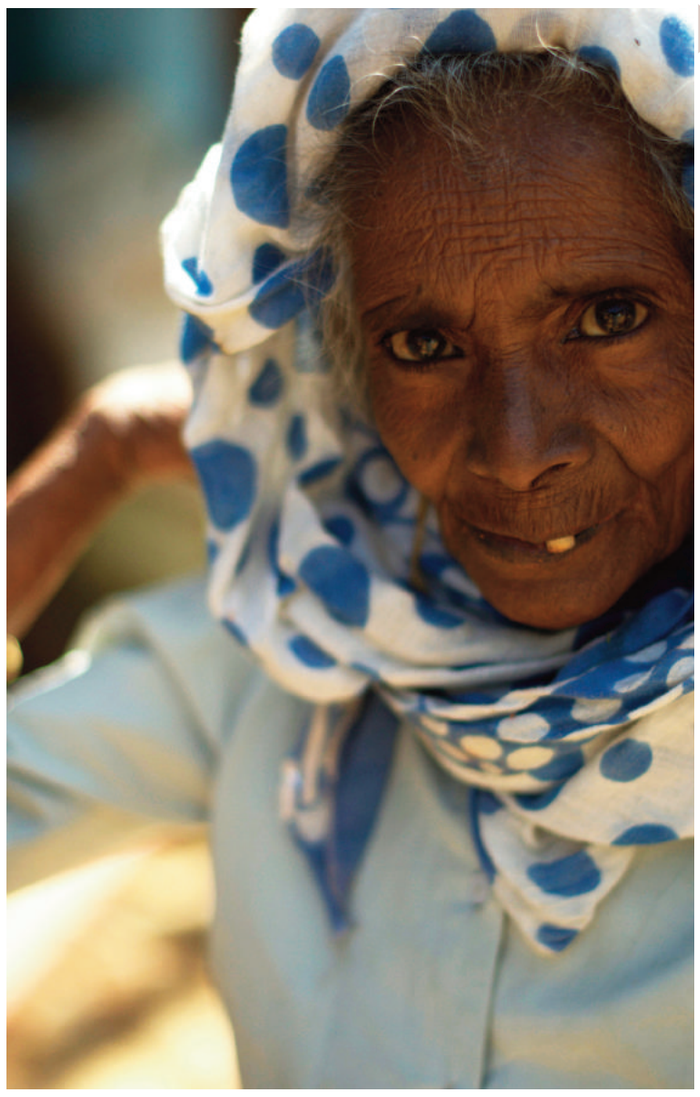
Fragile Workers

Pictures and text by ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

These women stand testimony to the patriarchy that once thrived in *Kerala*. Never allowed to pursue education because of societal obligations, they are now struggling to make ends meet without the support of a close male relative.



Nasifa (65) runs her own grocery store. "I don't have any sons, and my husband died 3 years ago. I don't like being this helpless." Her neighbours visit weekly to take care of her.

Bhargavi (62) works intermittently on coffee estates to buy her grandson equipment to support his football career. Her community looks after her.

Devi's fingers are filled with grit from working in manual labour. At 65, she doesn't work daily anymore because of her epilepsy. "My son sends all his children to school. He doesn't want them to share the same fate," she said.

Fathima (75) says, "There are no males in the house to support us financially and I never sent any of my ten daughters to school. So now, all of us work on menial daily wages."

Climbing against all odds

SAMANTHA SHAJI

ALAPPUZHA: Having sharpened his knives and placed them back into the nylon bag tied to his waist with coir, Kochumon K. (40) walks barefoot atop an uneven, dried and broken bund to the coconut tree which he must attend to. With the sun setting to his right and the River Pamba flowing calmly to his left, Kochumon, a father of two school- going girls, is a man on a mission.

Dressed in a lungi and a worn out jersey, Kochumon is one of the youngest toddy tappers in the state. He belongs to a group of toddy collectors in Kerala, an age-old profession, usually practised by those from the Thiyya community. Toddy, also known as palm wine, is the traditional alcoholic beverage of Kerala, made from coconut sap.

Displaying the stealth of a cat, he uses the ingenious staircase of coir and dried coconut husks tied around the tree to scale it. "Men from younger generations don't want to be part of this profession," he explains while tightening his lungi before he climbs. With the tree trunk dangling precariously over the river, every move has to be careful and calculated, lest he slips and falls. Having worked as a toddy tapper for fifteen years, Kochumon underplays the perils of his profession. "Every job is difficult. Why should I complain then?" he asks.

Be it sun or rain, health or illness and even on days of hartal, I have to climb if I want to earn money," Kochumon explains. He isn't able to balance the physically taxing nature of his profession with the nourishment required for his body, and this is visible with one look at his muscular but thin arms and legs. A daily wage labourer, Kochumon works 365 days without a break. However, he credits the toddy tappers' union for providing him with money and other benefits like accident insurance and a provident fund.

Since it is a traditional profession, information like which coconut has the sweetest sap and how to accelerate the healing of a cut palm has been transmitted from generation to generation. Now, because the number of toddy tappers is dwindling, this knowledge will be lost to the world.

The sale of adulterated toddy doesn't seem to have affected Kochumon much. "People prefer buying toddy directly from tappers rather than at the toddy shops. It has helped increase my business," he says.

Does he have any regrets about his profession "Because I can't have off days, I can't take my family anywhere. But my two daughters are in school. And they will take us when they begin working," he says with an optimistic smile.

Kochumon's coarse palms | MEGHANA KURUP

Finding the lost Rasabale

PRAGATI K.B.

MYSURU: Krishnegowda S (65) and Krishnappa S (76) are having their post-breakfast tea on a narrow redoxide verandah in Devarasanahalli, a village in Nanjangud taluk in Mysuru district. When asked if they knew who were currently growing the Nanjangud-rasabale in the village, they toss around some names.

Finally, they agree that it is N. Mahendra, who is growing 300 rasabale plants in 15 guntas of land.

Mahendra is the sole Nanjangud-rasabale cultivator in all of Devarasanahalli today, which until three decades earlier was the largest producer of this variety of banana. In all of Nanjangud taluk, the rasabale is grown in just over ten acres now.

The Nanjangud-rasabale was given the Geographical Indication (GI) protection in 2005 under the Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. It was hoped that the inclusion in the GI registry would give renewed impetus to its cultivation.

The slump began when water from the Kabini dam was used for irrigation instead of the rainwater pond in the village. "That year, all the rasabale crops died. Only one Yelakki bale farmer reaped a good harvest," recounts Krishnegowda. And since then, the Yelakki bale and Pach bale varieties of banana replaced the rasabale.

One rasabale banana sells at Rs. 5 or Rs. 6 apiece in Nanjangud town. Each plant, grown at an investment of Rs. 100, yields around 35 to 40 such bananas.

"There is good profit if the crop is successful," says Mahendra. But out of his 300 plants, 60 have died without yield. He points at the rotting stem of a freshly uprooted plant and says, "all 60 were attacked by the Panama disease."

The Panama Wilt disease, a fungal infection caused by the Fuserium Wilt pathogen has been the bane of rasabale farmers. The symptoms aggravate and start showing just before the flowering stage. The leaves turn yellow and wither, the base of the stem splits and the roots rot.

Dr. Vasanth Kumar Thimakapura, an agricultural scientist, says, "The fungus spreads by contact. They survive as spores on carriers and multiply once they come into contact with a host, like the rasabale plant in this case." Thus, the soil borne disease can spread through running water, farm implements and infected material.

"When the Kabini dam was opened, infection restricted to a certain area spread to wherever the water flowed. The soil of Devarasanahalli wasn't spared either," explains Thimakapura. The pathogen stays in the soil for 30 years once it gets affected.

N. Mahendra at his Rasabale farm | PRAGATI KB

The Fuserium Wilt fungus was responsible for wiping out the then popular Gros Michel banana variety. It originated in Panama (hence the name Panama Wilt) and spread to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Colombia and Ecuador, obliterating the variety by the 1950s.

Navyashree, a technical consultant in the Horti Clinic, Mysuru, says the horticulture department gives subsidies on chemicals, drip irrigation, mulching sheets and planting material. The Comprehensive Horticulture Development program earmarks Rs. 99,000 for one hectare of GI crop.

In neighbouring Mullur village, Sannappa Gowda's rasabale cultivation is a success story. He has planted 1200 plants in 1.5 acres this crop-year, after a profitable harvest of 400 plants in the previous year. He received a subsidy of Rs. 39,000 for neem oil, Banana Special micronutrients, manure and the cost of planting material in 2018.

"The first time, ten to fifteen plants died in the sixth month. I was also scared like the other farmers. But it is normal for some plants to die in any variety of banana crop, so I kept at it," says Gowda.

The government also gives subsidies for labs interested in developing tissue cultures of the planting material (suckers), to ensure that they are disease free. "The suckers are only disease free and not disease resistant. And since the soil is infected, the problem is not really solved," says Thimakapura.

Page Editors: Ashna Butani and Harshita Mishra

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Painting to keep his dreams alive?

Pictures and text by SHUVABRATA GARAI

KHAMMAM: If you are arrested by Che Guevara's painting on the walls of one of the houses in Mudigonda, Khammam, don't mistake it for a Communist Party office. The house belongs to an artist, M. Akhil.

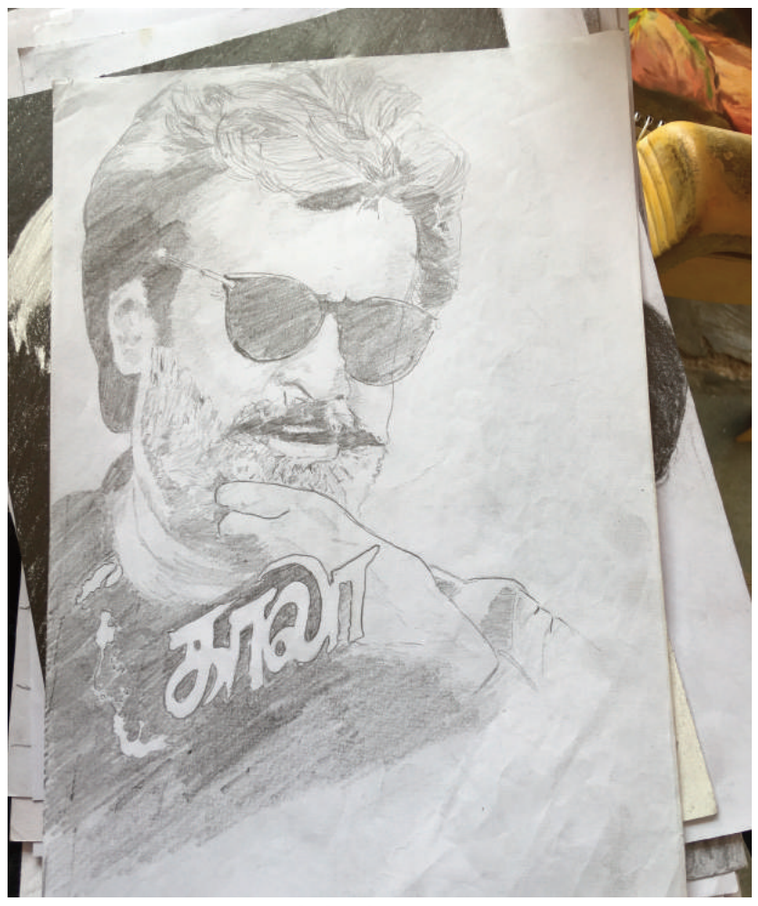
Akhil (22) wants to be a portrait artist in Bangalore but poverty is a barrier to him realising his dreams. He feels there are a lot of opportunities in Bangalore. The 'Che Guevara' painting symbolises Akhil's fighting spirit through which he keeps his artistic dreams alive.

Akhil, currently a student of SN Murthy Polytechnic College, Khammam, lives with his parents and younger brother. His mother works as a nurse in the nearby health centre. His father is a tailor and brother a daily labourer. He often fears that in coming days he might have to give up painting due to his poor financial conditions but he says Vivekananda's teachings and philosophy have stopped him from surrendering himself to the circumstances. "Vivekananda is no less than God to me," said Aakhil.

His portraits range from those of actors, sportsmen and politicians to those of other iconic personalities. He draws them either in A4 or A3 size by seeing their images on the internet. He sells the A4 portraits at Rs 100 each and the A3 at Rs 300. But since his customers are limited to the village he is worried about the future.

Though his parents have recognised his talent, they do not want him to take up art as a career. "They want me to pursue agriculture. But painting is my soul. As long as I breathe, so long shall I paint," said Akhil.

He has approached the Gram Panchayat and many other people, including his college teachers in his village, to make arrangements for the scholarship as he wishes to pursue a BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) in painting from JJ Arts College, Mumbai, but none have paid any attention to his problem.



An artistic tribute to actors

In memory of Michael Jackson

Akhil with the wall painting of Che Guevara at his house

Remnants of the Deluge

Pictures and text by ASHNA BUTANI

A walk through the villages of Chennamkary and Venattukadu in *Alappuzha, Kerala,* is calm and peaceful, the serene backwaters on one side and the smiling faces on the other. But on the smooth winding road, sits a blurred trail of devastation. Destroyed homes, broken boats and rusty television sets come to sight every few metres. The flood had raided homes, stolen lives and looted livelihoods just six months earlier.

Children's laughter fills the villages while the women come together and engage in their hearty afternoon conversations. The minute the word 'flood' is uttered, a wave of melancholy sets in.

Suja Johnson points to the six feet high flood level in her home in Pandanad. "We lost everything we owned. The compensation from the government did not cover our reconstruction costs." Despite being painted, the cracks on the wall are still visible.

"The flood levels were higher than little Abhishek's height. He was very scared," says Manju Alex, mother of the four-year-old. He clutches his mother's hands at the thought of the flood. The damages in their home are visible in the dining hall, washroom and walls.

When teachers lost their books in the flood, 12-year-old Manoj Mahesh donated his books to the school because he did not want to stop studying. His family had to rebuild their home. The blue tint in the frame is a reflection of the blue plastic cover that protects houses under-construction.

FRAMED

"Working in the paddy field makes me happy like no other job does," says 68-year-old Varghese Chako who has been helping his father on their five-acre paddy field in Kuttanad's Chennamkary village since he was 12 years old. "I worked as a driver of a government ferry for a few years but I hated that job and quit when I was 26," he said. "If I had continued as a boat driver, I could have retired with a good pension. I would not have had to depend on crops that can be lost to the flood or pests. But in spite of the increasing costs and declining profits, I don't regret my choice at all. Farming is not just a business. You need to be passionate about the land and understand the crops."

Picture and text by ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND

The keeper of lost tribal tunes

AINDRISHA MITRA

KALIMPONG: The winding lanes of the eastern hill town of Kalimpong seem to resonate with Sonam Tshering Lepcha's soulful music.

Listening to the 93-year old Padmashree awardee's melodius tunes, while sitting in the room of the Lepcha Museum curated by him exclusively at Bom Busty, is an enthralling experience. Be it whistling into Bam Pathyut, a small bamboo-made instrument used to alert people of the wild animals or strumming the three-stringed Tungback, that resembles the flow of the Teesta River nearby, Sonam Lepcha preserves these age-old folk tunes.

With unsteady hands, he grips his Panthong Palit which looks like a flute and plays two distinct notes of male and female voices by applying pressure differently. The other instruments he plays are called SatSang which is like a violin, and Gyaom-Paleeth and Bangho, which were used during wars to warn against the enemy.

Sonam Lepcha was recruited in the Gorkha regiments when war broke out between Germany and Japan in 1914. During his training in the jungles, the beauty of the place inspired him and he devised about 500 songs which he refers to as Tandongor, the Song of the hills.

In Lepcha's words, all of these instruments have folklores associated with them. Legend has it that Rungi Punu, a Lepcha king and a music lover met a beautiful princess called 'Gejo' from "Jawlasi", (now Jalpaiguri) and enchanted her. While returning to his land, he could collect only one instrument, Suno, which was played in court to please the princess, who later became his wife.

He was also the first in the Lepcha community to get aired at the All India Radio, Kolkata in 1960 and popularise the indigenous culture of his tribe. After the Padmashree in 2007, he won the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar and the Banga Bibhushan Samman from the West Bengal Government for his lifelong contribution towards folk music.He also has been accorded the title of "Pahhar ka Tiger" or Tiger of the hills by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

The General Secretary of West Bengal Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board (WBMLLDM)- the first ethnic board for Lepcha Welfare, Rumden Simick believes that Sonam Tshering Lepcha is nothing short of a national treasure.

"He represented us when anyone hardly knew about this micro-minority tribe ," he says.

Lepcha plays one of his tunes | MUSKAAN S

Page Editors: Ashna Butani and Harshita Mishra

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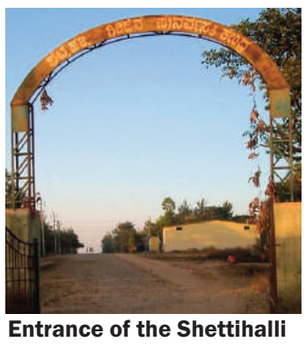
Resettlement still a dream

PRAGATI K. B.

HUNSUR: Shettihalli Lakpatna and Old Shettihalli are tribal hamlets here, 200 metres from each other. While Lakpatna has won the fight for tribal resettlement, the latter hasn't been lucky. However, tribals of both hamlets are a vanquished lot.

At Lakpatna, a metallic arch with two big gates announces the entrance of a tribal resettlement centre, where 150 tribal families, displaced from the Nagarahole forest, are housed.



Entrance of the Shettihalli Lakpatna centre | PRAGATI K. B.

Seethe S., a resident in the centre, was given three acres of land, Rs. 3 lakh and the house she lives in, as the resettlement package in 2011. She gets water for one hour, once in three days. "Even on those days, taps inside the house run dry, because of lack of pressure," says Seethe.

Her house has a gas connection, but since one cylinder costs Rs. 1000 and doesn't last even a month, she doesn't use it for cooking. "My family cannot afford it," she says. She relies on firewood gathered from the adjoining forest instead, but with watchers keeping vigil, access is increasingly becoming difficult and dangerous, she rues.

Electricity has been disconnected for her because she hasn't paid the bill. She hasn't tilled her farm this crop season, because she didn't reap a profit on her last yield and does not have money to invest. "My family will go to Kodagu for plantation work instead," she says. "We used the Rs. 3 lakh from the settlement package, to settle our crop loans. It was all used up within one year," Seethe adds.

The 50 families of Old Shettihalli, on the other hand, haven't received any resettlement package or rehabilitation and are living in homes constructed by the Neralakuppe Gram Panchayat. "We have been demanding at least two acres of land per family. We have houses to live in, but no livelihood," says P. K. Ramu, President, Budakattu Krushikara Sangha, Hunsur.

"We don't want rehabilitation like Lakpatna. We should be given infrastructure and basic amenities. Our community rights over forests must be restored. We should be given access to small forest produce," he says

Thousands of tribals were displaced from the Nagarahole forest in 1970, when it was declared a National Park. Further displacement occurred due to Project Tiger. Families were promised a compensation of Rs. 1 lakh initially, which was challenged through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by Development Through Education (DEED) in 1999. A committee was formed in 2009, to arrive at a resettlement package, as per the Karnataka High Court ruling on the PIL. The committee identified 3418 families eligible for rehabilitation and fixed a package of Rs. 10 lakh in 2014.

Four years hence, families are still waiting to be rehabilitated. "About 6500 to 9000 acres of land must be acquired and denotified and Rs. 450 crore earmarked by the government for this rehabilitation drive," says Sreekant S. of DEED.

A food guardian for tribals

PRAGATI K. B.

HUNSUR: At a time when corruption and dishonesty are plaguing the Public Distribution System (PDS), Harsha T. (46), the first tribal fair price shop owner in Hunsur, is lauded by all villagers as an example to emulate.

Harsha got a licence for his shop in 2002 and has since been operating it in Hemmige village here, providing ration for BPL, Antyodaya and Annabhagya card holders. For the last five years he has been operating the ration shop in Neralakuppe too, after villagers complained against the previous owner to the Panchayat Development Officer (PDO). His Hemmige shop caters to 126 cards in one tribal hamlet while the Neralakuppe shop caters to 600 in 8 surrounding tribal hamlets.

HARSHA T., the first tribal ration shop owner | PRAGATI K. B.

"Harsha's is the only ration shop out of the 115 in Hunsur, against which complaints haven't been received. So, when a problem arose in the Neralakuppe shop, he was asked to take over," said Mani D., Neralakuppe PDO. Allegations of swindling provisions and keeping the ration shop open for just two to three days making it inaccessible were levied against the previous owner. Apart from the two shops manned by Harsha, there are only five others run by those belonging to tribal communities

"I belong to the Soliga tribal community and grew up in a poor household. We weren't allowed on the premises of ration shops. My father would wait outside all day, hoping to be sold some foodgrains," recounts Harsha. And if the shopkeeper wasn't feeling benevolent that day, his father would go back to waiting again the next day. "Grains would be weighed inside in our absence and thrown at us, even if they did entertain our plea," he says.

For months, his family, like many others in his village, would survive on boiled leafy vegetables because of inaccessibility. "I have seen my father getting berated and beaten up for asking for ration," Harsha says. Thus, when Harsha was advised to quit his job at a factory in Bengaluru and work for his community instead, the decision came easy to him.

In 1999, he was elected as the President of the Budakattu Krushikara Sangha, Hunsur, an NGO working for tribal rights. It was then that he applied for his licence. "Officers mocked me. They said that girijanas [adivasis] are not fit for managing a business," Harsha says.

Depending on the number of cards his shops are allotted, Harsha gets a bill from the food department and deposits the money in the bank. Afterwards, he gets the provisions from the Hunsur procurement centre, between the 1st and the 10th each month. He gets a commission of 70 paise per kg of rice.

Harsha keeps his shops open from 8 a.m. till 4 p.m. every day, except Tuesdays. "The shop must be accessible to the daily wage earning villagers, who cannot miss work for ration," he says. When families don't come for their share in the first few days, he personally calls and informs them.

"People depend on ration shops for their survival. We owners must understand this and do our job with honesty," he says.

Rabbit farming, a success story

OMJASVIN M. D.

MALVALLI (MANDYA): While there is despair over unemployment among youth, a young entrepreneur in Marigowdana Hundi here, has found a lucrative livelihood in broiler rabbit farming.

D. N. Mahesh (28), a History graduate from Mysore University, started rearing rabbits four years ago with a loan from the Karnataka Vikas Grameena Bank.

"Unable to find employment after graduation, I found out about a rabbit farm through a Mysuru newspaper and decided to venture into rabbit rearing," he said.

He said the start-up capital depends on the number of rabbits and cage space. "At Rs. 600 a rabbit, one can begin with three females and a male," he adds.

"Every four months, a rabbit gives birth to a litter of six to ten," he said. After delivery, the rabbits are caged separately for three to four months.

The rabbits are fed grass, ragi, jowar and corn. Each rabbit on Mahesh's farm consumes 250 g of grass per day at a monthly expense of Rs. 120. "In three months, a rabbit weighs 3.5 kg and is sold for meat at Rs. 300 per kg," said Mahesh, who spends only four hours a day on his farm.

Mahesh said that rabbits contract fever only from extreme temperature changes. "I treat them on my farm itself. But on rare occasions, I take them to vets in Mysuru. It's easy to detect when they fall sick as they don't eat and become inactive," he said

Mahesh has been training people in rabbit rearing for the last two years. 'This is what a rabbit looks like' is the first thing he says to the learners. "No special educational qualification is needed to rear rabbits; everything can be learnt on the job" he said.

"Housewives, too, eagerly learn as it is an ideal occupation to pursue during their free time," he said. Mahesh has trained about 2000 people so far.

He uses social media to advertise his farm. "I also assist my students on video calls to solve problems and connect with buyers," he said. "People from all over Karnataka come to learn. Some from Andhra Pradesh and Kerala too have taken classes," he claimed.

Rabbit meat is more expensive than chicken meat and mutton and rabbit rearing is growing commercially, said Mahesh. "Rabbits survive at temperatures between 0 and 35 degree Celsius. So, it is a good alternative source of livelihood for those in the country."

On his 400 square foot farm, he has 30 New Zealand and Chinchilla breed rabbits, which he commonly sells for meat.

Pakshirajapura's desolate nest

SNEHA KANCHAN

HUNSUR: When Papancheri's son Saiju (30), a Hakki Pikki tribal from Pakshirajapura here, left for Mozambique in July last year, the family thought it was going to be one of his regular business trips. What they didn't expect was his detainment.

Saiju Papancheri was one of the three men from the village who were detained for alleged visa fraud in Mozambique after their 16-member Hakki Pikki group from Bengaluru and Pakshirajapura was arrested in Nampula last year.

Saiju's parents Chainrani and Papancheri | SNEHA

"He has gone abroad multiple times in the past two years and has visited countries like South Africa. This time around, it's been seven months since he left and we don't know what the scene is," said Papancheri.

Papancheri, a farm labourer said, "I don't even know what the issue is. I don't go to the city or roam around a lot, just rear my goats and come back. They [the local officials] told us it's too far. Had it been Bangalore or Mysore, we could've gone. When we asked the Sarpanch, he told us it's a far off country."

Saiju's mother Chainrani lamented, "Nobody is telling us anything. We don't even know how to read and write."

Papancheri said that Saiju had taken loans to go abroad, Rs. 3 lakh this time. He had gone there for business - to sell oils, rings and other small things and to provide massage services. "We don't know where he is and how he is. We haven't even been eating properly. We're just praying to God that our son comes back," he added.

Pratap Simha, Mysuru and Kodagu's Member of Parliament raised the issue with the Ministry of External Affairs to get the remaining men extradited. Whenever somebody gets into trouble in any country, they alert the Indian embassy which then follows it up, said Simha. "We've raised the issue with Sushma Swaraj, External Affairs Minister and have asked the embassy to go through the case and offer legal service. Since it's a fraud case, it's taking time," he added.

He said that they generally don't let the kin know about the details in such cases. "They will panic if we tell them the exact position of the case and the charges they are facing. We have to go through the court process. It might take some time but somehow we will get them out," said Simha.

Hunsur's globetrotting tribe

SNEHA KANCHAN

HUNSUR: Dubai, Qatar, South Africa, Mauritius, West Indies, Singapore and Brunei. Shantamma (55), a Hakki Pikki tribal from the obscure village of Pakshirajapura here, has lost count of the countries she's visited in the last 10 years. The tribe, once hunter-gatherer, now travels far and wide to sell traditional oils, medicines and massage services.

A bunch of families in the seemingly affluent village have at least one frequent flyer. "You see all those duplex houses? Those are the ones that go abroad frequently," said L. Umesh, admitting that he's never stepped out of the country but has toured India extensively.

The tribe, whose ancestry can be traced back to Gujarat and Rajasthan, was relocated from the neighbouring forests of the Nagarhole National Park and Kodagu in 1955. While the State government provided them with houses and land, most of them stuck to making herbal medicines and oils, turning it into a business.

The government would initially help them set up all-expenses-paid stalls at exhibitions across the country.

"We don't do a lot of farming. Nothing grows there. There's water scarcity and no pipelines," said Shantamma.

To travel abroad, they take loans locally as banks don't offer loans, said Shantamma. "Some countries let us in, some don't. Sometimes, we get people who buy our things and sometimes we don't," she added.

Papachi (50) from the same tribe said the profits depend on the countries they visit. Middle Eastern and African countries are easier to get into, he said. "I tried going to the US but couldn't get the visa," he added.

"Some of them sell their farm land, mortgage their houses with local landlords to get a passport and visa made and go abroad. Sometimes they end up losing a lot of money and come back poorer than when they left," said P. S. Nanjundaswami, village head.

> *"Sometimes they end up losing a lot of money and come back poorer than when they left.*
>
> *- P. S. Nanjundaswami (village head)*

He mentioned that some private travel agents in Mysuru help the tribe make the arrangements - picking the country and arranging for their passport, visa and stay. The host hotel they stay at hooks them up with potential buyers. The agents even take a cut out of the profits in some cases, said Sajini, a tribal woman.

They do commercial business on tourist visas there which gets them caught. And then they are either detained or sent back, he said.

Shantamma recollected her trip to Brunei seven years ago when she was caught by the local police there and sent back. "I incurred a loss of about Rs. 4 lakh there. 'This is our country. You're here on tourist visas and aren't allowed do business here' is what they said. If the police catch us there, they don't leave us. The same happened in Singapore," she said.

A group of 16 tribals from Pakshirajapura and Bengaluru were arrested in Mozambique while they were on one such trip to Nampula in July 2018. While 13 of them were released after government intervention, three men from Pakshirajapura – Madhu C., Praveen K. and Saiju were detained for allegedly overstaying and fraud. One of them came back in December, said the locals.

Pratap Simha, Mysuru and Kodagu Member of Parliament said that they are not just following the court procedure and are also trying to convince the Mozambique government to grant clemency pleading that they will never set foot there again.

But the entire process will take about six months, he said.

"I think this is the third or fourth case that we've received in the last three years where we've had to get the Ministry of External Affairs involved," said Simha. The tribe often gets into trouble in foreign countries, he added.

Taluks step up in managing waste

DIVYA SETHU

HUNSUR, NANJANGUD: Effective segregation and management of solid waste has helped Hunsur town bag the Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry's Best City Award in the South Zone for 2018.

Hunsur produces up to 22.85 tonnes of garbage per day from 12,971 households and commercial establishments. The garbage is collected by workers going door to door and several self-help groups have also been employed.

Speaking about the process, K. P. Ravikumar, Environment Engineer, Hunsur, says that auto tippers collect garbage, which is then transferred to pushcarts and taken to a processing unit.

This waste is then segregated into wet and dry. Dry waste is sold to recyclers and scrap dealers, while wet waste is processed through windrow composting, where it is stored in a heap and turned twice a week with cow dung, enhancing the decomposition. After 45 days, this waste is sent to a rotary screen to be separated into compost and non-degradable waste, and the compost is sold to farmers.

The reject is taken to a dump yard. Citizens are penalized in case of non-compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules.

Nanjangud, a neighbouring taluk, is following similar steps to ensure proper solid waste management.

Archana Aradhya, Environment Engineer, Nanjangud, says that until 2016, only 60 per cent of waste generated by households was collected. However, with the involvement of ten auto tippers and three tractor trailers, the taluk now collects 100 per cent of the waste generated. The capital cost required to carry out the operations is Rs. 5.6 crore, out of which Rs. 3 crore is for maintenance. For door-to-door collection, JCB front-end loaders, sucking and jetting machines are used. These vehicles have GPS trackers to regulate fuel consumption and ensure that all waste is taken to the landfills.

Both taluks face the problem of citizen cooperation. "Many residents believe that it is the municipality's responsibility to segregate waste," says Aradhya.

A sanitary landfill is currently under construction in the Hunsur taluk, where all the reject will go.

The Nanjangud municipality plans to give Rs. 26,000 to each household.

Both towns use the Swacchata app, where residents can lodge their complaints. They can post pictures, and municipality workers will be deployed to these sites, to resolve the issue.

A Tibetan tale: refugees live with an 'alien' tag

ANKITA MARWAHA

HUNSUR: Vibrant Tibetan prayer flags start appearing on top of pastel-coloured houses and patches of green land on either side of the bumpy Hunsur roads, in a careful transition from the green horizon to a few nondescript houses.

The unfamiliar Kannada on billboards also transitions into the unknown Tibetan alphabets as we enter the Tibetan Rabgyeling Settlement, Hunsur.

Around 2300 Tibetans were rehabilitated in 1960 on this 2000-acre forestland in Hunsur taluk, after China's invasion of Tibet in 1959.

"My father was a 17-year-old war fighter in Yunnan (Tibet) against the Chinese when he fled," said Tashi Choedon (40), a resident of Gurupura, one of the 13 villages under the settlement.

Tashi Choedon with her son | ANKITA MARWAHA

The government allotted to each person an acre of land later in 1972. Between 1959 and 1972, the Tibetans lived in bamboo huts and tents in the village without water and electricity, clearing the forest to build houses and grow local crops.

"The climate was very hot here when we arrived, and a lot of us fell ill. The food was also very different and we couldn't eat much initially," said Penpa (61), who was 15 years old when he shifted here with his parents in 1972.

He is now the head of Gurupura village. "Now, we grow our own food, and cook noodles, momos and thukpas. I love idli and often cook it at home," he said.

Penpa now grows maize on his eight-acre land and sells it to the Cooperative Society at Rs. 5 above the market price.

Today, most of the people in Gurupura are farmers from May to September and businessmen from October to January. "We buy woollen clothes from Ludhiana on credit and sell them in Jodhpur or Delhi," he said.

"The locals were very helpful when we arrived and taught us how to grow maize and ginger," he said. However, there have been points of discord between the two.

"Whenever there is any mishap anywhere, the natives from nearby villages come here in a gang to blame us," said Tashi.

"A few months ago, a friend was riding his bike when an old lady from a nearby hamlet came near him and fell down on the road. When he went to help her, she started screaming that he had hit her," she said. "Because we are not citizens here, he is being summoned by the court even today," she added.

The people are constantly reminded of being foreign, not just by the nearby villagers but, by the system itself, lamented Tashi.

"We are not eligible for any government or MNC jobs. We get on;y less-qualified jobs at call centres, hotels or spas," said Tashi.

According to the Tibetan Refugee Rehabilitation Policy, 2014, the State government has allocated the land on lease.

"Every year, we have to fill out forms and stand in a line for two days at our cooperative office to get our Registration Certificate (RC) renewed. We have to show this document anywhere we go to travel, work, or stay," said Tashi.

"I was born here and have lived here for 40 years, this is my home. Still, I'm not considered an Indian citizen," she added.

Page Editors: Ankita Marwaha and Aishani Saha

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Food crops take over tobacco

OMJASVIN M. D.

HUNSUR: While the State is asking farmers to switch from cultivating tobacco to alternative crops, thanks to cutting-edge guidance of the Central Tobacco Research Institute (CTRI) in Hunsur, tobacco farmers are gaining more yield from lesser acreage. This has helped them strike a balance between cash crops and food crops without losing the revenue from tobacco.

Nanjunde Gowda of Agrahara village here, happily walks out of a tobacco auction after selling 90 kg for Rs. 14,000. In 2015, he could only harvest 250 kg of tobacco per acre, but now he is able to harvest 800 kg.

"Field officers from the Tobacco Board guide us on seed spacing (three metre distance between two seeds) and non-chemical pest control measures (Neem cakes)," said Gowda.

The officers frequently inspect and remove aberrant crops. The farmers then sell the harvest, while the seedlings are taken back to the CTRI for disease observation for 30 days. The defect-free seeds are sold for Rs. 10 per kg.

Gowda, who grew tobacco on two of his ten acres, now grows only one acre. In the rest of the area, he grows ragi, horsegram, sunflower, and groundnut. Following the State's advice to grow *hebbevu* tree, he has planted around 300 trees which may take six to eight years to grow. "*Hebbevu* wood has anti-termite qualities and is used for making plywood," he says.

He gets Rs. 1.2 lakh from tobacco per harvest and uses it for food crops.

"The Forest Department provides *hebbevu* seeds and its wood fetches me Rs. 6000 per tonne," he says. Though food crops are low income yielding, he is compensated by tobacco sale, he adds.

FCV tobacco grown on the Central Tobacco Research Institute farm, Hunsur | OMJASVIN M. D.

The CTRI and the Tobacco Board advise farmers to grow tobacco within the prescribed limit each year. "We fine farmers who violate the prescribed limits," says V. K. Purushothama Raju, Auction Superintendent, Tobacco Board.

Besides producing high-yield hybrids, the CTRI does research to improve tobacco quality.

"Low levels of carcinogenic elements like heavy metal compounds, carbon compounds, nicotine and sugar make Karnataka's FCV (Flu Cured Virginia) tobacco ideal for export," says Dr. S. Ramakrishnan, Head, CTRI, Hunsur.

Around 48,000 farmers in Karnataka are registered to grow the progressive FCV tobacco.

The Institute aims to reduce the carcinogenic content by curing the raw tobacco leaf. Thus, the chlorophyll content is removed and the leaf changes from green to lighter shades.

Normally, five kg of wood is required to cure one kg of tobacco, but since the Karnataka tobacco is rain-fed, the leaf texture is smoother and lighter.

"Only 2.5 kg of wood is required to cure the same amount," he says. "The nicotine content in Karnataka tobacco is 1.5 per cent while it is 2.5 per cent in Andhra Pradesh."

The CTRI distributes biofertilisers and biopesticides to prevent soil degradation and pesticide residue accumuluation.

"Farmers can gradually move to growing other crops in the same land in which they grew tobacco," he says.

Neem, cow-dung and urine are fertilisers for organic tobacco, free from non-tobacco related material, he says. "We experiment this in Nagerhole farm and by 2020, these fertilisers will be widely distributed," he adds.

Around 120 training programs are held yearly for farmers on planting crops, handling tobacco nursery, curing crops and grading them post production. "Scientists teach farmers in-person to prepare them for the April season of planting tobacco," he concludes.

Auction season for farmers

TULIKA CHATURVEDI

HUNSUR: Sales season for farmers in the second largest tobacco-producing State has the Tobacco Board hosting auctions in several taluks of Mysuru district.

"The auction kicks off in September and goes on till March or April," said G. Rajasekar, a Field Officer at the Hunsur platform. "That is when the sales start in Andhra Pradesh and the cultivation resumes here."

Karnataka's Flue-Cured Virginia (FCV) tobacco is especially sought after by international buyers for its low nicotine content, neutral filler, and its ability to blend well with any grade of tobacco.

"Over 80 per cent of the produce is exported to Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bahrain and Qatar," said V. K. Purushothama Raju, Auction Superintendent.

"Several manufacturers and suppliers show up every year, but the majority of the produce is bought by ITC, Godfrey Phillips India (GPI), and Deccan Tobacco Exports Pvt. Ltd."

"The farmers are discouraged from indiscriminate application of pesticides as it affects the crop and the export demand decreases," said Field Assistant G. Nagasundar. "We also ensure that the tobacco is free of plastic, feathers, dust, or any other pollutants," he added.

Once the Board procures the tobacco bales, they are marked as per their weight and grade, and kept in the auction hall, he said. The bidding process involves buyers quoting prices on their HHT devices (Hand-Held Terminals), and the bale is automatically allotted to the highest bidder in the room.

The sold bales are moved to the godown for dispatch, and the growers are paid within 15 days.

"This year, each farmer was allowed to produce 1750 kg of tobacco on 1.3 hectares of land, against the total crop size of 100 million kg," says Basavaraj, Deputy Manager at GPI. "The Board and the traders meet beforehand to discuss everyone's share and the quality of the crop." he added.

The Central Tobacco Research Institute (CTRI) considers the demands of the traders and scientifically modifies the crop. "The growth of tobacco can be manipulated in multiple ways," said Dr. S. Ramakrishnan, head of the CTRI station at Hunsur, "We regulate topping, nitrogen intake, and crop spacing based on the traders' requirement of nicotine levels, size of the leaves, etc."

While the health costs of tobacco consumption raise concern, the produce provides livelihood to a large community of agriculturists, and is even cited as the most economically viable crop.

The CTRI has been credited with researching alternative uses for the crop.

"The Directorate of Oilseeds Research (DOR) in Hyderabad determined that tobacco seed is an oilseed crop as it contains 35 to 40 percent oil content," says Ramakrishnan,

"The chemical value of the oil is at par with sunflower oil and groundnut oil, making it fit for human consumption," he adds.

It has been approved by the National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, and is likely to hit the market later this year.

A protein called Solanesol can be extracted from the seed with as much as 99 per cent purity, and has been proven to have anti-cancer properties, he said. It is also highly effective as a clinical drug.

Trouble looms over artisans

ANKITA MARWAHA

SHRIRANGAPATTANA (MANDYA): In the last 60 years, the deafening roar of the cotton powerlooms in Kodiyala village here has almost replaced muted the clamour of wooden handlooms.

Nonetheless, a few handlooms still hold out in the village amidst the cacophony in an attempt to revive the craft within the mechanized industry. One such place is the Padmashala Cotton Handloom Weavers' Cooperative Society (Ltd.).

"The factory provides employment to rural women near their homes. Unlike in factories where employees have to reach at a fixed time and work without breaks, women in this factory are free to work and manage their homes," he added.

The factory is run by the Padmashala Cooperative Society with support from the government. A committee, elected every five years, provides wages, and looks after the orders and raw material to run six handlooms.

"We had to rent out our factory to powerlooms in the past years as there were no handloom workers. Six months ago, the government decided to train a few women and reopen the handlooms," said Manjula M. (36), Secretary of the society.

Although the government has helped open the cooperative society to revive the handlooms, there are still a lot of obstacles to running the factory. According to the Mandya District Gazetteer, 2000, only 1186 out of 3329 handlooms are actively functioning.

The government provides the factory with a 20 per cent subsidy on yarn, pays for the training of the women, and gives them a 20 per cent aid on housing loans, said Manjula.

"However, none of our salaries come from the government. We have to pay the wages from profit," she added.

"I get a salary of Rs. 3000 per month, and despite working the whole month, often don't get paid," said Manjula.

"For a metre of cotton fabric that gets sold at Rs. 100 to Rs. 150, the women are paid only Rs. 20," she said.

The women manage to earn Rs. 80 per day. "The government is not willing to spend more even though there are a lot of interested women. Only six women got training this year." added Manjula.

"I applied for funds in 2017 for toilets and a compound as the women feel unsafe, but still haven't got approval," she said.

"All committee members are businessmen and are not interested in working for the factory even though there's high demand for cotton," she said. There is no one who will listen to our problems, she adds.

An unholy dump

Clothes left behind by devotees and locals | DIVYA SETHU

DIVYA SETHU

NANJANGUD: Despite several efforts to keep it clean, the Kapila river here, remains polluted with waste and clothes left behind by locals and tourists.

The river is filled to the brim with discarded clothes and other waste left behind by devotees who bathe in it for religious reasons. Ayyappa pilgrims on their way to Sabarimala often stop by the river for *visarjan*, where they 'cleanse themselves' and consider it holy to leave the clothes behind.

The cleaning of the river comes under the jurisdiction of the Srikanteshwara Temple here. H. M. Kumaraswamy, the Executive Officer of the temple, says that during summer, the river dries up to expose even more clothes and waste. "We clean the river twice a year using JCB tractors," he says. "Once during Sankranti and once around November. During a single clean-up, we collect 440 tractors full of clothes." He added that before *Jatre* (the temple festival), the authorities ask for more water to be released into the river from the Cauvery. At any given time, devotees and even locals can be found bathing in the river. The bank of the river is also littered with piles of clothes. At the temple, regular announcements are made in Kannada telling people to not leave their clothes in or near the river. Despite this, the problem persists.

Other than the Ayyappa pilgrims, women who take vows during the full moon at the temple also come to bathe and discard their sarees once their wishes come true.

Volunteers from NGOs like the Save Our Earth Club help clean the river on a regular basis with help from the general public.

The temple authorities have raised this issue with the Pollution Control Board and the municipality of the taluk, but were not offered any help.

"We try to creat awareness through announcements, posters and campaigns around the city. Yet, the belief stays," says Kumaraswamy.

Khadi consigned to the past

DIVYA SETHU

NANJANJGUD: Six women sit in a small room at the Khadi Kendra in Badanavalu village here, spinning thread, while the deafening sounds of the machines fill the room. Clad in sarees, they are sitting on mats on the floor and don't look up from their work.

Spread across nine acres, the Khadi Kendra was established by Tagadur Ramachandra Rao to provide employment to the villagers. The Supervisor is 65 year-old Vishwakarma. The Kendra makes shirts, towels, undergarments and dhotis. Khadi is still important in Badanavalu.

"It's a matter of pride," says Vishwakarma. "CMs, MLAs, they all wear clothes made of khadi. Even Mahatma Gandhi has come to visit this Kendra once. Making our own clothes is satisfactory, and we take pride in it, which was Gandhi's ideology."

Speaking about the process, he says, "The raw materials come from Chitradurga. A *charaka* is used to spin yarn, which is later treated with maida and starch. After treatment, it is sent to the warp room, and then to the handlooms. Then accordingly, colour combinations are given with bleach. The clothes are made and sent to Mysuru for selling."

Though the Kendra was once pivotal in the promotion of Khadi, Vishwakarma says that the government has forgotten about it now.

Renovation work remains pending, and the loans they have applied for take too long to come. Their repeated attempts to reach the government for help have been in vain.

Employment is also a major challenge for the Kendra. When it started in 1925, it had over 500 employees. Today, the number has reduced to a mere 50.

"15 of our employees quit together a few months ago due to low salary," he says. Due to low sales, it is hard to convince others to work here.

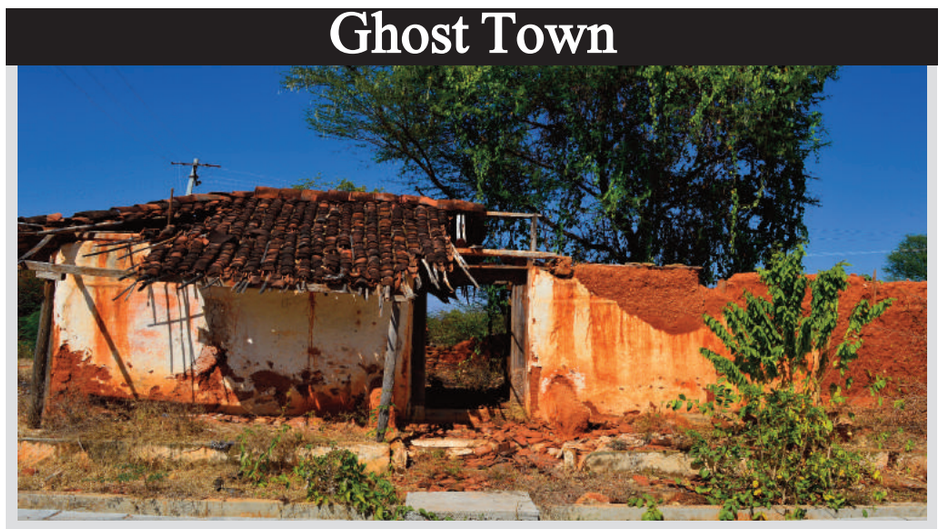
However, the women working at the Kendra seem content with the working conditions.

Nagamma (35) has been working at the Kendra for the last 12 years. "I enjoy working here," she says. For her too, Khadi is a matter of pride. "It doesn't matter that there are only a few of us here. We will continue to do good work."

The oldest employee of the Kendra is Puttmadamma, who is 80 years old and has worked at the Kendra for the last 60 years. "When I started, we had big *charakas* that were hard to spin. I lost all my weight working on those," she jokes. "Now the equipment we have is much easier to use."

When asked what the future holds for the Kendra, Vishwakarma says, "We make do with what we have, and we are happy. No one really knows what will happen next. If the government comes through, maybe 'we can one day achieve the vision that Gandhi had for us."

Ghost Town



Only one person inhabits Nanjangud's Aralikatte Hundi, which was once a vibrant agrarian village. The villagers started moving out ten years ago to other cities due to water scarcity. | SNEHA KANCHAN

Prodigy puts Kalale on the map, one move at a time

AISHANI SAHA

NANJANGUD: A beaming 11-year-old Anagha K. G. R. of Kalale village here aspires to become a Chess Grandmaster when she grows up.

Anagha, who went on to win the 29th National Under-7 Chess Championship in 2015, remained unbeaten in the Karnataka State Under- 9 Open Chess Championship and represented Asia in Under-8 Chess Championship (2016) in Mongolia.

"When my father's students played chess and won trophies, I would pose with them for a picture. That's when I knew I wanted to play chess," said Anagha, who started playing chess at the age of five.

Anagha, shyly looking at her father said, "The only hobby I have is playing chess. I have school from 8.30 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon. Between 3.30 and 9.30 p.m. I practice chess."

Anagha idolises Humpy Koneru, a grandmaster. She wishes to walk in her footsteps.

Anagha's father K. M. Gopinath said, "I hope she continues to play chess and makes a name through it. Then she can teach not only chess but also provide education in the village as it will bring the whole community forward."

He started the Acharya Gurukula Vidyapeetha 21 years ago and would provide free tuition seven days a week along with chess classes.

"The art of playing chess is God's gift. It was passed down through heredity but not everybody in the family has the same skills, my brothers don't know how to play but I do and I am teaching my daughter," says Gopinath, and recounts that a family member, an *amaldar,* five generations ago, played chess with the Wadiyar king.

Anagha poses with her chess trophies | AISHANI SAHA

According to Gopinath, chess lays the foundation for good education, and further "imbues the student with qualities like patience, focus, memory and attentiveness." He feels that states should have chess in their syllabus.

He hopes that Anagha's achievements would encourage more people in the village to take up chess as a profession while also concentrating on education.

Three months ago, the secretary of United Karnataka Chess Association Hanumantha R., noticed her play at the State Women's Tournament where she managed to draw a game against her opponent which otherwise was believed she would lose. Impressed with her skills, the secretary offered to coach her twice a week in Bengaluru.

Twenty years ago, the villagers believed that chess meant gambling; so people stayed away from it until they realised it was just a game. At present almost half the children in the village play chess. and take it up professionally.

Kalale is mythologically significant but little do people know that this is a chess-crazy village, where Anagha and her family play a big role.

Nostalgia in a sachet: story of the Nanjangud Powder losing its bite

PRAGATI K. B.

NANJANGUD: From the 1930s and up to the 1980s, the Nanjangud Tooth Powder was a household name in the southern States and some parts of western India. Having arrived in the market at a time when people were just transitioning from charcoal powder to sophisticated dentrifices, the brand sold about 15 lakh sachets a month. The popularity dwindled with the advent of the toothpaste and now only about one lakh sachets a month are sold by B. V. Pundit's Sadvaidyasala, its parent company.

B. V. Pundit, a graduate of the first batch of the Mysore Ayurvedic College, started Sadvaidyasala 105 years ago, in 1913. He chanced upon an idea for the tooth powder during a *homa* at his house in 1920, when he noticed paddy husk ash. The base of this ash was silica and he knew silica was good for the teeth. The rest was history as an entire generation grew up trusting this powder with oral hygiene.

"The visionary that he was, he set up a self-contained unit," says Dr. Rajesh Sreenivasan, his grandson and Director, Production at B. V. Pundit's. Not only was the powder prepared at the unit, but its signature brown sachets were printed and pouched there too.

A governmental regulation on Rhodamine 123, a synthetic food colouring that gave the tooth powder its pinkish tinge, caused an unprecedented disturbance in the market. "We used Cosol Red dye instead and there was a slight change in the pink colour. Since we

The 18 g packs | PRAGATI K. B.

didn't advertise and publicise the change, consumers thought they were buying a spurious product" recalls Sreenivasan. Toothpaste was introduced hot on the heels of this hitch, and the beloved *hallupudi* eventually lost its footing.

It was still popular in rural areas, but affordable access to toothpaste and the notional superiority of an urban lifestyle accelerated the transition even there, says Sreenivasan.

The company tried to bounce back with a brand of toothpaste, but that didn't do very well. "We were over employed when the tooth powder lost its market. But we did not lay off workers and retained them until their retirement," he says.

Today, the company employs 65 people in the manufacturing of 230-odd ayurvedic products under its label. All other processes of the product are outsourced.

"Our focus is not the hallupudi anymore. That is not our revenue model," Sreenivasan says. The trademark of the tooth powder hasn't been renewed.

Brand loyalists write nostalgic testimonials to the company via letters and email, recalling how as children they snacked on the sweet tooth powder. The tooth powder came in two varieties- 'sweetish' and 'saltish'.

Sachets of 18 g are sold at Rs. 10 each on their webstore. The 100 g economy pouches are supplied to the Central Jail in Bengaluru.

"Speculations are rife, but we have no plans of shutting down production of the *hallupudi*," says Sreenivasan.

Page Editors: Divya Sethu and Tulika Chaturvedi

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Unsung women of the soil

TANYA KHANDELWAL

HUNSUR, NANJANGUD: Sundaramma (38) and Mahadevamma (43) were in a hurry to report to their nine-to-five job at a field owned by Antony Taragan, an absentee landlord in Neralakuppe village. They hitch a ride with an acquaintance to make up for lost time.

"We work on his fields and help each other cultivate our own lands too," said Sundaramma. Her family owns a small piece of land in her husband's name. "We till, sow, harvest and sell the crops from our fields while we are paid to work at the landlord's," she adds.

It is common to find, on any given day in rural areas, women working in fields and plantations, with many others involved in allied activities. The Economic Survey 2017-18 speaks of an increased 'feminisation of agriculture' in the countryside, with women donning multiple roles.

A woman manuring her farm | SOUMYA KRISHNAMURTHY

A major reason for this is the rural to urban migration of male family members. "Men men in rural areas go out in search of work, usually to Kerala or Kodagu in the off season. This migration is often associated with them bringing back problems like alcoholism, leaving women in charge of work. This is more common amongst tribal groups and agriculture there is increasingly becoming women's domain," said Arun Balamatti, Senior Scientist at Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Nanjangud taluk.

He added that even though 60 to 70 per cent of agricultural work is done by women, their contribution is hardly acknowledged. This is evident from the fact that in India, 85 per cent of rural women are engaged in agriculture, yet only 13 per cent own land (Oxfam India).

A 2001 report by the National Commission for Women says that women play a key role in agricultural development, main crop and livestock production, horticulture and agro/social forestry.

According to Census 2011, out of the total female main workers, 55 per cent are agricultural labourers and 24 per cent are cultivators.

"We have almost equal number of male and female farmers and agricultural labourers in the village nowadays," Sundaramma said. She added that earlier, women in the village used to have five or six kids. But with better awareness, family sizes have reduced, giving women more time to work.

'Doctor who?' ask villagers at the Neralakuppe PHC

SNEHA KANCHAN

HUNSUR: The recently renovated Primary Health Centre (PHC) in Neralakuppe village here has everything – desired levels of sanitation, clean drinking water and toilets for the patients, adequate supply of medicines and an attentive health inspector. The only thing that it lacks is a doctor.

The PHC currently has three staff members – a health inspector, an attendant cum cleaner and a nurse who alternates between the centre's and her Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) duties. As per the minimum requirement prescribed under the Indian Public Health Standards (IPHS) norms, a PHC is supposed to have one medical officer (MBBS) supported by 14 paramedical and other staff.

According to the Rural Health Statistics 2014-15, out of the 2353 functioning PHCs in Karnataka, 285 were running without a doctor. Neralakuppe's 1017 residents along with villagers from nine other villages now mostly visit the PHC in Hanagodu, a neighbouring village, seven km away.

"We treat normal cold, cough and small injuries. The nurse takes care of the patients, giving them injections and glucose. But for anything major, the villagers have to go to the Hanagodu PHC," said T. S. Chandrashekhar, Health Inspector, Neralakuppe PHC.

Arpataiah (52), a resident of Mastammahaadi, a hamlet barely two km from the Neralakuppe PHC, said that for the past three years, villagers have been going to the Hanagodu PHC, five km away. "We have to call for an auto to get there. Catching a bus is difficult because our village is far from the main road. It costs us anywhere between Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 just to get to the clinic. Neralakuppe would cost us only Rs. 30," said Arpataiah.

On an average day, 20 people visit the PHC but the one doctor assigned to the centre usually sits in Hanagodu and visits once in two or three months, said Chandrashekhar adding that the doctor was supposed to visit at least three days a week. Even in the case of deliveries, the women are referred to Hanagodu. "Deliveries don't happen here. If there's an emergency then the nurse attends to it," said Chandrashekhar.

The doctor officially assigned for Neralakuppe has been put in charge of the 24/7 Hanagodu PHC because it's a *hobli* (cluster of villages) headquarter frequented by a lot of patients, and has been without a doctor for a while now, said Dr. B. Basavaraj, District Health Officer, Mysuru. "The situation in Neralakuppe is temporary. We select doctors on a contract basis. The process is on. In another week, we'll post one contract doctor to Hanagodu also," he said. About 20 villages fall within the ambit of the Hanagodu PHC.

At present they have about 30 per cent doctor vacancies in Mysuru's rural areas, said Basavaraj. Appointment of permanent doctors is the State government's job and he has no power over the recruitment, he added. "We're not getting doctors to work in rural areas. For the past two and a half years, I've sent more than five to six doctors there on contract basis. They work for one or two months and then leave. In Hanagodu, one lady doctor was posted eight months ago. She worked for some two to three months and then left the job. That's the reason we're assigning one doctor who is regularly working there to one or two PHCs," he said.

Basavaraj linked the vacancies to the doctors' preference for corporate hospitals in cities. He mentioned the National Rural Health Mission under which some nurses, doctors and specialists have been posted but retaining them has not been easy. "We have two mother and child health hospitals in Nanjangud and K. R. Nagar of Mysuru district. We've been posting regular doctors and specialists with Rs. 1.1 lakh salary per month. They are not happy staying in rural areas and working in villages," he said.

SHGs show the way

PRAGATI K. B. & DIVYA SETHU

HUNSUR, H. D. KOTE: Self Help Groups (SHGs) formed and run by women are leading the way in empowering them socially and economically across marginalised tribal hamlets here.

Though the concept of cash economy is relatively new to the tribal community, the idea of stocking up resources is not. "Theirs was non-monetary, subsistence economy. But they have always saved agricultural produce and bartered it," says Sreekant S., Director, Development Through Education (DEED).

Manjula (26), a resident of Mahadeshwara Colony in H. D. Kote is an agricultural labourer who earns Rs. 150 daily and saves Rs. 100 a week through the 'sangha' (what the SHGs are colloquially referred to as) in her hamlet. Neelamma, her sister-in-law, also a member of the sangha says, "I would borrow money from my landlord and be obligated to them. Saving and knowing that I have the sangha to fall back on, give me courage."

Their SHG has 14 members. Halagamma and Nirmala are its two elected representatives who are responsible for depositing the savings in the Kaveri Grameena Bank, Annuru each week.

"The idea is to discourage hard-earned money from being used wastefully on alcohol and tobacco," says Sreekant. "We encourage savings depending on their capacity. We want to build self-sustenance," says G. S. Rajegowda, Director, Parivarthana, another NGO working in the field.

DEED has so far established 54 SHGs in 40 villages. In 4 years, Parivarthana has covered 45 villages and set up 52 SHGs. Rajegowda says that when they began, they didn't think these villages would have much capacity to save. "But, we were wrong. The savings in tribal villages is higher than that of rural villages, with a total savings of Rs. 60 lakh," he says.

Basappa Yadawad, Senior Health Facilitator, Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement Organisation (SVYM) who helped form the Mahadeshwara Colony sangha says that SHGs differ from micro-financing institutions in purpose. "Unlike micro-financing, where they arrive on the scene just for money recovery, we provide guidance for holistic development of the village," he says. Also, interest paid on a loan, unlike in micro-financing, doesn't accrue on any institution, but gets divided among the members.

In Mahadeshwara Colony, when rains damaged roads, the sangha wrote to the panchayat officer, under their seal and signature, demanding its repair. On another occasion, members of the sangha took charge and distributed equally, the bricks that arrived for construction of toilets amongst the villagers. "There is high bargaining power, ownership, accountability and responsibility within the sangha, and they can manage even in our absence," he says.

Mandatory weekly meetings are held for all members, where personal and community problems are discussed. "We talk about vaccinations, farming practices, sanitation, etc," says Manjula. "We cannot attend these meetings in a nightie or with uncombed hair. We cannot chew tobacco either. We take the meetings seriously and maintain discipline," adds Neelamma. The members then educate the other villagers.

While all-men SHGs exist, they are few in number. "They don't need the same kind of empowering that women do," says Rajegowda.

Some hamlet leaders are not welcoming of the fact that women are taking up responsibilities and have power. "But this sort of opposition is thankfully low," says Dr. Dennis Chauhan of SYVM. "There's now a sense of leadership in these women. Their husbands treat them with respect and instances of domestic violence have drastically decreased," he says.

Police stations sans women cops

AISHANI SAHA

NANJANGUD: One woman police constable Pavithra R. shuttles between eight Gram Panchayats here, catering to the needs of women and women complainants of all these police stations.

L. Gopala, Assistant Sub Inspector (SI) of Biligere Police Station, one of the stations without a single woman police officer, said that Pavithra is called in to different stations as per the need.

Gopala said, "The two women police officers we had were transferred three months ago. Our superiors have been informed of the vacancies."

"I accompany women and minor girls for medical checkup, I am present when women are arrested and escorted to court," said Pavithra. A woman police has to be present when a woman or minor girl is produced before court.

"Women mainly come to us with domestic violence, land dispute and missing person complaints," said S. Mahadevamma, Police Constable, Hunsur Rural Police Station. This station has four women officers- an SI, an assistant SI and two constables.

A. Subrahmanyeswara Rao, the Commissioner of Police, Mysuru said, "It takes time to fill vacancies irrespective of gender. Depending on the number of vacancies, Amit Singh, the district in-charge of police, appoints the women officers from the pool of officers available."

"If there is shortage of women police officers across the district, then it is reported to the headquarters who then handle it," said the Commissioner.

Pavithra said that stations are lacking in women officers probably because not many women are keen on joining the force. However, Rao said that they generally receive more applications than necessary.

As per the 2017 report of the Bureau of Police Research and Development, stations should have at least four women police officers.

The Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 says that a woman can be arrested only if there is an accompanying woman police officer and only a woman police officer can search another woman.

India's oldest railway bridge

The 284-year-old Kabini River Bridge in Nanjangud taluk was built in 1735 by Dalvoy Devraj. This engineering marvel that began as a passenger bridge to transport carriages was later converted into a railway bridge. Lack of maintenance though, is slowly damaging the structure. | DIVYA SETHU

Tribal schools suffer without resources

TULIKA CHATURVEDI

HUNSUR, NANJANGUD: On the outskirts of the village of Veeranahosahalli, an upper-primary ashram school reserved for the children of the Jenu Kuruba tribe also functions as an Anganwadi centre for the village.

Out of the 62,000 odd Anganwadi centres in Karnataka, only half get buildings of their own; the rest function out of schools, temples, panchayat buildings, and even the homes of Anganwadi workers at times.

"I came here 15 years ago," says Anandi (49), caretaker of the school. "Initially, I was paid only Rs. 500 a month, but I enjoyed cooking for the children so I never thought of leaving," she says. Three meals are served every day as per the Integrated Child Development Scheme, including nutritious food like ragi mudde, sambhar rice, chikki, bananas, eggs and chicken.

Although students of classes I to V can be seen reading and writing English, most do not understand the language. "The students mug up and see it as a means to pass the exam," said English teacher Subbegowda. "They converse in Kannada and Kurumba, so they don't get a chance to practice speaking it anywhere." he says.

The school premises does not have a main gate, and children climb in and out through a broken compound wall, which also means they can leave any time they please. Construction of three additional classrooms has been on for almost two years but work has been intermittent as labourers are hard to source.

"The State government has sanctioned 20 new computers," said Subbegowda, "but we have no faculty to teach them and the laboratory lies untouched." The closest high school is six km away in Nagapura. "It takes me an hour to get here from my home in K. R. Nagar, Periyapatna," said Mathematics teacher Manoranjan.

The majority of the children in Nanjangud's Kalale government primary school (79 boys and 40 girls) belong to the SC/ST communities. Most of them walk or cycle about seven km, from the neighbouring villages.

Private schools on the other hand, are faring better. The Acharya Gurukula Vidyapeetha, an upper-primary private school offering free education boasts of separate toilets for boys and girls, a library with over a hundred books, a playground, and a ramp for disabled children- facilities that aren't common in the district. M. K. Gopinath, its founder says, "we have six teachers currently and hope to soon introduce computer-aided learning."

Efforts from multiple allies have made it possible for children to have dreams. "I can't wait to be a teacher!" smiles 14 year-old Suganthi, as she hops onto her bicycle and gears for the three km ride back home to Kareba form Kalale. She shakes her head to get the stray strands of hair out of her eyes, and nothing seems to be able to shake her determination.

Mulberry farming: A lucrative and empowering alternative for everybody

OMJASVIN M. D.

MYSURU: The Central Silk Board (CSB) and the Central Sericultural Research and Training Institute (CSRTI) here, are empowering farmers and giving a boost to indigenous silk production in the State, by conducting classes in mulberry farming.

Madhu S. (42) of Devalapura village here, who grew paddy, cotton, and sugarcane for 20 years, took up mulberry farming two years ago. "The training classes helped me look into newer farming options and brought me good revenue," he says. 1000 kg of mulberry leaves in one acre fetch him about Rs. 50,000 per harvest. He grows mulberry on two acres of his seven acre land, earning Rs. 1 lakh totally. The rest is used for food crops.

The Regional Officers of CSB inspect the farmer's history of growing crops before issuing license for mulberry farming. Further, the farmers are advised to obtain at least Rs. 2 lakh loan for the mulberry plantation and silkworm rearing shed. The government gives subsidy of Rs. 10,000 per acre. The CSTRI gives Rs. 52,000 for rearing materials, attracting housewives to grow mulberry crops and rear cocoons.

Silkworm cocoons after rearing | OMJASVIN M. D.

M. Basamanni (47) of Uthanahalli village here, a homemaker for 16 years, set up a silkworm rearing shed one year ago. Now, she and her husband pair moths and feed caterpillars with the mulberry leaves from her farm. "We are taught soil maintenance, pre-cocoon and post-cocoon production and pest control techniques," she says.

Basamanni, who feeds the caterpillars thrice a day, said that cocoons are sold for Rs. 600 per kg in the market. Sometimes though, the price dips to Rs. 150 per kg. "Due to overproduction and the silk quality not matching buyer standards, this reduction in price happens," she says. She sells around 200 kg of cocoon per season, fetching her Rs.1 lakh.

Dr. N. G. Selvaraju, Head, Silkworm Division, CSTRI said, "more people must take up mulberry farming if by 2022 we want to end importing silk from China."

Pointing out that Karnataka's temperature (20 to 28 degree Celcius) is ideal for silkworm rearing, he said that outreach programmes and farmers' appreciation *melas* are conducted to bring more farmers into mulberry farming.

Each month, 100 people join the CSRTI training classes. People from Brazil, the Caribbean and African countries have also taken these classes. Farmers are now increasingly investing in mulberry cultivation because of the support given by different institutions, said Selvaraju.

Saving water through micro-irrigation

Drip lines | TANYA KHANDELWAL

TANYA KHANDELWAL

NANJANGUD: The recent shift to micro-irrigation techniques in the region, by rich, small and marginal farmers, is evident in the use of drip and sprinkler irrigation systems at several farms in G. Marahalli village here. Central and State agricultural policies have aided in this process.

Drip and sprinkler irrigation systems are especially efficient in the cultivation of plantation crops- fruits, flowers and vegetables, minimising water loss as compared to traditional surface irrigation.

Shwetha Naganna's husband, who learnt of drip irrigation while working on another farm, set it up on their farm as well. "Before these pipes, a lot of water would get wasted and stagnate in the fields. But now it reaches the roots directly. The whole thing is connected to the borewell," Shwetha said, pointing to the thin, black pipes running across the length and breadth of the field.

With over 50,000 hectares in the district under horticultural crops, drip irrigation is suited to the needs of farmers here. "We have used drip irrigation for around four years now to grow jasmine and *rajanigandha* flowers which we sell in the market, while the coconuts, bananas, tomatoes and other vegetables are meant partly for our own use," said Shwetha.

In general, 80 per cent subsidy is available on drip irrigation for general category and 90 per cent subsidy for SC/ST beneficiary farmers. Announcements in support of micro-irrigation techniques are regularly made in Karnataka. In 2013, the Chief Minister had announced a 90 per cent subsidy on drip irrigation for holdings of all sizes.

According to Arun Balamatti, Senior Scientist and Head at Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Nanjangud, the State's Krushi Bhagya scheme, launched to increase farm productivity through water management and irrigation practices, already incorporates drip irrigation. Krishi Rishi awards given to innovative and progressive farmers are another such encouragement.

"We get subsidy for drip irrigation. Around five acres of our land is inline drip irrigated and saves a lot of water," said Vineeth Revanna, another farmer. To irrigate half an acre of land they used 1000 to 2000 litres of water before, but now they only need around 500 to 700 litres.

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Hunsur farms in a jumbo fix

AISHANI SAHA & SNEHA KANCHAN

HUNSUR: On a balmy morning in November last year, S. Girija (40) woke up to find her crops and irrigation pipes destroyed by wild elephants. But this isn't the first time that wild elephants have made a foray into her four-acre land in Neralakuppe village here.

S. Girija's village is about two and a half kilometres from the Nagarhole National Park. It is one of the several villages in Hunsur where the man-animal conflict has erupted over the past few years.

Chandregowda (50), who has worked as a forest watcher in the region for the past 35 years said that he's seen a rise in the number of animals entering human settlements. "Other than the rail fences in the Neralakuppe B region, which the elephants can easily cross, there are no fences in the area," he said.

The villagers have set up watch-towers on trees close to the farms to keep vigil at night which is when the elephants enter the farms. They use flashlights and crackers to scare them away, said Girija. "Forest Department officials sit by the farm sometimes but there's only so much they can do," she said.

In the November incident, Girija suffered a loss of about Rs. 30,000. "A lot more than money goes into it. The trees take time to grow and we'll have to grow them all over again," said S. Girija.

S. Girija's destroyed farm | AISHANI SAHA

"Crop destruction by animals doesn't fall under our jurisdiction. We are informed of the incidents but the Forest Department handles it," said S. Ramchandra, Secretary, Neralakuppe Gram Panchayat.

Girija has filed more than 10 applications for compensation over the years but most of them have gone unanswered. "It took two years to get a compensation of Rs. 3000 after my two acres of corn were destroyed the last time," said Girija. She said she has filed an application this time but hasn't heard back from the department. "Barely anyone gets compensation here. I might even have to fix the irrigation pipes myself," she said.

The process to get compensation for the crop damages involves the Deputy Range Forest Officer visiting the spot, marking it and sending a report to the Assistant Conservator of Forest. The report is then given to the Deputy Conservator of Forest who sanctions the money, said T. S. Adishesha, Forest Officer, Hunsur Division. In 2017-18, there were 323 recorded cases of man-animal conflict out of which 285 cases involved crop damage by wild elephants. "Out of 285 registered cases, the Forest Department has compensated 243 cases by paying Rs. 11,25,000 for crop damages," said the officer.

"From April to December 2018, there have been 78 registered cases of crop damage, out of which 38 were compensated by paying Rs. 1,64,000. Rs. 3,00,074 has been released for the compensation for all the man-animal conflict cases."

He said that the number of cases have gone down which accounts for the fall in the compensation from the previous year's Rs. 20 lakh, but now, since it is the harvest season, the elephant raids will increase and so will the cases.

Vijay Kumar, Deputy Conservator of Forest, Hunsur Division, said, "There are Elephant Proof Trenches and solar fences on the boundaries in the buffer zone to stop elephants from entering the fields." The Forest Department has Anti-Depredation Camps of four villagers each who are responsible for chasing away the elephants from the field with the help of firecrackers and drums, he said.

Training centre for Adivasis

PRAGATI K. B.

HUNSUR: Adivasi men and women aged between 18 and 35 are picking up vocational skills like tailoring, computer operation and driving, moving away from working as seasonal agriculture labourers on plantations in Coorg and Kerala. The Adivasi Human Resource and Technical Skill Development Training Centre here has so far trained 101 youth.

Started by Development Through Education (DEED), an NGO that works for tribal rights, in association with CIAO KIDS Foundation, a Switzerland-based NGO in January last year, this is the only skill development centre in Karnataka that exclusively caters to the tribal community.

"As per our survey, out of the 5000 tribal youth in and around Hunsur, less than one percent have any employable skills," says Ashok B. R., the training centre manager. Opening the centre to other communities would dissuade the adivasis from joining, he says. "Their way of life, dressing and speaking are different. They are shy and hence afraid to mingle with others," he says. The Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana has centres with similar facilities in the state, but for these reasons, the tribal youth are not keen on them.

Sowmya C. at a tailoring session | PRAGATI K. B.

These residential courses also provide mandatory classes in English, workplace etiquette and entrepreneurship.

"Not all students take interest in the classes. If we put in effort, there is a lot to learn," says Sowmya C., a tailoring student from the current batch. Shashi, another tailoring student, from Motha village in H. D. Kote, says she will start a 'tailoring shop' on her own.

Students from the centre have been placed in Himatsingka Linens in Hassan as computer operators and tailors. Some have found employment in Mysuru and Bengaluru too. The driving students get a five lakh subsidy to buy yellow-board vehicles, which the centre will help them avail. Upon successful completion, all students are given a certificate, tailoring students receive a sewing kit with 15 items to help them start off independently and driving students get help with obtaining their Driving License.

The centre advocates its students to return after earning in the cities. "Our students earn Rs. 25,000 to Rs. 30,000 a month. They are role models in their villages and the youth have begun to aspire high," says Ashok. And yet, he says, the Adivasi students are still adapting to the working hours in an alien place with a different way of life.

The centre needs government support for infrastructure and additional courses.

Faeces no, rangoli yes

OMJASVIN M. D.

NANJANGUD: Today the roads of Haradanahalli here are without any human faeces. The man behind it is its Gram Panchayat Development Officer, M.C. Mahadevaswamy. Demoralised at people using the newly laid roads as toilets, he built 849 toilets in two months with a conviction to make the village open defecation-free.

In 2017, he became the PDO and his Panchayat was in the 45th place in the taluk for toilet construction. The villagers neither knew the importance of hygiene nor toilets. "People of Haradanahalli had been open-defecating for 40 years," he said. To make people understand "open-defecation is against the self-respect of a person", he collected human faeces in his hand and walked to every house. "The conscience of villagers was stirred up seeing someone carry the faecal material in his hand," he said. Soon, villagers joined him in his campaign to dig pits and build toilets. From 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., he went around the streets of Haradanahalli GP, under whose limits are Ibjala, Basapur, Katur, Hallayanapur and Huchchagani. He used loudspeakers in an open-roofed auto calling out young children to join him.

In 20 days, at least a dozen people joined him in every street. "Everyday 100 pits were laid," he said. "The house heads would ask us to leave," he said, pointing that it was the women who welcomed building toilets.

Mahadevaswamy conducted group awareness by giving talks on hygiene, sanitation and self-respect. Home to 12,000 residents, the whole Gram Panchayat enthusiastically participated. Sand was hauled by bullock carts and mini-trucks. They swept the faeces with brooms and used wastepipes to clean the roads. "This was all done by the villagers themselves and nobody else," says Mahadevaswamy. He went on to make the Panchayat 95 per cent open-defecation free. Roads strewn with faeces for the last five years are used now for drying grains and drawing rangolis. "I would tell the people that we've to build toilets for the future generation," he says. Now almost every house in the village has a toilet. "Women of the village face no problem from natural and social vermins," he says.

This work has given the PDO and the village recognition in the district level. "The mindset of rural India on open-defecation can be changed by bringing in constant awareness," he believes.

Cast(e)ing a shadow over Nanjangud

SNEHA KANCHAN

NANJANGUD: 'Yaavu jaati? (Which caste?),' echoed in Geekehalli village in response to an inquiry about Mahadevamma's home. The quest to find her exposed Nanjangud's Geekehalli's grim reality: caste-based bifurcation.

The village is divided into two sections – the Vokkaligas, Kurubas plus OBCs and the SCs. A narrow road separates the sections and the gulf between the two is glaring. While the Kuruba section looks well-off with concrete roads and duplex houses, the SC one, marred by overflowing drains, dung-strewn lanes, thatched roofs and dingy houses, stands in stark contrast.

Today, Mahadevamma, a 45-year-old tenant farmer from the Kuruba caste lives peacefully in Geekehalli's Kuruba section but things weren't always this innocuous.Trouble started brewing for her family when they sold their land in the other section to someone from the lower caste five years ago. "That's when the caste issue came up. The villagers started saying, 'You gave your land to *them*' and started boycotting us," said Mahadevamma.

The family started living like outcasts with the villagers ostracising them allegedly at the behest of two village elders. They lived in a shed on a small site given by Nanjanna, the brother-in-law of the person they'd sold their land to. The site wasn't under their name and Nanjanna asked them to vacate their shed in July 2018. This, she said, prompted her husband Mahadeva to file a police complaint against the village elders.

The complaint, filed at the Biligere Police Station on 30th July, 2018, mentions the family's ostracism and harrassment. It concludes with Mahadeva asking the police to intervene, who visited the village, called the ones mentioned in the complaint and recorded their statements at the station. The case was shut on 1st August, 2018 with their undertaking to accept the family.

The Biligere police said that the case was only regarding some village deity ritual from which Mahadevamma's family was excluded. "Looks like a local tiff between the complainant and the ones mentioned in the report," said Gopal L, Assistant Sub-Inspector and Station House officer (SHO), Biligere Police Station.

"After the police case, they've accepted us. They include us in everything – in the religious rituals and have agreed to register the plot in my mother's name," said Mahadevamma's daughter.

A few kilometres from Geekehalli lies Biligere, another village with about 500 houses and an overt caste-based demarcation. Biligere has two anganwadis, a few metres apart - for the SCs and STs and for the 'others'- upper castes.

"There are two anganwadis because of the population. Kids from this street go to this anganwadi (others) and kids from that street go to that (SC and ST) one," said M. Kempamani, attendant, Biligere Panchayat, pointing to the two adjacent streets.

"This caste thing has been here for a while. The upper caste people used to send their kids only when Brahmins or Lingayats cooked the food. They avoided when someone from the lower caste cooked," said Prabhamani, an anganwadi worker who has been at the "others" anganwadi for the past 25 years. "You know how it is, right?" she added meaningfully.

Toilet a luxury?

AISHANI SAHA

HUNSUR, NANJANGUD: M. Saradhe of Neralakuppe and her neighbours borrowed money to build toilets but are unable to use them as they are kept locked by the Gram Panchayat.

The Central Government had launched the Swachh Bharat Mission which aimed to make India an open defecation-free country and to construct toilets all over the country, especially in the rural areas.

Saradhe, who belongs to the Jenu Kuruba tribe, was asked to pay Rs. 10,000 to build a toilet. She was supposed to get the money back once the toilet was built.

"I am yet to receive Rs. 7,000 more and the toilet that they have built is in the middle of nowhere. They even keep it locked at all times," said Saradhe.

She and her family have to use the farm but they get insulted by the people who own the farm, says Saradhe.

Differing with Saradhe's opinion, R Puttegowda, a farmer, said, "The government has built toilets for us and even for the Kurubas, but they don't use it."

S. Ramchandra, Secretary, Neralakuppe Gram Panchayat said, "We have built toilets and almost all the houses have toilets now so they don't use the open space."

Biligere Village in Nanjangud Taluk had the same story as the other village where some people had toilets and some didn't.

Marishija Gowda (55), a farmer, said, "We don't have money or the space to build a toilet, nor were we given any so my family uses the toilet in my brother's room."

In the same village, V S Shivamurthy (40), who works for the government, has two toilets in his house because they are a family of 11.

In this village almost 90 per cent people have toilets, 10 per cent don't, so they use the field, says M. Kempamani, attendant, Biligere Gram Panchayat.

Speaking on the awareness of using toilets rather than the open space, Prakash S., District Health Education Officer, Mysuru, said, "There have been a number of awareness camps in the villages like Vishwas and Rural Health Sanitation, under which a local body has to monitor the state of health and sanitation in villages."

He added, "These campaigns have been receiving funds under the National Rural Health Mission."

Life is not silky for weavers

ANKITA MARWAHA

MYSURU, MANDYA: Mangala Gowri (35) spends the better part of her day at what is the only pure silk handloom centre in Kodiyala village. She refuses to take a break as paddling of her feet harmonises with the labour of her hands on the silk yarn.

Three to four days of this continuous labour and she'll be ready with a sari which can be sold at Rs. 6,000. Mangala, however, earns only Rs. 300 for weaving one such sari, and manages to earn Rs. 2,000 per month.

The Mysuru royalty used to have pure Mysore silk as a part of their sartorial ensemble back in the day. Even today, silk is worn by the elite as a testimony of their wealth.

Mangala weaving a sari at the handloom | MIFAT NAYER

However, the condition of the weavers and the handcraftsmen, working eight hours a day, is in contrast with that of their patrons. In the districts of Mysuru and Mandya, the silk saris that reach all the other parts of the country are woven either by the government silk weaving factory or the private silk powerlooms and handlooms. In the past 50 years, most of the households in the district have shifted from handlooms to powerlooms.

Sri Lakshmi Handlooms stands tall against this trend to be the only pure silk unit in the village. Currently, the masterji of the unit is training two women on the handloom, Mangala being one of them. "I used to work in a garment factory before joining *masterji* for Rs. 6,000 a month for six years.

However, I developed thyroid and menstrual problems and hence had to leave the factory. The factory is 30 km away and travelling every day with my deteriorating health was a problem," said Mangala.

"Working on the handloom used to be tiring earlier but now I'm used to it. After getting treatment in Mysuru, my health is fine now, and I am planning to go back to the powerlooms," she said.

Jairam (55) has been working at the government silk weaving factory in Mysuru for the last 34 years. "I started here at a salary of Rs. 1,500 a month and earn Rs. 55,000 today," he said.

The non-stop blaring sound of the powerlooms inside the factory fades away in the background for Jairam and his young colleagues as they have grown accustomed to it. The factory has provided them with earplugs, "but we often develop feeble hearing, headaches and shoulder pain," he said.

As the industry is growing, what remains stagnant is the underpaid labour of the hands that produce the silk fabric, exploitation of their conditions, and the ebbing desire of the future generation to carry the legacy of this craftship.

A bitter existence for cane cutters

Children of Marigowdana Hundi, Mysuru | NANDINI PAUL

TULIKA CHATURVEDI

MYSURU: Less than a kilometre from the Marigowdana Hundi in Mysuru is a score of tents sprawled on the side of the main road. Move closer to the bright blue tarpaulin, and you can spot children playing *anna saru*, a game where they pretend to cook with mud.

"If there was anybody to look after our kids in Ballari, we would've left them behind," says Sita Bai, mother of Rakshata (10) and Lakshmi (5). "They come with me and sit on the sugarcane field while we work."

Sixteen families moved to the rural settlement here from the towns of Hospet, Kamlapur and Hampi, at the behest of the Mysore Sugar Factory. These are nomadic sugarcane cutters of the Lambani community, who have been coming back in search of work for the past seven years. "We spend at least six months each year in time for the harvesting season," says Krishna Nayak, father to two sons, aged one and four. "We walk three kilometres to reach the fields and earn around Rs. 500 a day."

The amount is just enough to cover their daily needs, but does not meet the costs of harvesting sugarcane and transporting it to the factories, borne by both the growers and the cutters. The factories function in the dreaded ex-field price system, as opposed to the desired ex-gate price system wherein the sugar factory bears all additional costs of labour and transport.

"Out of the 65 sugar factories in Karnataka, over 30 are owned by MLAs or MPs," says Kurubur Shanthakumar, President of the Karnataka State Sugarcane Growers Association. "They are part of an improper profit-sharing channel and care little for the needs of the farmers."

The Sugarcane Growers Association has been instrumental in raising several related concerns during farmer agitations, such as increasing the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of sugarcane from Rs. 2,750 to Rs. 3,000 per tonne, payment of arrears and procuring a share for the farmers in the by-products of processed cane.

"The factories refuse payment if the harvesting is delayed, or the market demand goes down," says Shanthakumar. "But the farmers continue to cultivate sugarcane as its harvest is more reliable than most crops, say paddy."

"The problem can be avoided if ethanol production in the factories is increased," says M.S. Hattikal, Technical Head at the S.Nijalingappa Sugar Institute, Belgavi. "It would bring more returns to the farmers and also regulate the price of petrol."

Masthamma - the herbal lady of Hunsur

TANYA KHANDELWAL

HUNSUR: Finding Masthamma isn't too difficult, even without an address. Just ask people in Hebbala *hobli* here and they'll guide you straight to her. After all, the hamlet is named after her.

A herbal healer, Masthamma (80) belongs to the Iruliga tribe. She is a household name among the tribals and her medicines find a market in places like Bengaluru, Mysuru, Mumbai, Chennai and Chikmagalur. Knowledge about herbs and their medicinal properties has been passed through generations in her family. "Masthamma haadi!" she exclaims, as she narrates how the place came to be named after her. "It was earlier called Laxmipura. There used to be a big forest here. I cleared this patch and built this house, all by myself," she said proudly. She came to Hebbala hobli with her husband, from the Magadi taluk in Ramnagara district, 55 years ago, after getting a job as woodcutters from the Forest Department.

"My son gets the medicinal plants for me from Ramnagara. We don't have land to grow them," said Masthamma. "I have 100 medicinal plants - the stems, leaves, roots, everything required to make the medicines," she said. Using these herbs and oils, she prepares remedies for ailments like joint pains, skin diseases, menstrual problems and infertility.

"Masthamma has helped around 2000 women in safe delivery," said Sreekant, Director, Development Through Education (DEED), a Mysuru-based NGO that works towards tribal welfare. She was earlier the Vice-President of DEED and is currently one of its board members. He added that the State government felicitated her with the Rajyotsava award for her work.

But due to old age, her eyesight is failing so she teaches her daughter Sivagange how to make the medicines. "My mother used to run around a lot earlier. But now she is growing old and I have started to realise that," said Sivagange. Sreekant added that earlier Masthamma used to travel a lot to popularise herbal medicine.

Masthamma said that collection of the medicinal plants isn't as easy as it once was. But owing to her popularity among local officials, she manages to source the herbs and stores them at home. She receives orders and often has clients who come all the way to her place to collect their orders. "People pay Rs 50 to Rs 100 for the medicine which isn't enough, but I manage to make a living out of it," Masthamma said.

However, she is happy that up until now, she has done good work, helping people in ways even doctors haven't been able to. She takes pride in the good name her work has earned her and hopes to be remembered by that.

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Rain scarce, ryots left high & dry

Depletion of groundwater adds to farm crisis in Salem and Namakkal

DEEKSHA SHYAM & SAURABH SAGAR

NAMAKKAL: Farm land and crops in Salem and Namakkal districts are drying up as farmers have been facing an acute water scarcity in the past one year. Drinking water is equally a problem for villagers.

"With scarce rains this year, I was able to cultivate only 5 acres of my land, said Nachimuthu Karupannan, 35, who has 10 acres at Pachapatty in Salem district. The other five acres remained fallow. I usually make around Rs. 5 lakh from my crops; this year, I could barely make Rs. 3 lakh."

Groundwater in that part of Salem, bordering Namakkal, is already quite low, a problem accentuated by discovery of platinum deposits in the Sittampundi belt. "All our wells are dry," Nachimuthu continued. "I have a borewell on my land, but even that has gone dry. Our sources of water are reducing one by one."

Water in a trickle as the pump goes dry | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

As farming dwindled, agricultural labourers also suffer without work. Ramaswamy S., 49, who worked on 2-3 farms in the vicinity of Kurinjikalmedu, Namakkal, said: "I used to earn about Rs. 5,000 per month during the cultivation season. That, combined with income from other odd jobs, helped me survive. This season, there were no crops for me to cut." One-time jobs were not enough to sustain himself and his family of three. The dry spell meant jobs also drying up totally.

At some places like Pachudayampatti Pudur in Namakkal, villagers do not have enough water even for household needs. "Water from the main bore at Sendhamangalam [2 km away] fills up one of the three tanks in the village every day and there's a street-wise timetable for supply, said Dhanalaxmi Perumal, a mother of two children. "This means that we get to fill water only once in almost ten days. No matter how much water we store, it will never be enough for 10 days."

So people in this village are forced to buy drinking water. "Two private trucks come from the other side of Kolli Malai twice every day to sell drinking water at Rs. 6-8 for 15 litres. Many a time, we have no choice but to buy it," says Malathi Ponnusamy.

"It hasn't rained the way it should in the past year and a half, maybe more," said G. Rajagopal, 62, a landowner at Chettimankurichi, Salem. "Already, water has been in short supply for two-three years with depletion of groundwater and erratic rains in the last year have made matters worse."

A. Murugan(50), a farmer said, "Earlier, we had waterpumps in our village; now my wife travels daily five km to fetch drinking water."

Farmers are at the end of their tether

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

EDAPPADI: "The taller the tower, the farther would stretch the support ropes, destroying not just my land but the holdings around too," said Govindswami Kaliappan (50). He was complaining against the Power Grid Corporation's Raigarh- Punalur 80-kV ultrahigh voltage direct current (UHVDC) project.

Support ropes are meant to erect and hold upright a tower so that workers can climb it easily for further construction.

Karthi Veerappan (34) said, "Ropes have to be pulled and fixed tightly on the lands away from the tower. My land is near Govindswami's land, where a tower is being built, and the ropes have already destroyed half of my land."

According to the Indian Telegraph Act 2013, permission has to be taken from the farmer before a tower is constructed on his land and also from the farmer on whose land the support ropes are to be fixed. But farmers here say no permission was taken from them.

> *"We have stopped the construction in places by removing support ropes."*
> *P. Perumal*

At Edapaddi, tobacco and onions are commonly raised and the crops take a minimum of six months to grow fully. Karthi, who planted tobacco just a month ago, says: "An acre of tobacco is worth Rs 1 lakh and my crop, if cut within another month, would not even be ready for sale."

Following protest by farmers, construction of towers has been stopped halfway through. "We have stopped construction in many places by removing the support ropes. We demand compensation for these farmers as well," said P Perumal, district secretary of the Tamil Nadu Farmers Association.

Paddy cultivation shrinks

SHASHWAT MOHANTY

PACHUDAYAMPATTI: It has been 10 ten years since S. Selvam (60) grew paddy on his six acres of land at Sendamangalam, 2 km from here in Namakkal district. He has been forced to raise crops that require less water, yet more than 4 acres remains fallow.

The last time Selvam and his family saw a "proper" monsoon was 5 years ago, he says. "Growing up here, we could grow whatever we wanted, though rice used to be our staple. Paddy meant a lot of work, but it fetched good money, and we weren't worried. Now, worry is all we have," he rues. "After all, no government or politician can bring the rains, can they?" he laughs

Selvam grows carrot, beetroot, maize, pumpkin, and tomato in his scattered land. For the first ten days of every month, he waters the crops, and then lets them be. "Makes my job easier," he says.

Selvam's two sons have taken to other occupations to support the family. S. Ramesh (33) runs a butcher shop, 2 km from their house, while the younger son, S. Ponnu (26) works in the family powerloom unit.

Less rain, lesser paddy | SHASHWAT MOHANTY

"My husband was forced to open the butcher shop, because we couldn't sustain ourselves on farming with the dwindling rains," said Manonmani (30). She takes care of household chores, but when rains come, the entire household helps with farming.

The Tamil Nadu government used to give the family Rs. 1,000 per month to sustain farming, but it has not received any money for a year now. "The last time something interesting happened here was when a film crew passed by three years ago."

However, the family gets uninterrupted electricity and subsidised fertilizers. "We could use cheaper tractors [rent Rs. 900 an acre], but it does not make any difference as our holdings are small, says Selvam.

Workers also get wrong signals

ANUSHKA DEEPAK & DEEKSHA SHYAM

MALAYADIPATTI: "Last year I hired 10-15 labourers but since this year there hasn't been enough rain I have hired none," says Anandan Raji (44), owner of a 5-acre land.

Adding to the problem of poor rains, farmers have a new concern, arising from the Power Grid Corporation's Project -- towers are erected on vast stretches of farm land and high tension wires run over it. In a chain reaction, agricultural labourers, who get hired only in the season of cultivation, suffer without work.

Koindamma (67) from Kanakkanpatti, pointing to dried up land, said, "Ever since the towers were built, there has been no rain. Farmers don't have any work for us. This is the first time in almost three weeks that I've been called for work."

Earlier, even when the crop prospects were better, labourers didn't get enough wages. Grief is written on their faces, travelling after miles across villages to the work site and still not earning enough to fill their stomachs. "If we work from 8 am to 6 pm, we get Rs 200 per day which is not enough for a 6-7-member family. We can't even afford to buy pulses and rice from the ration shop at times," said Karuppayi (65).

Farm labourers at Malayadipatti | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Walking alongside a dried flat beans field and half-done high voltage towers, Kulandai Gounder (35), whose 12-acre land has the lines running over it, said that only women worked as agricultural labourers as men did other jobs for a better earning.

"2 to 3 years ago, men of the village used to get 100 days of work under the MNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act] scheme but now the jobs are hard to come by here. My husband is physically not well enough to work anymore, so I'm the only breadwinner for the two of us," added Koindamma with a tear in her eye.

Compensations for owners are being promised by the govt but it is turning a deaf ear to the plight of labourers, whose livelihood depends on farm cultivation as well, says Kulandai Gounder, adding, "I feel bad for these women but how do I hire them when I have neither money nor work for them at my disposal?"

People are blaming poor rain in this part of Salem on the high voltage towers. Chitra (28) said, "I have a younger sister married in Kolli Malai (75 km away in Namakkal district) and she tells me that they got wonderful rains this year, whereas our lands are dying of thirst."

Dr. Shanti Sahay, a practising oncologist said, "Working in close proximity to high voltage towers emitting heavy electromagnetic rays can affect the health of the labourers adversely and the treatment can be an extremely costly affair."

Tax defeats social cause of Ashram

SAURABH SAGAR

TIRUCHENGODE: The highly unpopular Goods and Services Tax has not spared even the Gandhi Ashram here, whose sales suffered a loss of Rs. 25 lakh last year, says secretary M. Kumar (58).

The ashram produces, apart from khadi clothes, furniture, incense sticks, neem oil and cake, paper sheet and paper files. Only after much protest was GST on khadi clothes removed, he says.

Soaps, furniture and handmade files are taxed at 18 per cent in the luxury item slab, and agricultural products, at 5 per cent. "Government says that it wants to increase the farmers' income, but here they are taxing neem oil and neem cake. These are used as fertilizers, pesticides by farmers," says Kumar.

Pointing out that Khadi Gramodaya was never taxed before, he says, "We are helping the poor villagers by providing education and employment. If we are taxed, then why not the NGOs?"

Worker at Gandhi Ashram | SAURABH SAGAR

However, government offices, the main source of income to the ashram, continue to buy papers and files from it despite high prices.

In 2017, there was talk by the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Ministry (MSME) to exempt khadi products from GST. Haribhai P Choudhary, Minister of MSME said the matter had been brought to the "cognizance of the GST panel and will soon be sorted out," but so far nothing has been done.

In a mail sent to the GST Department, the problems were highlighted but there was no reply.

Amidst all the odds, small town dad and son dream big

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

EDAPPADI: Maheshwaran (35) is tense. He fears losing the value of his 2-acre land at Chettimankurichi, near here, once high tension wires, cutting through it, start emitting electromagnetic signals.

Under the Power Grid Corporation's mega project, towers are being erected on an extensive stretch of agricultural land from Chhattisgarh to Tirupur. Though officials say proper compensation would be given and that livelihoods would not be harmed, farmers are protesting and asking for the project to be either scrapped or made completely underground.

Maheshwaran's biggest concern is not being able to pay school fee for his two kids. "I send my children to the private school, which is 15 kilometres away from our village, in a school bus, and it'll be very difficult for me to pay their fees if the tower leaves my land barren."

The man, who doesn't know English and has never gone to school, dreams big for his children, so they're never referred to as 'poor kids of a farmer'.

Diwakar and Varsha Maheswaran | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

"I know that speaking English nowadays is a religion, so I want to give my kids the best of facilities for them to be able to speak the language confidently."

His son, Diwakar Maheshwaran, (12) studying in the Kalaimagal Vidhyashram Matric High School here, is alive to his father's concern and goal. "I love speaking in English and my father told me that I might have to shift to the government school nearby as he will not have enough money, after this project starts, to pay my fees."

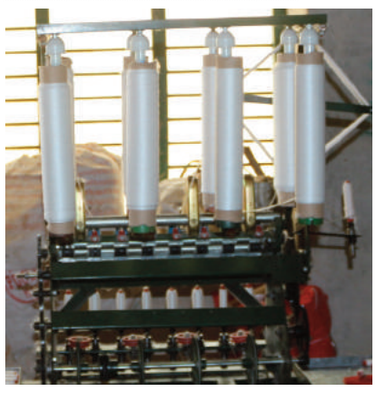
On his passion for the language, he said: "I teach English to all my friends who are studying in the government school. I feel nice when people like you come and talk to us in English and I'm always the only one to answer. I don't want to change my school because I really want to study what I like,"

The Tamil medium government school is just three km from his village.

Maheshwaran's daughter is three years old.

Solar charkha spins out eco yarn

SONAM CHOKI



Solar loom | SONAM CHOKI

TIRUCHENGODE: When the whole world is plagued by climate change, the Gandhi Ashram here, in keeping with its ethos, has taken to the eco-friendly solar charkha, which has also made life easy for workers and increased production.

The solar charkha was started in 2016 to ensure generation of employment, especially for women and youth. The move to switch to solar charkha makes the industry a shining example of sustainable employment generation.

It is a low-cost technology for production of yarn which can easily be undertaken in rural areas. The yarn is used in making handloom cloth.

S. Jyothi, an accountant, said, "With the help of the solar charkha, we can work fast and we are able to produce more goods in a shorter period." Earlier, they made 10-20 pieces of cloth a day using manual charkha, but now they produce 50-60 per day with the help of the solar charkha." In return, an artisan's daily earnings go up from Rs.140 to Rs.350.

However, there's a hitch. Sumathi Ramesh, a solar charka worker at the ashram, says, "As the solar charkha is fully dependent on the sun, we can't use it in the monsoon season. However, our work has become easier," she added.

Kolli Malai's first Hydroelectric Power project: is it a boon or bane?

ANUSHKA DEEPAK & DEEKSHA SHYAM

KOLLI MALAI: Tamil Nadu Electricity Minister P Thangamani and engineers say that the proposed Kolli Hills Hydroelectric Power Project here would not hit the environment in any manner and would generate electricity pollution-free.

The Rs 339- crore 1x20-MW project aims to generate 4000 MW by 2023 and, it is claimed, will also be helpful to farmers as water will be stored in large quantities, thus increasing ground water levels.

The Minister said that 75 per cent of electricity generated in the State was thermal which affects environment but this project would be a boon for the development of the State.

But farmers have their own reservations about the project, for which the minister laid the foundation on December 21, 2018.

Thiruppathi Peramar, head of the Abhinav Gram Cooperative Society, said building a dam for the project would completely block water supply for agricultural land in the hills.

The Mettur dam | WATER RESOURCE INFORMATION SERVICES

Another farmer, Krishnakanth V (36) is wary of quite a different problem. "We will not have an issue as such, but we will face trouble only when the natural flow of water from streams is diverted towards our fields, as we grow crops that do not require much water." He grows silver oak to support pepper plantations around his field.

It is mostly rain-fed cash crops at Kolli Hills, where the precipitation on average is 1,070 mm a year, much higher than the State average of 945mm.

"We get ample amount of rainfall, so because of the dam our group would never get affected. The problem might be for farmers who raise crops on the banks of the Ayyaru river as the land there would be cemented and their trees cut to make way for the construction of the project," said Sivakumar Selvam (25) from Podambelpatti.

As for reports that this project would not only enhance power supply in the State but also recharge the groundwater table, Sivakumar said cementing of the land would block seepage and the water level would reduce, thus hindering the growth of crops.

Page Editors: Anushka Deepak & Deeksha Shyam

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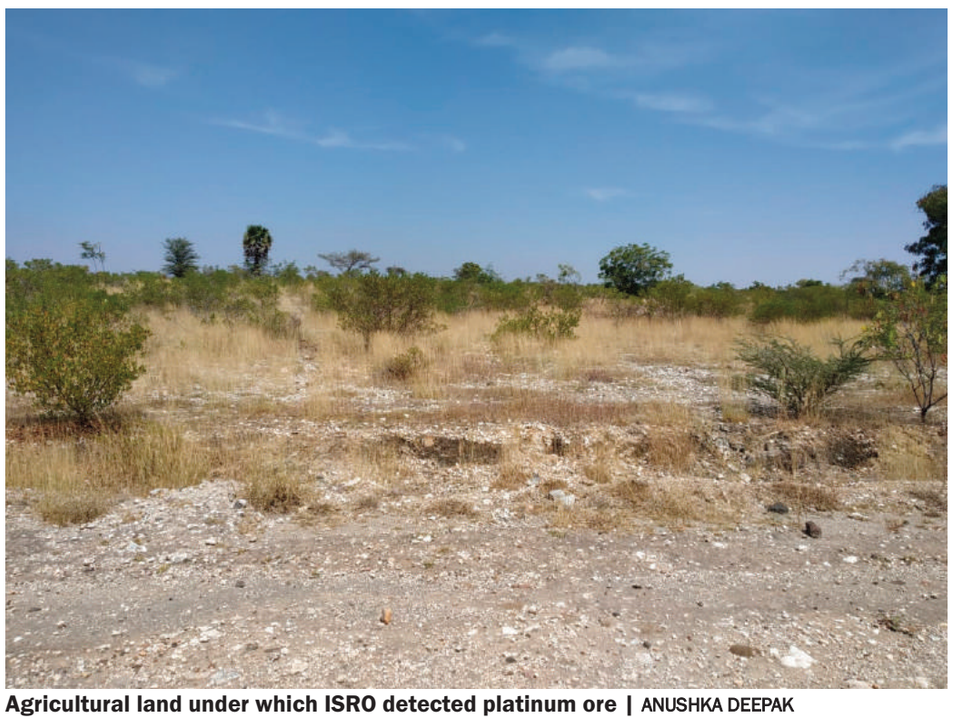
Metal dodges researchers

Govt puts off extraction as ore purification is exorbitant

DEEKSHA SHYAM



Agricultural land under which ISRO detected platinum ore | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

KURINJIKAL MEDU: Plans for extraction of platinum at a Sittampundi mine in Namakkal district have been put on hold as the purification cost is too high, locals said quoting researchers from the Geological Survey of India. Geologists have been exploring a 17-km belt surrounding the village since 2006 for Platinum Group of Elements (PGE), of which they have uncovered huge deposits. They have found that platinum deposits found here are 2,500-2,700 million years old, while most of the find in other parts of the country is only 70 million years old.

Sabareeshwari Vishwanathan, a Pedology graduate and PhD student of Soil Sciences, who is living in Sittampundi, says "Researchers often came here to conduct various experiments. Sometimes, geology students from up north would accompany them. That's where I would get most of my information from."

She observed them coming in Jeeps with core samplers and other tools and dig mini bore-like structures to obtain samples.

Foreign testing of the samples revealed that platinum ore is quite deep underground, and heavy mining would be required to extract it. "All minerals are generally found in ore form, mixed with many substances," Sabareeshwari said. "Purification of the ores is a costly affair, platinum even more so."

Currently, the purification technology is available only in Germany, and the cost of purification seems to be much more than the value of platinum extracted. So the government is reluctant to begin the mining project. "The last group of researchers said the government will begin the extraction process only when we procure the purification instrument for ourselves. Till then, mining for platinum will only make us incur heavy losses."

Traces of PGE - Platinum, Palladium, Rhodium, Iridium, Osmium and Ruthenium – have been found even on many farmers' fields around the area, though the primary location of research has been made off limits.

"This part of the village, Kurinjikal Medu, has been the prime location for researchers to work in," said Pazhaniappan, 74, a small farmer whose land is a few km away. "A 40-square kilometre area of land has been cordoned off for the past 10 years by these scientists. No one is allowed to use this land; we're not even allowed to dig bores, even in this drought-hit times."

On his two-acre land, Pazhaniappan grows groundnut and maize. "I was told that there are platinum traces even on my land," he said. "But it doesn't affect my crops. We have been growing mostly the same for the last decade, excluding last year or so as rains have been scarce."

Sabareeshwai clarified: "These areas have only 30-40 centimetres of soil. The ground is rocky beyond that, so no deep crops are grown."

Platinum curse on villagers

"Mining will hit farmers' land and livelihood"

DEEKSHA SHYAM

Sabareeshwari: PhD student & farm help | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

KURINJIKAL MEDU: All that glitters is not gold. So is discovery of platinum in villages surrounding Sittampundi to farmers. Unlike the government and researchers who are excited, farmers here seem quite uneasy, especially about the prospect of land mining for the silver grey precious metal.

"We've seen on TV how mining works," said Pazhaniappan,74, whose two-acre land is also said to have platinum deposits. "All surrounding areas are destroyed. If they start mining for platinum, the entire Sittampundi belt, maybe even half of Namakkal district, will be destroyed."

Platinum ore, along with other Platinum Group of Elements (PGE), has been found to be lying quite deep underground, necessitating heavy mining for extraction. "When the process starts, soil and debris dug up will be dumped on the surrounding land, damaging it totally," said V. Sabareeshwari, a Pedology graduate and PhD student of Soil Sciences. "Almost 99 per cent of people here are farmers. When mining starts, all of their land and livelihood will be destroyed."

Morever, the residents fear, as the project progresses, they will be forced to migrate to faraway locations. "We've lived in the same place and have done farming on the same land for generations now," said farmer Arumugam. "Our families have settled here from the ancient times. Now if the government suddenly asks us to move out one day, where will we go?"

Arumugam has no faith in the the government providing the villagers compensation or new houses or farmland in exchange. "We've seen what they've done in Neyveli [Cuddalore district]; we can't trust the government to help us out."

Sabareeshwari explained what happened in Neyveli. "Around ten years ago, they [the government] promised jobs to all educated people in the town, but as far as I know, no one has gotten a job even now." she said.. "They even promised to give some money to help the farmers there compensate for damage done by mining, but that hasn't been done either."

Pointing out that there are about 50,000 families under the Sittampundi panchayat, spread across nine villages, she asked, "Even if we were to trust the government, where would it get enough land to settle all of us in one place as well as find a means of livelihood?"

Ever since the news of platinum discovery spread, land value and sales in the area have dropped. "No one wants to buy land that can potentially be destroyed within the decade," grumbled Pazhaniappan.

"I can't take a loan with my land as security, as the bank doesn't want to risk its money. This discovery might be seen as a blessing by the scientists, but for us it is a curse," he said.

In Yercaud Hills, tribals prefer jobs to schools

SAURABH SAGAR

YERCAUD: Nine villages of Yercaud have a healthy literacy rate of more than 78 per cent, according to the district handbook. However, most students of the Hindu Malayali tribe here are not inclined to pursue higher education. For the others who are keen on it, the fee is a deterrent.

Tribal students quit education after Class 10 or 12. D. Suman(18), a student in the Yercaud Government school said, "Most of the classmates, especially boys, left the school after the 10th class. We all find it difficult to pass Mathematics and English exams."

D. Laxmi (15) of class 10, said, "My brother left education after high school. He didn't like to study. Now he makes food in a hotel in Salem." Since the tribals are more physically gifted, they are preferred for hard manual work by contractors and other potential employers. Some of them flock to Telangana to become woodcutters. However, the most preferred destination for the tribals here is Kerala.

Suman said," My brother left the school after class 11. Now he works in Kerala. He climbs coconut trees. It is a major livelihood for us. Three of his friends also work in Kerala as coconut tree climbers."

Despite the benefit of reservation for Schedule Tribes, not one of them from Asambur village works in a government office. The older ones either work on coffee plantations or take to farming.

High fees for private tuition also put off tribal students. Suman said, "Our [government] school teachers teach well, but still we fail. When we think of joining private tuition, the fees are beyond our means."

Though Yercaud boasts some of the best residential schools in Tamil Nadu, it is still inaccessible to local tribals. Laxmi said, "Montfort School is such a big school. I have only seen it from outside."

Ayan Durai(44), a local activist, said" These residential schools charge high fees because they are located in this beautiful Yercaud hill, but it is the local tribals who have preserved this hill, not the schools. Our children should also be allowed in these schools at low fees, or the government should make its schools perform on a par with with these residential schools."

Survival means self-sufficiency

ANUSHKA DEEPAK & DEEKSHA SHYAM

Sivakumar (22) is third-generation farmer | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

PODAMBELPATTI: Self-sufficiency is his mantra. "No point of my being a farmer if I buy things from outside," says the 25-year-old leader of a youth farmer group, Sivakumar.

He believes that a farmer should not depend on outside resources for his subsistence. "A farmer should work with his own produce. We get our seeds from our best coffee and peppercorn beans. Our cows provide us the manure. All our food are the crops we grow on our land."

"If I feel hungry, I will cut it and eat it,"he said pointing to a goat.

Sivakumar, a part-time B.Ed trainee, started farming on his ancestral land along with his mother two years ago. His group specialises in organic farming and soil testing first introduced by G. Nammalvar, an environmental activist and organic farming expert.

The 22 member group at Podambelpatti, all under 30, works under the guidance of Thiruppathi Peramar, head of the Abhinav Gram Society that aims to create self-sufficient villages for tribals on Kolli Hills and help each other in times of need.

"I started the society two years ago with a view to bringing profits to the farmers for their produce. I do direct marketing of spices like pepper and Arabica selection 9 coffee," he said. "The profit on coffee is Rs 25 per kilogram, that is Rs 2,500 per year, which is not enough, so I'm working to increase yield through the age-old organic farming techniques of Nammalvar."

Though there is water crisis in Salem-Namakkal districts, water has never been an issue at Podambelpatti, a village with about 60 families, says Sivakumar. "Out of 100 farmers, only two or three here have wells, as we have natural streams and lakes to give us ample water for our production."

Kolli Malai, surprisingly, recorded 1070 mm rainfall in three spells even in May. Last year it was 1790 mm, much more than the normal annual rainfall of the State, 945 mm.

"We've always grown crops that require less water. We used to grow millets at first, then tapioca and now coffee and pepper. Hundred kilograms of coffee takes one year for production and a 30 to 60-foot bush yields approximately 30 kilograms of coffee. So we usually get a good annual yield, yet the returns are not sufficient," says Sivakumar. "Most of us end up doing odd jobs when there is no cultivation to earn more money."

P. Perumal, district secretary of the Tamil Nadu Farmers Association and member of the tribal society, said, "Earlier the farmers of Kolli Malai were growing food and feed crops but now they're shifting to cash crops. Due to this, they are neither able to use crop for themselves, nor are they getting a good profit for their produce. Hence, their methods of self -sustained living are failing."

Job training goes abegging

AMIR MALIK

KOLLI HILLS: It's a three-hall building serving as a vocational training institute here exclusively for Scheduled Tribes but has only 84 students out of a sanctioned strength of 200.

"In 2017-18, 168 students were enrolled but 50% of them dropped out. People do not want their children to come here because of lack of awareness about technical and practical knowledge," says M V Manohar, Assistant Training Officer, Government Industrial Training Institute.

Other such institutes are at Sankarapuram in Villupuram District, Anaikatti (Coimbatore), Karumandurai (Salem), Jamunamarathur(Thiruvannamalai) and Gudalur (The Nilgiris).

In these schools, where there is no upper age limit, any tribal student can get trained as electrician, mechanic, diesel engine mechanic or in sewing technology.

But all is not well with the Kolli Hills institute, which has been functioning under the Labour and Employment Department since 2013.

"We are giving students free bus passes, laptops and machine to work on. We are motivating them, but they do not seem eager to join us. We are contacting locals also to inspire them to become fit for the requirements of industry," says Manohar.

K Palanisamy, whose mother was an MLA from the Kolli Hills, says, "Government has 7.5 % quota for them in jobs. But the youngsters think that they will earn more here than going outside their area."

But K Gopi (17) and S Venkatesh (18) said they had to go home because there is just one bus available to reach their villages.

Farming hit by flouride contamination, crisis prevails

SONAM CHOKI

SALEM: Since 1984, fluoride contamination has deeply impacted agriculture at Aachankuttapatti in Salem.

A.Simraj (51) said, "We have been struggling to find a solution. We are pushing our next generation into this problem. The State Government must come out with an alternative arrangement to keep us safe." The chronic problem has also affected cattle and crops.

"When animals get affected by fluoride, they lose their appetite which leads to weight loss. It affects milk production.

The animals get weak and can't be put to work," said Prabhakaran (33). The high concentration of Fluoride in the soil has adversely affected their field.

Irrigation burns the tips of the plants. Once the plant develops necrotic spots on their leaves, the damage is irreversible.

Affected cattle | SONAM CHOKI

A farmer friendly market holds out in Namakkal

NOEL A. CORERA

This uzhavar sandhai starts everyday at 4:30am | PRAGYA GARG

NAMAKKAL: Freshness, variety, and farmer and consumer friendly. That's about a surviving vegetable market, Uzhavar Sandhai, here.

Under this project, introduced by the then Chief Minister, M. Karunanidhi, farmers are not at anybody's mercy. Uzhavar Sandai provides them transportation, stalls, electricity, and electronic weighing machines, all for free.

Inaugurated on November 15, 1999 in Madurai, the market acts as a direct link between producers and consumers, eliminating middlemen. "There are 100 such markets across the State," says Shiv Rajan, local administrator of the market.

Located in the centre of the town, the Namakkal market is open from 4. 30 to 10.30 a.m. daily. The timings enable buyers to visit the Anjaniyer temple (where the deity is 18-foot tall), as well as the Namakkal Fort and the Amma Canteen in the vicinity.

Though the town has its own vegetable market, the public prefer this facility, for its fresh vegetables and their variety, says Shiv Rajan.

This Uzhavar Sandai has has 134 stalls, each measuring 5*8 metres. The shops are allotted on the basis of the farmers' card.

"To set up a shop here, we need to show our land ownership papers, and our card. Prices of vegetables are fixed after a meeting with the local administrator, and whatever profits we earn are our own," says Vignesh, who has been regularly setting up shop here for the plast four years.

"The rise of the AIADMK to power led to the decline and mismanagement of the markets, and other markets in this district have shut down," says Shiv Rajan. "This one survives because of its importance."

Risky, irresistible border

SHASHWAT MOHANTY

ACHANKUTTAPATTI: Since December 2017, 17 tribals from Tamil Nadu have been gunned down in the Chittoor and Kadapa regions of Andhra Pradesh, while nearly 10,000 have been arrested on the charge of illegal felling of red sanders, according to their families here near Yercaud Hills.

The Andhra police has termed the deceased smugglers, and alleged that it was they who opened fire at first.

Almost all of the arrested and slain belong to the Malayali tribe. Mostly uneducated, woodcutting is a ready source of employment for them. "Year after year, we have at least three dozen young men ready to cross the the border for this job, since the moment they land there, they start working," says Mani Kandan (38), whose son left for Kadapa earlier during the summer.

However, thanks to a case filed by B. Chandra Mohan, a CPI (ML) leader and fought by Kranti Chaitanya in the Andhra Pradesh High Court, 288 people were freed and a compensation of Rs. 5 lakhs was secured for 20 of them for being wrongly accused of illegal felling.

The locals remain hopeful of the release of the remaining arrested, but Kandan thinks that their return makes no sense. "Even if they are released, they will not and should not come back home; there are no jobs here. At least they are sustaining themselves there, wherever they are."

Page Editors: Shashwat Mohanty & Noel A. Corera

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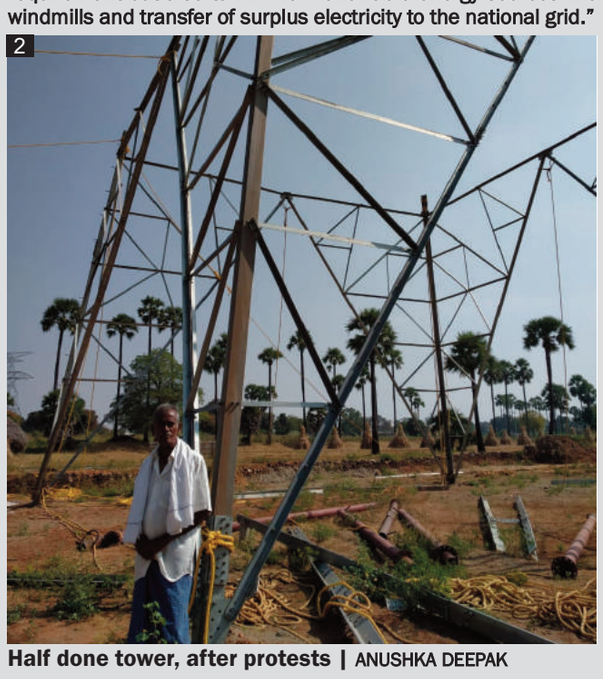
Yet another high voltage struggle in Tamil Nadu

Development versus Environment debate over the Power Grid Corporation's High Tension Wire project

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

It takes a minimum of 90 days to lay the foundation and a year to complete the tower. Claiming that such projects are the need of the hour and TN cannot afford to let them go, K Kasturirangan, chairman of the Indian Wind Power Association, said: "Imagine the power requirement of a town like Tirupur five years later. Such a project is necessary not just to meet the growing power requirement but also to link non-renewable energy sources like windmills and transfer of surplus electricity to the national grid."



Half done tower, after protests | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

30 cents dug up to lay the foundation for one of four legs of a tower | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

SALEM: Tamil Nadu has been witnessing an intense development vs. environment debate of late. After the Sterlite copper smelting plant expansion proposal at Tuticorin and the Rs10,000-crore Salem-Chennai eight-lane green corrdior, it's the multicrore 80-kV Raigarh-Pugalur ultrahigh voltage direct current (UHVDC) project that has sparked vigorous protests by farmers.

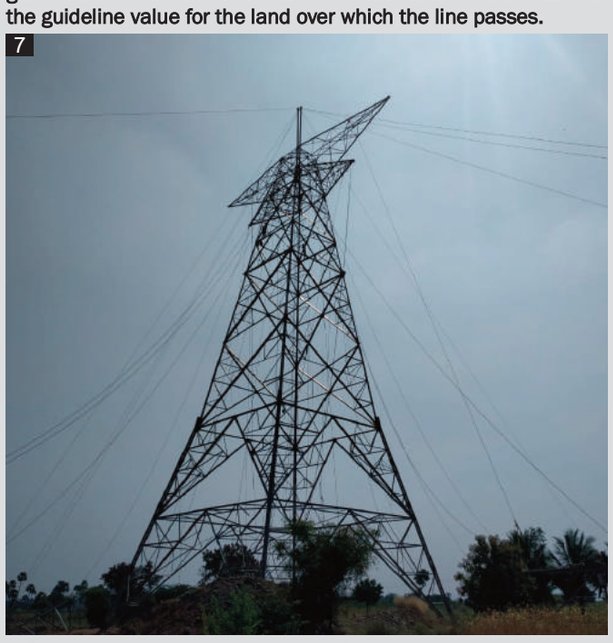
They are fighting to save their land and livelihoods —from cutting down access for Power Grid Corporation workers to their fields to mixing grains in mud and eating it, they've done it all. The Tamil Nadu Farmers Association is asking for the entire project to be disbanded or, in the alternative, made completely underground, like they claim it has been done in Kerala.

However, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Minister has said that the wires in Kerala are of a much lower voltage, and India doesn't have the technology to make this demand possible for such large power projects.

Here are pictures depicting the process of putting up a tower, from the foundation to the ready-for- use state, on agricultural land.

The taller the tower, the longer gets the support rope. Farmers say this affects not only the the land on which it is is being built but also the adjacent holdings on which support ropes are put up. At Eddapaddy village, farmers are fighting to save their tobacco fields that yield Rs 1 lakh worth of the crop from an acre.

As for compensation, the state at present offers 85% of the guideline value on the land where the tower is located and 15% of the guideline value for the land over which the line passes.



A fully built tower on a tobacco farm | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Wind energy producers said the northern and southern parts of the country are not adequately connected yet for electricity sharing. "In summer, our generation has to be sent to the north and in winter we need additional power from there. Tamil Nadu generated about 12 billion units of wind energy. "Three billion units go waste because we are not connected. The government should [however] ensure agriculture is not affected by such projects," Mr. Kasturirangan said.

Tower after completion | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Steel plates for separating tower tiers | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Ropes are pulled to support tall towers | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Farmers come out with a litany of complaints. They say towers on a small plot would mean much of its being used up for the base, rendering the land partially unproductive. The condition that only certain crops and no tall trees be grown on the plot raises livelihood concerns. The farmers, many of whom own small plots and grow coconut trees, are unrelenting. They worry that radiation from the towers may affect agriculture but experts say there are no conclusive studies to prove this.

Tobacco Farm in danger | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

TN Vivasayigal Sangam secretary P Shanmugam said, "Once a tower is erected, the farmer loses his right over the property. Compensation will not be adequate. The state should pay farmers rent for using their land."

Here, toilets are only for bathing

NOEL A. CORERA

NAMAKKAL: "We use toilets mostly for bathing, but not for answering nature's call," says Velu, a worker in a powerloom at Pachudaiyampatti Pudur village near Sendamangalam.

"The government gives us Rs. 12,000 to build a toilet [under Prime Ministe Narendra Modi's pet project, Swacch Bharat Abhiyan]. The rest of the cost is borne by us," he said, adding the structure of the toilets is weak, making it unsafe for for his family members. Hence, they still resort to open defecation, However, the personal assistant to the Namakkal district health inspector claims that at least 80% of villages in the district are open defecation-free, and toilets were built in every home.

"The toilets built by the Central government were specifically engineered to be environment friendly. Each toilet has two pits lined with horse manure, which has bacteria that fertilizes human waste into compost material," he said.

Flawed toilet | PRAGYA GARG

Hence, the toilets do not have the flushing system.

But the villagers think the toilets will be useless without their investing extra money, says V. Manoj, a police constable from the village. "Most of the farmers who cannot afford it build toilets within the given budget, but do not use them."

A rebel, in the cause of nature

SAURABH SAGAR

SALEM: Colourful birds are chirping and a cool breeze makes ripples on the calm water surface in the 58-acre Mookaneri lake. It is dotted with 35 artificial islands with the Shevaroy hills in the background.

The lake is pictureque and pristine. But not so, 15 years ago, when it was one of the most polluted lakes in Salem. It is Piyush Manush, 40, an activist, who brought about the transformation.

S. Mariamma (43), a fisherwoman in the lake, said, "The credit for rejuvenating the lake goes to Piyush. It has given us employment."

The activist said, "We held a long protest for restoring this lake. In 2009, I formed Salem Citizens Forum (SCF) to strengthen the fight. Our 150-member organisation built an artificial island on the lake with donations from Salem citizens. The names of donors have been inscribed on the wall of the bird sanctuary there." .

He has been fighting for environment protection for the past 20 years. He afforested a 150-acre land, now called a 'coop forest', in nearby Dharmapuri in 2009.

Piyush Manush | SUSHMITA PANDA

Calling himself a "green entrepreneur," Piyush sells areca sheet plates to discourage use of thermocol plates, and is designing a biogas plant. "People are spending on religion but not on nature. They should worship nature, not idols," he smiles.

An activist since his collge days, Piyush, brushing his moustache, says: "I spent a day in jail. The college principal filed a false case aganist me of attempted murder. I had protested against a lack of regular classes in college."

Piyush says his inspiration to conserve nature came from Nityanand Jayaraman, a member of the anti-corporate collective, Vettiver Koottamaippu. "Before meeting Nityanand, I had a belief that only 33 per cent of land should be covered with forest to overcome environmental problems. But Nityanand pointed out an actual problem. Laws are being changed to benefit the corporates in their illegal mining loot. The forest needs to be controlled by people, not corporates."

In 2010, Piyush was charged with sedition and jailed for 23 days. His crime? Putting up notices in Salem claiming that residents of Bastar, Chhattisgarh, were forced to live as refugees in their own country. In 2016, he was again jailed for protesting against a delay in the construction of a 650-metre overbridge for pedestrians in Salem city. "I raised questions regarding the delay, the answer came in the form of torture in the lock-up by the police. I was beaten by 30 policemen," he says.

"Piyush started the SCF from ground level. A movement in Salem against greed and consumerism has been started," says D. Selvaraj, 37, a member of the forum.

Cleaning up his light yellow kurta, Piyush heads to the lake, saying, "Solidarity is missing among people. Mettur people will not come for the help of Salem people. But solidarity alone can help us win the fight against environmental damage."

Water, food and electricity still a far cry

SONAM CHOKI

YERCAUD: Inadequate drinking water, no land to live on, lack of proper sanitation, and no electricity either. That's life for all 28 families living at Pudur in Yercaud taluk for the past eight years.

Unsteady home | SONAM CHOKI

The majority of the 200 villagers are wage workers, working on farm land. Dharma Laxmi (51) said, "I'm earning Rs.250 per day and with this amount it is very difficult to sustain. We have have no other place to go. We are relying on the government but they never take any step for us."

People dwell in shanties put up on government poromboke land, and are under constant threat of eviction. Palaniswami (55), said, "Government is not ready to register our house and provide electricity." People use firewood to cook food in the open in front of their shanties, and oil lamps for lighting. They don't have even safe drinking water. Bathrooms are enclosures without doors or taps.

As for toilet, it is an apology for the facility, full of filth and without water supply. The result: open defecation. But it is still a problem at night. N.Mahadur (28) said "people often get bitten by snakes or sometimes encounter boars."

Mahadur added, "We are unable to maintain cleanliness, hence contract diseases. We made a request [to candidates] during the time of elections but they never turned up thereafter."

Lights out for diya makers

AMIR MALIK

NAMAKKAL: They are making diyas but for them there is no light at the end of the tunnel. More than a century-old traditional pottery-making at Ramapudar here is on the verge of dying. Now there's only one potters' family in the town.

Chiragh (lamp), mug, karahi (earthenware), hearth and containers are some of the potters' products the people of the region have been using. May not be so in future, it is feared.

"Our children are not willing to carry on making pottery, since it does not give them much money," says Ratnam Vellalar (62). "It is because our ancestors entrusted us with this task that we have carried on so far."

The business, which was started by Arianna Vellalar, has seen four or five generations.

It has now been reduced to one family of seven households and 30 members.

Seventeen of them are women, who take care of family chores and sell the products. Most of them are now too old to put in labour.

"The government has left us like its abandoned children," said Saraswati Vellalar of the family.

Potter's art | NILADRY SARKAR

"The people remember us only during festivals."

Managing the basic expenditure on an income of Rs 2000-2200 per month is a massive problem, says Punnu Vellalar, 38, a potter.

On his children's reluctance to take up the job, he says, "It is not their fault. Even I do not want my children to take up my profession."

"I want them to do a job somewhere," he adds.

"It will not be possible for anyone to light a diya in any festival here if the government does not wake up and support us," said Ratnam, another potter.

"But we do not want to see the houses of my fellow people engulfed in darkness."

Malathi, Project Director of the District Rural Development Agency, Namakkal, said, "It has not come to our notice earlier. We will approach the family and see if any loan can be provided to them."

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

Vasanty (35), working at cotton powerloom factory, says that she works for lesser pay than men, at Pachudaiyampattipudui, in Namakkal. Women earn Rs.600 for a day's work, whereas men get Rs.800. All workers in her factory work six days a week under an 80-day work programme. "I believe the pay gap exists because men begin work at 4 a.m. and women begin work at 6 a.m."

Page Editors: Anushka Deepak & Deeksha Shyam

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Farmers see red in green corridor

They won't give up land for 8-lane expressway project, say it's redundant

SAURABH SAGAR & AMIR MALIK

AACHANKUTTAPATTI: "There are already four highways, two railway lines and one airport between Salem and Chennai. We don't want new fancy highways," says S. Manivanan (26) of Aachankuttapatti in Salem district, echoing resentment among farmers against the proposed eight-lane green corridor express highway.

The Rs. 10,000-crore project will pass through Salem (36.3 km), Dharmapuri (56 km), Krishnagiri (2 km), Tiruvannamalai (123.9 km) and Kancheepuram (59.1 km).

Once the project materialises, travel time for four-wheelers will reduce to three hours from the existing six hours between Salem and Chennai. However, no two-wheelers, carts or livestock will be allowed in the 70-metre wide and 277 km long corridor.

In all, 150 villages in Dharmapuri, Salem, Tiruvannamalai and Kancheepuram would be affected by the highway, farmers fear. They are against it as it will pass through fertile farmlands and render them useless.

A youth showing proposed highway land markings passing through his fertile fields | SAURABH SAGAR

H. Laxmi (48), also from this village, said, "From my five-acre land, the government wants to acquire two acres. How would I do farming if there is a 70-metre wide highway with no easy passageway? Along with land, I am losing two wells and one rainwater harvesting plant."

On compensation, protesters allege that the government is not giving market value for their land and trees. Manivanan says, "Government said it would give Rs. 3 lakh per acre but the market value is Rs. 10 lakh at the minimum. They set the price for a five-year-old coconut tree at Rs. 5,000, which is 10 times lesser than its actual value."

Ayan Durai (44), a farmer and member of the Movement against Salem-Chennai Expressway, said, "We are not willing to sell our fertile lands to government even if they give us the market value. This land is our only source of employment. It's our livelihood."

Apart from the loss of fertile land, animals in forests are in danger, say farmers. A 10-km stretch of the highway would pass through a reserve forest, hampering movements of animals inside.

At Ariyanur, black flags fluttered, the air tense. M. Valarmathy, an activist arrested for protesting against the project, said, "This is war, either we live or die. We are not going to give up on our land."

"This project is of no use to the farmers. It will destroy their land, forests, hills and water sources. Over 750 agricultural wells will be affected in 130 villages in Tiruvannamalai itself," said L. Alagesan, district committee member of the All India Kisan Sabha.

The corridor does not have any opening to small villages nearby. "Only four-wheeler owners will benefit by this," said R. Rajendran, MLA and central district secretary of the DMK.

"How can it be a 'Green-Corridor' if it devastates hills, agricultural land, water resources, forests and livelihood of the people," asks Kanaklata, owning just an acre of land which, she is worried, will be taken away if the project actuates.

"The farmers who gave their land for the existing four-way lane have not yet received compensation. The others are wary of giving their land again," said Lakshmi Narayan (32), a photojourmalist.

The protesters also complain they were booked under false charges, as well. Ayan Durai said he was put in jail on charges of drinking alcohol and fighting on the streets. "I was kept in jail for eight days. All 13 of us arrested have filed a counter FIR against police. Still, the police have been hounding me for the past four months for organising people against this Expressway."

"It is not that all farmers do not want to give their land. It is just the big farmers. Daily wage labourers working on farms are for the project, thinking that the corridor will bring them more employment," said Babu Suresh, Sub-inspector, CID, Salem.

Teacher shortage in central school

SONAM CHOKI

NAMAKKAL: It's a two-teacher show at the Anganwadi Central School here, for 64 children from pre-class to Standard V.

A. Vasanti (57), who has been teaching in the school for the past six years, said, "it has been very difficult to manage time for different classes and to give them quality education in a stipulated duration. I have to handle two or three classes at a time."

Why is the shortage? Vasanti says inadequate pay is one of the reasons for schools finding and keeping good teachers. The other reasons, according to her, are a change in the public perception of the teaching profession, fear of isolation in an unfamiliar area, and lack of recreation centres in a rural school.

The other teacher, P. Kulalai (39) said that everyone in the community should be deeply concerned at the shortage of teachers in the school because the quality of work would suffer.

"Every day there are six periods and each of us have to take three classes at a time. It is very difficult to take classes separately, so normally we combine classes and sometimes we try to complete a topic within a short time and give students class work so that we find time to teach another class." he added.

In addition to this challenge, the school faces shortage of classrooms, chairs and tables, and most of the students have to sit on the floor. "And it is very difficult for them to focus on their studies in such an environment," says Kulalai.

Also, the school also doesn't have adequate water supply. They have to fetch water from a well 2 km away. There is a handpump in the school but it isn't working.

All the parents want their children to be in a classroom with a highly professional, engaging and relational teacher with good learning environment. But that isn't the case for every child in the system especially in the rural areas. On the issue of the shortage of teachers, the school awaited the government to employ new teachers as soon as possible.

Kids forced to attend combined classes | SONAM CHOKI

An uphill health issue

Disturbing HIV-AIDS prevalance

AMIR MALIK

KOLLI HILLS: This place is an offbeat paradise, say tourism promoters. But it is in the news for all the wrong reasons too.

The Government Taluk Hospital here receives two or three new HIV/AIDS cases every month. "HIV has always been a major disease in the region. It is still not obliterated," says Dr Monisha (26).

The reasons, according to her, are bigamy, polygamy and polyandry prevalent among the tribal population in the hills.

The newly diagnosed persons include people in extra-marital relationships, those who have separated from their spouses and are living with new partners, and youngsters given to premarital sex. The cases recorded in the government hospital do not include those who, making a good income from pepper and coffee plantation, visit private hospitals if they see symptoms of the disease.

Thirupathi Perumal (30), a member of the Abhinav Society which works for farmers' rights in Kolli Hills, said high prevalence of of sex trafficking is also a reason for HIV/AIDS. "All the fancy hotels and resorts in the hills are the real predators. They transport tribal women to the city and women from the city to the hotels in the hills."

Migrants are a good egg

Workers are mostly from Bihar, Odisha

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

NAMAKKAL: Vehicle tyres are washed and people disinfect themselves at the entrance of Sri Krishna Poultry Farm here.

"We take the utmost care as our 50,000 hens which lay 45,000 eggs per day contribute largely to making Namakkal district India's biggest production centre," says supervisor Govindaraju Venkatachalam.

Cheap Labour

In one shift there is one supervisor and five others to collect eggs and feed hens. A total of 60 people work on the farm, all of them from Bihar or Odisha. "We need a lot of labourers but getting them at lower salaries is not possible in Tamil Nadu and so all our workers are Biharis and Odias," said the supervisor.

To get cheap labour, who are specialists in poultry farming, people are approached and brought to Tamil Nadu.

"We have a broker who has contacts in Bihar and Odisha and he gets people to work here. Since most of the experts are from these places, sometimes our raw materials for chicken feed are also imported from there," said Rajesh, a labourer.

There is also a cowshed on the farm with 20 animals, each yielding 14 litres of milk a day.

Wage Disparity

"Men milking the cows with a machine for 10 minutes twice a day earn Rs 8,000 per month. We pick 9,000 eggs per person per day and earn just Rs 225 per day. We work the whole day to feed hens four times a day and we still earn less.

It's really not enough to survive and send our kids to school but the supervisor will definitely increase it over the years," said Latha, 27.

50,000 hens are taken care of by migrants | ANUSHKA DEEPAK

This woman, who came from Bihar when she was 12, said, "I came to Tamil Nadu on a family vacation, we got a job here. I've been here ever since."

Painful experience

"We like staying here and working here but our children also joining the same occupation is painful," said Radha and Shyamu, whose daughters, 12 and 16, are working picking eggs with them.

"However, we feel that earning Rs 225 a day is better than paying thousands for their school fees," they added.

A mission: anti-liquor or entrepreneurship

SHASHWAT MOHANTY

PUDHUPALAYAM: While being rooted to its anti-liquor message, the 94-year-old Gandhi Ashram here has extended its activities to entrepreneurship. It is now home to 750 families, of four or five people each, almost all of whom depend on it for their livelihood. It manufactures and sells textiles, soaps, neem oil, hand-made files, mattresses, steel furniture such as beds and cupboards, and incense sticks.

The ashram was started in 1925 in the tiny village, 92 km from Namakkal, after land was donated by a woman whose husband died of alcoholism. Living up to her request, the ashram to this day actively creates awareness of the ills of liquor.

It was only after C. Rajagopalachari stayed here for ten years did the ashram truly become entrepreneurial. Locals were recruited to build the ashram compound and work on its premises. It started off with cloth weaving using a charkha and moved on to a range of products.

Enjoying good relationship with the Sarvodaya Sangh, which arranges for raw cotton supply, the ashram buys it at Rs 5 a kg and sells woven cotton at Rs. 20 a kg.

"There is a certain prestige in working in the Gandhi Ashram, which isn't available anywhere.

A. Baby has been working here for 15 years | SAURABH SAGAR

Nobody has problems with substance or alcohol abuse, and haven't had it for decades," says A. Baby (45), a single mother, who has been here for 15 years.For the past five years, she has been in the neem segment, manufacturing oil from seeds. Working along side 55 others, she earns Rs. 200 per day. "It's not enough, but we make do with it. My son and daughter pitch in, but had to discontinue their studies."

While women are paid Rs 200 daily, men get monthly wages, averaging Rs. 230 a day, says Baby. The monthly payments system allows men to skip days and yet get paid while women miss out on it."A lot of women tend to miss work often due to family or personal problems, but this is how it has always been," says Baby, adding she won't move to the monthly payment scheme even if offered, since all her purchases and payments are arranged according to the current system she is in.

A contented migrant couple

ASHMITA MUKHERJEE

YERCAUD: Hiring fresh hands has stopped. There are only 10 workers on a coffee plantation here including N. Sekar Ramaiahthevar, 50, and his wife Rajeshwari, 40, who have been employed there for 30 years now.

The couple from Madurai work from 8 a.m till 12 noon on the 65-acre coffee estate at Karugamaram owned by Gem Granites, Sekar earns Rs.300 per day.

Every year their salaries increase by Rs. 500. They are given living quarters by the owner. A house is leased to them free of charge. The company pays them allowances also for medical treatment. Thy have to manage on their own other necessities like food and water.

The couple, who had moved to Salem in 1989, began their work on a daily wage of Rs.17. Rajeshwari works on the coffee estate during the rainy season and earns Rs.250 and at other times she stays home, doing household chores.

Their two children are pursuing college education back in Madurai. The son is studying M.Sc, and the daughter pursues Bachelor of Science in Computer Science. The couple, not fully able to fund their children's education, borrow from moneylenders at an interest of Rs. 2 for every Rs. 100. However, they have paid off all their debts.

Granite mining in Yercaud hills by Gem Granites stopped two years ago. The company has also stopped hiring new hands for coffee plantations owing to poor coffee growth. However, considering that Sekar had been working there for three decades, he has been permitted to continue work.

Workers in the granite factory were migrants, so they returned home after it was shut down.

In another development, youth living around the hill have migrated to bigger cities for studies and work.

Alcoholism begins at home in villages

Addiction rampant among kids between 12 and 17 years

ANUSHKA DEEPAK

PACHUDAYAMPATTIPUDUR: "Don't talk to that kid. He's an alcoholic!" said Vimala, 60, pointing towards a 12-year-old cycling lazily around the village.

A village, already in tears due to severe water crisis for the past few years, is now fighting with the problem of alcoholism among young children aged 12 years to 17 years.

"Older kids bring alcohol from the wine shops and get the younger ones addicted to it," said B. Saroja, a teacher at the village government school.

Wine shops in Tamil Nadu have boards, written in bold words, 'Alcohol shall not be sold to people under the age of 21'. "But I've seen people selling alcohol to teenagers from their homes as TASMAC is too far from our village," added Saroja.

Children from the village collect glass bottles from the garbage, sell them and the money they eran from it is used by them to buy alcohol. "Children aged 12 and above get drunk on the weekends and on Monday, then miss their classes and go to the school to have mid-day meals while creating a ruckus demanding more food and special dishes," said Susheela, 62, mother of one of the high school students.

Older children give the first few drinks free to the young ones and once they become addicted to the alcohol they start selling it too. "The children abuse their parents. A 17-year-old beats his mother every time she tries to stop him from consuming alcohol," added Susheela, pointing at the kids playing with a snake.

"They go to school from Tuesday to Friday, but on other days they get drunk and do things like this."

There are 7 wine shops within a 2 kilometre radius of the village from which the elders and the children buy alcohol. "Even the police is taking bribes from them and not doing anything about the whole situation. It's not just the branded alcohol, people even sell home brewed local alcohol to the kids," said Vimala.

"Though some children are serious about their careers, we can't keep a count of how many children are into alcoholism. It seems as if everyone is into it."

Page Editors: Saurabh Sagar & Sonam Choki

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Divided land and farmers

VIVANESH PARTHIBAN

KOTTAIYUR: Scant rains for the last one year have laid 350 acres of agricultural land fallow in Kottaiyur village and nearby areas making livelihood hard for the farmers.

Thiruvallur, however, is one district in Tamilnadu which has sufficient fresh groundwater in most areas but small farmers can't use it because their lands are fragmented and input costs involved in extracting ground water are high. Sharing the costs would be the solution, but farmers refuse to cooperate among themselves.

Sandiappan(43) is a third generation farmer said that he has never seen such a dip in paddy production before and now depends entirely on allied activities like cow rearing works in nearby company as contract worker seasonally and subsidised food from Public Distribution Shop for his livelihood.

Agriculture is subsistence among many small farmers in Kottaiyur most of whom own 2 or 3 acres of land iwhich yield 20 bags of rice per acre in one season. He said that they have sufficient groundwater, "if it rains for two or three days, then field becomes a swamp because the water table is very high and if you dig 25 to 30 feet you can get water".

Varadhapan(53) who is also a farmer in Kottaiyur said, "the problem among the small farmers is that they have fragmented land holdings in different pockets of the village. If they pump water in one field they have to transport it to another field through some other famers' fields, which they normally don't allow". He said that they tried to convince every farmers through the gram sabha but their efforts were futile. He also said big farmers don't suffer much becuse they have capital to invest in bore wells and their land is not fragmented. He said "Frangmented land also hinders in getting loans".

Apart from seasonal rivers like Kosasthalaiyar, Araniar, Nandi, Kallar, Coovum and Buckhingham Canal there is no perennial river in the district. Since these seasonal rivers are not sufficient, irrigation through tanks, tube wells and open wells is common.The National Agricultural Development Programme (NADP) District plan for Tiruvallur stated that being a coastal district, Tiruvallur has good groundwater sources. It also states that if the rains are plentiful during the north east monsoon and if they use the ground water potential, the farmers might be able to produce two crops per year. Farmers of Kottaiyur have a solution in hand but they have to join their hands.

Sandiappan hoping for a good monsoon this year | VIVANESH

> "If it rains for 2 or 3 days then field becomes a swamp because the water table is very high
>
> -SANDIAPPAN (A FARMER)

Seeds from the co-op not suited for Kottaiyur

N SINDHU

KOTTAIYUR: Crops sown on 350 acres of agricultural land have failed because of the unsuitable variety of paddy seeds provided by the government-run Agricultural Cooperative Society.

The farmers purchased CO 51 and NLR 34449 variety of paddy seeds with a 'high yielding' tag on them from the Cooperative Society on Poondi Koot Road at subsidised rates.

CO 51 paddy seeds sold by the government has a much shorter duration of 105-110 days to mature compared to the traditional varieties. NLR 34449 is preferred because of high yields to the extent of four to five puttis (one putti is equal to 850 kg of paddy) per acre as against three puttis for other varieties. It is also blast resistant, a rapidly spreading disease which stunts the growth and destroys crops.

Varadhapan(53), a farmer, says "The problem occurs because these varieties of seeds are sold without testing on local fields. In a village like ours where we completely depend on the rains, seed varieties like these which do not have deep roots cannot survive for even a short period without rains."

Bapatla variety of paddy seeds which were traditionally used by the farmers have deep roots and can withstand longer periods of dry weather. Sandiappan(43) a farmer, says "Big farmers who own large acres of land do not suffer much as they purchase costly Bapatla seeds from the market. Most of us who own small pieces of land cannot afford these seeds; we buy what is sold at the Agricultural Cooperative Society."

Bapatla rice variety | TIMBAKTU ORGANIC WEBSITE

Officials at the Cooperative, Poondi Koot road, said that the Central government is no longer providing subsidies for the traditional variety of Bapatla seeds. This forces farmers to depend on private suppliers. The seed varieties provided by the government have been tested in labs, they said.

However, the crops in the farms grew only up to two feet and dried up later as the region has not received rains for the past year. Kanaiyaram(60), a farmer who purchased these variety of seeds from the market, says "Due to monsoon failure the fields became a grazing ground for our cattle. Most of us are still struggling to pay back our loans."

Farmers are forced to take loans if they have to purchase seeds from private suppliers in the market. In order to avail of the agricultural loan provided by the Agricultural Cooperative at seven percent per annum, the farmers are supposed to have a patta (a title to a property). Most of the farmers who have leased lands, have to submit a no-objection certificate from the land owners to avail of these loans. Due to lack of proper documentation farmers are forced to take loans from private moneylenders at much higher interest rates of 14-15 percent.

Farmers have to take more loans to purchase fertilisers. Sandiappan says, "The Koot Road Society does not have much stock of the fertilisers at subsidised rates and the few bags that they stock are handed over to big farmers who have political backing."

Kanaiyaram, says "The government keep talking about loan waivers but that does not help farmers like us who are forced to take loans from local moneylenders. Also, the compensation the government releases does not reach us on time and even if it does, it is not sufficient for us to meet the needs for the field."

Equality village falls victim to party conflict

VIVANESH PARTHIBAN

MAPPEDU: Samathuvapuram (equality model village) in Mappedu village has fallen into disrepair following years of neglect by the ruling ADMK as the model was introduced by the opposition (DMK), says residents in Usain Nagar panchayat. The scheme to provide 100 houses to mostly Dalits and scheduled castes and tribes was launched in 1998 by then Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi as an experiment in social harmony. Successive non-DMK governments have, however, failed to maintain the villages making conditions deteriorate which have, by now, become intolerable.

G.Subramani(48) a resident of Samathuvapuram for the past 15 years living since its inauguration said, "Every time ADMK comes to power we get less attention from the municipality regarding maintenance". He said there was constant clogging in the local drainage system which has proliferated the number of mosquitoes making life miserable. He added,"even the Ramki workers (sweepers) who come daily to clean the garbage say this is not our work".

Sarath Kumar (32), another resident from Mappedu Samathvapuram, said it is obvious that a sweeper can't clean a drainage system which clogs daily. He said, "We need a permanent solution to this problem which is replacing the old drainage pipes with new ones". He added, "if you come after 6.00 in the evening you will be afraid to enter two or three streets in Usain Nagar because of the lack of street lights."

Vikram(28), a resident, said, "we completely cannot blame the municipal authority because even the residents throw all kind of waste into the drainage which ends up clogging". He said, "We gave a petition to the Kadambathur block officer but the panchayat clerk showed a copy of a voucher which states that cleaning work was carried out for last two months which came as a huge shock to us". Now the residents of Usain Nagar have lodged a complaint with the panchayat regarding the improper drainage system and the poor maintenance work.

Vikram said, "Even though the MLA of Tiruvallur is from the DMK there is no sign of improvement". "The only thing which improved was the street lights which were installed in some streets of Usain Nagar, but some streets still do not have sufficient lighting", said Vikram. He said, "Nowadays residents of Usain Nagar have adjusted to the problems here and many don't come forward to complain which makes the situation more worse."

How caste tensions stopped a 200-year-old festival

Closed Ponniyamman temple in Kottaiyur | VIVANESH

NARESH SINGARAVELU

KOTTAIYUR: An air of silent hostility prevails in the Kottaiyur village here. The annual Aadi-month festival has not been conducted for the last five years here, owing to a caste dispute between the Most Backward Caste-dominated (MBC) Kottaiyur village and the Scheduled Caste (SC) community living in a separate colony nearby.

"There are two temples in the locality, the Mariyamman Temple which we [the MBC community] use, and the nearby Ponniyamman Temple, which is predominantly used by members of the SC community", said Vijay (27), a resident of the village.

The five-day festival is a 200-year-old tradition, where the deity from the Mariyamman Temple is worshipped at the Kottaiyur village for the first 4 days. "On the fifth and final day, the deity is brought to our colony and we perform our own set of rituals and prayers", said Sadasivam (45), former President of the Kadambattur Panchayat, who belongs to the SC community. It was during his tenure that the dispute happened, back in 2013.

The problem started when people from the Kottaiyur village allegedly refused to bring the Amman deity to the SC colony, said Jayabalu (61), a Dalit residing in the colony. "All the people in the colony filed a case in the Mappedu Police Station after they refused to let us have the deity for a day", he said. Following this, the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), the Collector and the Inspector of the Mappedu Police Station held a meeting with members of both the communities, following which the elders decided to stop the festivities indefinitely, he added.

Traditionally, members of the SC colony worked as agricultural labourers in the village, and also went there to play the Melam, a drum used in funeral processions. "For four years after the dispute, they stopped going for work in the village. Only after the Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) intervened and convinced them to set their differences aside, they started going to work", said Sadasivam.

Asserting his view on the issue, Varadarajan (55), belonging to the Vanniyar (MBC) community, said "They [SC community] tried to stir trouble, we in turn showed our force". This sort of conspicuous caste assertion is especially common among the youth, said Sadasivam. "In fact, five years ago, the fight was started by a bunch of 20-25 year-olds", he added.

Will the festival happen again? Sadasivam was optimistic, "Disputes have happened periodically in the last 2 centuries. But every time, the festival resumes after a gap of 5-6 years, since the elders believe the village won't prosper if the festival is stopped for long". But for now, an uneasy calm prevails in the village.

Age no bar for caste in Kottaiyur

Vijay in his jersey that has Guru's image | VIVANESH

VIVANESH PARTHIBAN

KOTTAIYUR: Vijay and his group of friends said with pride,"Kaduvetti Guru is our leader and there will be no one in Tamil Nadu who might not know him". He and his friends were playing cricket wearing a jersey in which Kaduvetti Guru's image was printed.

Vijay (19) studied Diploma in Mechanical Engineering and is searching for a job. His friends were of different age groups and had similar plans. Kottaiyur village was riddled with caste problems where one could clearly see the identity being established by the dominant caste. "Kottaiyur is dominated by Vanniyars while the Kottaiyur colony has Scheduled Caste population," said Viji (27) a resident of Kottaiyur.

"We just print jerseys with Guru's image to show our loyalty to our leader who has given all his life for the upliftment of our community," he added.

Vijay said, "We play cricket with other village people with this jersey to show our identity and pride".

He said, "Guru has donated a lot to the temple in Kottaiyur (temple which is only meant for Vanniyars) and sometimes even had come for our village festivals".

When asked about the caste name being painted in all water tanks,Kannayaram(53) said, "This is not discrimination or untouchability, it is just that our youngsters paint it to show our identity". Viji said, "mostly these are done by youngsters who are in politics".

Sathasivam(45), former Panchayat leader of Kottaiyur and a resident of Kottaiyur colony said, "many problems in the village is caused by the youngsters who form groups and inflate minor issues too".

When asked about this issue in Kottaiyur colony, many youths refused to answer.

A native of Kaduvetti in Ariyalur, Guru was the son of local CPI leader Jayaraman. He got involved in the movement spearheaded by PMK founder S. Ramadoss in the 1980s seeking reservation for the Vanniyars.

Mr. Guru became one of his trusted lieutenants. While Dr Ramadoss took care of the PMK, the task of mobilising the Vanniyar community in favour of the party was left to Guru who has a great influence in Vanniyar community circle especially in north Tamil Nadu.

He was first elected to the Assembly in 2001 from Andimadam and in 2011 from Jayamkondam. He was the leader of the PMK legislature party during the second tenure. .

He contested unsuccessfully from the Tiruvannamalai Lok Sabha constituency in 2009.

He faced many cases for making inflammatory speeches. He was arrested in 2013 for making a hate speech. Guru (57) died recently in May 2018.

Alone yet fighting: 'NREGA' a blessing for widows

Benefeciaries from left Saroja, Rani and Rani Kannapa | SHIVAYAN

SHIVAYAN ROY

POONDI: In the village of Nambakkam near the Poondi dam, one will come across a group of villagers toiling in the heat at a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) project site.

NREGA provides them with a stable daily income for around six months a year which earns them anywhere from Rs 150 to 220 a day depending on the number of hours they work.

The rest of the year is dedicated to agricultural activities. But the harvest, over the past two years, has been meagre because of poor rains and so, for many of the villagers, the NREGA wages is the only income they make in the year.

Most of the workers at the site are women, some of whom are in their 60's.

Saroja Sampathy (64), Rani Shri Ramani (65) and Rani Kannapa (64) are three women who work on the site from 9 a.m.to 4 p.m. every day. Theyalso have one more thing in common; all of them live alone, and all have to fend for themselves for a day's meal and their medical expenses..

Saroja who lost her husband five years ago to Tuberculosis and was childless said that life, since her husband's death, has been difficult. "My husband was a farmer and I used to help him in the fields with his work"

"I'm too old to be farming alone now and so I'm doing this work to earn a living," said Saroja.

Rani Shri Ramani too lost her husband a few years ago but, unlike Saroja, has two sons, both of whom do not seem to care about their mother.

"My older son is not educated and works as a labourer in villages nearby. He comes over once or twice a year and gives me some money, but that hardly lasts me a few weeks" she said.

Her younger son, on the other hand, isn't involved in any work and is an alcoholic much to his mother's dismay.

Fate has not been kind to Rani Kannapa either. Her husband went missing over 10 years ago and her only son left the village with his wife and children for greener pastures and ever since she too has been all alone.

"Having my son and his family around made things better. Making a living was difficult, but then again having them around for company made things easier." said Rani.

The NREGA project has been a blessing for these women. While they might not be earning a substantial sum from the work they are putting in, it is helping them survive and fight on in a world which seems to have turned blind to them.

Page Editors: Sruthi V and Vivanesh Parthiban

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Abandoned village fends for itself

RIA KAPOOR

BEEMAVARAM: The two sister villages, Beemavaram and Kottaiyur are separated by a stretch of four k.m. They are hardly ten minutes away, but look like different worlds altogether.

There are only seven houses left in Beemavaram | RIA

Administered by the same panchayat and block development office, they present a contrast of differences in the smallest of aspects.

Beemavaram stands aloof, with only seven families collectively forming a village while Kottaiyur is home to more than 200 households. A rough terrain of mud and potholes forms a pathway that runs through Beemavaram while concrete cemented roads adorn Kottaiyur.

"There used to be 50 houses here but now we're left with only seven. Everyone has migrated", said Gopal (75), one of the only 20 residents in Beemavaram.

Beemavaram seems to be completely cut off from the world. Most of its residents are elderly people who're too attached to the place to migrate." I was born here, got married here and I want to die here too", said Chandra (70).

The people of Beemavaram have to walk a minimum of four km to get to the nearest road where they can get transport to travel by. The conditions are worse because most people are old and no one is in a stable condition to take care of the other if things go south.

"Government remembers us only when they want votes", said Chandra, who was infuriated with government officials. "No one wants to give us enough money", she said.

In contrast, Pichakani (55), a resident of Kottaiyur and a worker under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), explains that his village has two buses plying to and from Chennai for regular medical check-ups and other chores.

Most of the youth in Kottaiyur are either students or work with telecom companies. Unlike the hay-stack huts at Beemavaram, the houses here are concrete. There are small retail booths for groceries too.

Pichakani explains that people of Beemavaram do not want to move from the place as they find themselves too attached to it and therefore, because of depletion of resources, their lives continue to be miserable.

"The Block Development Officer (BDO) comes and takes note of both Kottaiyur village and Beemavaram, but the latter is a lost cause and no one wants to invest in it. Their children give them money for their expenses, but it's never enough to rebuild the village. Their entire family has moved on to other villages. There are too many problems to fix in the village," said Pichakani.

Health, forever a concern

NIKEETA GAUTAM

BEEMAVARAM: Panjale, an octogenarian, has been suffering from unbearable knee pain for more than a week after a fall. Left to fend for herself, she is too old to go the nearest hospital, which is about 8.k.m away. Therefore, she carries Amrutanjan (balm for headache and pain) with her all the time to apply when it pains.

In this isolated village, most people cannot access healthcare independently as they have to walk about eight kilometers to reach the nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC), located at Satharai village.

There are seven houses and 20 people in the village. "My son lives in Chennai with his wife and children," Panjale said.

He comes to visit her every 15 days and gives her Rs 200 for expenses.

Panjale, who has been suffering from fever as well, said that her son took her to the Government General Hospital in Tiruvallur a few days ago.

The doctor diagnosed a nerve related issue and said that an operation would be risky. "My pain will die with me," she said while applying Amrutanjan on her forehead.

Gopal (75) has two sons who left the village several years ago. If he gets a health ailment, he calls his son in Chennai who takes two hours to get there and take him to a hospital. If its an emergency, he calls people from the nearby Kottaiyur village.

S. Deivanai (25) is one of the only two young women in the village. Another is her twin sister Valli (25) who cannot speak properly. Her family is uninformed about her health issues.

Deivanai bears the responsibility of taking her family members to the hospital whenever needed. Her parents are in their seventies and work seasonally under the MGNREGA scheme.

"We have no choice but to walk when we need to go to the hospital or the PHC at Satharai," she said. She rarely leaves the village, except once a month, to go the Public Distribution System (PDS) outlet at the Kottaiyur village, which is situated 4 k.m. away, for rations.

Irulas: a life beyond snakes

NARESH SINGARAVELU

SATHARAI: Pushpa, a septuagenarian from the Irular settlement in this village, beams at the mention of their community's deity. "We call her Kanniyamma. She protects all of us, irrespective of where we live", she proclaimed with pride.

The Irulas are a tribal community who are traditionally associated with hunting reptiles, primarily snakes, that were a menace to farmers in various parts of the State. Their livelihood completely dwindled 46 years ago, when the Government of India introduced the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, banning the hunting and sale of snake skins, the primary source of income.

Pushpa holding the snake deity | VIVANESH

"We will never go back to the snake-trade. Snakes are like God to us, we don't want to ever hunt them", said Pushpa.

Today, the Irulas from the Satharai village work as either agricultural labourers, or as labourers at several industrial companies around their village.

For the former, they receive around Rs. 400 for a day's work. For the latter, it is anywhere between Rs. 3000 to 8000 a month, said Gurunadhan (70), a senior member of the tribal community.

Lack of awareness inevitably led to the Irulas neglecting education. Prakash, the founder of the "*Nammal Mudiyum* [We can do it]" Trust, said, "The kids are disillusioned and drop out even before they reach class 10 to go work in small companies as labourers. They don't have the awareness to save money, whatever they make per day, they use it almost completely".

His trust runs several awareness programmes and evening schools to make children from tribal communities such as the Irulas aware of the importance of education, hygiene and cleanliness.

"It is not because they view snakes as God that they've stopped the practice [of hunting]. Even now, if you give them 500 rupees, they will go catch snakes for you, ignoring the law", said Prakash.

Prakash is not alone in his efforts to aid the social upliftment of the Irulas. Romulus Whitaker of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, who has worked towards providing income security for the Irulas for more than four decades, started the Irula Snake Catchers' Industrial Cooperative Society (ISCICS), at Mahabalipuramin in 1978. The organisation employs the Irulas to use their skills to capture poisonous snakes for the purpose of creating anti-venoms.

In addition, he started a sister organisation called the Irula Tribe Women's Welfare Society (ITWWS) in 1986 for Irula women and girls with an objective to provide livelihood and development, in addition to social and economic empowerment to the women and girl children of the community.

"With proper guidance and help from organisations, the Irulas will soon adapt to the necessities of the modern world", hopes Prakash.

An adamant refusal to leave their home and land

NARESH SINGARAVELU

BEEMAVARAM: "When I die, it will only be in this place", proclaimed 75-year-old Gopal, one of the only 20 residents of the obscure Beemavaram village here.

Situated 4 k.m. away from the nearest village (Kottaiyur), Beemavaram consists of just seven households. "It used to have 50 houses several years ago. But almost all the families left one by one to towns with better facilities", rued Gopal, who has been living in the village right from the time of his birth.

Chandra (75) and Gopal, who live in opposite houses, are both relatives of a well-known Tamil film actor. Yet, they are unwilling to leave their village and their lands to go join their family in Chennai and elsewhere. "Why should I abandon my house and my lands and go live with my children?", asked Chandra.

The nearest medical clinic is at the Satharai village, situated more than 8 k.m. away.

Gopal owns four acres of land which had earlier been his source of income. "A few years ago, when I was active enough, I toiled in the fields without any problems. Today, I'm unable to do so", he said. To make matters worse, severe shortage of rains this year had rendered his lands inarable. Gopal and Chandra hence depend solely on what money their children send them.

Their village temple, which is used only once a year, has a desolate appearance. "A few decades ago, the annual temple festival was celebrated with much fanfare, with people from adjacent villages also joining us. Today, we have no such festival", said Chandra. She visits the temple during the Aadi month (around July) and offers prayers.

Beemavaram falls under the Kadambattur panchayat, but is probably the most neglected of the 48 villages that come under it. "If we leave the village, it will practically cease to exist," said Gopal.

Chilli cultivation, the last resort

SHIVAYAN ROY

ATTIRAMPAKKAM: The village of Attirampakam which is situated on the banks of the river Kosathalaiyar was once a region where cultivation of paddy and wheat crops flourished due to easy access to fresh water.

But, insufficient spells of rainfall to store the water available from the seasonal river has meant that the region has not seen enough success in agriculture in recent years.

The farmers of the village have now moved to cultivate crops like chilli, which require lesser amounts of water to be cultivated.

K. Sreenivasan (70) is one such individual who has been forced to shift from the cultivation of cash crops in his 2-acre land to that of chilli which has lower profit margins.

"There is a superstition that one should not leave their land fallow, so I've decided to grow chilli as it requires very little water" said Sreenivasan.

Sreenivasan ends up spending around Rs 50,000-60,000 a year to cultivate these crops and usually ends up with produce of about 1,600 kilos of chilli which he sells at a price of approximately Rs 80/kg which ideally sees him making a profit of Rs 70,000.

"It is difficult to sustain a family of five with the sort of money I make throughout the year," laments Sreenivasan.

Sreenivasan resorted to chilli plantation due to shortage of water | SHIVAYAN

Barriers remain in casteless society

SMRUTI DESHPANDE

MAPPEDU: Not all caste boundaries have been erased in the casteless society known as Samathuvapuram, as the youth wanting to get married to someone from another caste or religion are often met with refusal from the families.

Periyar Ninaivu (Memorial) Samathuvapuram was a scheme introduced by former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi based on Periyar E. V. Ramasamy's idea of social equality.

Under this scheme, the State government in 1998 built houses in various parts of the State that were allotted to beneficiaries from different communities. As many as 145 such colonies were set up.

Sangeetha (21) and Vinod (24) were seeing each other for five years before getting married a year ago.

"Our houses are situated right opposite each other's. I come from a Hindu family and Vinod's parents are Christians. My parents did not approve of my relationship with Vinod and vehemently opposed my getting married to him," Sangeetha said. Vinod's family on the other hand was very supportive of the marriage on the condition that she converts to Christianity.

"I agreed on converting and we got married in a Church but my family did not attend. Later, my parents abandoned the house that we used to stay in and went to stay elsewhere. It's been a year since I last saw them. They haven't even bothered to come and see our first son, Sarvesh," she added.

Sulochana, 28, a Naidu girl got married to her partner, Munuswami, 30, belonging to Schedule Castes (SC) eight years ago.

"I met my husband at Foxconn while working together. We got married without our family's consent. My parents in fact even filed a police complaint against him and his family.

After the police questioned me and asked me to pick one side, I chose my husband," said Sulochana.

She said that there had been absolutely no contact in between the two families for as many as seven years. It has only been a year since the two families sorted things out.

They are trying to come together for the sake of their grandson who is six years old and studying in standard one.

Annual ritual of bonded labour at a brick kiln

NIKEETA GAUTAM

MOVUR: Every night at 12 a.m., R.Ambika (28), a seasonal bonded laborer at the SDM Brick Kiln, wakes up to begin her extremely tedious brick production work, leaving her one-and-a-half year old son sleeping.

Ambika is originally from Viluppuram district, which is 200 kilometers from the brick kiln.

Along with nine other workers at the brick kiln, she places clay into a mould made of wood carefully filling all the corners. Their work involves lifting the mould and stamping the letters "SDM" on the bricks.

Usually, the couple shift to the brick kiln for six months in a year. Their relationship with the employer starts with indebtedness and restricts them with freedom of movement during their stint.

"Two people (husband and wife in most cases) are paid Rs 70,000 in the beginning and have to survive with this amount for six months," she said.

"My husband and I make around 3,000 bricks every night," she said. For every 1000 bricks they make, Rs.500 – Rs.550 is subtracted from the Rs.70,000 that they are paid initially. "We need to work until we make enough bricks to fulfill the amount paid", she said. They have to make about 1,50,000 bricks in the six months they spend working at the kiln.

"The money we get is spent during festivals like Pongal or any small functions at home. We need Rs 1,000 weekly for buying required rations," she said.

Ambika gets just 2-3 hours of sleep each day| NIKEETA

Their work, which begins at 12 a.m. and goes on for eight hours, doesn't stop with the night. In fact, Ambika sleeps for only two to three hours a day. "In daytime, our work is to wipe off any small particles that stick to the raw bricks," she said.

Most of their time awake is spent attending to the bricks. For the six months they stay at the kiln, they can barely think of anything else, rued Ambika.

The raw bricks are dried for six days, and are piled up along with coal at the furnace one day in each week. They collect around 1, 50,000 bricks and bake them in the furnace.

She has two sons. The elder one, who studies in the first standard, stays in his village with his grandparents. "We are not allowed to bring school-going kids to this brick kiln," she said.

They are allowed to go outside the factory only once a week for an hour to get the ration. "Women usually are not allowed to go anywhere; it is my husband who goes to market," Ambika said. "My mobile is the only means of entertainment for me," she smiles.

"Earlier we used to earn enough as we used to do farming during monsoon, but it has been three years since we have had rains. It is difficult to survive on this meager amount. Alas, we are left with no choice" she said.

Nammal Mudiyum, a trust that believes education is the best way out

SMRUTI DESHPANDE

KADAMBATTUR: *Nammal Mudiyum,* [Yes We Can] is a four-year-old Trust founded by A Prakash (38) to encourage youth from oppressed communities to take up education and become independent.

Kanniyamma Nagar is a colony in Kadambattur which contains 27 houses constructed by the State government for the Irula community. The Trust conducts evening classes for children reinforcing what they learnt in school. It also conducts other extra curricular activities.

"Thirty-eight students, starting from standard one to twelve, attend our classes. I insist on getting them here every evening from 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. because, if they are left alone, they will stay at home and watch TV or indulge in catching rats or fighting among themselves which will only worsen conditions in the long run," said Prakash who has been working as a Railway staff for last five years.

The Irulas are an Adivasi community who were traditionally involved in catching snakes and exporting snake skins. The practice had to be ended when the Indian government introduced the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and trapping snakes was banned.

After giving up the practice, they started working as bonded labourers in brick kilns or rice mills and had no place to stay. In brick kilns, to meet the daily quota of bricks, children also were made to work after they reached a certain age.

Four years ago when Prakash started the classes, children ran away at the sight of him and the other four fellow teachers. They had to be given food and gifts to entice them to come and learn new things. "The community does not wear chappals, the Trust gave them chappals to wear and taught them the importance of good health and hygiene."

They don't get any funding for the school, members contribute to it. "Christians traditionally have to donate ten percent (Tithe) of their earnings to the Church. So being a converted Christian, rather than giving the money to the Church, I put it in this work. We don't have any funding from anybody. We look after the children's needs all by ourselves," added Prakash.

Kanniyamma Nagar being an ST society, other castes like SCs or MBCs are not allowed to stay there. But they still come and stay. Relations have been amicable but there are times when the SCs try to dominate the STs. There have been instances where STs who mortgaged their land and borrowed money from the SCs were unable to repay the amount often resulting in the latter taking away the former's land.

One of the achievements has been to educate the youth about the reservation schemes available to them from State and Central governments and this has made a difference in their lives. They have become independent and have started asking for proper housing facilities, a playground and good roads.

"Our aim of teaching the community to take over their own village is slowly coming true. I started this organisation because I have myself gone through rough patches in my childhood but never stopped believing that education can change lives." said Prakash, who belongs to an SC community.

Children often don't go to school because there are no morning meals. They get nothing for breakfast. Most of them end up going to school at 11.30 a.m., have mid-day meal and come back. *Nammal Mudiyum* has taken an initiative to provide them with breakfast so that the children attend all the classes without fail.

Kadambattur records one of the highest ratio of child marriages. Parents tend to marry their daughters off at the age of 13. *Nammal Mudiyum* is making efforts to make parents let their daughters finish their schooling and not marry them before they turn 25.

Page Editors: Naresh Singaravelu and Smruti Deshpande

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Fishy ice, what's the catch?

N SINDHU

PULICAT: Improper packaging and transportation of ice blocks by the ice manufacturers not only fails to serve the purpose of keeping the fishes fresh but also poses a serious threat to public health.

KRK Ice Plant situated near the Pulicat Lake is one of the many manufacturers of ice in the locality.

Water for manufacturing the ice is drawn from an underground bore-well and it takes three days to produce 320 kilograms of ice. Though the water is carefully checked for salinity, the huge pipes that carry water into the main compressor are old and rusted and are temporarily fixed using brown tapes which lead to contamination of water.

The containers in which the ice is stored are corroded and are cleaned only once in three days.

Brine and ammonia coolants which are used in manufacturing ice might lead to serious health hazards if the workers are not properly trained. Binod Kumar, the manager of KRK Ice Plant, says, "Every time there are new employees, it's the old employees who train them." This increases the chances of the workers mixing up the quantities of the chemicals.

A worker hoarding ice for transportation at the KRK ice plant near Pulicat Lake. I SMRUTI DESHPANDE

Transportation of ice blocks in extremely unhygienic conditions adds to further contamination.

The workers at the ice plant handle the ice with bare hands as they are not provided with protective uniforms or gloves. The ice blocks are transported in plastic containers without any cover.

Once these huge blocks reach the retail outlets, they are either lined on the floor or on plastic sheets. They are then broken into eight equal parts using an iron rod and put on to the ice cutting machine which breaks it down into smaller pieces.

These small pieces are then wrapped in dirty ragged sacks or packaged in small boxes which are priced ranging from Rs 50 to Rs 500 depending on the quantity.

Kalasa (32), who owns R.S. Durai and Co, a retailer who sells ice outside the Pulicat fish market says "Our profit completely depends on the fishermen and their business.

If they don't go for work due to some reason we might incur losses from around Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000.

This happens usually during cyclones and rough tides."

During such times he is forced to sell the ice to small hotels or juice vendors at a much lower price.

This can lead to various health risks as the ice prepared for preserving fish is not the same as the one used for soft drinks

Kuppan (40), a fisherman who regularly buys ice from this shop says "Sometimes I am forced to sell my catch at a much lower price as the ice fails to preserve the catch. If there is even a hint foul smell, the price falls."

He is cool in ice plant

RIA KAPOOR

PONNERI: Vinod Kumar (24), a migrant labourer from Jharkhand, works as an 'operator' in an ice plant in Tiruvallur district near Chennai. The ice plant goes by the name of K.R.K enterprises and follows a hierarchy that flows downwards from the owner to the operator and then to the helpers.

The operators fall right below the owner and thus are responsible for taking care of the plant when the owner is not around. Kumar, along with a friend works as an operator in the plant and overlooks day to day functions and assigns responsibilities to the helpers who fall below him in the ladder.

Vinod hails from Jharkhand as do the other nine people who work in the plant. He explains that the job openings are conveyed through word of mouth.

"We're all from Jharkhand because there is no system of recruitment here. If there is a vacancy, we just spread word back at home and bring in new people. The person is then trained for the work."

According to Vinod, who has been staying in the city since 15 years now and also has a family that comprises of his wife and two children(daughter (3) and a son (1)), the operators earn about Rs. 20000 in a month. However, there is no fixed payment and the work is not on a contractual basis.

"The workers work for the time they want to. Then they go back home and we bring in new people in their place." He says. The helpers however, start at a mere Rs. 8000 a month. The money increases as they move on from the training period to actual work.

Vinod Kumar, operator of the ice plant I RIA KAPOOR

The ice plant therefore, survives on recruitment by word-of-mouth where employees bring in other employees and then train them. It would therefore be safe to say that it is a completely employee run organization.

An interesting thing about Kumar is that he loves down south more than his hometown.

"Yahan acha lagta hai. Ghar par kuch nahi hai. Yahan kaam hai, zindagi hai. Ab yahi ghar hai. (I feel good here. My work is here, life is here. This feels like home now)" he says.

The ice that is produced in the plant requires heavy machinery that pose danger to the lives of the workers if they're not shut down within fifteen minutes of an electricity cut. Thankfully, no life threatening incident has happened in the plant till now and the workers are very well equipped to handle if it does.

The ice that the plant produces is used for storing fish and juice and is also used to stop dead bodies from decaying for a short while. The ice is produced by pressing bore well water and Ammonia gas together in boxes under pre decided temperatures. It takes about three days for 320 blocks of ice to be ready.

The blocks are then packed away in large crates that are well facilitated to maintain the temperature for the ice to not melt and are supplied to places of storage and requirement.

Financial strains, workers seek raise

NIKEETA GAUTAM

PONNERI: Rameshwar Singh (50) is the only watchman in the KRK Brothers Ice Plant at Ponneri, and he works throughout the day, and at night.

Out of his monthly salary of Rs 9,000, he sends home Rs 8,000 to repay a Rs. 4 lakh loan that he had taken for his daughter's wedding, in monthly installments.

He sleeps on a straw mat in a room along with eight of his friends at the Ice Plant. A maid comes to cook for them daily.

Jagannath Singh (24) who works on the factory floor also loads and unloads the ice and raw materials here. He is from Kalajharia village in Jamtara district of Jharkhand, and has been working here for the past year. He has pursued an Inter in Arts, but now he has no plans of studying further.

"I have a brother who is studying B.com in my village; I send him money for his fees," he said. Jagannath gets Rs 12,800 in the ice factory, of which he keeps Rs 1,000 for expenses," he said.

Though they are supposed to work an eight hour shift, they have to be prepared to unload and load the ice and the raw materials whenever the truck comes.

The staff is not allowed to go anywhere in a group or even in twos. "If we have to go to the market, only one person can go at a time," he says.

Dhanu Singh (30), a farmer, has a wife and a son back in the village he comes from. "In my village, I used to earn Rs 200 everyday for the labour. Now, as I have child, I came here to earn more," he said. He earns Rs 12,800 monthly.

Jagannath has plans to return to his village in April of this year. "I want to go back to my parents and do a business there," he said. Rameshwar plans to stay on at the ice factory until he has paid off all his loans. "I have not decided when, but I want to go back home now," said Dhanu. The five-year-old Ice-factory hires their workers mostly from Jharkhand state.

"When two workers from here go back to Jharkhand, substitues are ready to come to the factory. We need to hold on," Singh added.

PAINTING PEOPLE

With a wooden plank as his palette and the wall as his canvas, Thennarasan (21), paints portraits of political figures like Ambedkar and Thirumavalavan, on orders. He his now learning to paint portraits of his favourite actors Vijay and Surya in his house. I CHITWAN KAUR

A life wedded to the art of embroidering sarees

SMRUTI DESHPANDE

KOTTAIYUR: As you enter the village of Kottaiyur, if you walk past a few houses in one of the lanes and turn left, you will come to an embroidery unit set up 29 years ago by K.Govind (49) a local entrepreneur.

The unit is equipped with three wooden frames on which are spread blue, pink and yellow sarees of six metres each.

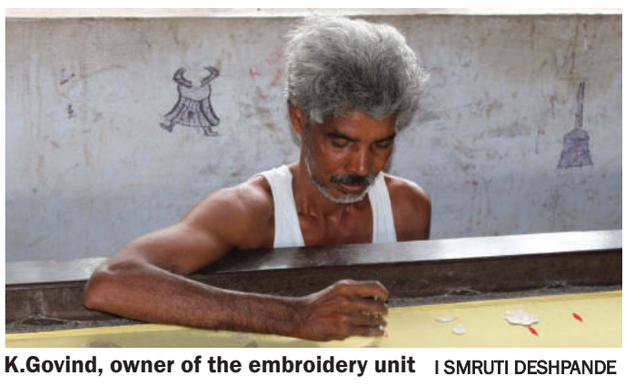
As Govind sits there tracing the yellow saree meticulously with the help of butter paper, chalk powder and kerosene, he says, "tracing a design is the first step in embroidery."

Ten women workers embroider the designs on to the sarees stretched on the frames.

He has been doing embroidery for the past thirty-four years now. He was only 15 when he went to Beemavaram, a nearby village, to learn the art from a man called Velu.

At the time he earned a rupee a day. "I couldn't take up any agricultural work because it was strenuous and was not my cup of tea. So in order to make a living I had to acquire some skill," says Govind.

It takes them 36 hours to embroider one saree. Govind makes a profit of at least Rs. 10,000 at the end of every month. The ten women workers are paid Rs. 250 for a twelve–hour day. Two of the women are his daughters.



K.Govind, owner of the embroidery unit I SMRUTI DESHPANDE

R.Poonamal (35), who has been working at the unit for the last twenty years said, "I have two sons who are both studying at a private school.

I invest the money in their education and am satisfied with this job as I can contribute to household expenses."

She gets a weekly off on Sundays and on days when the material doesn't come for embroidery. Twelve hours of continuous work makes her body ache but every kind of job has its side effects, she said.

The sarees are made to order for a wholesale shop in Sowcarpet, Chennai. He is given the saree and the design by the shop owner.

His investment is meagre as his only expenditure is in buying the decorative material needed for embroidery.

The designs on sarees are typically of Marwari or Gujarati style.

Govind says that he doesn't have any particular criteria for hiring an employee other than the willingness to learn the trade.

"These days youngsters learn on the internet also, so they don't have to wait to develop a skill to start earning," Govind says.

Govind said that demonetisation and GST did not directly affect his business but orders slowed down as a result.

Due to GST the cost of each saree went up so the orders placed by the retailers, initially, were very few.

However, he did not face any problems in his day-to-day life as they had sufficient amount in the bank, but he could see the small time workers in his village going through a rough time.

Alienated in a casteless village

SHIVAYAN ROY

MAPPEDU: Amrita Sharma, a resident of Samatvapuram, the equality village founded under a State Government scheme to promote communal harmony, is unfazed by the issue of caste-based discrimination. The issue of caste has never stopped her from fitting in with the villagers; rather she believes it is a matter of her complexion.

Amrita, fluent in Hindi, comes from the Pyuthan district of West Nepal and has come a long way from home with her husband who is from Dimapur, Assam for jobs that barely sustain their livelihood.

She and her husband shifted to the village two years ago to work at a factory nearby which deals with the packaging of different garments.

Their facial features, complexion and the inability to communicate or comprehend the language according to Amrita are some of the contributing factors to the sense of alienation she and her husband face.

The couple has managed to rent a shabby little property in the village from where their workplace is only a 15-20 minute walk away.

When asked about the legality of renting a property in the area which is directly under a government scheme, Amrita gave way to a smile and said that they haven't faced any problem over the past few years and hopefully won't in the near future.

She though has managed to pick up a bit of Tamil bit by hearing and listening to others speak the language around her.

"It was not easy at first; with time though I have learnt to construct some basic sentences here and there to converse with the locals," said Amrita.

The couple decided to stay in the village as the cost of living would end up being way cheaper than that if they had decided to stay in Chennai. "We had considered the option of staying in Chennai, but that would've involved traveling over forty-five kilometres to work every day and we couldn't afford the cost of living in the city." she said.

According to Amrita the people of the village, in general, have been nice to them but they haven't made much of an effort to help the couple feel at home.

"Now that I've picked up a bit of Tamil, I can ask the locals for some help here and there but no one really comes up to talk to us on their own" she said.

"We do tend to feel quite left out during the time of festivities, Diwali isn't really a big deal here and over the last two years we haven't had the opportunity to celebrate it either," said Amrita.

Amrita said that she would be travelling back to Dimapur with her husband soon and doesn't plan to return anytime soon.Her husband will have to return to work in a few days time and must then become the sole breadwinner for his family.

Where filial obedience trumps opportunities from education

G. Nithya and G. Sangeetha designing a saree | RIA KAPOOR

RIA KAPOOR

KOTTAIYUR: In a corner of the hall that functions as an embroidery centre in Kottaiyur village, sisters G. Sangeetha (26) and G. Nithya (23) work with their father K. Govind who owns the place.

They live wieth their mother, father and younger brother. The youngest sister has been married off. Both Sangeetha and Nithya have completed their B.E. (Bachelor of Engineering) and B.C.A. (Bachelor of Computer Applications) respectively from SIPCOT engineering college near Kottaiyur.

The three of them work at the centre, twelve hours a day and finish sarees by embroidering beautiful designs on them. "Our work starts at seven in the morning and goes on till seven in the evening," says Govind who supervises the all-women work force.

Sangeetha says she grew up seeing her father work and that she feels a close connection to the art. "When I was studying, I would work here in my free time. But it has become a full-time job since I completed my degree." She says.

But despite being educated, both sisters have taken up work at the centre because of the restrictions imposed by their father. "We did not know fashion designing was a course. I was not aware that what I do here is taught in professional colleges and that there are well paying jobs for it," says Nithya.

On the other hand, Sangeetha constantly tries to convince Govind to let them go work in embroidery companies that pay much higher than the mere Rs. 250 that they manage to earn on an average day at the centre.

"We have always tried to convince our father to let us work in companies. But he believes that the money spent on travelling to and from the city can be saved for the future. So, we work here," she says with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

Govind also disapproves of the machinery the companies use for the same work. "It is not the right way of doing it." He says, "The machines westernize everything and there is no real effort."

The centre gets plain sarees and raw materials from wholesale dealers in Sowcarpet in Chennai. "The manager comes with different designs every ten days. We have to make about 20 sarees carrying the same design until the design changes," says Nithya who has mastered the art of embroidery over time.

The embroidery is done using intricate design needles and beads to make designs given to them by the wholesale dealers. It takes three women working through a 12-hour shift to finish one saree.

"Every piece sells for approximately Rs 3000- Rs 4000 and every bit of effort that we put into it, counts." says Govind. He believes that the daughters can do much better under his own supervision than in some MNC doing the same work.

"The money they will spend going to and from the city will cost us much more than what we earn here. And why go for electronical methods when we know the art?" he asks.

Talking about his youngest daughter he adds "She had a love marriage and we somehow managed it. But I have to save up for these two too. I cannot stop thinking about it. Letting them spend unnecessary money is not what I have in mind right now."

The sisters thus work on as if fulfilling an obligation, making do with their low wage.

Page Editors: N Sindhu and Ria Kapoor

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Mangroves help sustain ecology

VIVANESH PARTHIBAN

PULICAT: Mangroves planted by CRëNIEO (Centre for Research on New International Economic Order) checks not only the soil erosion in Pulicat Lake but also sustains the life of 500 fisher folks in and around five villages of Pulicat. A Mangrove rehabilitation and restoration project by CRëNIEO (NGO) was started in 2009 to restore the destroyed mangroves of Pulicat.

A study by CRëNIEO says mangroves in Pulicat started deteriorating in late 19th century and only a few patches were left by the 1990's. Meeran Shah (42) who is the project coordinator for CRëNIEO in Pulicat, has been a resident of Pulicat for the last 20 years. He said, "We started with only a few saplings in Thangal village in 2009; now we have five different sites in Pulicat namely Thangal, Sengalaneermedu, Kattur, Edamani and Kollathamedu". He also added that they planted around 22,000 saplings of Avicennia Marina variety in 2009 but as the survival rate of the plant was only 30 per cent, they started planting Rhizophora Mucronata variety which has a survival rate of around 80 percent.

Mangrove sapling at the CRëNIEO office | SHIVAYAN ROY

He said, "because of a miscommunication between Chennai Corporation and Tiruvallur district, 70 per cent of the saplings were destroyed in the 2015 Chennai floods as the water was flushed though adjacent rivers like Buckingham which drain into Pulicat Lake". In 2016 CRëNIEO, planted 10,000 saplings of Rhizophora Mucronata after the Chennai floods; so now they have 6,000 fully grown mangroves and 9,000 saplings in five different sites. Janagaraj (29), a resident of Vairavan Kuppam in Pulicat said, "artificial mangroves planted provides a good habitat for the shrimps and prawn which has raised our revenue in the last two years". He also said that residents help in digging canals for the Mangroves and also plant the saplings given by NGO in the specific site they allocate. He said, "150 people go to the mangrove site daily in Thangal to hand pick prawns. They normally got 200 prawns per person but after the plantation of mangroves they handpick around 400 prawns daily".

Rama Subramaniam who works on wetland conservation projects at the MSSRF said, "The mangroves planted by the NGO are a good initiative but I think artificial mangroves with number of saplings grown is very low to attract the prawns and shrimps. He said when they grow in coming days given the mangroves start regenerating on their own through seed dispersals, it may make for some change. He said, "both the varieties they plant are taken from Ennore creek and Krishnapattnam which are not alien species; so, they may not affect the ecology of the natural habitat".

CRëNIEO gets funds from the Global Nature Fund in Germany for this Biodiversity Restoration project in Pulicat. Projects for growing artificial mangroves are on in four countries namely India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and Thailand.

Insurance: a boon for poor

SRUTHI.V

TIRUVALLUR: With all the necessary documents arranged carefully in a plastic bag, Lalitha Raja (46) waited in the hospital to get approval of her health insurance. The Chief Minister's Comprehensive Health Insurance Scheme was a boon to her family living on an annual income below Rs 72,000.

"I am using this scheme for the first time. The card is in my husband's name. I have been asked get my nose scanned as there has been frequent pain for the past two months. The doctors at GH have referred me to a private centre in the city for the scan which the insurance covers," said Raja.

Families gets an insurance card after the Village Officer gives an income certificate which is sent to the Collectorate. Members on the family card are eligible for this insurance to a limit of Rs 5 lakh a year.

"The family card number can be used if the person has lost the card. Around 50 people visit the hospital every day with their insurance cover. The insurance covers accidents," said an employee who worked on the insurance desk of the hospital.

"If a woman's name is removed from the original family card following marriage, she has to apply a new family card with her husband. Otherwise, she is not eligible to claim insurance." the employee added.

The scheme is delivered through United India insurance.

"There are fewer people visiting with insurance claims. Most prefer other centres upon their doctor's suggestion. However, we do it partly as a social service," said the owner of a scan centre.

"I was asked to take an MRI. To get this insurance cover I had to go to a private lab in Villivakam in Chennai. Though tiring to travel, but that was the nearest place to get the scan done," said Amudha, a 66 year old.

Fishermen net tourists for livelihood

SRUTHI.V

PULICAT: Das K (62) was moving his fishing net to a safer place in the fish market along the banks of the Pulicat Lake, so that the tourist could comfortably sit in his fishing boat. He knew that it was illegal to take them on a fishing boat and he was likely to get fined if he is caught. But this was his only source of reasonable income for the month.

"We take people till Annamalaicheri or till the bar mouth which is a journey of almost an hour in a motor-powered boat. Boating is available from morning to evening. Since the production of fish is less in the lake due to pollution we depend on boating even though it is illegal." said Das from Naduvoormathakuppam.

"People who go for fishing in the sea can go daily. But those who go for fishing in the lake have restrictions. We go for fishing in turns. So we don't have a regular income every day. Previously we had enough produce even while using a 25mm net. But now we don't get sufficient amount even while using a 10mm net." he added.

"People usually throng the lake when it is the season of migratory birds. But there were fewer migratory birds this October," said Prakash M, a local fisherman.

"Rainfall was a key factor for reduce in migratory birds in October. The migratory birds come from Russia and China. There are local migrations as well. The migratory birds include Flamingos, Painted storks, Pelicans etc. Water contamination also has an influence in reduction of migratory birds," said Dr K Sridhar, veterinary surgeon, Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Chennai.

During the Christmas season in 2011, 21 members of a family died in the lake after the boat which was supposed to carry only 12 people capsized. The ban for taking tourists in the fishing boat is in place from then.

"We keep frequenting the lake to check on this illegal boating. We try to avoid unfortunate accidents. The vigil is strict especially in festive seasons," said a police officer in Pulicat.

"Police vigil is strict during the festive season. Since tourism is not encouraged here, this place is comparatively neat. Boating is not my primary source of income," said Punniyakodi (32), a fisherman.

Pulicat fishermen await working of repeater tower

NARESH SINGARAVELU

PULICAT: Thousands of fishermen living in hamlets around the Pulicat Lake await the electrification of a Repeater Tower that was put up here three months ago to expand the range of their walkie-talkies.

The government provides free walkie-talkies for fishermen with registered boats.

Currently, these have a 5 k.m. range. "By the time we enter the marine waters after crossing the bar mouth, the signal starts fading. The main purpose of the walkie-talkie is for us to receive warnings and updates when we venture out into the sea, but the range is very low", said Moorthy (35), a fisherman. The bar-mouth in Pulicat, opens out to the sea, is about 4 k.m. away from the banks of the Kosasthalaiyar river.

The Tamil Nadu government in November 2017 procured 20,000 walkie-talkies to be distributed among fishermen in the State. To facilitate coverage for these walkie-talkies, the State fisheries department along with Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu Limited (ELCOT) had planned in 2015 to install 17 Repeater Towers in 13 coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, the northernmost tower being in Pulicat.

These towers are 50 metres tall, and can provide an aerial coverage of approximately 30-40 km. However, the tower at Pulicat is yet to receive electrification, and has remains unused for over three months.

Lying unused | VIVANESH

"When asked about this, officials tell us that they have to relay an electric line from Gummidipoondi village, which is about 35 k.m. away", said fisherman Mahendiran (39).

"Although, by the grace of God, no mishap has occurred to us, it still is a nervous affair when we venture into the sea knowing we cannot communicate with our fellow fishermen beyond a certain range", said Mahendiran.

The functioning of the tower will give some much-needed confidence for thousands of fishermen living in five villages surrounding the Pulicat Lake, he added.

"We use the walkies to communicate amongst ourselves to let our fellow fishermen know where we are venturing out for the day. We decide on a common channel and will try to stay within range of each other", said Moorthy.

The walkie-talkies also contain an emergency button that sends a distress signal containing the positional coordinates to an INSAT satellite, which is used to relay alers to the Coast Guard during life-threatening situations, Moorthy added.

The spirit of an entrepreneur

SMRUTI DESHPANDE

PULICAT: For generations together, women have not been allowed to go out at sea and join the men in netting fish.

The reasons usually given are that women are frail and are physically weak to undertake the arduous and sometimes dangerous task of fishing.

M Meena (41), a post graduate continues to do fish work.

"I graduated with a degree in Chemistry and then went on to pursue a Master's degree in Library and Information Science but did not work anywhere," Meena said.

"I chose fish-work over everything else because I knew I could do well in it," Meena said.

If she would have chosen anything over fishing, she would have had to work under somebody, which she didn't want.

"The small fish that come in are dried and given for grinding. They are then fed to the poultry.""" she said.

"I don't have money to purchase the grinding machine and whenever I have tried to purchase one, the banks have thought that I'm setting up an industry, and ask about income tax returns that have to be filed for business."

"Fishing is small scale and does not involve any bank transactions. So they deny giving me a loan," she said.

"Recently, I purchased prawn nets and have employed around 200 fishermen. I work as an agent by purchasing prawns from these men and paying them right away."'

'If, for instance, they come up with a catch of say Rs 1000, I pay them Rs 960. I sell the catch later in the market," she said.

Prawns are caught at night so she works from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. in the morning.

The fact that she is able to employ people keeps her going.

Poverty holds back athlete

Senthuri with her medals and father | RITU MARIA JOHNY

SRUTHI.V

KOTTAIYUR: Senthuri Parthasarathi could hardly lift the bundle of certificates she had won for the various sports events she had participated in. The cups of her victories were stacked in a box over the loft of their single room, unfurnished house.

The only source of light in the drawing room was a zero watt bulb which flickered once in a while. But Senthuri shone like a star. She is a 12th grade student in the Sacred Heart Girls High School in Tiruvallur.

"I didn't realize my potential in sports till the 8th grade. I participated in a sports day event in the school in which I got the first prize for running. From then, I have been active in sports", Senthuri said. "My dad is my support system", she added.

Her dad, Parthasarathi R, worked as a daily wage labourer and mom, Kalaivani P worked for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

"She has got 36 certificates and six medals as of now in different games. I wish she continues her passion for sports", said Parthasarathi.

She has participated and won prizes in inter-school Zonal and District-level running races, in addition to other events.

"I am not particular about the sport I play. My only wish is to manage studies and sports equally. I am not willing to depend on sports as a profession as I am afraid it would affect my family financially," Senthuri said. "If she is interested in sports I am happy to encourage her", Parthasarathi added.

She would be happy to get a sports quota but is yet to know about the procedures involved to get one, she said.

Senthuri has a younger sister who is in the 8th grade. Unlike her sister, she is not very interested in sports. She loves singing and aspires to become a singer someday.

A PLOUGH FOR THE TIMES

K. Sreenivasan, a farmer from the Attirampakkam village bought this cycle plough from a market nearby which helps him prepare his chilli fields. | SHIVAYAN ROY

A man's quest to avert a ticking ecological time bomb

SHIVAYAN ROY

ATTIRAMPAKKAM: Well known for an ancient stone cleaver, discovered by geologist Robert Bruce Foote in 1863, the village of Attirampakkam has since become integral to the study of the Indian Middle Palaeolithic period. The village came under the spotlight once again in 2015, this time though for a different reason.

The Tamil Nadu government back then was planning on giving private establishments the go-ahead to quarry sand from the banks of the seasonal river, Kosathalai which flowed through the settlement.

With the only access to groundwater for the village coming from the river bed, quarrying the area would have ended up turning the village into a semi-arid desert. This had disaster written all over it for a village where people primarily employed themselves in agriculture.

It was then that Vetniveerapandan (40), a native of Attirampakkam, led the movement which would see not only his villagers but people from surrounding areas unite and take a stand against the sand quarrying incident.

Vetniveerapandan, once a member of the Tamil People's Liberation Movement, was supported by numerous other leftist parties in the fight to save the river and the villages situated along its banks.

He managed to get the signatures of all the villagers from the region and filed a petition to the court demanding that their area be exempted from quarrying. Two cases were filed by Vetniveerapandan, one in the Madras High Court and the other in the National Green Tribunal, South Zone, Chennai.

"We protested for days at the site while the cases were fought in the courts. We would under no circumstance let them quarry the river bed," he said.

"The media coverage also played a big role in spreading our word," he said.

He said that he was once offered a sum of 30 lakhs in cash by some contractors to drop the case altogether. "I wouldn't have said yes to any amount in the world, this is my village and these are my people, how can I let them down" he added.

They went on to historically win both cases in 2016. The river bed and the villages were saved from the brink of disaster.

Ironically enough in 2018, the Tamil Nadu government sanctioned funds for a check dam to be built along the same river bed to help the villagers get access to water they can use for irrigation.

"We had been requesting the government for a dam over the past 10-15 years but our requests seemed to fall on deaf ears" he said.

The dam which is still under cosntruction is all set to be completed by the end of the coming month. The villagers in the meantime have constructed wells along the riverbed to get access to groundwater which they primarily use for irrigation.

While the construction of such wells are illegal, the villagers believe that acess to the river water is their birthright.

"It's better that we utilise the groundwater than those greedy corporates" said Vetniveerapandan.

Page Editors: Nikeeta Gautam and Shivayan Roy

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Wayanad sits on shaky ground 33 | Violated nature settles a score with man 34 | Here, tourists are chained to a tree 35

Paddy, banana go down the drain

'Increasing iron toxicity in soil and loss of nutrients stare farmers in the face'

SHRAVANI NELLORE

WAYANAD: In the vast expanse of Achhappan Paliyer's fields at Kaniyambetta village, rows and rows of banana plants stand wilted on a hot day. Another acre of the plantation has just been cleared for the new season starting in February.

"Each acre normally bears around 1,100 bananas but the crop on three of my four acres of the plantation is destroyed," says Achhappan in a heavy tone. His paddy and areca also took a hit.

Pointing to a healthy banana tree in a row that wasn't affected by floods, thanks to its elevation, he adds, "This tree has around ten kg of banana which is yet to ripen. In normal times, bananas would have fetched me around Rs 300, but last year, after the floods, each kg was sold at a mere Rs 10. It was a huge loss for us."

Shaji Alexandra, Principal Officer at the Agricultural Department, Kalpetta, quoting records, says, this district lost 4,942 of the 24,710 acres of banana plantations. "Each 2.47 acre has 2,500 plants and each plant has eight to ten kg of banana, which is sold at Rs 30 per kg. The district has lost nearly Rs 120 crore revenue from banana alone."

As for areca, it is another bitter tale. Looking at his leafless trees, Achhappan says, "While 15 per cent of the 1,500 trees is damaged, a bigger problem is that there will be no yield at all for one year."

Talking about cash crop loss in Wayanad, the Deputy Director of Agriculture for the district, Lovely Augustine, says the brunt of the floods has been borne by perennial crops like areca nut, which take five to eight years to yield. Achhappan, now a retired government officer, says, "I can overcome the loss much more easily than small-scale farmers, who grow only one crop."

Achhappan Paliyer's damaged banana plants at Kaniyambetta village | SHRAVANI NELLORE

Similar to the plight of many paddy farmers in the district, Gopal Krishna's 3.5 acre land at Panamaram was submerged for more than 15 days. "Flood water not only washed away nutrients from the soil but also brought with it one foot-deep mud to our fields. De-silting has become an uphill task."

The paddy fields, which were a source of income for him, have now become only fodder for cows to graze on.

According to Mr. Alexandra, the district has lost 2,965 of the 19,768 acres under paddy due to the floods. Nithin P, Associate Professor at the Kerala Agricultural University says, "After the floods in Wayanad, there are two mounting problems ahead us. One, iron toxicity in the soil is increasing. And the second is the soil that has been stripped off its nutrients. Both have adverse effects on the growth of the plants."

Appachhan (60), another banana plantation farmer from Mechena, lost crops worth Rs four lakh after his two-acre banana plants were submerged for more than a month.

Now, four months after the floods, he is caught in another vortex of problems. Appachhan had started cultivation three months prior to the season, using the damaged crop as manure and now, to his dismay, the crops are showing a declining sign of productivity.

He says, "I couldn't afford to wait till January to start the second round of cultivation.After sowing the seeds in October, there has been no growth at all in some plants. The ones that are growing are prone to Kokkan (a common viral disease affecting banana plants)." Alexandra believes that except destroying the infected crops, there is no way out.

With agriculture letting him down, Appachhan's wife, Rosamma, has gotten into tailoring for their survival, while other women work on coffee plantation nine hours a day. After meticulously inserting the thread into the needle of her sewing machine, Rosamma says, "We received Rs 10,000 last year as flood relief, along with some materials. But it is not even close to compensating what we have lost."

According to Mr. Alexandra, almost Rs 17 crore has already been given to 14,000 farmers. "The amount of compensation is decided on the price range fixed for items. For instance, a bunch of banana will get Rs 100 as compensatory money." A sum of Rs 15 crore- more is required to compensate the remaining farmers, he adds.

Debt, default and death

25 farmers have committed suicide at Kottathara in 3 yrs

CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

KOTTATHARA: At least 25 farmers have committed suicide in the past two or three years in Kottathara panchayat alone, says M.C. Kelu, President of a farmer's co-operative group (samiti) in his ward 13.

"There was another suicide in the village as recently as two weeks ago," he says matter-of-factly. In fact, Wayanad district has the dubious distinction for the second highest suicide figures in Kerala, adds Kelu (69). The commonest reason, he explains, is losing one's crop due to natural calamities and defaulting on loan repayments. That's not the end of it. The loan burden of the dead farmer passes on to the next of kin, who wouldn't receive any compensation either.

> "There was another suicide 2 weeks ago

Kelu recounts the tale of one family at nearby Kambalakkad town, which had taken a loan from the district co-operative bank by mortgaging their house. However, both the farmer and his wife died of cancer, in the space of six months, and it fell to their son to repay the loan. As he was unable to clear it in time, he forfeited the family house.

"We work with chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides, and often eat on the field itself, without properly washing our hands." That's why more and more farmers are falling ill, says Kelu.

Kelu, who owns three and half acres of land, and other samiti members, have their own woes. They face difficulty in securing agricultural equipment, fertilizers and water supply for irrigation.

The government does give them subsidies on purchasing tillers, and renting tractors but it's not enough and they have to pool in their resources to meet their requirements. They got two tillers, one 10-15 years ago and the other last year, but the machines wear out soon and new ones have to be purchased often, says Kelu.

For irrigation, the farmers use water from the nearby Venniyode river, and supplement it "with nature's grace," as Kelu puts it.This often leaves them without any safeguard, especially during June-July, when high intensity southwest monsoon winds destroy their banana crops.

The dog who waited

JOYDEEP BOSE

PANAMARAM: It was an unforgettable ordeal for villagers in the flood-hit Panamaram. While people were rescued a few days after they were marooned, a four-year-old Spitz was not as lucky when a Navy team refused to take her aboard. The dog, named Julie, battling three days and two nights of rainfall, flood and starvation alone on a rooftop, waited for her master, Vinu. He did return to pick her up, but life has not been the same for the dog. She, who lived a cozy life under the care of Vinu and his wife, Biji before disaster struck, has now been reduced to a caged existence.

On August 8, Julie was wrenched away in time when the waters started reaching menacing heights. The terrace of Vinu's house was weak and damp.

Nevertheless, a group of 10 people and the dog remained there for four days, Julie howling like a beagle at the sight of any speck in the distance.

On the fifth day, the Navy arrived but refused to take the dog with the others. With folded hands, Vinu cried, but the raincoat-clad men who had come to save other men left Julie behind.

Three days and two nights later, when the skies looked like clearing, Vinu, wading through five feet of water, returned to the abandoned house, with biscuits and eggs for the starving Julie. The ecstatic dog greeted him, wagging her tail but soon starting to bark woefully as if in mourning.

"She was happy to see me, but I didn't notice something was wrong," Vinu said five months later, standing on the premises of his house under reconstruction.

He said Julie had become extremely violent since that incident, and eventually started scratching and biting people at random. No amount of persuasion and training helped.

Julie now remains in a locked cage at one corner of the site.

Buried tourism back on its feet

DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

KALPETTA: Tourism in Wayanad is regaining its momentum, five months after severe floods engulfed Kerala. This worst-affected district witnessed 242 episodes of landslides, landslips and land subsidence. All tourist destinations were closed for weeks thereafter.

According to media reports, indiscriminate promotion of tourism and encroachment on the banks of the Banasura Sagar dam were responsible for the disaster.

The Wayanad tourism industry faced a loss of Rs 3.1 crore, which includes a two-month revenue loss of Rs 1.35 crore and loss to tempo-travelers worth Rs 13 lakh. A compensation of Rs 2.65 crore was provided by the government to the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), says Praveen Pottammal, Marketing Manager of Wayanad Tourism.

Is this the dam that devoured a district? The earthen Banasura Sagar is lying low in January 2019, five months after wreaking havoc on Wayanad. At right is the Pookode lake | DEEPIKA AGRAWAL & SREENIDHE SIVAKUMAR

He says the number of visitors dropped from 1500-2000 to 600-750 per day. The worst affected destinations were the Pookode Lake (boating), the Soochipara Waterfalls (trekking, swimming), the Kanthanpara Waterfalls (trekking and picnic spot) and the Kuruvadweep Island (water sports).

Moosa Toriki, a shopkeeper at the dam, says each shop faced around Rs 6 lakh revenue loss after remaining closed for more than 20 days in the peak business season. Loss of materials accounted for Rs 50,000, he claims. The number of visitors to the dam fell from 2 lakh to 30,000 per month.

But, "we are back on track now. Since the Christmas week of 2018, the footfall has been increasing," says Pottammal. The DTPC has been carrying out an inter-state drive where 50-60 bike riders rally to promote tourism. The bullet drive in Mysore, Bangalore and Chennai sends out the message that the destination is safe to visit.

"It is a mass campaigning activity. We are also participating in the Traveller Tourism Fair in Andhra Pradesh and Delhi, where we will set up stalls to promote our destination," says Pottammal.

Moreover, the DTPC has come up with an online ticketing system for all tourist destinations. It is preparing new brochures and conducting Business to Business (B2B) meetings with tour operators. It is actively doing social media marketing and website promotion on wayanadtourism.com.

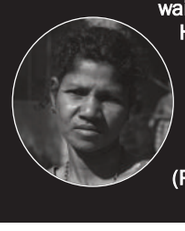
Concurring with Pottammal on tourism revival, Rahul G.L., Assistant Cashier at the Banasura Sagar dam, says: "The footfall is back to normal now with the help of the DTPC promotions." The destination was closed for three weeks after the floods, hampering revenue from shops, an exhibition hall, boating and horse riding, Rahul adds.

Moosa reopened his shop during Eid. "Government gave compensation of Rs 10,000 per shop but our loss is in lakhs," he complains. However, he is confident that the New Year looks promising.

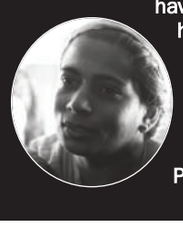
But an exhibition hall guide, Biju, fears that tourism in the area is still vulnerable. "Even slightly heavy rainfall will get an orange alert now, which will draw away tourists." The water level rose to his chin after the Bansura dam shutters were opened up to 90 cm. Water flow rose to 22 lakh cubic litres per second. "The experience was horrible," he recalls.

> "On August 8, the rains were so bad that Sugandhagiri was cut off from the rest of the State. Next day, TV stopped working. We stepped out only to see mud and stones being tossed towards the house with water. The makeshift house of people living near us was completely destroyed.
>
> – K Rajan (67), Sugandhagiri

> "Our tiller (machine used to cut crops) was completely destroyed in the flood. We gave it for repairs but nothing could be done. We can't afford a new one. We are waiting for government help. How can we buy a Rs 12,000 machine when we earn Rs 350 per day?
>
> – Yeshoda Shankaran (Paniya), Panamaram



> "My husband has been paralysed from the hip for a long time. Since then, I have been working alone to make a living. I have three children, and on top of that the havoc caused by the floods has now led to our kitchen getting washed away.
>
> – Rahinath Yusuf (34), Panamaram



RESILIENCE

Deluge can't drown faith

JOYDEEP BOSE

"And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it." Matthew 7:27

PANAMARAM: The floods came upon God's Own Country and washed away a part of Mani. Sitting on a collapsing rooftop with 11 others, trying to survive the deluge, the 60-year-old had only the name of his Lord and Saviour in his mind, and a copy of King James' Bible, torn to shreds but clutched tightly in his hands. The catastrophe, Mani believes, was a test of faith.

Born into a Christian tribal family in Kottayam, Mani A.C. was baptised soon after, taught the ways of the Church and tutored early on in his life by a priest.

At 16, a prospective fortune brought him, along with his mother, to Wayanad district where they settled on a piece of land within the tribal colony of Panamaram village.

When floods hit Kerala in August 2018, Wayanad was one of the worst-hit districts in terms of devastation. "The water took most of our home away. The furniture, stove, a lot of our farmland, poultry and cattle were all gone. It left behind a broken home, with sunken floors and spoiled appliances," Mani said strolling across his fractured house.

"But if that is God's will, then so be it," said the regular to the Panamaram Church, 2 km away. Mani recalls that on August 13, he had gone to a local store, wading through two feet of water, to buy candles, match boxes, and sugar.

It had been raining incessantly from the night before, and by the time he returned, water had risen to eight feet within two hours.

Quickly gathering his family, including his 90-year-old mother, Mani managed to climb to the rooftop. It was a long wait, watching the rain pour, the torrent rage, the wind bang their house and the waters swell, as desperate neighbours joined them on the rooftop. "I thought I was going to die. All I did was pray," he says.

On the seventh day, help arrived, and all of them were rescued.

Five months later, Mani stands on the premises of his house, broken but not defeated, his faith stronger than ever. From the damp balcony wall, Jesus in a newly hung portrait raises his hand in assurance. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of mankind.

From submerged mud to safe 2 BHK

CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

PANAMARAM: The floods submerged the makeshift house and the single mother was at her wits' end. "Water had reached the roof. The kitchen was completely destroyed," Chitra KKV (36) said, recounting the August 8 floods in Wayanad district. As the mud-brick house, where she and her daughter Ashwini Shivan (15) lived, was built on encroached land near the Panamaram river, the daily wage earner couldn't claim any relief from the government, leaving her despondent.

A few days later "a man came to survey our houses." That was an unexpected turnaround and the end of her housing woes. Thanks to a benefactor, Chitra is now in a 560-square feet, two BHK house, with cement fibre board walls, and clay tiled roof at Panamaram. "This house is God's gift for us," she said.

"Thanal Villa," a block with 16 houses built by a Vadakara-based NGO, Thanal, has accommodated some of the worst-hit families in the area, those who cannot avail themselves of any social security measure.

Chitra and Ashwini, who moved into their new home in October last year, expect to get the property deed (Adharam) within six months. Earlier, they stayed at a relief camp at the Panamaram Government High School, where Ashwini is a student in class 10.

Chitra's eyes glimmer with hope when she talks about the girl: "My daughter, she studies well. She aspires to become a teacher. She finds Science and Maths difficult, but does well in the rest of her subjects."

How was she separated from her husband? When Chitra was five months pregnant, her husband abandoned her. Since then, she has brought up Ashwini by herself. "I was honest with my kid. I told her the truth about her father. I never thought of marrying again." Her eyes welled up as she recalled painful memories from the past, "The last I heard from him was when he was in Kanyakumari."

But Chitra has put her past behind her. She works on a coffee plantation, picking beans, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., six days a week. She walks the 4-km stretch to work and back. Under an NREGA programme (Thozhilurappu), Chitra earns Rs 300 a day. Her income is deposited directly into her bank account, although with a 2-3 month delay.

Her worry now is how she will afford Ashwini's school fees for classes 11 and 12. Currently, the school charges Rs 500 per year from her as a 'PTA fund.' "It's free education for Adivasis, but we don't get that benefit as we are Thiyyas [an OBC]."

Page Editors: Anshita Bhatt and Chhavianshika Singh

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Will land regain coffee aroma?

Farmers despair of floods washing away soil nutrients

SANAL SUDEVAN

KALPETTA: "Ponnu vilayam mannu etha, Ponnu polle kakkanam, Maana ariyam paani edutha munne eriyam koothre (Here is the soil to sow gold, protect it like it's gold, you should know your soil and work on it, we can move forward friends)."

This famous Malayalam folk song may no longer be applicable to Wayanad -- where agricultural land used to produce tonnes of coffee, tea, pepper, cardamom and paddy – what with soil nutrients getting washed away in the August 2018 floods.

K. Rajan (67), from the Kurichyar tribal community, seems to be aware of what is in store for him. The organic farmer, who has been cultivating coffee, pepper and cardamom on his five-acre land in the Sugandhagiri hills, says: "Last year, the production was one tonne of coffee and 10 kg of pepper. But this year, due to pralayam (cloudburst) I doubt if I will even get a hundred kg of coffee."

This kind of Pralayam is something they have never seen in their lifetime, say locals. Out of one kg of beans, only 50% can be used for production normally. So this year, it will be hardly 50 kg of coffee, says Rajan.

K. Rajan drying coffee beans under the sun outside his home in Sugandhagiri hills. Is that possible next year? He is not sure. | VARUN VASUDEVAN

Even as he spreads beans on a tarpaulin to dry under the sun, he is nostalgic about the past when he sold coffee and pepper to other States. "Till last year, I made a profit of Rs. 75000-1 lakh, after deducting labour cost and other expenses, from my sale earnings of Rs. 3.5-4 lakhs. My produce used to go to cities like Kochi, Bangalore."

Rajan's wife Thangamani, 58, said: "The land has lost its nutrients and it is impossible to cultivate coffee again. Now we have to work as wage labourers as farming will not help us earn our livelihood."

At Kurichyar Mala that experienced the largest landslide in Kerala, the situation was more devastating with loss of not only agriculture but also houses.

Meekutty Umma (70), a mother of eight children, says with a heavy tone, "I had one acre of coffee plantation which was destroyed in the landslide." She stays with her son-Naufar (33), who works as a labourer at Kalpetta. "My elder son Ashraf (50), used to work on our agriculture land."

Animal menace

While the deluge was recent, one problem at Sugandhagiri has always been wild animals destroying the crops. Fearing this, the farmers have been chopping off their own crops.

Brijesh P.G. (35), another organic farmer, who belongs to the Kurumal tribal community, says: "On January 2 this year, a wild elephant destroyed my banana and coffee plants." He pointed to a field where a wild deer, without showing its face, was feasting on his coffee and banana around 11.30 a.m .on January 5.

Waiting for compensation

Adding to farmers' woes, no compensation was forthcoming for crop loss, says Rajan. "However, we have received Rs.10000 as temporary relief for damage to our houses from the government."

Kunhiraman K (62), a Kurichyar tribal, says "We have given the application to claim our losses but nothing has progressed for the past five months."

Speaking about compensation, Shaji Alexander, Principal Officer, Agriculture Department, Wayanad, says: "We are continuously receiving applications. We expect to compensate all farmers before March 31, 2019. Till now, we have disbursed as much as Rs. 60 crores as crop loss compensation."

Mr. Alexander showed documents for disbursal of compensation so far.

For coffee (without insurance), the compensation is Rs 100 per plant, and with insurance, it is Rs 350. For pepper (without insurance, it is Rs 75 per kg and with insurance Rs 200. N.C Prasad, President, Pozhuthana, Gram Panchayat, says, "We are processing losses case by case."

Idle pump house adds to misery

CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

KOTTATHARA: The floods have come and gone, after having caused large-scale destruction of crops.

Now the farmers are confronted with a new worry: a looming drought as water has drained within days of the deluge an dno other means of getting water supply..

There would have been a way out here had a NABARD-sanctioned pump house built in Ward 13, meant to provide lift irrigation for 500 acres of land in this panchayat, been functional.

But even after three years of construction, the project is in limbo because the electricity board hasn't given it power supply yet.

The reason: its demand for a new transformer has not been meant, say locals.

Cheriachan, an executive member of the local farmer's co-operative group, had leased his land for the pump house project about three years ago.

However, now Cheriachan says he "wants no part in this deal", and has returned the money he received for the transaction to the panchayat.

The pump house has been built on the banks of the Venniyode river. It has three motors, each worth Rs. 25 lakh.

With the construction, the total cost of this project comes to about Rs. 3 crore, says Ramunni Nair, a high school teacher who owns two paddy fields on either side of the river.

A private van driver and a volunteer working for an organisation at Kalpetta say repeated pleas by locals to their MLA, C. K Saseendran of the CPI (M), to make the pump house operational, have gone unheeded

According to the driver, the authorities have not been listening to their pleas and they keep saying, "We'll look into it," the driver adds.

Nair has another complaint. Before the construction of the pump house, water from the Venniyode benefited farmers on both sides of the river.

However, now fields on only one side can be irrigated.

Because of this, Nair says he has been able to grow only one crop of paddy for the past couple of years, down from two.

The mountain threw up rocks

Worst of the 47 landslides in district

DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

VYTHIRI:"There was a loud noise in the morning. Water started gushing out of the mountain, bringing with it sludge. Trees crashed and were rolling down along with rocks," said Abhisha, 30, about the largest of the 47 landslides, in Wayanad district, that occurred in Kurichyar Mala hills at Melmuri on August 9, 2018.

The fleeing woman, who lives near the scene, said she also saw the carcasses of three animals and damaged electric posts. The landslide happened at 10.30 a.m.

The root of the problem

Suma T.R. a social scientist based in Wayanad, said Wayanad has steep slopes which were earlier covered with rainforests. Some of these were cleared during the British era to establish plantations for cash crops. This hampered the continuity of forests, and became cause for the landslides. For, the roots of these plantations have a single layer and are not strong enough to withstand the pressure of rain water. On the other hand, rainforests have different plants and different layers of roots, she explained.

"We need to build policies on land use system and cropping pattern. We should avoid monocropping," Ms. Suma suggests, adding that public awareness should be created to avoid landslides in future.

Five months after the incident, Abhisha's family is yet to get over the shock. Her sister-in-law Aishwarya said, "We fear what the next round of rainfall will bring. There hasn't been a destruction like this in the past 40 years."

The family, which immediately ran to a shelter camp and stayed there for 15 days, complained that the broken panchayat water pipeline to its house had not been fixed yet. "We have now put a hose in the stream coming from the mountain to draw water. Often, the stream dries up and we have to ask for water from houses nearby," says Abhisha. Nor has her family received compensation of Rs 10,000 announced by the government. N. C Prasad, Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat President said, "We are trying to fast-track the compensation process and finish it by March 31."

THE BIGGEST LANDSLIDE: Kurichyar mala, scene of the worst-hit landslide in the district, lost six hectares of land during the August 2018 floods. | ARIF C

Wayanad sits on a shaky ground

Massive rainfall weakened marshy land, says expert

SHRAVANI NELLORE

VYTHIRI: When R. Chandran(52) left for work at Vythiri town on August 7, it was not without a premonition. Wayanad had witnessed incessant rain for the past three days, interrupting normal life and keeping people indoors.

His fears came true, and worse. The two-storeyed building in the centre of the town, just behind the bus stand, that housed his Milma milk outlet was nowhere to be seen.

The eight-year-old ground floor, which had five shops, along with a Bank of Baroda ATM, sank under the ground. The first floor, constructed last year, disappeared the following day.

Chandran says, "The building came down on the night of August 5. After closing the shop on the night of August 4, I did not go to Vythiri for two days as the roads between Kalpetta and Vythiri were blocked because of landslides. Though I was anxious, never did I imagine that my shop would vanish."

According to P.U. Das, Soil Conservation Officer, Wayanad, what happened here was a form of land subsidence, where a building caves in the impact of soil movement. Normally, cracks, 5-8 metres wide, are used to determine an episode of land subsidence.

Though there were no cracks in the shopping complex at Vythiri, the building sank because of loosening of the soil, which happens when organic matter that holds the soil structure is washed away.

"When Wayanad received 4,824 mm of rainfall in just 80 days, water entered marshy lands, thereby weakening the strength of the soil in the entire area."

This is what remains, only the top portion, of a two-storey shopping complex at Vythiri town | SHRAVANI NELLORE

While Das believes that it is the marshiness of land in Wayanad that renders it susceptible to land subsidence, Prof. Keshav Mohan, member of Kerala State Disaster Management Authority, Thiruvananthapuram, says: "Soil piping, deforestation, indiscriminate use of land and utilization of chemical fertilizers are also some factors."

He added, "The flood was not a danger in itself, but it became a catastrophe aided by the incidents of landslides, landslips and land subsidence. It has exposed the vulnerability of the State to these calamities."

For Abdul Manaf, whose shop is adjacent to Chandran's erstwhile building, the structure sinking into the ground was inconceivable.

Agreeing, Mr. Das says, "it is a rare phenomenon in Wayanad. There were 47 land subsidence cases reported last year, and major ones were in Thirunelli and Mananthavady. It is likely that these incidents may happen whenever Wayanad receives heavy rainfall."

After witnessing cracks and cave-ins, many residents are worried. "Soil testing has been started. Studies are being done," says Mr. Das.

"To start with, when a building is to be constructed in a hilly area, permission from the local authorities should be taken. It is their duty to see if it [land there] comes under the hazard zonation map. These days, it is hardly followed," says Professor Mohan.

Chandran, who now works as a security man at Wayanad Metals at Kalpetta, says he lost around Rs 3.5 lakh – in cash and dairy products.

"Since our home at Kalpetta was flooded, we kept all our cash and documents in the shop. The money I brought for Onam expenses was there too. Our neighbours helped us clear the rubble, but we couldn't find anything. Everything was in ruins."

Chandran, who had enough savings earlier to sail through rough times, now earns Rs 10,000 at his new job but, he says, it is not enough to pay for his daughters' college fees and the house rent.

Though the government had announced a relief of Rs 10,000 for all flood-damaged houses, the money has not reached the affected so far, complain people.

"These shopowners have suffered losses in lakhs. The compensation of Rs 10,000 or even a lakh doesn't suffice, yet it should have reached them by now," says Abdul Manaf.

Silently thanking the One above us, he added with a smile, "fortunately, there was no loss of lives. The timing of the incident [the night when the complex remained closed] saved many of us."

Rain saps Sugandhagiri

SANAL SUDEVAN

SUGANDHAGIRI: The August 2018 deluge was a devastating experience to the tribals here. Nutrients and organic matter in the fertile soil have been washed away following incessant rainfall in Sugandhagiri, which is home to 1,000 families of Kurichyar, Kurumal, Kattunaickkan and Paniya communities. It is impossible to cultivate new crops, the tribals say.

As a way out, experts are suggesting that plants and trees be grown so that organic matter in soil and nutrients can be regained.

The Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat has plans to develop indigenous floriculture in this effort.

The government is considering introducing the Integrated Water Shed Management (IWSM) in the hills under which biomass activity, indigenous tree plantation, mulching, etc, will be initiated for improvement of natural resources.

A view of Sugandhagiri hills from the top | PUSHKAR TIWARI

Suggested remedies apart, "The government decision [in 1976] to move all tribes to Sugandhagiri was wrong as they do not have required understanding to maintain such a high altitude mountain," says Suma T.R., a social scientist at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation at Kalpetta.

Sugandhagiri (meaning fragrance) sits on a diversion off National Highway 766 (from Kozhikode in Kerala to Kollegal in Karnataka) One must walk 10 km up a serpentine, rocky path to reach the two peak points, '50-acre' and '7th unit' of the hills.

Loss of soil nutrients

MANJIRI CHITRE & CHHAVIANSHIKA SINGH

KALPETTA: No plan has been evolved so far (as of January 23, 2019) for soil regaining nutrients in Wayanad district, which witnessed massive landslides in August 2018, says hazard analyst Asha Kiran. Farmers complained that soil nutrients were washed away in the flood-hit district.

But,Vision Organic Farming is looking into the issue. The objective of soil nutrients is promoted under *Haritha Keralam* as well, according to Ms. Kiran of the State Emergency Operations Centre, State Disaster Management Authority, Kerala.

Haritha Keralam is a mission integrating three major activities: waste management, organic farming and water resources management.

Compensation: Ms. Kiran said approximately Rs. 50 crore had so far been disbursed to people whose houses were damaged. She added that 651 houses were completely damaged, while 9,271 houses suffered partial damage.

According to government officials, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan announced compensation of Rs 6 to10 lakh per family depending on the severity of destruction. Maximum compensation is Rs 6 lakh for a house and Rs 4 lakh for agricultural land.

The next of kin of each of the nine persons who lost their lives in landslides received Rs. 4 lakh, said Ms. Kiran.

While most people from Sugandhagiri hills and Kurichyar Mala have got an ex gratia payment of Rs. 10,000, others are yet to receive even this money, say villagers. "Even though the government has provided us with some money, it is not enough as we have lost our entire house," said Sulekha, a tribal from Kurichyar Mala.

Although we are doing our best in terms of cash and kind, the compensation is still less compared to the price of land, says Shaji Alexandra, Principal Officer, Agricultural Department, Kalpetta.

Farmer Suicides: Asked about Wayanad having the second highest farmer suicide rate in Kerala, Ms. Kiran said: "The reason for farmer suicides gathered international attention once. Still it continues... after the floods, Pulpally grama panchayat in Sulthan Bathery taluk witnessed three more suicides, I guess. These are due to crop loss. The compensation amount is not sufficient to meet the entire loss."

Farmers have also taken small to largescale loans from various banks, she points out. "Issuing a mitigation amount for loss of life is the only intervention the Revenue department has made."

Page Editors: Manjiri Chitre and Sanal Sudevan

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Violated nature settles a score with man

ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH, JOYDEEP BOSE & ANSHITA BHATT

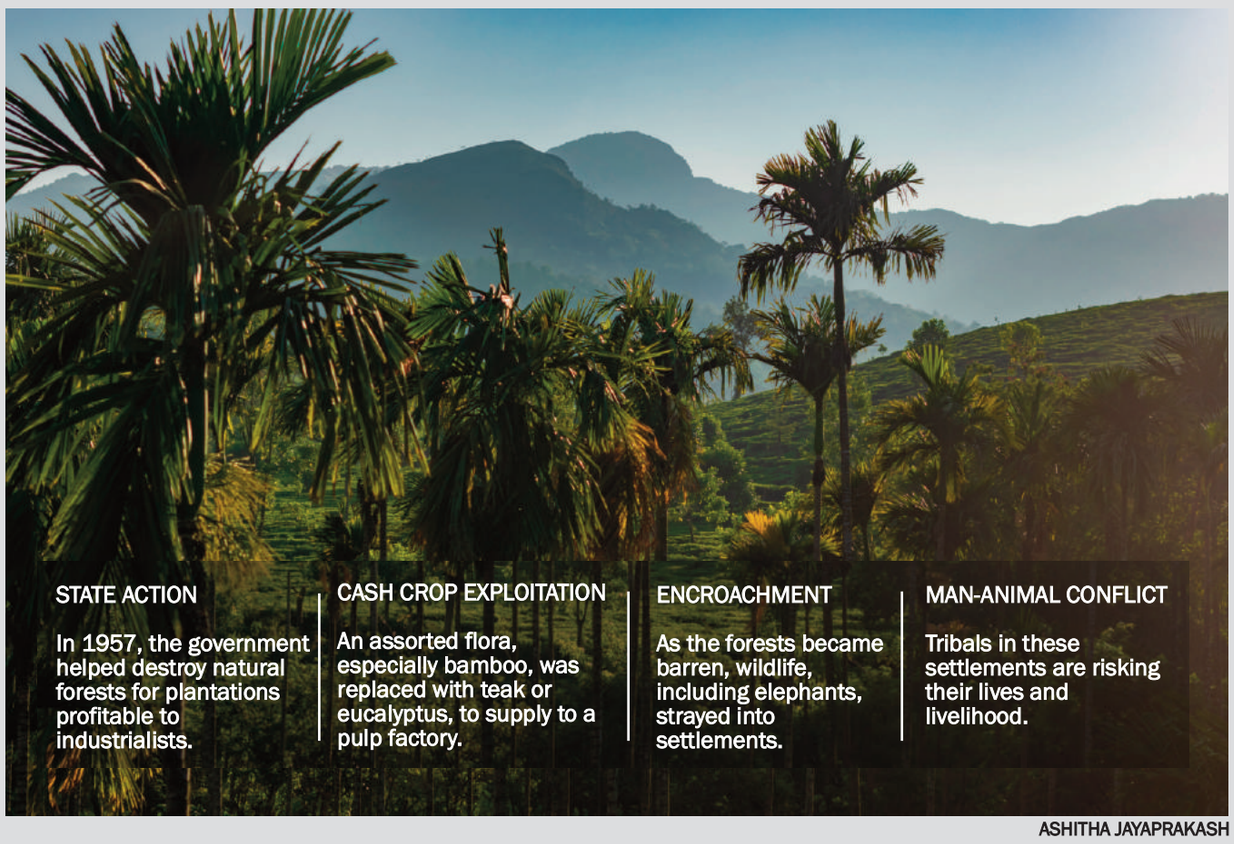
Wayanad, a heaven on earth, was endowed with soil made of gold. But conversion of this land into a profit mine by vested interests has caused immense ecological damage, reflected in last year's deluge.

"The hills in Wayanad fell like dominos when the August 2018 rains struck, destroying more than 4,500 houses in the Pozhuthana panchayat alone," according to its president, N.C. Prasad. As many of the houses here lay waste providing home only to roaches and locusts, he added, "nature is reclaiming the land that once belonged to it."

"When the Kerala Government was formed in 1956, the natural forests were destroyed for teak and eucalyptus plantations. Teak is a long-term investment, and profitable. But it serves no purpose to wildlife," T.C. Joseph, a committee member, Community of Leaders, at the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation said while talking about the imbalance in ecology.

Back then, an 862-sqkm of forest held together an assortment of bamboo trees, wild neem, gunpowder, kumil, bedda nut and jamun in Wayanad. Deer, monkeys, elephants, mongooses, jungle cats, jackals, hares and bears thrived on their fruits. 40 per cent of this forest was felled for the sake of economic development.

In 1956, the government entered into a trade agreement with Grasim Industries, known then as Gwalior Rayons, owned by Birla. "They would buy one tonne of bamboo from the Kerala government for a mere Rs 1.74. It gave away our forests for nothing," added Joseph. Bulk of the supply was made to the pulp factory, leaving elephants, which are bamboo lovers, with no choice but to encroach on nearby human settlements.



ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

Invasion of wildlife

This explains why help was delayed during the August 2018 floods. Rimya (34) who lives in a settlement in the Begur Wildlife Sanctuary, said, "When water gushed into our houses at night, we couldn't run away. Nobody travels after dark because we've heard stories of people getting crushed by wild elephants."

Wild animals have started invading agricultural land and forest areas for food, disrupting livelihood in tribal settlements.

Ammalu (60) who resides on the outskirts of the Sugandhagiri forests, also complained about wild elephants frequenting settlements. In the middle of one night, the woman woke up on hearing the noise of twigs and branches being crushed just outside her house by elephants. Only the next morning did she see trees uprooted and damaged at the trunk, Ammalu said, adding that since then, she had seen frequent presence of elephants in the vicinity.

Increasing use of chemicals

Animals are not just predators. They are also vulnerable. Drinking water was contaminated with pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Use of the highly toxic pesticide phorate, in large quantities, in banana plantations has led to the extinction of some native aquatic species and animals like foxes, apart from wreaking havoc on the food chain, said Joseph. "Just look around you for butterflies. There aren't any. Thousands of butterflies used to flutter around during December and January," But with fungus poisoning of fields, the number of butterflies and fireflies has reduced.

Phorate contents stay in the soil for up to 10 years much like the remnants of a nuclear bomb. It seeps into water veins that reach streams which support manifold organisms, including humans. The use of pesticides is being reduced, Joseph said, "but there is no official ban by the government because they are still being sold by international corporations." However, various organizations including a local environment protection group formed by Joseph and other farmers are promoting organic alternatives. For instance, Jeevamrutam, consisting of cow dung, pinnakku (coconut press cake), mud and Trichoderma (fungi in soil), "works best without killing the environment and it is cheaper too," he said.

Incidents too many

LANDSLIDE	47
LAND SUBSIDENCE	50
LANDSLIP	150

Changing geology

Another problem, Joseph says, "We have been changing the natural structure of the soil to suit the needs of certain cash crops." Increasing extent of cash crops and use of modern agricultural methods has changed the geology of the land. "For banana plantations, they convert natural paddy fields by draining water through burrows."

Land for paddy cultivation has reduced since 1984, from 48,000 to 9,000 hectares owing to low prices and for lack of government subsidies. The remaining 41000 hectares is now filled with teak, eucalyptus and other cash crops that require more water, more fertilizers, more restructuring to support the growth of the non-native species. Man-made agricultural changes and constructions blocked various water bodies that ensured water release from mountainous areas during monsoons in Wayanad.

Health, an uphill task

SANAL SUDEVAN & MANJIRI CHITRE

KALPETTA: Plain, flat land. A tall order in Sugandhagiri hills and Kurichyar Mala. This explains the shortage of public health centres and educational facilities in these regions of Wayanad district, where land is uneven. "Owing to non-existence of flat land, we are unable to construct anything," said N.C. Prasad, President of the Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat.

For more than a 2.61-lakh population in Vythiri taluk in the district, there is only one public health centre. Tribals from Sugandhagiri hills and Kurichyar Mala say they have to travel 15 and 12 km, during serious illnesses for treatment.

"Even though there is one clinic here, during major illnesses we have to travel for a long distance as we do not even get ambulance services," said Thangamani, from Sugandhagiri. Other villagers said they have to hire a jeep or an autorickshaw, coughing up a good amount of money. Government officials said doctors from the Vythiri public health centre hold medical camps in the area. Every month 20-25 camps are organized to generate health awareness. .

A PHC vehicle at the ready | MANJIRI CHITRE

A Tribal Mobile Unit is also sent to the hills for a weekly health check-up. "We try to cover 20 to 25 colonies in a month. A full body check-up, along with medicines, is free to the tribals. However, in case of emergencies, they have to find their own vehicle to come down to the hospital," said Dr. Suneesh of the Vythiri taluk hospital. In pre and post-natal situations, tribals are helped by ASHA and Kudumbashri workers.

As for education, the only lower primary school with 90-plus students in classes up to 4 at Kurchyar Mala has been shifted to a madrasa after the building was destroyed during the August 2018 floods.

"We have sent a Rs 3-crore plan for an upper primary school for Cabinet approval. Once we receive the nod, we will start the process of setting it up," said Mohammad Aslam, president of the Parents and Teachers Association.

At Sugandhagiri, there is one upper primary and two lower primary schools.

Tribal children feel alien in school

ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

KOTTATHARA: The Serve India Adhivasi Lower Primary School at Venniyode in Kottathara Panchayat was buzzing with the shrill cries of children playing Tag. On one end of the hallway sat Sharath, a second grader, who was upset that his classmates hadn't returned after holidays. "A lot of Paniya students, his friends included, will return only three or four days after class has resumed" said his teacher, Jyoti Shaji. At the Kottathara Higher Secondary School, Commerce professor Sebastian said five students out of 38 in class 12 have poor attendance. "They haven't dropped out. They just do not come to class often."

Krishnapriya (7), living in a Paniya tribe settlement near the panchayat office, didn't go to school the day we met her. She said shyly, "I was completely dressed up and ready to go to school but [her neighbour] Kuiri, 12, didn't show up! So I returned home."

Tribal students record low attendance in schools and higher dropout rates owing to their "laziness" and nomadic lifestyle, according to teachers and government employees. Babu Raj, district project officer for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, said their enrolment is phenomenally higher than during the previous generations. "But our biggest problem is retention of these students. And we are trying a lot to get these children to attend school every day."

A Paniya student | ASHITHA J

On schemes implemented for ST children right from primary schools to increase their retention and interest in education, Mr. Raj said, "We have appointed mentor teachers in all 241 primary schools in the district in order to ensure that language and cultural identity gaps are bridged."

Ooru fest (native fest) is conducted to ensure that tribal students feel included and recognized as a significant part of the community. "Provided they're given opportunities to display their tribal art and folk dances, they'll feel like they can also do something," said Mr. Raj.

"Our only issue is that we don't have enough teachers, especially from Paniya, Urali, Kuruma who are the most primitive tribes - the most socially and economically backward."

About opportunities to ST students after graduation from schools, teachers of the Kottathara Government Higher Secondary School, in unison, talked at length about reservation proving inaccessible to the most socially backward of them all – Paniyas and Adiyas. "The Kaattunayakan and Kuruma tribes are smarter, so they push their children to take up all the reservation in government jobs, leaving Adiyan, and Paniyas jobless. It's a reoccurring problem we've been trying to tackle." Mr. Sebastian said.

Addressing this problem, for the past three years, every government school has been conducting an additional skill acquisition programme (ASAP). "Under this scheme, tribal students specially are given vocational training so that they don't lose focus during holidays and find lowly jobs during vacations. It is during the holidays that the children often leave school in order to take up manual labour, along with their parents, for menial wages."

The tribal parents haven't quite understood the importance of education. Philomina K.A, Malayalam professor said, "The Paniya tribe, along with the other tribes, has a certain way of life and what we need now are schemes and programmes to alter their way of thinking to suit the socio-cultural reality of the state."

For all the noon meal scheme and financial incentives for school attendance, the tribes have not accepted the modern system of life in Kerala as part of their own and therein lies the hitch, say teachers.

Phoenix like, school rises

SRAVANI NELLORE

POZHUTHANA: Slushy and rocky paths led us to what was once the only lower primary school at Kurichyar Mala. The bridge connecting the government school with the hilly village is washed away. There are no signs of the playground, and classrooms are swamped with waist-deep mud. Benches, tables and chairs lie scattered and the rakes of the roof have peeled off in the devastation wreaked by one of the biggest landslides to hit Wayanad on August 9 last year.

"We heard a blast, like when a big rocket shoots up in the sky. When we went out, we saw boulders sliding and mud splashing down the hills. We ran to the nearby shops," said Aadisha, a Standard I student, spreading her hands wide to show how ferociously noisy the landslide was. The government already declared a holiday for all schools when rains began to hit Wayanad in the first week of August. The schools, closed for a month, were slated to reopen on 29. But the lower primary school headmaster, Sasi P.K, was unsure how and where to hold classes for his 90 students.

After he visited the panchayat, a madrasa in the village came to its rescue. "We were offered help by the Melmuri Muslim Mahallu Committee after the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) approached it.

New classrooms were built in 72 hours in Kurichyar Mala | SRAVANI NELLORE

The Hayathul Islam Madrasa was made as a makeshift school. It runs its classes from 7.30 to 9.30 a.m. and our school starts at 10," Mr. Sasi said. "The school is allotted Rs 49 lakhs from the Block Panchayat and Rs 1 crore from the State government for the new building for lower and upper primary schools," said the headmaster. However, a teacher, K. Shanavas said, "During crisis, the Local Self-Help Government (LSHG) didn't help us to arrange a temporary school. All help we got was from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). We spent Rs 5 lakhs on all materials." As lunchbreak nears, there is a hustle among the students, who are sitting on new polished benches. The walls of the rooms are painted in bright colours, with an India map on one side and murals of birds and animals, on the other. "The first floor had no rooms. These were built in just 72 hours with the help of volunteers from three organisations, Human Beings Collective, Green Palliative, Malabar Flood Rehabilitation," said Shanavas, adding that as the school is now more easily accessible, the number of students has increased to 93.

According to Saji.M of Human Beings Collective, "many volunteers and students from all over the country, including Calicut University and Jawaharlal Nehru University, came to support us [in restoring normality at Kurichiar Mala]. It was proof of humanity."

Dishes and debate aplenty

JOYDEEP BOSE

PANAMARAM: It is lunch time at a grocery store-turned-community eating hub at flood-hit Panamaram. But you have food for thought too, with people coming together in times of distress.

The owners, Rasak Malail and his wife Vanita, arrange for lunch every day for labourers employed in rebuilding the damaged houses in the locality. The family, including three kids, has been living in rented accommodation for over five months now, after their home, much like almost everyone else's, was washed away following the August 8 deluge in Wayanad.

"They welcome us with a smile, even when they are struggling themselves" said Viju, expressing gratitude to the family. He is one of the several labourers, engaged in daily restoration work, who gather here for lunch and a few moments of company.

One of the issues that came up for discussion was a burning row in Kerala – Sabarimala. On January 1, lakhs of women had participated in a state-sponsored "women's wall" launched to counter the campaign against the Supreme Court verdict allowing women of all age groups into the temple. Moreover, two women under 50 entered the temple with police protection, defying the ancient custom of the temple not allowing women of menstruating age inside its premises.

Rasak said: "We got only Rs 10,000 from the government as compensation for flood damage, while crores are happily being spent on the women's wall and all that. The truth is that the Chief Minister has forgotten about us, the flood-affected victims, and is now concentrating on the Sabarimala issue." Vanita seconded her husband: "Ayyappa is our Lord. What is the need for breaking an age-old tradition?" A number of heads nodded in agreement.

While hundreds of kilometres away in Thiruvananthapuram, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is in talks about taking up this issue in the Legislative Assembly; here in this village, a group of daily wage labourers debate culture, tradition and survival within institutional patriarchy, in a less formal but an equally lively session.

Unabated Agony

Fathima Ismael (65), still lives in a house where the bedrooms and kitchen were washed away in the August 2018 floods.

ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

Page Editors: Ashitha Jayaprakash and Joydeep Bose

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Is this the freedom they asked for?

Paniyas are wage workers and bonded to drinking; kids drop out of school

DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

VYTHIRI: Ananya, 7, shows us around her house in the Mechena tribal settlement near here. An old television set sits on a table at the entrance. A thin unpainted wall separates the two small rooms in the house. A wooden bed without mattress is the only piece of furniture in one of the rooms. Clothes crowd the wall hooks there. An adjacent open area serves as the kitchen, with stainless steel utensils piled up on the floor.

The girl belongs to a family of Paniyas, the single largest tribe in Wayanad, accounting for 45% (69,116) of the district's tribal population, as per the 2011 Census. The name 'Paniya' has been given by other people. It means 'worker' or 'slave'. Other tribes of the district include the Adiyas, the Kattunayakan, the Kurichiyans, the Kurumas and the Ooralis.

Says Ananya's grandfather, Maran, 65, who was a daily wage labourer, "We used to work as bonded labourers earlier and mainly worked on the fields. We'd go before daybreak and work till 6 in the evening." As they were paid in kind by their landlords, they'd remove the chaff from the grain and cook it.

The Bonded Labour System was abolished in India in 1976. "The freedom is better. We get paid in cash now. We can at least buy other things. We buy rice from the ration shops now," says Maran, who has four children: two male and two female. The eldest child is 35 years old and the youngest 28. "All of them went to school," Maran proudly says. "The eldest studied up to Standard VII, the second child up to Standard V, the third child up to Standard VI, and the youngest up to Standard X. He is a daily wage labourer now," Maran appreciatively says. "They are all out of home now, working."

Maran, 65, a retired daily wage labourer | DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

What is his daily routine? "I do not work anymore. I mostly sit here and eat. I play with my grandchildren at other times," Maran says laughing while spitting out betel juice on the floor.

He says he gets a government pension once in six months and some money during festivals like Onam. "It comes to around Rs 4,400 per year." Maran's youngest son earns Rs 450 a day as wage labourer but work is not regular, he points out. According to media reports, the lowest minimum wages in Kerala are Rs 600 per day.

Paniyas do not have their own land so they mostly work as daily wage labourers, says Aparna A.S., a doctor at the Panamaram government hospital.

As for education, Babu Raj, District Project Officer, Sarva Shiksha, Kerala, says, "It is difficult to retain Paniya kids in school after enrolment. Especially during the cropping season, they become lazy and take to earning small money." Another reason for their dropping out, Mr. Babu Raj says, is inferiority complex. Language barrier comes in the way of interaction between Paniya students and teachers. Nor do parents show interest in compelling the kids to go to school. The children end up as daily wage labourers, adds Dr. Aparna.

Most Paniya men and women consume a lot of alcohol. There are very few men above 50-60 in their community as most of them die of drinking, says Dr. Aparna. "They got this culture from the migrants. Usually, people who they work for give them little food, little money and alcohol. Alcohol makes them dependent on the landowners so that they come back to work and get more alcohol," she explains. De-addiction centers have been opened in some places.

"Paniyas take weekly off from Saturday evening to Tuesday, consuming alcohol and relaxing. They get back to work only on Wednesday," complains M.V. Krishnan, an ex-serviceman, who owns a coffee plantation.

"However, the tribe has a good knowledge of medicine, geography, arts and culture. They fear joining the mainstream because they feel that they are not accepted by other people," says Dr. Aparna.

As per media reports, Paniyas do not have adequate representation in local bodies, in leadership of political parties and in government service. "If the government wants to lift up this community, it must do so by accepting and inspiring them. We should all stop calling them a backward community," Dr. Aparna urges.

The tribal folks

ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

Veran, 85+

His son and daughter-in-law stayed with him until rescue boats showed up when water level rose up to 8 feet at Panamaram panchayat, one of the worst affected areas in the August 2018 deluge.
"Appa is visually impaired, and completely depends on us to get through a day," said son Gopalan.

Krishnendhu, 8 months

The kid is being coddled by her neighbour, Radha. Children are taken care of by everyone in the community.

TALE OF DESTRUCTION

The floods washed away not just our houses, but also our peace.
– Rimya, 36, from Nettara Colony, Thirunelli

Rimya's family of four still lives in their ancestral home along with her in-laws, five months after the August 2018 *pralayam*. Their destroyed house has still not been repaired. They're waiting for money from the government or at least a piece of land anywhere but in this crumbling hill. The government had announced that it would give Rs 10,000 as compensation to every household.

| ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

ASHAs did not lag behind

MANJIRI CHITRE

KALPETTA: If Wayanad district is deficient in public health facilities, Accredited Social Health Activists are filling in the gaps, helping out tribals and villagers.

These community health workers, numbering 800 in the district, proved their worth during and in the aftermath of last year's deluge. On August 9, all tribals and villagers from the Sugandhagiri hills and Kurichyar Mala were shifted to a relief camp.

"All of us were staying at the camp for 28 days. Since there were no doctors available, our team provided pre-natal and post-natal care too," said Cecila, an ASHA worker.

The activists were responsible for bringing medicines and kits to treat those who had fallen sick in relief camps. According to one worker, about 240 patients were waiting to be treated.

Apart from the services rendered by ASHAs, workers of Kudumbasree and the women empowerment programme, forming groups of 10, fanned out in the district to help tribals.

The ASHA system was instituted by the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare as part of the National Rural Health Mission.

Selected from the village itself and accountable to it, the ASHA will be trained to work as an interface between the community and the public health system.

Each worker gets Rs 4,000 as monthly income.

Forget floods, here is healing touch

ANSHITA BHATT

PANAMARAM: As we were waiting for fellow students to return from their beat covering flood-hit areas in this village, a lean man walked towards us and, after pleasantries, opened up to us.

He is octogenaraian Ali Mohammed, an informal Ayurvedic expert, who treats people for various ailments for free. "I have a few people to help me supply medicines but most of the time, I myself prepare and give medicines to patients," he said. By medicines, he meant herbs which he grows in his garden right outside his house.

Pointing at Pottikka (Genus: Luffa from the gourd family of edible plants), he said, "The leaves of the plant are fried in oil and applied on an affected area to cure itching." Karalayam (Indian Birthwort or Aristolochia indica) is an anti-venom cure for snake-bite and scorpion-bite.

Mohammed then showed us another plant that helps prevent blood loss after haemorrhoids (piles) surgery. "Pluck 10 leaves, grind them, mix the paste in milk and have it in the morning and evening for 10 straight days, and you are fine," he explained. "This medicine is present everywhere but people don't know about its usefulness."

How does he differentiate among leaves of various herbs? "Come and sit with me for five days and I will teach you."

Ali Mohammed | ASHITHA J

Mohammed treats jaundice, headache, piles, migraine and many other problems. "For migraine, I examine the patient for an hour and give medicine; and the person is cured." The medicine? "It's a trade secret," he smiled.

About recurring diseases, he said, "Once I give the medicine, the person never suffers from it again."

For all his proficiency in the subject, Mohammed had no formal education in Ayurveda. "My grandfather practised it and then it was my father. It is knowledge that has been passed on," he said with pride. "Now I am teaching it to my two children."In fact, "Whenever I meet people, I spread general health awareness."

Mujeed Rahman, a practitioner of Ayurvedic massage, has come here all the way from Guruvayur in Thrissur district of Kerala, to learn Ayurveda from him.

"I am 82, and may die any time. But I want my skills to survive," Mohammed said. "I am not keeping them a secret; I want to pass them on. Within a span of a year, I can teach anyone."

In the 2018 floods, he said though Panamaram was one of the badly affected villages, no major health problem was reported here. "We did not use water from the wells until they were cleaned up. The health agencies were liberal in supplying clean water, so we used that," he says.

A virtue in Kerala is that people always boil drinking water. "People here are careful in their use of water."There are no epidemics in the area, he says.

Apart from spreading health awareness, Mohammed silently propagates the message of humaneness.

In an English yellow shirt and white mundu, he is like any other local passing by the street. But he would stop and talk to anyone he comes across. "I can see you and just walk past. But I don't do that, because it is the nature of humans to interact."

And his motivation for the good deeds? "It's a god-given gift. I have always been this way. In the eyes of God, we are meant to serve others."

No wonder, Mohammed looks younger than our 67-year-old teacher, who accompanied us on our tour.

Digging in, for wages

ANSHITA BHATT & ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

MANANTHAVADY: On a brisk winter evening, about a dozen aged women, with caked hands and soiled scarves on their heads, are digging a trench, a project taken up at Begur colony in this taluk, in the wake of last year's deluge, to allow for proper flow of rainwater.

"I work because I need to feed myself," said Devi Basavil (60s). She narrated her plight even as some were crouching during a break. "My husband died a long time ago and my son can't afford to look after me because he has his own family to look after."

> **I work because I need to feed myself.**

Her lot is no different from the other women, who have been working from 9 a.m to 5 p.m. for the past two months under the government's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which provides at least 100 days of employment a year to every rural household at minimum wages.

Their biggest worry now is delay in payments. They haven't been paid since they joined in November. They still show up for work because they have loans piling up.

"We do get rice from the ration shop but we buy other groceries on credit. These menial wages help us pay it off," she said.

Devi doesn't work eight hours for six days anymore as she suffers frequent seizures. Suomi Mathan (65) has a backache. "All other women have some or other age-related problems," Suomi said.

Wage labour in Wayanad is seasonal, depending on the time of harvest of coffee, paddy, banana, areca nuts and pepper, and of brick making. Healthy youth migrate to nearby Coorg or other districts for better salaries."But we are constrained by our age,"she says.

BELIEFS

Where tourists are chained to a tree

DEEPIKA AGRAWAL

VYTHIRI: ""From the earliest times, trees have been the focus of religious life of many people around the world. As the largest plant on earth, the tree has been a major source of stimulation to the mythic imagination. Trees have been invested in all cultures with a dignity unique to their own nature, and tree cults, in which a single tree or a grove of trees is worshipped, have flourished at different times almost everywhere ..."

This remark by Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, a U.S. art historian, is true of a chained, 25 feet tall ficus tree standing along National Highway 766 on the way from Kozhikode to Wayanad near the Wayanad Ghat Pass here.

Changala itta maram [a tree tied with chains] reads a board put up there. A petite white-painted temple sits at the foot of the tree. Steel fences enclose the worship area.

The ficus tree on NH 766 highway has become a tourist attraction | NILANJAN DEY

Local legend has it that the spirit of a Paniya tribe man, Karinthandan, has been tied to the tree with chains to prevent him from causing accidents on the highway. Karinthandan is said to have been killed by an English man in the 1700s after taking his help to find the Churam route from Kozhikode to Wayanad. "The British did not want the route to be named after him, so they killed him," explains Shahju Joseph, 55, a local visitor.

"Christian priests conducted manthravaadam [conjuration of the spirit] to be able to tie him to the tree. Since then, the number of accidents on the highway has reduced. The tree grows but its branches do not," says Joseph.

Paniya Adivasis regularly worship the spirit and priests light the lamp kept in the tree temple, says VX Josekutty, 66, another visitor. "It has been going on since I was a child. Even my uncle saw this practice during his childhood."

As a tourist bus stops by the tree, heads pop out of its windows. "This has become one of the tourist attractions in Wayanad," he says.

Naseer, 55-year-old worker at the tea shop, says, "Karinthandan was buried there (pointing behind the tree). Next to his grave lies the grave of 'Kuttichathan', a godly figure among the tribals."

A helper at the tea shop, S. Vishnu, says, "The Paniyas perform special pujas for the spirit during March-April and sacrifice animals at the temple." He says, "Once a construction worker had thrown a stone at a branch of the tree, and he lost his four fingers the same day."Interrupting, Naseer says, "I do not believe in this story. It is all hearsay. Still, people believe in these things," he exclaims.

Page Editors: Deepika Agrawal and Sravani Nellore

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Gorkhaland: down but not out

SWAPNAJIT KUNDU

KALIMPONG: Varun Bhujal, councilor of ward number 16 in Kalimpong municipality, was arrested on the second day of the Gorkhaland agitation two years ago. He fell ill and died in police custody. His family was denied permission to treat him.

The 104-day protest in support of a separate State began on May 26, 2017 after the West Bengal government announced Bengali as a compulsory subject from Class 1 to 10 across the state. North Bengal refused to accept the order.

The agitation ended with the formation of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), a semi-autonomous body set up after a tripartite agreement between the Centre, West Bengal Government and the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM).

The agitation was crushed brutally at times and people remember that period with a shiver. The villagers said if the shutdown had continued any longer, they would have died of starvation.

People fight on, despite the crackdown. | SWAPNAJIT KUNDU

However, they hinted that the agitation would continue.

A GJM cadre, who wants to remain anonymous, said, "The demand for a separate state is not absurd. We have no similarity with the plains regarding culture and language. Why should we remain in a state known as Bengal?"

The people say they face racial discrimination and are seen as 'Nepalis'.

Kamal Kumar Sharma, a former ABVP member, currently teaching at Sinji, said, "When we visit Kolkata or any city in India, we are asked whether we are from Nepal. They taunt us by calling 'Chinkis', and make fun of our accent."

"There is a conscious effort to wipe out our culture and population. Our officers are sent to the plains, while most officers here are Bengalis. There is an unannounced emergency here; anyone speaking against the state government is arrested by the police."

During the agitation, around 1200 people were arrested and each person was charged with at least 4 cases. The agitators and anyone willing to help them were harassed, people in Kalimpong said.

After the death of Varun Bhujal, his house was ransacked and his brother arrested. Anyone seen carrying ration for his family was stopped.

A school owned by Bimal Gurung was raided. The police confiscated kitchen knives, bows and arrows used by children and even nail-cutters, they alleged.

"Several people have been arrested and tortured with the atrocity still going on," said Kesav Prasad Chhetri, an activist in Sinji.

When asked if a separate state would solve the problems of Gorkhas, he said, "Conditions may be worse in the new state. But at least we will be free. We are like second class people in this country."

According to the local people, the State government discriminates in providing employment.

"Bengalis are preferred over the local people when it comes to government jobs. The vacancies are 95 for Bengalis and 5 for the Gorkhas out of 100. "said Krishna Chhetri, a resident of Kalimpong.

"Young people who have finished their education migrate to other states and countries to find jobs."

Hari Shanker Panicker, Additional District Magistrate of Kalimpong, is unsure whether a Gorkhaland state would be able to sustain itself independently.

"A state requires huge revenue to function. If there is no investment how will the state run? The GTA has a huge workforce, which is unnecessary. One cannot run a government based on whims and fancies."

Sanchabir Subba, a member of the GTA Board of Administration, said "We are trying to solve the problems of this region. But we act on the instructions of the state government.We lost everything."

Locked and unused village toilets. | JAYAKUMAR MADALA

No water for Swachh Bharat toilets

JAYAKUMAR MADALA

KHAMMAM: Toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Mission in Khammam have failed to prevent open defecation, as there is no water.

Under the Swachh Bharat Mission, every household in the State is eligible for a government subsidy of Rs. 12,000. The Centre gives Rs 9000 and the State government offers Rs. 3000.

Charan (23), residing in Pinjaramadugu in Kamepally Mandal said, "We took private loans to build them. But even after building the toilets we aren't able to use them as there is no water connections to these toilets. We need to clean them after every usage".

There is no continuous water supply because household cannot afford bore-wells. The wells have to be between 200 and 250 feet deep and this can cost up to Rs. 70,000.

"We encouraged everyone to build toilets, but now they are unfit due to lack of water supply. If toilets are not cleaned regularly, it becomes dangerous and easier for diseases to spread", said Rekha (35), an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker in Adavi Maddulapalli, Kamepally Mandal.

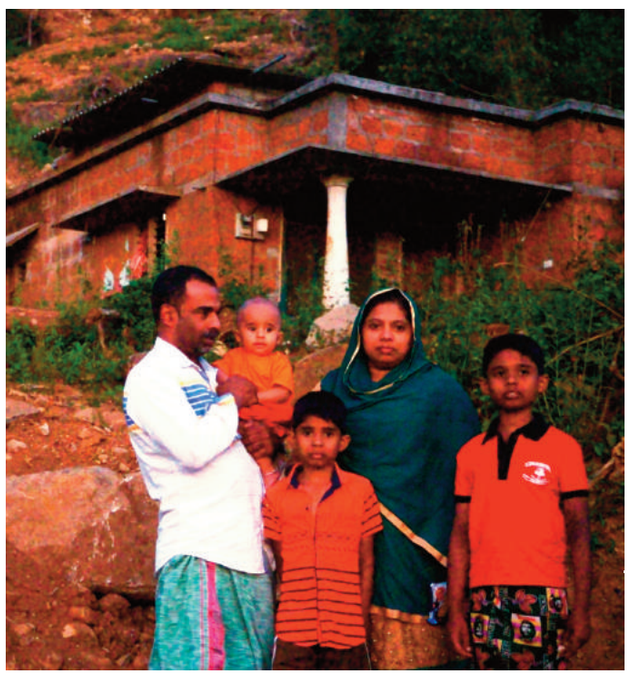
The toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Scheme have two main structures- the superstructure (including the pan and water closet), and the substructure (either an on-site treatment system or a connection to the existing underground sewerage system).

Ajmeri Jagiya (40), of Ajmeri Thanda in Thirumalayapalem Mandal said, "We thought when we build toilets under this scheme, our women will no longer have to defecate in the open. But nothing has changed."

"Women are still forced to defecate in the open, as the latrines are built inside our house premises and it stinks badly if we don't pour enough water to clean it," says Jagiya.

Krishna Kumar (30), residing in Pammi in Mudigonda Mandal, said "As we have put in a lot of money, we tried using these toilets for three months before we gave up. Shortage of water to clean the toilets after usage left a bad stench in our houses. This made it difficult to even live in them with the stench."

Anuraj Jayanthi, Sub- Collector of Khammam district, referring to the unavailability of water for the toilets, said, "Under the Mission Bhagiratha, we are trying to build a tank in every village to provide continuous water supply. Once we implement the scheme , we will be able to solve this water problem in households."



Family stands together in front of their house : From left to right: Abdul (36), Azeem Abdul (7 months), Afil (7), Jasila (32) and Adil (10). | ASHITHA JAYAPRAKASH

Escape from the jaws of death

SRAVANI NELLORE, MANJIRI CHITRE & SANAL SUDEVAN

WAYANAD: Little Azeem Abdul, eight months old, giggles blissfully oblivious of the fact that it was a rebirth for him five months ago, when his family was caught in a ferocious landslide and floods at Ammara near here.

"It's God's wish that he lived," says Jasila, recounting in horror how she wrapped the three-month-old son in a towel and passed him on – it was virtually tossing the baby – to her neighbour as the family sought to flee its flooded home at midnight on August 8, 2018.

"Around 11.30 p.m., we woke up to a distress phone call from a neighbour, asking us to rush out of our home. Before we realised, we were standing in knee-deep muddy water." Within minutes, the water reached above their waist.

Jasila, her three sons including Azeem, and their grandmother, found themselves drifting in water.

Keeping Azeem aloft, she started moving towards the door. "But we were caught in the current of water."

Losing all hopes of survival, she sought to grab hold of her other two sons also but soon realized that the eldest, Adil Abdul, had gone missing.

"We thought we will never find him again." Luckily, the standard III boy had climbed up an electric pole at the back of their house and was crying for help.

"My son was alive because there was no electricity then. I still shudder to think about the whole episode," said Jasila, her voice shaking.

It was her neighbour Sunil Kumar, whose house had already been engulfed, who heard the boy shouting.

Then, Jasila, still in a state of panic, virtually threw Azeem into the hands of Sunil. Just in time, he managed to collect the child and passed him on to another neighbour, Mani, who didn't even know the bundle was a child.

"Subsequently, Sunil formed a chain and pulled all of us out of water," she said, recalling "the most horrifying and disturbing experience of our lives."

"It all happened in minutes. Now, even after five months, I have sleepless nights, " said Jasila.

She is living with her brother-in-law's family at Ammara.

The houses of Sunil Kumar and Jasila are in ruins. Her husband, who was working in the Gulf, returned home after the incident.

According to Pozhuthana Gram Panchayat President N.C Prasad, a compensation of Rs. 6 lakhs was sanctioned for those who lost their homes in the floods.

Severe floods affected Kerala, due to unusually high rainfall during the monsoon season last year. Over 483 people died, and 14 went missing.

Barred from fishing

VIVANESH PARTHIBAN

TIRUVALLUR: Every day, Dhayanidhi used to take his motorized boat for fishing out to the sea through the bar mouth that connects Pulicat Lake to the Bay of Bengal.

For the past six months he has not been able to go out into the sea because the bar mouth is filled with silt and the outlet to the sea is narrow. Boats have to be towed over the silted area into the sea.

Dhayanidhi (37) , resident of Lighthouse colony in Pulicat, has a fisherman for two generations.

"Two types of fishermen operate in the area. While the majority are backwater fishermen who operate within the Pulicat Lake, others go into the sea. For both, an open bar mouth is crucial," said Dhayanidhi.

When the fishermen in and around 52 hamlets gave a petition to the State Fisheries Department, it proposed to build walls on the two sides of the mouth to create a 300-feet wide opening into the sea. It also proposed to dredge the mouth to a depth of 3 metres, facilitating free movement of fishing vessels in the sea. However, protests have surfaced against the Fisheries Department's plans.

Janagaraj (29), a fisherman from Vairavankuppam, said, "We are organizing the protest against the building of a wall. When the issue was referred to the Central Environmental Impact Assessment Committee, it stopped the project saying the bar mouth is a sensitive ecosystem and an impact assessment has to be made before constructing a wall."

"What can we do when the government stretches the period of discussion in the committees, and those in need are not rich people but poor fishermen like us who depend on the lake for our livelihood?" asked Janagaraj.

K.Saravanan, member of Coastal Resource Centre, an NGO in Chennai,said,"This project required approvals from the State Environmental Impact Assessment authority Tamil Nadu and others from the Forest Department. But because of the ineffectiveness of State Environmental Impact Assessment committee the petition moved to the central committee."

Ramasubramaniam, who works in MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, said, "The bar mouth formation is a natural event and if we do something artificially on a natural habitat, it may affect the whole ecosystem".

"We cannot stop a project on the basis of assumptions. Since IIT Madras had been roped in for consultation, the project would not have been cleared if there were concerns that the ecosystem would be affected," he added. Ramasubramaniam also added that there was another solution which may not affect the ecosystem.The government could help the fishermen by dredging the bar mouth periodically without constructing a permanent wall.

Janagaraj said the bar mouth was getting silted because of the excessive dredging in Ennore port.

But Saravanan said the bar mouth silted up because of the movement of the current in the Bay of Bengal carrying the sand from south to the north.

Fluorosis plagues village in Salem

ASHMITA MUKHERJEE

SALEM: "We are refugees in our own land." This dejected comment by villagers of Achankuttapatti in Salem district sums up their plight with fluorosis for generations. According to the Indian standard drinking water specification 1991, the maximum permissible limit of fluoride in drinking water is 1.5 ppm (parts per million). But, in four villages in the Ayodhyapatnam block it is very high, ranging from 3.8 to 8.0 ppm, says a research report published by International Society for Fluoride Research.

Salem has 25 fluorosis-affected habitations. As groundwater is contaminated with fluoride, fresh water is accessible only from the Mettur dam. Fluorosis leads to osteoporosis, arthritis, brittle bones, cancer, infertility in women, brain damage, Alzheimer's disease and thyroid disorder.

But, according to a resident, Selvaraj, 51, "villagers here are aware [only] of stained teeth, weakened bones and arthritis." Fluorosis is preventing them from leading a normal life, much less earn a livelihood. About 60 percent residents of Achankuttapatti have migrated for better lives. The ones who stayed back depend upon government aid and orphanages.

Selvaraj said, "We are tired of demonstrations, we are tired of protests, we are tired of talking to people. We have made protests over 200 times." The residents had given petitions to the District Collector, written to magazines and newspapers but to no avail. During their first protest, the government had assured them of fresh water supply from the Mettur dam, but it is yet to come.

A water tank purification scheme was supposed to have started in 2013 but it did not materialise. The only medical assistance available is at a local governmental primary health centre, according to Selvaraj.

How long will this smile last? High fluoride content in water is causing tooth and bone diseases. | ASHMITA MUKHERJEE

In 1984, earthen pots and tamarind were offered to curb fluoride contamination of stored water, as a part of a social movement. However, there were not many takers for lack of scientific knowledge of fluoride's ill-effects. There has been no awareness programme either to educate the villagers.

Kanmani, 32, said, "It is difficult to harvest rainwater because the land absorbs water quickly. Water cannot be stored for long and as there is drought there is no steady supply of rainwater." Those who are comparatively wealthy dig sump, an open, 10-20 foot-deep, concrete well which helps to store rainwater in homes. The scheme was not collectively implemented in all homes due to a lack of funds, say the villagers.

Maheshwari, 40, said, "Government had provided us plastic tarpaulin to collect rainwater in 10-foot deep artificial ponds."

In nearby Dharmapuri district, fluoride contamination is acute but people there draw fresh water from Hogenakkal falls under the Hogenakkal Integrated Drinking Water Project, which is a fluorosis mitigation governmental scheme. Drinking water pipelines have been laid at Achankuttapatti too but nothing further.

Piyush Manush, an environmental activist, said, "Fresh water conversion, harvesting rainwater, forming open wells and eschewing deep borewells are feasible solutions to fluoride contamination. India does not have any actual lack of funding. Monetary aid is sufficiently available but it has to reach the aggrieved."

Digital Library opens a window to the world

OMJASVIN M. D.

MYSURU: One year ago, the local high school students in Haradanahalli village of Nanjangud taluk in Mysuru district wouldn't have known what career choice to opt for. Now they confidently say they want to become "civil servants, doctors, engineers and scientists." They owe their exposure to the state of the art Digital Library set up in the village's Gram Panchayat Office.

The Digital Library is the brainchild of the village's 34-year-old hardworking Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) M.C.Mahadevaswamy. He set up the library at a cost of Rs. 5 lakh from the Rs. 10 lakh which he had won through the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan 2018 Champion' award for building 800 toilets in a month.

With five computers and one projector, the Library has power back-up and internet round the clock. Since students in Haradanahalli lack access to computers, the PDO wants the students to aspire for professional careers through the Digital Library. "Experienced professionals from Mysuru and Bengaluru make video calls to students on competitive exams. We also get study materials online," he said.

With more than thousand eBooks for all ages, the students read subjects of their liking. "Unlike urban schools, the students here learn English alphabets only in Standard Eight. With such a late start, digital activity based learning has enhanced their progress in reading, speaking and writing in English," he said.

Even Primary Class students visit the Library and qualified teachers assist them in handling computers. "We allow children to play video games, read novels and broadcast some English cartoons," he said.

The students also learn Mathematics, Science, and Social Science in many creative ways through the Library.

"Videos on syllabus chapters has helped students visualize while they learn," said Ranjitha.V, Science teacher at the Haradanahalli High School.

The Library has benefited 250 students in the high school. Standard 10 students claimed it helped them to prepare for their board exams. "When I see how a human brain functions, it is easy for me to remember it," says Janvi P, an high school student and a state-level athlete.

Mahadevaswamy said that only 30 to 60 students from Haradanahalli had come to the Library in the beginning but now around 600 students come from the village's Gram Panchayat limits.

"The library is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. We talk to students every weekend and counsel them."

The multi-purpose computer facility in the Panchayat Office provides digital assistance to the villagers too. "We help villagers get birth certificate, death certificate, caste certificate and Aadhaar linking very quickly," said Mahadevaswamy.

The D-Space app allows villagers to access data from their houses. Once the ID and Password to the app are provided to the villagers, any information in the library's repository can be accessed from the mobile phone itself. "We go to houses and educate people to register," he said.

"Most villagers lack knowledge to apply for jobs or for exams online. The digital library is supportive," said Abhijit.G, a tenth standard student.

Before Mahadevaswamy became the PDO two years ago, the Panchayat Office was in a derelict condition.

Now he had set up this library in a 400 square feet room. Two more rooms are being constructed to install a dozen more computers to accommodate more students.

The PDO also plans to install another projector in the Panchayat Office's Common Hall to screen awareness videos on hygiene, sanitation, and education.

"This enables gathering of villagers and to build a strong communityship," he said.

Mahadevaswamy said that the Digital Library in Haradanahalli Panchayat is the first of its kind in the State and could be replicated by other Panchayats too."Villages can be changed by bringing awareness."

Haradanahalli High School students attend class at the Library. Mahadevaswamy (Right) looks on. | OMJASVIN M. D.

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