

COVERING DEPRIVATION



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Fishing under the gun is 'a daily risk' for them

Fishermen in Rameswaram say they have no other option

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Fishermen of Rameswaram and their families wish they could turn their backs on the profession that endangers their lives on a daily basis. Apart from natural causes, the threat of being shot, killed or detained by the Sri Lankan Navy still looms large on the 3,500 fishermen families.

Till date, 3,000 fishermen have been caught, beaten up or shot by the Sri Lankan Navy. India and Sri Lanka are 18 nautical miles apart. Indian fishermen get only nine nautical miles to fish. As a result they allegedly stray into Sri Lankan waters. The increase in the number of boats has led to more competition for the catch.

Says Sekhar Pandiyan, 55, who survived a Sri Lankan Navy attack: "It is better to die... living a physically disabled life is a punishment."

On January 11, 2008, he went into the sea with his two brothers and son. His son had accompanied him for the first time. Even while he was telling his son about the direction from which the Sri Lankan Navy could approach them, his boat was shot at.

His brother, who could speak English, told the personnel that Sekhar had been shot. The Navy cut their net ("as they always do"), and told them to get back.

When a person dies in Sri



COLLISION COURSE: Fishermen at Rameswaram jetty try to steady an incoming trawler | MANTHRA KOLIYER

Lankan Navy firing, his family gets Rs 5 lakhs as compensation. Survivors get financial assistance of Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh from the government. But their medical expenses are much more.

"The people around you start treating you like trash once you are rendered incapable," says Sekhar. "When we were in debt, I was asked to send my wife to a brothel and my son to beg," he adds.

Worse is the fate of fishermen detained by the Sri Lankan Navy. Stalin, Sekhar's son, says, "The Fishermen's Association gives around Rs 100 a day to the family, depending on how many days he

has been kept in prison."

He was caught twice. "Fifty-five days in prison. My family was left to survive on its own. It is only after we come back that we apply for the allowance that the government provides (Rs 250 a day). Our boats rot on the Sri Lankan coast," he adds.

The BJP has promised that it will give boats to people whose boats had been seized by the Sri Lankan navy. But fishermen have been asked to invest Rs 50 lakhs initially.

Talking about the ties between the Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen, Sesuraja, head of the Fishermen's Association, says,

"The relationship dates back ages."

The fishermen of Tamil Nadu practised fishing in a peaceful manner. They bonded like "Uncle-Nephew" with the Sri Lankans, sharing the wealth of the sea, food and produce. They maintained peaceful relations till the Sri Lankan civil war broke out in 1983, he claims.

The Indian fishermen were accused of helping the Tamil militants fighting the Sri Lankan Government.

From 1988-1997, "we were caught and tied to trees. The Sri Lankan Navy would take the fish, prawns and let us go. Arrest was rare," says Sesuraja.

Now when a fisherman is caught for the first time, his fingerprints are taken and he is imprisoned for three months. The second time it is two years, and the third time five years.

The Rameswaram fishermen were also accused of using trawlers and taking the entire aqua life from the Sri Lankan waters. (Trawling is banned in Sri Lanka).

Fishermen here say they have no other option, as their ancestral job is on the verge of a breakdown.

"Vidyalay noki kanneroodu kaathirukam meenavargal (teary eyed fishermen waiting for brighter mornings). My children will never learn that the sea is a beautiful place. They've only heard stories of pain and agony," says Raja.

SWACHH BHARAT?



A toilet in Alagiri village of Tamil Nadu's Dharmapuri district, built under the Centre's flagship programme Swachh Bharat Mission to achieve an open defecation free India by 2019. Since October 2014, nearly Rs 48,000 crores has been spent to build over 10 crore private toilets, covering more than 6 lakh villages. The government claims that India is now 100 per cent open defecation free. But recent visits by students of the Asian College of Journalism to several villages showed that many residents still do not have a toilet and have to travel long distances to defecate in the open. Those who do have a toilet do not use it because of bad odour, lack of water supply and other reasons. Detailed reports in the inside pages. | JASMIN NIHALANI

15 years on, Tharangambadi yet to recover from tsunami

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Tharangambadi: Samuel Thomas remembers arriving in Tharangambadi on December 28, 2004 - only two days after the tsunami hit the coastal district of Nagapattinam. Over 400 people lost their lives in the town alone, most of them women and children.

"At first, the government needed people to bury the bodies. So, they sought help from NGOs all over. I was in Trichy then, so I was the one of the first to get here," the 51-year-old, who works for the non-profit HOPE Foundation, said.

Tharangambadi, known as the erstwhile Danish colony of Tranquebar, attracted the attention of many global non-profits after the ill-fated morning of December 26 when the tsunami struck. Both the Central and State governments were swift in delivering financial compensation to the victims. Even



Women at a basket weaving unit in Tharangambadi

the Danish government has since then invested in the town's restoration.

Fifteen years later, only a handful of the NGOs that had set up camp here remain. Veronica Raphael (64), who runs a non-profit called Rural Organisation for Social Action (ROSA), felt the relief measures by the global non-profits at the time had failed to bring real change in people's lives.

"There was a complete lack of coordination between the NGOs in terms of relief work. They just dumped things onto the families of victims. One family would end up with five cupboards from five different NGOs," she said.

"The actual tsunami was totally overshadowed by the charitable tsunami that followed," said P. Maria Lazar, a retired professor who lives in Porayar near here.

Raphael felt the money from both the government as well as the non-profits had not been used effectively to address problems like alcoholism plaguing the fisher community.

Vairam, the mother of a fisherman, said alcoholism was more like a tradition passed on from generation to generation.

"You fish in the morning, then drink in the evening. No one has a problem when business is good. But when they spend the same amount on alcohol even in bad times, it puts pressure on women," she added.

Thomas believed that despite the efforts of the government, NGOs and fishermen associations, their rehabilitation was far from over.

"Our work won't be complete till we get rid of alcoholism and domestic violence. Women need to be empowered. It will take at least another decade," he said.

No country for dead men

Bodies buried on the roadside in Kamalapuram Pirivu

NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: Residents of the Kamalapuram Pirivu area in the district are deprived of access to a proper burial ground. They buried 16 of their dead in 2019 alone, all of them on the side of a road.

"We have written many times to the government (for a burial ground) over the past 16 years but have not received any response," said Muthammal, a 46-year-old sanitation worker who helps clean the Kamalapuram village.

Kamalapuram is where the upper caste people stay, situated right next to Kamalapuram Pirivu.

Kamalapuram Pirivu is home to 200 families of the Hindu Sakaliyar community, a Scheduled Caste, and most members work as labourers or sanitation workers.

Muthammal and her colleagues earn Rs. 68 for every day they work, as against Rs. 403 proposed by the Chief Labour Commissioner's Order that was to

"The government ignores us because we are an oppressed caste." - Muthammal, sanitation worker

come into effect on October 1, 2019.

Even their old salary has not been paid for the past three months, said Muthammal. When she and other workers approached the Nilakottai Union Office to voice their concern, they were told that the government had not allocated the funds yet, she added.

Katturaja, husband of the newly elected Panchayat Union President Pounduthai said, "These people don't work enough for the illegal proposed amount, they usually

slack off."

Muthammal said, "The Kamalapuram village gets immediate response when people over there send petitions. They have good electricity, water and roads. We have none of that."

"The government ignores us because we belong to an oppressed caste," she added.

The residents alleged that the Village Administrative Officer (VAO) asked them to provide land for a graveyard.

"We live under extreme poverty and most of us do not even have our own houses. From where can we provide land for the construction of the graveyard?" said Sammiyammal (37), a resident of the area.

Pandi.K, VAO of the area said, "The government is trying its best to get a burial ground for the people of Kamalapuram Pirivu but it isn't the first priority now. The government has to clear the illegal squatters from the area first."

Women 'face harassment' in Dindigul textile mills

SHREYA HARIDAS

Dindigul: Dindigul's textile industries are slowly replacing agriculture as the main occupation in the district. Eighty per cent of the workers are women, and 60 per cent of them are youngsters. This job sounds like a "safe job" for women, but it's not.

The mills work 24/7 with workers taking up 8 hour shifts. Kasturi says she is made to work for 12 hours, or till the employees come for the next shift.

"I am a B.Com degree holder, but my parents don't allow me to take other jobs thinking this is the safest place for me to work. They don't know about the sexual harassment that we face and I don't want to make them sad," says Kasturi.

One of her friends stopped coming to the factory after she was sexually harassed by a supervisor.

There is no Internal Complaints Committee in the factories as

required by the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act. There is no female supervisor, even though most employees are females. Cameras installed in the rooms are only used to penalise the workers if found taking a break or lagging in work.

The workers say they are given only a 20-minute toilet-cum-food break for every eight hour shift. For 100 women, there are five dirty toilets. No chairs are provided in the working rooms and the women are fined if they show up late after break. The women don't get time to change sanitary napkins during periods.

The women are given some pills when they complain of stomach pain. The workers feel relieved as soon as they have it. But the women say they miss their periods for two to three months after having the pills. The impact of the pills on the women's periods was found when a journalist sent one for testing.



Women battle long working hours, lack of menstrual hygiene and sexual harassment | SHREYA HARIDAS

S Dhanalakshmi, 30, says she could not conceive after marriage and the doctors found out that it was due to her work-pattern.

However, it is said to be worse for the workers in the mill hostels. Girls aging from 18 to 20 years are brought from very deprived villages like Shanarpattia and

Anjukulipatti and made to stay in hostels. These girls say they are sometimes forced to do even all three shifts.

They are paid as low as Rs 220 a day, and the money is given directly to their parents who visit their daughters once a month. The parent-daughter conversations are

also overseen by a warden. The hostellers are taken out by a van once or twice in a month for buying essentials from shops pre-determined by the factory.

Kasturi, a member of the all-women Tamilnadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), says that her peers are discouraged from joining the unions.

"The industries say they give PF to the workers, but there is a discrepancy between what is shown in the passbook and what is owed to the workers," says Thivya, TTCU State President.

TTCU tried to be vocal about the workers' problems through radio shows like Gram Vani, but had to stop it as the workers were penalised by the mills' management.

"The women tolerate all the harassment as they have to sustain the family... 40-50 per cent of the men's income is not given to the family...most of it is spent on alcohol," she adds.

River linkage well behind schedule

PRIYADA K S

Thoothukudi: Eleven of the eighteen months set by the AIADMK government is over and the process of linking the Thamirabarani, the Karumeniyar and the Nambiyar is nowhere near completion. The work on the 73 km flood carrier channel started in 2009 under the DMK government.

"The channel will help irrigate 50,000 acres of land in Thoothukudi as the people here are now dependent on rain water," said S. P Ganeshan, a farmer from Arasoor village.

The work is divided into four phases. The channel works for the first and second phases have been completed. Ninety per cent of the check dam building in the third phase is over, but the channel work is yet to be completed.

For the last phase, a revenue

survey which has to be conducted before land acquisition has not begun.

"The farmers now get an average yield of 30 bags of paddy, which converts to 60 kg rice each. With better irrigation, it can go up to 60 bags," said Subrahmanian, a farmer involved in project activities.

Farmers spend around Rs 25,000 per acre and the rate for a bag of paddy varies from Rs 1200 to Rs 1400. Many of them have taken up other cash crops and horticulture to sustain their livelihood.

Once the channel supply starts, their dependence on animal husbandry and cash crops will be reduced.

"The ground water level in the areas has reduced drastically and sea water intrusion makes the water in the wells salty. Salt water is bad for the crops, which in turn leads to reduction in yield," said Ganeshan.



Agriculture no longer preferred livelihood

Villagers move towards cities and other professions because of crop failure, drought and debt

ABHIJIT PAUL & MEGHNA.M

Dharmapuri: Agriculture is fast losing out as a choice of profession, as people look for alternative livelihoods because of the uncertainties associated with agriculture.

Villagers at Ramakondahalli said that inadequate rainfall, price hike of daily commodities, unavailability of access to the lands and loss from farming are some of the issues that deter them from taking up agriculture.

Coming from an agricultural background, Asaithambi (31) is a first generation power loom saree weaver from his family and in Ramakondahalli, there are two more households that run power

looms.

Asaithambi's family has two acre land at their native place and mainly, his father grew paddy there. But Asaithambi did not want to join as he believed that saree weaving will be more productive and fruitful for his household.

"Agriculture has left nothing for us as we have to wait for three months to get the invested money with a marginal benefit. Moreover, the market rates we get during harvestation are quite low and unsatisfactory," said Asaithambi's father.

"But producing two or three sarees per day can give around Rs. 700, better than relying on agriculture. But this machine costs Rs. 3 lakhs and I have got the amount from chit-system, which is



Sathish with his paddy harvest for the season | RIZVI SAIIF

a boon and a curse at the same time," Asaithambi concluded.

Their cash driven occupation indicates the uncertainty in agriculture. Asaithambi had got this idea of saree weaving business from one of his relatives who worked in a factory of Salem. The weavers here are not vocationally trained but have worked in factories for a couple of years to learn the skill.

Dr. B. S. Sumalatha of Central University of Tamil Nadu said that uncertainty of agrarian economy tends to change the mindset of the next generation farmers to pursue various other fields other than agriculture.

People in Ramakondahalli, a village of some 6000 villagers, mostly grow paddy and ragi.

"We have no other options than getting into this occupation as it has been years, the government could not provide us lands to develop sustainable farming. Hence, we are completely dependent on selling ornaments and other fancy items," said Satya (27), who sells toys and imitation jewellery at temples around her village, Pachinampatti.

Pachanampatti is a village of people belonging to Scheduled Castes, or the lowest of the low, who typically do not even have lands.

The people here look forward to the Thiruvizha (festival), which is when Satya's business goes up. On those days, she can make as much as Rs. 500 per day.

In Malaiyur village of Dharmapuri, most of the men go to

nearby big towns like Hosur or cities like Coimbatore and Bangalore to work as daily wage labourers.

Lakshmi (30) has three children and her husband works as a daily wage labourer in Hosur. To run her household, like many other families in the village, she nurtures flower plants and it is a source of financial support.

"Mostly the women in our village work in this field and it has been an integral part of our livelihood. The flowers consume less water and we get the water from Panchayat tap water lines mainly, but the irregularity of water often becomes a problem," she said.

"Our village is not developing as you can see, people are roaming

around here and there because they have actually nothing to do. We have no lands here for agriculture as the government has taken no initiative for us," said Muniamma (52), of Pethampatti village.

Some 25 or 30 women work in a matchbox factory in Dharmapuri town and they earn Rs. 200 to Rs. 250 per day, depending on how much boxes they can pack daily.

In villages like Doddampatti, the second generations of farmers have all moved out.

"We have educated our sons and daughters. They have now settled abroad and are earning fairly good Today, my crops might fail but I can rely on the fact that my children are making steady income which I can fall back on," said M.Sivan, a farmer.

An Island of Opposition

-SASHWATA SAHA

Pennagaram: Most of the problems of Pethampatti, a village under the Pennagaram taluk stem from the fact that the local panchayat representative and the panchayat president are from two diametrically opposed political parties.

The representative is an AIADMK man while the president is from the DMK. The two parties have been warring since 1972.

A panchayat is a third tier of government in rural India.

K. Nagarajan, a local resident said, "This village does not have any farmers. It is because none of us, here, own any land. All the fields surrounding the village are owned by people from Paruvathanahalli and Kongarpalayam."

"Our land was taken away from us, a few years ago," he added. "We have been fighting in court for a few years. We are generational DMK voters but this election we voted for AIADMK. Now, we are in more trouble."

Pethampatti is a predominantly Scheduled Caste village, which according to local primary school teacher, N. Kalimandi is why their concerns are overlooked by the local panchayat.

"This is not the first time we have been treated badly," he said. "In 2011, the panchayat closed down the local high school. They said that there were not enough students. Yet the school in Kongarpalayam (a predominantly higher caste village) had even fewer students but they are still running."

B. Senguttan, Pethampatti's panchayat representative came to power on January 6, this year. He is a former government employee of influence and multiple villagers have said that he, unlike other candidates, did not distribute money to influence voters.

The DMK administration has begun extending an existing highway near the village which is supposed to connect Pethampatti's larger neighbour, Paruvathanahalli to Pennagaram.

However, the road construction has proven to be an inconvenience to the residents of Pethampatti.

"The road (construction) blocks our path to the cemetery. Now, we have to carry our dead for four more kilometres," said S. Narasimhan, the local ration shop owner.

"Our customs say that the dead can only be carried by members of the family or very close friends. The cemetery is three kilometres away from the village but now we have to walk seven kilometres in total," he added.

The Panchayat President's office confirmed the construction of the road and said that it would be an economic boon for Paruvathanahalli but declined to comment on the caste based allegations.

"Not that the newly elected man is any better," said Narasimhan, "Only yesterday, he threw a feast for all those who voted for him. I don't know he knew who voted for whom."

MGNREGS starved of funds here

MEGHNA.M

Dharmapuri: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been starved of funds for over a year causing agricultural labourers who rely heavily on this in their off season to remain unemployed.

Vanitha.S enrolled for the first time in the MGNREGS in October 2019 only after marriage.

"I worked for 10 days before they asked us all to go home as there was no more work for us to do," she said.

The common work that everybody gets to do in Dharmapuri district is desilting the reservoirs in the nearby areas.

The very next day a JCB was brought in to finish the rest of the work. When the villagers of Doddampatti enquired their panchayat about this, they were told that there was no funds to carry on with this

scheme.

Many like Vanitha depend on this scheme to feed their children and run their household and have since not been given any work.

But unlike her they were paid for the work done. She has been awaiting payment for the 10 days work that she has done.

The MGNREGS ensures employment for 100 days in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage for Rs 375 per day.

However, Malaiyur, a hill top village, had been given work as recent as two weeks involving the cleaning of their nearby reservoir. However, more work on that has been stopped due to the local body elections that were conducted recently.

"We were told that once the results were announced new work

will be allotted to us," said Latchmi.M who had utilised the scheme for the past 10 years. "Since we are a hilltop village there is no real job opportunity here. The nearest one is 13 km away in the town, Papparatpatti and the reservoir we are asked to clean is just 1 km away. Being

under this scheme has ensured an ease of access for us."

From Malaiyur a total of 150 people are enrolled under this scheme and are put into rotations in batches of 10-15 people every two weeks. "We are paid on a daily basis and are informed if we have work the next day and we are paid about Rs 100 to Rs 200," she adds.

However, it is a different story for the people of Nochikuttai, a village in Sitheri that is 30 km from Dharmapuri and lacks access to the town and district.



STRIVING TO SURVIVE

Threshing: This ragi comprises the only crop that survived in Sundari Raju's one acre farm in Malaiyur | SASHWATA SAHA

Let women study but what about jobs?

RIZVI SAIIF

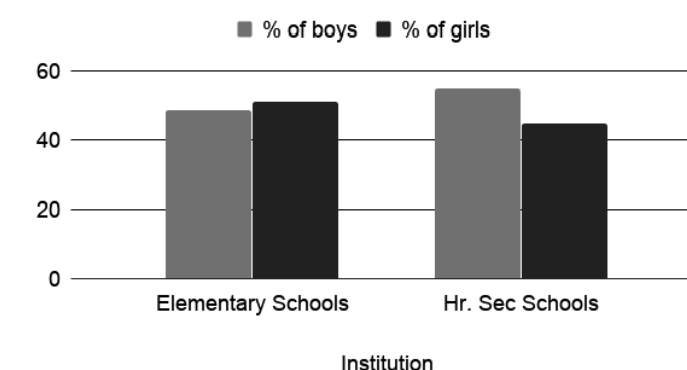
Dharmapuri: With a six-month-old baby in her arms and a two-year-old son who keeps getting into mischief, 21-year-old Kasturi has her hands full.

Adjusting her oversized churidar that keeps falling off her bony shoulder, Kasturi said she stopped education after twelfth standard as her parents decided to marry her off. There are a lot of women like Kasturi, people who live their lives according to societal demands.

Early marriage is rampant in India, especially in rural areas. "People here believe that a woman will be safe if she is with a man," said P. Nithya, who runs a non-profit organisation for the prevention of child marriages. She added that the rate of child marriages might have decreased over the years but it has not yet completely stopped.

Rajeshwary Thangaraj, a government school teacher said,

Enrollment of girls and boys



Graph showing enrollment percentage of girls and boys in elementary and higher secondary schools. RIZVI SAIIF

"Girls in our school have more enthusiasm to study than boys. Some get into college as well but very few end up working because they get into married life."

Teaching and nursing are the professions that women are allowed to pursue here. "We can study as much as we want but we

are not supposed to go outside for jobs," said Nithya.

Most of the villages in Dharmapuri have primary and middle schools but accessibility to higher secondary schools remains tough. In fact data from the district statistical handbook shows that the number of girls enrolled in

elementary schools is more than the number of boys. But in Higher Secondary Schools, the percentage of girls decreases.

S. Shanmugam, a government school teacher in Malaiyur said, "I joined here in 2012 and since then only two girls have gone to college from our school." He added that children in hilly villages like Malaiyur lose interest in studies after a point of time. They get accustomed to the village lifestyle and goes for cattle rearing and other daily wage jobs, he said.

Although the government has put forward schemes like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, which aims to educate all children giving special focus to girls, in the age group of 6 and 14, the implementation is not effective.

The certainty of higher education is meagre. D. Shekar, teacher of Dhasarahalli Panchayat Union Middle School said, "There are very less job opportunities here. It is more difficult for girls."

DIY equipment for cleaners

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Dasarahalli: Maiol's eyes watered. Her mouth tightly covered with a black cloth and grasping a stick with her bare hands, she pushes the plastic bottles, leaves and other things deeper into the fire.

Sakthi, her friend and colleague, looked away and started to sweep along the road, she collected the plastic bottles and hay, dumped it in one of the six green dustbins in her cart.

Maiol and Sakthi and many others like them haven't been paid in the last four months.

Maiol picked up the can and the traditional hand cart and dumped it, again, in the fire.

Sakthi and Maiol, cleaners in the Dasarahalli panchayat, are best friends travelling together every day from their home in Bodinaickenpatti.

"We have been working together for the last three years," said Sakthi. But the cleaners are given no protective equipment, only the brooms they sweep with.

Devaivam (36) a waste collector said that equipment was given to them in the initial years. The masks and the gloves are torn now and were not replaced.

Maiol complained of cough and occasional chest pain due to smoke. "Though I have not visited a doctor yet," said Maiol.

Chapter VIII of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013 states that every local authority should provide for doorstep garbage collectors and other employees, appropriate technological equipment for cleaning which includes gloves, mask and tricycle.(explain)

"I use the bell, to notify my arrival. The people, then rush to handover their wastes to me," Sakthi said.

"For the last four months, the cleaners had not been paid their salary of Rs. 2,900," said Maiol.

All the cleaners said that the payment was delayed due to State Civic Poll. "We have been bugging our supervisor for months now, but no action has been taken," said Devaivam.

Maiol (35), mother of two girls and a son, said, "My husband is a coolie, my daughters are in college. Money is important to us."

According to the cleaners, no job other than coolie and cleaners was available. If the government gave us cow for rearing, we would leave this job, they added.

Maiol said, "We have complained multiple times and they have asked us to wait till the next *thalamai* (sarpanch) is elected."



Piece of cloth used as mask | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Housing policy lags in implementation

SASHWATA SAHA

Dharmapuri: Residents from villages across the Dharmapuri district have complained about the mismanagement and faulty implementation of various government housing schemes.

The schemes are the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), the Tamil Nadu Village Habitation Improvement Scheme (TNVHIS) and the Chief Minister Solar Powered Green House Scheme (CMSPGHS).

Villagers who subscribed to the programmes have said that they have either not received the subsidy amount yet or the subsidy has not been passed on to them by the banks. They say the amount of money given by the government is not remotely enough to build a house.

In the Ramakondahalli village under the Pennagaram taluk, M. Sukumar, a 31-year-old junior engineer said, "We subscribed to the TNVHIS scheme when my father started renovating our house in 2015.

"It is over four years now and we are yet to see even a paisa that was promised by the government.

We also subscribed to the CMSPGHS, last year but no government official has come to check our solar panel and pay us our subsidised amount."

While Sukumar and his family are comparably well off and do not require the assistance, there are others such as R. Sekar, a 40-year-old farmer from Poochur village who have been affected more.

"The amount that the state government provides is nothing," he said, "One can barely buy cement and other building materials with the money let alone build a house. And still, I have yet to receive half of the promised amount. It has been over five years since I have built my house."

The branch manager of the Tamil Nadu Grama Bank in Manjarahalli refused to comment added that the schemes were being implemented properly without any hitch.

B. Mani, the 57-year-old Panchayat representative of Manjarahalli said, "The PMAY scheme has helped thirty people in our village to set up their own houses. So, I would say that it is a pretty effective scheme. However, it is a bureaucratic process and needs some time to implement."

An insight into Dharmapuri through Alagiri Nagar

Education and lack of job opportunities result in women being married early and men taking up daily wage labour in Harur taluk's Alagiri Nagar. – Etipatti, Alagiri Nagar and Pudhu Alagiri Nagar

TEAM DHARMAPURI

Alagiri Nagar: Alagiri Nagar, a collection of three villages flanked by the Pudhu (Tamil for new) Alagiri Nagar and Etipatti has some 300 houses. The river Cauvery, which flows through Dharmapuri district is the only evidence of 'Ala' (Tamil for wave) in the area. There is no sea nearby.

Initially there was just the one village Etipatti. But that soon became too populated and hence, the government gave land near the highway for the residents to shift, which became Pudhu Alagiri Nagar. However, since the land belongs to the government, the residents do not have the right to the land they built their house on.

Dhoumani.D, local resident, said that she moved to the New Alagiri Nagar as a young bride about 25 years ago. "My family lives back in Etipatti. It was just my husband and

I who decided to move here."

The barren ground near the temple, in the middle of the village, lights up during the Kovil (Temple) festival. The two-week-long festival's grand nature comes out in the flavourful food and the colourful clothes of the villagers. People pray to their main deity, Viraiyamma and dance to Thappattam music.

Education here revolves around its primary government school. The school has classes from 1 to 6 and has 39 students, of whom 15 are girls. It employs two teachers, Rameshwari and Maheswari. The former teaches Classes 1, 2 and 3 while the latter teaches Classes 4 and 5.

M. Jyoti, one of the students' mothers said, "Some of us send our kids to a different school in Etipatti, one kilometre away. It's because our children have grown up knowing the two teachers and



An illustrated look into life in rural India | SASHWATA SAHA

often, they don't listen to their teachers. Unfamiliar faces make them more disciplined."

The villages are separated by agricultural fields growing sweet

potato, millets and maize belonging to the villagers from Etipatti. The New Alagiri Nagar is neatly arranged with houses facing each other and wood-fired stoves for

cooking in the yard. The sewage from the houses join a drain running by the yard to a river nearby.

Much of the agriculture in Alagiri Nagar is rain-fed and the only surface water the village gets is for drinking. The water they get is from a panchayat line that they receive every 15 days with no timing announced prior.

D.Dhoman said that it has only been a month since they have received water before as there was a no water. The ground water now has turned salty causing them to use it only for washing vessels.

In years when the rainfall is scanty and the production is low and hence most people feel the need to hold second jobs to supplement their incomes.

"Once a week, my mother along with her friends walk 2 hours to the nearest forest. She collects firewood," says Vairanila, an

undergraduate student pursuing Mathematics.

Her mother and aunt work as daily wage labour in the fields nearby. The women have to work multiple jobs in order to make their ends meet. Some have tried their hand at tailoring and also have sewing machines in their homes.

Some of them have cows which they use for milk production and also serves as an extra income earning upto Rs 360 for a litre.

Thambidaran. S (33) owns an acre of land and grows cotton, one kilo of which fetches him Rs. 45. He sells his crop to the Kooturavu society in Harur.

"Low rainfall has resulted in crop failure, year after year. Now, I work both on my field and as a coolie," said Thambidaran.

It is (harvest festival) Pongal time and sugarcane harvest is the prime agricultural labour. The men cut the crop, for which they receive

full sleeved shirts for protection against scythes, while the women tie it and carry it to the shed.

Many of them work now in sugarcane harvesting as there is a demand for the crop for the festival Pongal.

While the women get paid Rs.150 an for every tonne, the men get paid Rs.250 for the same tonne.

All 300 houses in the village have a toilet but residents still prefer to defecate out in the open.

Many do not have access to medication as there is no medical store serving their needs.

For every medical need they need to visit the private hospitals in Harur.

The nearest Primary Health Centre is 4 kilometres away and the nurse who is part of the Village Health Nurse Scheme comes to visit once every month and to make records of the pregnant ladies in the village.



- Oh hey, can you ask Lord Indra to turn the taps on?
- But... I am Dalit.

A DRY SOLUTION

As droughts continue to hit Dharmapuri year after year the farmers have either resorted to migration or to futile prayers | SASHWATA SAHA

School by the cliff

RIZVI SAIF

Malaiyur: The new building of Panchayat Union Middle School Malaiyur, built two years back to relieve the pressure on the old, worn-out one, remains unused.

Teachers say, the new one is built right next to a steep drop in the hill, which they are afraid, maybe dangerous for the children.

Some two kilometres from the new building is the old school with just four classes for 100 students between classes one and eight.

Mariyappan, the English teacher of the school said, "We are scared for the safety of our children so we have not yet started functioning the new school. Its like there's a suicide point right behind the school."

Built on a mountain top, the new building has no boundary wall separating it from the steep slope of the mountain.

With three classes, this building was supposed to solve the space constraints of the old school by relocating students of standard sixth, seventh and eighth.

Malaiyur is a hill village situated some 10 km from the Pennagaram Taluk of Dharmapuri. Although a small village in terms of population, it covers around 20 kms.

A year ago, the teachers had

asked the government for a boundary wall to ensure safety but they have not yet responded, said Mariyappan.

The staff has now decided to take matters into their own hands and build a wall for the school. "We are planning to shift students of standard sixth, seventh and eighth to the new building for the next academic year," Mariyappan said. He hopes that since the local body elections are over, their problems will be addressed more strongly.

He said that he couldn't interfere much as he was not from the village. The school was built after clearing forest land in that area. The government allotted funds but no one came to inspect the spot. The locals of the area insisted on building the school there.

The Dharmapuri Education Department refused to comment on the issue.

The old school made of two small, single-storey structures, one of which has three classrooms and the other is a small thatched room. There is a large area surrounding the two structures which is used as playground by the children.

"We could have built the school nearby but the children needed the playground. We tried making demands but none was taken into account," said Mariyappan.



Sadiya and Pawan's home is a van filled with utensils, decoration and clothes | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Travelling couple on a dance tour

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Sajjalahalli: "Sadiya, Sadiya," the villagers called out.

The village in Pappapatti, a village dancer called Sadiya, travelled from village to village plying her trade.

She dances for village men and youngsters who gather in tight circles around her as she danced.

The scrawny figure that looked closer to her teens than her professed 22-years and came out from behind a mini-truck, popularly called a tempo in these parts.

She came out, her oversized pink gown flapping behind her like a butterfly's wings. The off-white dupatta she had wrapped around her neck seemed oddly out of place, given her child-like face.

Big, blue bangles that almost seemed to fall off from her child-like wrists completed the image.

She looked like a teenager wearing her mother's bangles.

"I am Sadiya," she nodded in confirmation shifting her two-year-old baby from one arm to another. Sadiya comes from a family of

dancers. "I like dancing because that is what I have learnt since childhood," she said. She dances from 7 in the evening, to the beats of Tamil movie songs.

For each performance, they collect around Rs. 3000, said Pawan Raj, Sadiya's 24-year old husband who drives her around and organises the shows. There is typically, one show a day, and Sadiya and Pawan move around between villages.

"Some days, there is no performance. Thus no money," said Raj.

Sadiya has been dancing since she was a kid.

"When I was young, my parents were not that aware. They made me drop out from school in Class-9," says Sadiya.

Sadiya and her husband have planned to leave their baby with her grandparents in Chennai, once she turns 5-years old.

"She will be educated, unlike her parents. I won't let her become like me," said Sadiya.

Sadiya and Pawan travel every day to a new village in a tempo, which she says is like her home.

Politics playing on Swachh Bharat toilets

JASMIN NIHALANI

Dharmapuri: Toilets in Dharmapuri are becoming unlikely battlegrounds for politics.

At first glance, the paintings of leaves, sometimes a comb, rising sun, mangoes look like they are there to beautify the otherwise drab walls. On closer inspection, it turns out that they are actually political party symbols.

"Why should we use a toilet, when we can go outside," says Rajalakshmi (26), a house-wife and mother of a one-year-old girl in Dharmapuri's Alagiri village.

Rajalakshmi's view shows what is wrong with the Swachh Bharat Mission. The scheme was launched with much fanfare in 2014 to make India open defecation free and get

more households to use toilets. Since then however, the mission has met with a lot of criticism for not achieving its stated goals.

The toilet in Alagiri is an example. On paper, however, Dharmapuri district is open defecation free. According to the Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin report, 1.75 lakh households without toilet were identified in 2014. By 2019, all those houses were given toilets. A further 1.23 lakh households that came up in that time were given toilets as well.

What that number hides is the number of people actually using the toilets.

Defecating out in the open is a 'fun activity' for the two women, which they do with their friends. Keertika, who lives in Erode, says



AIADMK symbol on a toilet | JASMIN NIHALANI

that she uses a toilet there but when she comes back to her native place, she would much rather defecate in the open because the practice is

culturally instilled in her.

The fields where they defecate is divided into two halves; one side is used by the males while the other half is used by females. However, during the rainy season and at night, they prefer using the toilet. The women also say that the toilets were just built by the government and nobody came to give them instructions.

But the truth about toilets and defecation is that there are as many stories as people you ask. More than 75 kms away from Dharmapuri, in Nochikuttai village of Sitheri hills, residents do not use toilets because they consider cleaning them shameful. Around five years ago, residents recall, that a person from the government had come to inform them about the

benefits of using toilets. Today, they still prefer going outside than defecating in the toilets.

Some, like Nadiya, a 27-year-old from Sellamudi village, who says she would prefer using a toilet if only she had one. Only five households in Sellamudi village have toilets.

Here there are specific timings for women to defecate. In the mornings they have to go at 6 or in before 6 in the evening. If they have to go sometime in between, they are forced to go somewhere far away.

B. Mani, president of Manjarahalli panchayat, which has jurisdiction over Sellamudi says there are as many as 15 toilets but residents don't like using them because they emit a foul smell.

"Private clinics might look shiny but they are also very expensive"

SASHWATA SAHA

Pennagaram: Healthcare in Dharmapuri has been one of the major concerns raised by several villagers in various taluks.

One of the major concerns is that the Primary Health Centers (PHC) and the Sub Centers (SC) are too far off from the villages and that in times of emergency, it is almost impossible to get the patient from the village to the health centre due to a lack of ambulance service.

Other concerns include the lack of expert personnel, especially qualified nurses and proper medicine at the PHCs and SCs.

It was also implied that the natal

care provided by the government bodies is subpar to that of the private clinics.

Dr. K. Uma, a Medical Officer at the Pennagaram Primary Health Center and the first woman to hold the post in the area, went on to clarify some of the issues. Edited excerpts follow.

What do you consider an 'emergency case'?

In these parts, emergencies usually are child deliveries. Many people seem to be distrustful of hospitals in general but they all agree that hospitals are more reliable for natal care than any local midwife.

Is it true that there is no

ambulance service to ferry patients to and from the hospital?

It's untrue. We use an app called, Pick Me. When a user registers on the app, they are given a unique identity, which they can use to call in an ambulance to their location. However, the locals tend to avoid using it especially before deliveries because customs dictate that nobody but a family member touch a pregnant woman before childbirth. We also have a programme to take patients back home in ambulances. That one is far more popular. Still, the number of



Dr. K. Uma is the first female MO in Pennagaram | SASHWATA SAHA

vehicles to patients is low.

Do you have access to standard medical care equipment?

Yes, we are equipped to deal with the cases that come our way. We have a fully functioning delivery room and our wards and other facilities such as toilets are hygienic. At a personal cost, we had mosquito netting installed on all of the windows. Me and the Chief Medical Officer also pay for the drinking water supply that we get here. We also have a dispensary stocked with

medicines which we supply to the SCs that fall under our domain on a weekly basis.

How do you track your patients?

We maintain a thorough register in which we note down the patients' details such as their contact number, their address, the last time they came to the PHC and when they are scheduled for their follow up check.

How do you ensure that they come in for their follow up checks?

Every village has a nurse who has a copy of that village's patient records. She is also equipped with a dispensary which contains all the

emergency medicines she might need. If a patient does not turn up for their follow-up then the nurse calls on them to ensure that they turn up to the PHC.

Do you think that PHC care is any less than private clinics?

No, of course not. Private clinics might look shiny but they are also very expensive. Additionally, most of them are located in the city which means that the villagers have to travel far to reach them and they tend to feel awkward in the environment and end up not disclosing their problems. PHCs are free but we care for them just the same, if not more. But the misconception still festers.

Libraries for name-sake

Lack of infrastructure and funding hinders libraries in Dharmapuri

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Dharmapuri: Hunting for a book, Nitish probed through all the eight racks of the local library in Doddampatti village.

Not finding the English book he was looking for, Nitish picks up a Tamil book instead.

Nitish is a class 4 student, whose favourite subject is English. "I don't like going to the library, nowadays. They do not have any book in English," said Nitish.

The village library at Doddampatti in Harur has 9,828 books. All are in Tamil. "General studies, novels, literature are some of the sections here. The books here are also accessed by the older population for leisure read," said Librarian Arumugam, a resident of Harur.

A graduate in Science, Arumugam said, "The library was built under Central government's Samagra Siksha Scheme and donations.

The scheme entails funding to panchayat for building and maintenance of educational infrastructure.

The goal was to make books available for both children and



The panchayat library in Doddampatti | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

adults." The increasing cost of library membership, the cost of getting to a library are serving to make whatever libraries that exist inaccessible to people here, far away from district headquarters in Dharmapuri.

"The price of the membership card has risen from Rs. 25 to Rs. 30 last year," he added.

Under a membership card, the villagers can borrow books and have access to the four newspapers in Tamil and English, the librarian explained.

"People from villages like Moberipatti, Achalvadi, Pethappampatti, Nachinampatti, Pachanampatti, Nambipatti, Kola-

gampatti and Valaithottam, come here to collect books," Arumugam said. Confirms to the distance as an issue for other villages, Librarian Shunguman, who works at the Malaiyur primary school in Pappireddipatti near Pennagaram said, "We only have one rack for books, rest we keep it locked in iron almirahs with locks."

The library at Malaiyur hill village unlike Doddampatti can only be accessed by students of the school.

Shunguman said that the books come as stock from Pennagaram; most of it is damaged and not replaced. "Being the only hill village under this panchayat, our demands

get ignored," he added.

The library here does not maintain a logistic system of the 500 Tamil books collection.

"Sometimes books go missing, sometimes it is submitted back torn," he said.

For another hill village of Sitheri in Pappireddipatti, the library was non-functional for last four years, said a resident.

On Jan 6, the village elected its first tribal woman, Govindama as the head of the panchayat.

"Under ex-president Aleagins the village library was always closed, but the newly elected President Govindama has promised to give funds to the village library," said Sendhil Kumar, a resident here.

Following a 10 k.m. trail from Sitheri, lies Nochikuttai village which only has a bus service twice a day.

The village doesn't have a library and the distance to the panchayat village makes accessibility difficult.

Susheela, the newly elected head of Ramakondahalli said that she will build a library for her village.

In popularity stakes, govt. schools trail pvt.

RIZVI SAIF

Dharmapuri: The Panchayat Union Middle School (PUMS), Pancharahalli in Pennagaram, recently shifted from Tamil medium to English medium to tackle the flow of students to private schools. Usha Nandhini, a teacher at the school said, "Our strength is falling because private schools are attracting more students. People feel they offer better English (education)."

The dissatisfaction with government schools has been increasing in villages despite the low cost associated with them. 10-year-old Aravindhan M. was moved to a private school for better quality education as soon as his father could afford it.

J. Janani, a B.A. English graduate who studied in E.R.K. Higher Secondary School, which is a private school, said, "Language is taught by good teachers in private schools and they are more clean and disciplined."

Comparing the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) of Dharmapuri for the last two years, the

enrolment percentage of children into private schools has increased from 28.7 per cent in 2016 to 40 per cent in 2018.

Despite government initiatives such as free bicycles and laptops for children and provision for mid-day meals, the government schools have failed to keep up with the private ones, according to experts.

Tamil Nadu State head for Pratham Education Foundation, Oliver B. said, "Private schools have better efficiency in appointment of teachers. The teacher ratio is much lesser in government schools." The

Private schools have better efficiency in appointment of teachers. The teacher ratio is much lesser in government schools - Oliver B.

government delay the appointment of faculty so the posts remain vacant. The proportion of number of teachers to students varies, leading to poor quality education.

"Replacement of teachers who go on maternity leaves is also not ensured," he said. Oliver added that the learning outcome is poor for both government and private schools which indicates inefficient teaching methodology that aims at 100 percent pass and not at quality education. PUMS Malaiyur has four teachers for all 100 students.

M. Mariyappan, English teacher at the school said that the students are often given free time as the faculty may not be available.

Lack of facilities and poor maintenance of buildings has also tainted the image of government schools further. D. Shekar, a teacher at the Dhasarahalli PUMS said, "No water purifiers have been installed here and the water supply is also not steady."

The Education officer in charge of Dharmapuri declined to comment.

Potters' wheel slowing down

MEGHNA.M

Ramakondahalli: Govind Raju limps around as he starts moulding clay for making his pots. He uses his deft hands to mould diya covers.

Housed in a remote corner of the village, he is the only potter to be found here in a radius of 20 km.

"I sell my pots only in this village and in this vicinity. With my ailment I cannot go around the Pennagaram Taluk or the town to sell my wares," said the 65-year-old.

However, it has become hard for him to obtain the river sand that is required to make clay for his profession.

The restriction imposed on sand mining has proved to be an obstacle for this potter.

They were imposed in 2018 in an effort by the Tamil Nadu Government to curb illegal sand mining which is rampant all over the state. Sand is mined extensively for construction of buildings and it is in high demand which has led to illegal mining of it. But the effect of imposing restrictions has had an adverse effect on another livelihood. Pottery.

"My profession is not that profitable. That is why you will find most of us migrating to cities in pursuit of a well paying job," he said.

The Cauvery River flows right behind their village. Govind used to collect his sand from there until recently when he was ordered to go to the nearest police station for permission.

Every morning he is out at 6 a.m. and takes periodical breaks to make sure that he does not exert much pressure on his back and knee.

"It is no longer easy to obtain river sand which I use to make clay and my pots. Because of the sand mafia they have asked us to obtain permission to take the river sand. I cannot visit so many government offices and wait long hours just to make a living," he continued.

Govind is a generational potter. "My father taught me this profession when I was 8 years old. It was lucrative then."

But at the age of 15 he decided he wanted to do something else and left home. Obtaining a job as a construction worker in Coimbatore, he worked for three years before injuring his knee.

"I hurt my knee very badly when I worked as a construction worker. I have visited numerous doctors in Salem, Dharmapuri, and Chennai but nobody could treat it and give me a permanent cure," he said.

Kalvi, his wife takes care of poultry and provides a second income for the family, making a meager income of about Rs.350 per month. After his injury, Govind turned to pottery to eke out a living.

"This is all I know. What else will I do?"

Farmers depend on informal banking

ABHIJIT PAUL

Paruvathanahalli: Many farmers are not eligible to get the loans from banking system. They are mostly dependent on the informal banking system or chit-system.

The usual rates are higher than the bank but avoiding lots of technicality and paper works, farmers, who are in need of cash on immediate basis, keep faith on this credit system.

Paruvathanahalli village of Pennagaram taluk can be observed as a positive side of the agricultural interest. However, various factors for a sustainable agricultural economy depends on sufficient rainfall, good price of crops, flow of cash and benefits from the invested capital.

Saktivel (56) from Balacode village, in the process of harvesting aman (one of the varieties of paddy) with six other men and women workers. A thresher which was running with the power of a tractor's engine was removing the seeds from the stalks and husks.

Rajendran (52), who owns a thresher and a tractor and also 10 acres of land said "Most of the farmers are dependent on the informal credit system as they cannot fulfill the criteria of being eligible to get the loan amount. And also, it is easier to get money from that informal system."

Saktivel said that the credit cost of Rs. 100 in that system varies from Rs. 2 to Rs. 5. "Suppose I have taken Rs. 10,000 from that credit system, I have to pay Rs. 2400 per month as the rate of interest is around 24%."

"Manual labour is unsustainable in the agricultural land if it's compared to mechanical process. In complete machine based labour, the workers get Rs. 1000, obviously depending on the quantity of the crops. But if it completely runs manually, the payment goes doubled," he concluded.

K. Sathish (38) said that machine works harms the economy, leading to a dip in the daily wage labourer's income.

From planting the saplings to harvesting, it takes almost three months. With adequate rainfall, 0.3 acres of land can produce almost 1200 kg. Rice grain and the market rate what they get is Rs. 22 to Rs. 30 per kg.

But there are expenditures also for ploughing, tractor costs Rs. 1000. Two times of fertilizer costs Rs. 2000, transportation and thresher's fare costs Rs. 1000 each. For harvesting, they have to spend Rs. 1000. So, in total, from that amount of rice, they can earn Rs. 27,500. But, in many of the cases, it has been found that the farmer could not bear the burden and ends up being bankrupt.

Anganwadis affected by absenteeism

Seasonal migration, a reason for kids' irregular attendance

ABHIJIT PAUL

Dharmapuri: The anganwadi at Nochikuttai village of Pappireddipatti taluk here has 15 children registered but only nine come regularly, said Illavarasi (43).

The teacher who has worked at the anganwadi in Nochikuttai for some 10 years, said that the reason is that the kids drop out because their parents are seasonal migrants. The parents often take their young children with them.

An anganwadi is a type of rural child care institution which plays a vital role for a child's nutritional growth.

To combat malnutrition among children, who belong to the age group of 0 to 6, Indian government in 1975 took this initiative.

According to Sathya C., Superintendent of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Dharmapuri, there are some 1333 anganwadis in the eight subdivisions of the district. Each anganwadi caters to several villages.

Absenteeism has become a major issue in several villages of Dharmapuri as the number of children who attend class has fallen for reasons like seasonal migration, children come to anganwadi only to get free meals.

Chetti, a five year old boy waiting for his free meal to be



(Left to right) Teacher Illavarasi and Tamilselvi | ABHIJIT PAUL

served said, "I love to have food here only but I prefer to roam around in the fields."

Nochikuttai is a village on a hill in Tamil Nadu's Dharmapuri. The road connecting Nochikuttai to the seat of local government in Sitheri, goes nowhere else. Two buses-one each in the morning and evening-are the only form of public transportation.

The Nochikuttai anganwadi has it worse because of its location is close to houses means the students can sneak away home after eating.

Tamilselvi (55), who has been working here for the last 30 years, said, "In the morning, we have to

go and bring the children from their homes at 8 a.m. We have to repeat again at 12 p.m. and bring them back as the children lose interest and leave."

Out of 40 students, only eight to ten students go regularly at Bodanaickenpatti village anganwadi of Harur taluk.

There is no 'ayah' helper to cook the food or to take care of the children. The teacher has to prepare meals for the students.

Sanjeevan (40), one of the guardians said that lack of interest is one of the reasons that the children stay away from anganwadi.

Sekharan (42), headmaster of Dasarahalli primary school said that the lack of education is blocking the path students' education and nutrition.

18 students were shifted from the anganwadi to primary school as the anganwadi was under construction, he added.

In the hilly village of Pappireddipatti taluk, the anganwadi was closed. The primary school teacher said that the anganwadi teacher and 'ayah' had gone to celebrate the appointment of a female panchayat head.

ICDS personnel Taramani in Chennai said that there are certain problems to bring the children on a regular basis at anganwadi.

Regular monitoring is a must for centres to keep a close eye on the drawbacks for improvement.

Though, Jayamani (48), teacher of Doddampatti anganwadi has different experience.

She said that out of 25 registered students 23 students come regularly. The children are fond of reading and drawing.

"Education is an important factor in terms of development of a child," she added.

Jayamani said that every alternative week the anganwadi tries arranging parent-teacher meeting. They exchange ideas and conduct discussions on child development.

ITS ALL ABOUT TAMARIND HERE...

JASMIN NIHALANI

Sajjalahalli: It is harvest time for tamarind cultivators. Heaps of harvested tamarind can be found all around the village, in empty plots, on side streets even.

In one of the lanes women are beating the pod to remove the seeds. A few meters away, some women are making 'tamarind cakes' by pasting the sticky husks in layers which would later be sold outside as blocks.

At a distance, a farmer, at some distance, is feeding the tamarind fruit into a machine which was removing the hard-outer shells.

Sajjalahalli, in Papparahalli, is all about tamarind now. Some years back the village grew paddy and sugarcane but the declining water table necessitated a shift to a crop that was less water intensive. And Sajjalahalli chose tamarind. And nearly half the village is dependent on tamarind in some form or the other now.

Tamarind is used widely in Indian cuisine. India is also one of the largest producers of tamarind with a production of nearly 1.7 lakh tonnes a year according to the Spice Board of India under the union ministry of commerce and industry.

Tamil Nadu is India's largest producer, cultivating approximately 48,000 tonnes a year. However, the prices of the spice have crashed this year too, despite a bumper harvest.

But, even tamarind cultivation is now leaving a sour taste in the mouth of farmers like Kaveri.

G.Kaveri (67), says the price of tamarind was Rs 150 for a kilo last year but this year it has dropped to Rs. 80.



A daily wage labourer sticking tamarind husks to a ring | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA



(Top) A worker in the tamarind workshops | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

(Bottom) A heap of ripe tamarind | JASMIN NIHALANI



Remote from all the necessities

JASMIN NIHALANI

Nochikuttai: Most of the men in Nochikuttai of Pappireddipatti taluk have left the village and majority of the houses are locked.

The only sign of human settlement is the commotion from a nearby school where children are queuing up for their daily sambar, rice and egg. Situated 25 kms up on the Kalrayan hills, Nochikuttai is inhabited by the scheduled tribes. Nearly 9 kms from Sitheri, the head of the local government, it is the only village accessible by road. Rest of the 61 villages that come under Sitheri panchayat do not have roads.

Only about half of India's habitations were connected to a road in 2014. This figure increased to 91 percent by January 2019 according to the data provided in the parliament.

H.Chinnapponnu (40) sits outside her house. For about six months a year this is her only job. With two milch cows to tend to, she cannot other work while her husband works as a labourer in coffee and tea plantations and pays her a visit once every two-three months.

It has been 10 years since the men have abandoned farms here, to look for alternate jobs. The women were left behind. Failing rains and increasing cost of living drove them out.

Chinnapponnu, like other women, was left with her one-acre farm where she now grows sweet potatoes and travels 35 kms away to the nearest town Harur to sell them. She takes the only bus that comes to the village at 8 in the morning and tries to come back by afternoon. Since there is no other bus service from Sitheri to Nochikuttai, she prefers walking the distance than staying there.

Besides a transport facility, Nochikuttai also lacks a proper hospital. Doctors visit a makeshift hospital once a week while nurses come and go. In case a patient needs to reach Sitheri, an ambulance is at their service provided they wait for 2-3 hours. Chinnapponnu says this itself causes 4-5 deaths each year in the village.

Despite all the hardships, Chinnapponnu prefers to stay in the same village where she was brought up. She is accustomed to the way of living and the pleasant weather here.



Jallikattu, matter of pride

NEIL CORNELIUS

Alanganallur: "We don't fight bulls in the arena, we hug them and hold on to them for as long as we can. That is why the sport is called 'yaeru thazhuvuthal' (hugging the bull). If there is any harm inflicted, it would rather be on us than the bulls," says Vinoth.N (34), a jallikattu veteran who is renowned as one of the best in the business.



Vinoth with his son and bull Pulikutti | NEIL CORNELIUS

Vinoth is a writer in the Alanganallur police department and raises 13 jallikattu bulls with his father. His bulls are yet to lose a game.

Vinoth says the bulls are treated like children and allowed to do whatever they want throughout the year. "Their only work is in the 'vadiyaasal' (jallikattu arena.) They are not made to do any other work," he says "I feel happier when one of our bulls wins than when I win," he adds.

There are three types of jallikattu - Vadi, Vadam and Veli Verattu. In Vadi, only one person tries to tame the bull. No one else

is allowed to jump on the bull. In Vadam, up to 9 persons can try and tame the bull. In Veli Verattu, the bull is set free on an open field and any number of people can try and tame it. If a man is able to hold on to the bull for a certain distance, he wins and if the bull is able to avoid getting caught or is able to escape the field, it wins.

Asked about PETA's allegations of animal cruelty in jallikattu such

as intoxicating the bull, Vinoth says: "logically speaking, a bull would perform better if it is not inebriated. So the claim is counter intuitive." He adds that if a bull is injured, the owner is the one who has to nurse it back to health. "There is no scope for cruelty towards the bulls".

Vinoth's father, Navaneethan. S (58), is the president of the Madurai District Jallikattu Association.

Navaneethan says the jallikattu bull is not from a specific breed. It could belong to any of the breeds, which include the Mala Madu, Puli Kolam, Naatu Madu and the famous Kangayam.

"This is the bull that made us famous. He's won over 40 games," says Navaneethan, pointing to a five-and-a-half feet tall, white bull named Puli Kutti (Tiger Cub.) Puli Kutti has allegedly killed two people during jallikattu.

Apart from raising bulls and taming them, Vinoth and Navaneethan also conduct free classes in which they teach people how to tame bulls for jallikattu. "We need to teach them how to play without hurting the bull or hurting themselves."

Asked about the prize, Vinoth says: "I spend Rs. 30,000 a month on the bulls alone. I also have to spend to take them to the event. The prize money might only be Rs. 10,000 or a bicycle, but to me it's better than buying an Audi. This is something we do out of passion and for pride, not for money."

In a woman panchayat, husband takes the call

SHREYA HARIDAS & SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS



Katturaja on the Panchayat President's seat with his wife Pounthai Katturaja | SHREYA HARIDAS

Jamburduraikottai: Pounthai-Katturaja, the newly elected village panchayat president, is set to remain the village chief only on paper. Why? Because her husband is the de-facto president. "I do not know what [schemes] are to be implemented in Jamburduraikottai," she says, hesitantly looking at her husband who is seated on the president's chair. Jamburduraikottai saw a local election after 10 long years.

Pounthai(32) won the elections conducted on December 31. Katturaja, who has flourishing businesses in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, promised a fund of Rs 25 lakhs from his own money for various projects, to escape the waiting time for receiving funds from the government. The election posters had the pictures of both Pounthai

and Katturaja. Muthammal G (47), a sanitation worker from Kamalapuram, was another candidate who stood for the seat reserved for women. "I contested as an independent candidate with autorickshaw as my symbol. Unfortunately, I lost by 700 votes. Even if I had won, I would have given the chair to my husband." The other candidates were Selvi A (54) and Vijaya C (50), who too said their husbands

would have functioned on their behalf, had they won. Pandiammal (37), a villager, responds. "I don't care if a man holds the seat. I just want someone to take the responsibility for the work to be done." "How can a woman go to the office and do field work, especially when it involves the responsibilities of a panchayat president," asked A.M. Benedict, the husband of a ward member.

School fights against all odds

CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kilakkuchettipatti: Despite the poor transport, uncooperative parents, distracted students, and the elephant menace, the Kilakkuchettipatti Government High School situated in the Palani Hills runs effectively.



Kilakkuchettipatti Govt High School | CHARUDATT PRABHU

"Two years ago, a wild elephant was spotted just a few metres from the school building. For precautionary measures, we immediately shifted all the students to the first floor," recalls Paulraj (50), a science teacher who also teaches English as the post is temporarily vacant.

Headmaster Suresh (42) is hopeful that the compound wall construction will start soon, as the funds have been allotted.

In summer, the teachers go around the hamlets of Palani Hills, convincing the parents to send their children to school. "In the plains, parents shift to other towns for their children's education, whereas, in the hills, there is no awareness on education. Studies are not a priority, earning is," laments Paulraj.

Despite regular circulars and notices, the parents "refuse" to attend the parent-teacher meet. "If they come here for the meet, they

lose a day's wage," says Suresh. "The children aged 13-14 take advantage of their parents' absence, and get addicted to alcohol," he adds.

"Today the strength of the school is 51. It was above 60 in June. The reasons for the dip are poor transportation facilities and family conditions," says Kumaresan (52), Mathematics teacher. Shivpalan (15) of class 10, for instance, lives in the interior, some 15 kilometres away. If he misses the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation bus, he has to wait for an hour for another bus. "He is irregular to school," says Kumaresan.

The teachers, too, have to travel long distances to reach school. All the eight faculty members, including the headmaster, come from the plains. The State government pays Rs. 7500 as 'Hill Allowance' to every teacher. "We

meet at Sempatti junction, which is 40 kilometres away, and come in one car," says Paulraj.

Student guides
For the students of class 6, 7 and 8, who walk alone through the jungles, the government has introduced "student guides", who escort them to school and back home. The criterion: the guide's child should be part of the group. The student guides should also make alternative arrangements if they are likely to be absent. "No student walks to school without the guide. We have two guides, and each one of them has the responsibility of five students," says Kumaresan.

"We are planning to arrange a car from the next academic year for the students coming from the interiors. If we do that, irrespective of the weather, they can attend school," says Suresh.

An uphill task

CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kilakkuchettipatti: For a student, going to school is normal but for Hariprasad (13), who lives in the Palani hills, it is no less than an adventure.

The Class 8 student of the Kilakkuchettipatti Govt High School walks alone for half-an-hour to school and back every day through the woods which are home to Indian gaurs, wild elephants and boars.

"I start around 8 in the morning and reach school by 8:30. After school, I start at 5 p.m. and reach home by 5:30," says Hariprasad, who stays with his mother and grandmother.

"Till last year, my mother would accompany me but now I commute alone."

Apart from books, uniforms, bags and stationery items, the government provides raincoats and jackets to students - for them to stay protected from the extreme weather conditions in the hills. "I have to walk irrespective of

the weather, and I use the coats," says Hariprasad.

The young boy doesn't complain. "No problem," he says, even if going to school means carrying a bulky school bag. But he is not particularly fond of the mid-day meal served in the school. "They serve food every day but I don't like it. It is tasteless."

His friends travel by the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) buses or their parents drop them at school. Hariprasad, however, prefers walking.

"The bus service is available every hour from my hamlet. If I have to take the bus, I will have to wake up very early. In the evening, it will be dark by the time I reach home." His mother works as a daily wager in the coffee plantation.

Asked what he aspires to become, Hariprasad says with a smile: "Police, because they shoot the culprits."



Hariprasad | CHARUDATT PRABHU

Water, a worry for Nilakottai villagers

SHREYA HARIDAS

Dindigul: Nilakottai residents buy drinking water priced at Rs 5 a pot from water tankers that visit the villages with 1,000 to 2,000 litres of water every 10 days. For other household purposes like bathing and agriculture, the residents are forced to use salty borewell water.

Nilakottai, an agrarian block in Dindigul, has been facing acute water shortage for five years. The Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 is used by the panchayat to determine the amount of water to be distributed to each village.

Due to less rainfall and indiscriminate use of groundwater by mineral water and RO (Reverse Osmosis) water industries, the groundwater table has seen a sharp fall. The economy has also been affected, with farmers moving away from agriculture or switching from grapes to less water intensive crops like flowers and broad beans.

Pandiammal, a resident of Kamalapuram village in Nilakottai says, "The families can't manage with the water they get from the tankers. How much water can one store in their house for 10 days? We have requested the people who regularly buy the RO water from companies to stop the practice that is sucking up all our water. We don't have any rivers here."

The Panchayat-arranged tankers, carrying water from Athoor dam and Kamarajar dam, are the villagers' only source of drinking water. For household purposes, the villagers have collectively built a common tank for borewell water. "The borewell water seems okay for the first few days, but later it develops a strange colour and taste," says Lakshmi from Perumal Koil Patti village.

Duraichamy, a grapes farmer in Perumal Koil Patti, is anxious about his children's future. "I don't have money to send them to good schools... for getting jobs, we have to give bribes... their only go is farming... but if the water table decreases like this, there will be no water for agriculture. Even if they want to switch to animal husbandry, we wouldn't have water to maintain the cattle."

O'chatram farmers peeved

SHREYA SAMTANI & SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Oddanchatram: The irony of being a producer but unable to fix prices, marks the lives of Indian farmers. "We know how deceitful the system is but what to do? We farmers don't have even a collective to support us," says Muthuswamy (54), an onion farmer.

"They [shop owners] take 10 per cent commission per kg. If it is Rs. 100, they take Rs. 10 from us," says Suresh Kumar (35), a cash crop farmer in the Oddanchatram market. "We still have to sell it here because the customers take at least one month to pay us while the shop owners give the money

immediately in the form of cash." The farmers' produce goes to different areas to get sold. "We can produce only 10 to 20 kg while the customers' demand is 100 to 200 kg. If we do not sell it here, we are at a loss."

"I come here to buy vegetables for Kerala's shops," says Rasa (50), a buyer from Dindigul. "Shopkeepers fix the price. What can the customer do? The farmer is the one working hard here," says Subramani (41), a lorry driver who helps in market-related logistics. "The bidding of vegetables is done as per the quality."

"There is a sangam (a management group) that decides the price of the vegetables. It doesn't listen

to the public," says Gobind (44), who provides parking tokens for lorries.

Kumar makes Rs. 30,000 a month. He borrows money from moneylenders as he does not trust banks. "If I am unable to pay them back, all my hard earned property would go in vain. In order to take Rs. 1 lakh, I have to pay Rs. 20,000, which is a lot of money for a marginal farmer like me. Even if I return the money before maturity, they charge me interest."

In the market, onion is auctioned till 10 a.m. Other vegetables are sold till 6 p.m. The last vegetable to be sold, green chilli, is soaked in water during day and sold at night, says Subramani.

Tribes selling facilities for exigencies

NEIL CORNELIUS & ANJALY RAJ

Dindigul: People of Kadaiyamalai, a predominantly Pulayar village in the lower Palani hills, give away LPG cooking gas cylinders that the government gives them for free to people from upper castes and use firewood instead.

The Pulayars, a Scheduled Caste which was once a Scheduled Tribe, are afraid of using gas cylinders. Priyammal of the village says they don't use gas cylinders out of fear. They have seen television reports of gas cylinders bursting. Others say the misconception has been there for a long



Women of Kadaiyamalai | ANJALY RAJ

time and the elders simply don't allow them to use gas cylinders.

The Pulayars of Kadaiyamalai give away their cylinders to the higher castes like Pillai, Chettiar and Mukkulathoor. The beneficiaries also include Other Backward

Classes (OBC). They have been taking gas cylinders by exploiting the fear of the villagers.

A similar practice prevails among the Paliyar Tribes of the Thangamma Porumbu settlement at the Palani Hills. There are only

thirteen houses in the settlement allotted by the government with the promise of a patta three years ago.

The people are awaiting their Scheduled Tribe (ST) certification and have not been given their ration cards yet. Due to this, they buy the free rice provided through the PDS from local farmers, who have ration cards, at Rs.8 a Kg. "I sometimes pay up to Rs.200 for a 15kg bag of rice."

"Only if the government grants us a patta can we apply for ration cards and also avail ourselves of other government schemes and facilities," says Chitra.S (26), a resident of Thangamma Porumbu.

Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin in Madurai: toilets built, but not used

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Madurai: "Rural India is 99 per cent open defecation free. Toilets have been provided to over 60 crore people in 60 months," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said recently. Minister Narendra Modi said recently. Minister Narendra Modi said recently. Minister Narendra Modi said recently.

"I have to walk 2 km early in the morning even at this old age," says Rassamma (80), who practises open defecation in the village of Perumal Koil Patti. Sandhira (58), another resident, says: "My husband has strictly said no to a toilet in the house because of the

bad odour. At times, I feel like having a toilet inside because of all the walking. During periods, it gets difficult for women but the thought of a toilet with all the impurities in the house is worse."

Malika (49) says, "We have the structure of a toilet but there is no water supply. So I use the toilet as a storeroom where I keep some of my utensils. I go to the nearby forest to defecate," says the resident of Kadaiyamalai, an SC village. There are around 78 houses in this area under the Indira Awas Yojana, out of which only 54 houses were given subsidy to build toilets.

A small hamlet comprising 13 houses of the Paliyar tribe residing in Thangamma porumbu,

where the tribals were relocated to a government land, is yet to get a toilet facility. "It has been two years since the government promised toilets," says Chitra (26).

"Our biggest issue is the sewage. There is no proper drainage system. Till last month, the entire waste was being burned, until Swachh Bharat cleaners came and collected it for the first time. I wish we had some awareness campaign happening. We defecate on the roadside," says Jeevitha (27) of K.C. Patti.

Pothumani (33) of Kamalapuram says: "The government has built us toilets but has not provided us with a septic tank or proper water supply." Fathima (48) from the same village, says: "During



Vessels in an unused toilet | SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

periods, it is very difficult. We store the waste for three days and then burn it in the open. We have a public toilet here but it is in ruins because of lack of water supply." Jaya Mary (73) has a different story to tell. "I was given only Rs 2000 instead of Rs 12,000

[sanctioned for building a toilet] and the rest of the amount was taken by the agent herself. I never received it."

Anaiyamma (60) from Perumal Kovil Patti stays with her son. "Our house does not have a toilet. So, we went to the panchayat office to get a toilet installed. But we were told that since we were from the outskirts, we could not have a toilet built."

According to Krishnan, the Block Development Officer, at Dindigul: "The first instalment of Rs 2,735 and the second of Rs 9,265 have to be borne by the individuals. The amount is reimbursed within 2 or 3 days if photo proof is produced of the basement and completed stage."

Krishnan adds that funding from the government goes directly to the beneficiaries through the district and block level but there are no trust or agents involved in this process. The beneficiaries are found from the SECC survey 2011, which is then verified by the Zonal Officer and the Deputy Block Development Officer.

The data states that there are 12,107 toilets in Dindigul district which consists of 14 blocks. Perumal Kovil Patti, according to the data, has been covered to a large extent with toilets built for 338 households. 205 households already have toilets out of 737 households. K.C Patti has a total household of 1,209 with 431 toilets built under the scheme and

689 already having toilets. In Kamalapuram, the data says in the 516 households, 206 toilets were built under the scheme and 307 already had toilets.

Bharani Lakshmi (33), Swachhta Prerak of A.Vellodu Panchayat says: "We conduct awareness drives in villages through street plays and dramas and also supervise the maintenance of public toilets and make sure that people do not defecate in the open."

"The success of our efforts is through the children in palwadis or anganwadis and schools. They aid in implementing ODF. They go back to their parents and pester them until a toilet is built in their house."

Organised Pulayars in Adalur village fight for lost Scheduled Tribe status

NEIL CORNELIUS

Adalur: People of the Pulayar Tribe in Adalur, a hill station in the region, now part of reserved forests, for centuries. They live off the forest produce and try to give back more than they take.

The tribe had its own form of government even before the British came," says P. Thuraij (64), a labourer from Sembadiothu. "There are 12 hills which were part of the Pulayar Tribe's government - from Thonimalai to Munnar." The tribes were further split into sub-tribes called 'kootam'.

"The leaders of the kootams constitute the council, a sort of govern-



P. Thuraij (right) with his friend. | NEIL CORNELIUS

ment." The chief of the Kosavam Kootam is the 'Thalaimalai Thagappan'. The hierarchy of each kootam is pre-determined but the power does not lie totally in the hands of the Thalaimalai Thagappan; rather the decisions are democratic.

The slots in the councils and leadership posts of some kootams are reserved for women who are treated as equals. "There were a total of 47 kootams, of which 36 exist now," says Thuraij, the 'Naduimalai Periyar' - a member of the council and chief of the 'Kovam Kootam'.

The Pulayars are recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution. In 1979, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi allocated jobs in the Railways, as trackmen and gangmen, to people belonging to the ST, who had completed at least Class 5. This gave them government jobs and education. According to Thuraij, the angry upper caste people used their influence

and money to prove that the Pulayars were actually related to the Cheramars of Kerala, a Scheduled Caste.

In 1984, the ST status of the Pulayars was revoked, making them ineligible for the government quota of jobs. As a result, the youth of the Pulayar community now work as farm labourers even though some are graduates. "Though we retain the features necessary for STs, we have been stripped of our status," says Nagapandi (35), a resident of Sembadiothu.

The people sent petitions to the Centre, which responded in 2017, asking Tamil Nadu to look into the issue. The State is yet to act.

Farmers' voices against Neutrino

SHREYA SAMTANI, SHREYA HARIDAS AND SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Theni: Sixty-five-year old Muthulikamu from T. Pudukkottai recalls a protest led by MDMK Chief Vaiko in 2018, against the setting up of India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), which inspires him till date.

Muthulikamu, a farmer, is afraid of losing his livelihood. Neutrinos are electrically neutral subatomic particles. Studying neutrinos will help researchers gain knowledge of the Sun, universe formation theories and nuclear non-proliferation. Immediate economic benefits of the study include improvement in telecom and internet services, and spotting of oil and mineral deposits on Earth. The only other countries with facilities to study neutrinos are Italy and France.

The location for the Observatory is in the Bodi West Hills region of Theni. INO requires a mountain like the West Bodi hills, since they provide the preferred girth of 1 km to filter away charged particles from the sun's rays. Also, the experiments need to be

conducted underground to avoid cosmic ray interference, for which the hills have to be drilled. "Rock tests and excavations would result in spreading of dust and debris in the surrounding regions. It would also lead to desertification. There are five villages adjacent to this mountain, and the villagers may get respiratory and other diseases," said Ilamaran M (59), a coconut farmer who holds a B. Sc in Chemistry

The major concerns regarding the project are the ecological imbalance and decline in biodiversity. This area had been marked as very sensitive in the Kasturirangan Report on the Western Ghats. The five surrounding villages will be affected by dust due to drilling and may cause respiratory diseases. Moreover, the villagers will lose their agricultural land, up to 30 acres, to the facility. This would, in turn, lower the water table. The scientists have kept mum on where to dump the debris after burrowing the tunnel. The villagers fear it will be dumped in the premises itself.

The hill is also of religious importance to the villagers. It hosts their tribal God. "Ambarappan



The West Bodi Hills site selected for the INO

| SHREYA SAMTANI

Malai is where our God resides and we would protect him even at the cost of our lives," said Muniyamma, a resident of T. Pudukkottai.

Ilamaran M has done extensive research on the proposed INO through internet sources. He was even invited by a Youtube channel to hold a debate with physicists. He is of the opinion that the true effect of the project has not been disclosed to the villagers - the im-

mediate recipients of its adverse effects.

He says: "On paper, there is only one research taking place while on the ground another research is going on without anyone's knowledge - the research being conducted along with Fermilab in the U.S. It is about dark matter energy. The lab is conducting the study in a 5-tonne detector in the U.S. But it wants to develop a 100-tonne detector which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has not cleared. It is looking forward to doing that in India. This proposal was approved by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR)," he claimed.

"This facility was built after SACON (Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History) cleared the project, saying the construction of the facility would not disrupt the ecology," said scientist S. Venkateswaran. "The Modi government has come up with a new notification, saying that public opinion on a government project is not a necessity. This is not right. We do not get any benefits from this project," says Ilamaran.

Pulayar & Palayar children paint contrasting pictures

SHREYA SAMTANI

Adalur: The laughter of children playing in the hills of Kadaiyamalai paints a different picture from that of a shy child held in her mother's arm in Thangamma Pombu. Their lives, too, are a picture in contrast.

The children of the Pulayar tribe study in the four-year-old Anganwadi in Pandrimalai which has around 20 to 22 students. Here, in K.C. Patti, English is taught in schools from class 1 to 8. Children are provided food, milk, egg, vegetable, and fruits.

Supaiya (47) is the father of three - Sathiya (21) who studied Home Nursing from Kerala, Satti, (16) studying in Class 9, and Shanthi (16), who suffers from kidney and heart problems.

Shanthi's problems were detected five years ago. Supaiya says she got ill due to rains. Her right kidney has been removed and the left is not functioning properly. She underwent treatment for heart too. While she was in Class 3, she



Pulayar tribe children | SHREYA SAMTANI

was afflicted by malaria frequently. She used to get fever whenever she stayed in closed premises. Because of her health, she left school at a very early age. Every month, her father takes her for full body checkup. "We will not get her married as no one will agree to marry her," says Supaiya. Dr Raj Kumar, who runs the Christian Federation Primary Health Centre (CF PHC), is treating her.

In the Pulayar tribe, there are more male children than female children. Parents prefer boys, but they don't abort female children

because of the presence of the 'Pillai Thatchi Koil' (pregnant woman temple) here. Children also help in work once they turn 12.

The effects of modernisation can be felt in the names of children and senior citizens. The younger generation has modern names due to the influence of TV. For instance, the name of Tangawali's grandson is Suhit. Mothers here breastfeed their children till they turn two-and-a-half.

The other tribe is that of Palayars, who were originally cave-dwellers. There are 13 families which account for a population of 60 to 70 people. Only 13 students among them have an ST certificate. Of these 13, one is a girl, who is the pride of the tribe. She is encouraged to attend school daily.

Palayar children are malnourished and their families do not have ration cards. For medical emergencies, they have to go down the hill to reach the government hospital.

Water crisis, a serious threat

SHREYA SAMTANI AND SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Perumal Koil Patti: The yield has been decreasing and water crisis has been a constant companion of the 45-year-old grape farmer Dorachami for five years. The reason for water shortage is the shortage in rainfall and non-availability of rainwater and groundwater.

"Grapes are dependent on rainwater and groundwater. If rainfall fails, groundwater level also falls. This 7-acre of land depends on rain alone," says an official of the Gandhigram trust, which has adopted the Perumal Koil Patti village.

The only source of water for the 1000 residents in P.K. Patti is a single well filled with water from

tankers. The villagers use it for drinking, irrigation and cattle rearing. When there is a complete absence of rainfall, they go hunting for work in other areas.

Doraichami recounts how, two years ago, the villagers encountered a severe drought as a result of which the villagers had to purchase drinking water at Rs 5 per pot. "Everything was going fine for us till five years ago. I used to get a profit of Rs 1 lakh a year but that is not the case now. The reason is climate change - the increase in temperature and lack of rainfall," says Doraichami. He cultivates jasmine for four months and black grapes for the rest of the year. The season for jasmine ends in February after which grapes are cultivated.

Black grapes are cultivated in his land with a yield of 2 tonnes and a

maximum profit of Rs 50 a kg. He sells his produce directly in the Dindigul market.

The cost involved is immense, including pesticides that are sprayed every three days. During the installation of drip irrigation system, he was asked to lay pipes worth Rs 30,000 by the Agriculture Office which has a 40% subsidy on micro irrigation systems for farmers. But Doraichami claims that he was turned down by the agriculture department. He has not received any subsidy on fertilizers either.

During the off-season, his alternate means of livelihood is cattle rearing. The family meets its ends by milking cows and selling it for Rs. 24 per litre. His wife Seethalakshmi (40) picks flowers and does weeding in the fields. His mother also helps him.

Incomplete houses under CM scheme

CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kadaiyamalai: Despite being the beneficiaries of the Chief Minister's Solar Powered Green House Scheme (CMSPGHS), a family in the Kadaiyamalai hamlet of Palani Hills lives in an unfinished house.

"We were eligible for the housing scheme but the Kupmalpatti panchayat, after building half of the house, recorded that the entire amount allotted for the building—Rs.2.10 lakhs—had been spent. In reality, it went to the officials and the builders," claimed Mallika (49).

The eligibility criteria for the housing scheme are: the beneficiaries should not own a house elsewhere; they should not have benefited from earlier housing schemes; they should be residents of the village; and they should own the land, which is below 300 sq ft.

Mallika's husband, Marudayya (53), said: "Like all beneficiaries, we spent Rs. 25,000 to lay the foundation for a complete house. I have no idea how much the panchayat spent on building this [incomplete] structure. I don't even have the documents."



Mallika and her husband Marudayya at their unfinished house | CHARUDATT PRABHU

A total of 8 members live in the house, which is a room of 160 sq.ft., enclosed with brick walls, covered with a concrete ceiling. It has rough flooring. There are no toilets, not do the residents have water taps in the house. "For water, we use public taps, and for toilet, we head to the jungle," said Marudayya, who works as a waterman in the village.

The family members have

knocked the panchayat's door many times. "The only reply we get from the office is that, the allocated amount has been spent on our house," said Marudayya. "I even bribed the panchayat members Rs. 25,000, but nothing changed," he lamented.

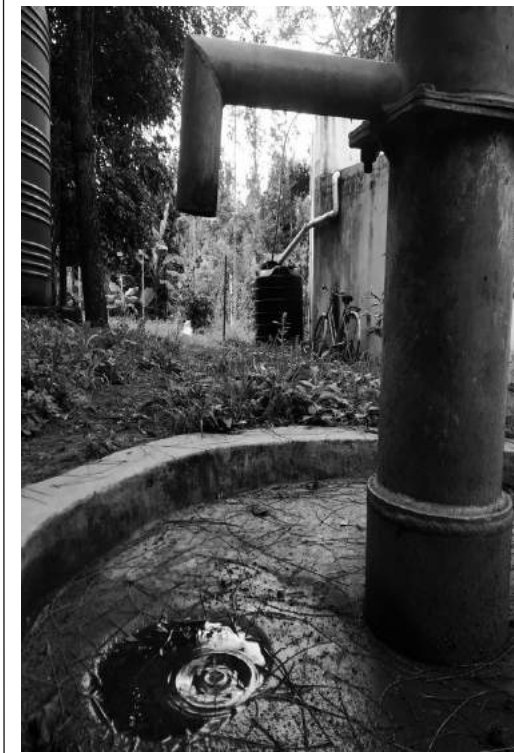
The hamlet has 60 houses, of which 20 have been built under the Chief Minister's Solar Powered Green House Scheme

(CMSPGHS). Fifteen others have been built under the Union government's Indira Awaas Yojana, which is now Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana. "The rest of the 25 houses were built under Kamaraj was the Chief Minister," said Palraj (63), an old resident of the hamlet.

"It has been over 10 years now. I don't think the panchayat members will complete my house. We will have to live with what we have," he said.

"I once bribed Rs. 25,000 to Gram Panchayat members (of Kupmalpatti), still it is what it is" Marudayya.

There is everything but water



CHARUDATT PRABHU

ANJALY RAJ

Oddanchatram: In the far-most stretches of Dindigul, village Puliymarthukotai is ideal on paper. It has toilets under the Swachh Bharat

scheme and houses under the Amma housing scheme. But it is deprived of water.

Lakshmi, 50, said her house was built eight years ago under the Amma housing scheme, equipped with solar panels and a television. Almost all houses in the village have been built under the scheme and are open-defecation free under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. But the villagers are still dependent on rainwater for their daily needs.

Puliymarthukotai lost groundwater years ago and has been a drought-ridden region since. "Cauvery is supposed to feed us," said S. Mari Murthi, a resident. He explained that the village was connected to the Cauvery underground pipelines but, with depleting water levels, it has become hard for the village to survive.

Villagers look up to their recently elected leader, Thanga Raja, with high hopes. Lakshmi said she did not worry about the water crisis in the village any more as Thanga Raja had promised to look in to it.

"Good news to us is good rainfall," 45-year-old Murthi said. The villagers work in their farms on small crops like maize, millet and sunflower but are mostly dependent on the 100-days work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

When the villagers experience a dry spell, they move to cities for a month or two. "We go to places where we can get daily labour and water," he said.

"The solution to our misery is Thanga Raja," Murthi said, knowing well that the villagers are giving themselves false hopes.

Jallipatti says 'No' to quarry

SHREYA HARIDAS

Jambuduraikottai: P. Katturaja, husband of the new panchayat president of Jambuduraikottai, who governs by proxy is strongly opposed to setting up a quarry in Jallipatti village for constructing a national highway.

Jallipatti was quarried from 2006 to 2011 for laying NH-7 which passes by the village. The rocks from the quarry were crushed for M-sand and B-sand which were used for the road. The quarry was closed down after the NH was completed.

A.M. Benedict, a villager and close aide of the panchayat president, says the quarrying had affected the ground water table adversely. If it were to be permit-



The Jallipatti quarry used in 2006-11. | SHREYA HARIDAS

ted again, it would lead to landslides and a dusty atmosphere that will affect agriculture and lower the water table.

"We don't want history to repeat. The use of dynamite in the quarries will affect the buildings. Some may even cave in. Last time, a church in the locality was destroyed due to the dynamite."

The proposed NH passes through the agriculture lands. This will push the farmers, who will benefit in no way from the NH, into further poverty, Benedict says. "The villagers will carry out a protest under the president's leadership if anyone forces us to give way for the quarry," he add, speaking for the farmers.

Music from the pheasant and mynah

NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: "No one taught us how to play our instruments. It was passed down to us from our forefathers," said Kathavan.K (65) who had just finished playing the 'Kuzhal' for three straight hours at a funeral in Sembadiothu in the Palani Hills. Kathavan is a well respected member of the Pulayar society.

"There are two main types of instruments they use; The Kuzhal and the Melam," said Kathavan. The Kuzhal is a foot-long flute-like instrument made from wood with holes.

The mouth of the instrument consists of a reed made of the 'koomai' bird's feather. The player blows into this to create sound. It

sounds similar to nadhaswaram. The Melam is a drum-like percussion instrument which has two playing surfaces (one on either side.) The larger surface of the Melam is made from Buffalo skin and the smaller surface is made from goat skin.

"We have different beats and tones for different occasions. In earlier days people used to find out what an occasion was just by listening to the music," said Kumar.B, another Kuzhal player. Cibe Chakravarthy, a journalist who works with the tribes, explained the myths behind these instruments. The crow pheasant's songs were sung in different rhythms at different times. Ancient Pulayar men beat rocks with twigs to mimic the rhythm of the bird and



Local musicians tuning the music instruments | CHARUDATT PRABHU

later Melam was born.

The conception of the Kuzhal has its own story. In ancient times a woman quarrelling with her husband, left for her mother's house in the middle of the night. She travelled through woods which were

known to have bandits and robbers. With the company of a hill mynah, a bird known to mimic any sound it hears, she made it safely to the other side by making the mynah mimic a crowd. In an effort to replicate the sound, the villagers made the Kuzhal.

This form of tribal music is on the brink of extinction as none of the younger generations have learnt to play the instruments. "We made our children study so that they would not be oppressed when they grew up. Little did we know that they would forget our own culture when they gained exposure to other cultures. But it is all alright if they can have a better future," said Paulraj (55) one of the last remaining Melam players in Sembadiothu.

GST eats up meagre earnings of this silk weaver

ANJALI RAJ

Kamalapuram: Anandi Seger, 38, works 12 hours a day at the weaving machine, making silk threads into a beautiful silk saree, only to get Rs 500 for it. It takes three days for Anandi to weave one saree.

"With the implementation of GST, my salary has been reduced by Rs 2,000," says Anandi. She earns Rs 9,000 a month. Before GST, her monthly earning was more than Rs 11,000. Anandi delivers the woven sarees to an agency. She is barred from selling the sarees on her own.

Anandi quit her education at the age of eight after completing her fourth grade, to learn weaving. She started helping her family by weaving professionally at the age of 12 and has been weaving since.

Anandi's is the sole weaver family in the village. She gets the raw material from Sowrastra Nagar, Dindigul, and sends her final product to States like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, etc, through her agent.

"The weaving machine cost me Rs. 70,000, I paid it from my pocket," she says, explaining how hard it has become for her family to weave with low earnings.

Even after the huge setback received by the implementation of GST, Anandi's spirit has not been broken. "Weaving is not just my profession, it's what my life is meant to be, and I will pass it down further."



Anandi at her home with her newly woven silk saree and the weaving machine-| ANJALI RAJ

PHC for neglected

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

KC Patti: "India needs not hospitals but primary health care centres that can provide holistic care," says Mary Ramaswamy, an obstetrician who has been working in the Christian Fellowship Primary Health Centre at K. C. Patti for 10 years. Mary is the wife of Rajkumar Ramaswamy, founder of CFPHC.

In a PHC, patients are screened for problems at an initial stage and, most importantly, a follow-up is possible unlike in a hospital. The CFPHC was founded 20 years ago for the tribals and people from the lower socio-economic strata.

Mental health is a major concern in this area because of alcoholism and drug abuse. The PHC provides counselling sessions and educates people.

The hospital staff visit the villages thrice a week. Village level health workers, 15 of them, have been trained by Dr. Rajkumar. They are as good as junior doctors and act as a bridge between the PHC and the villages, including tribal hamlets. They are trained to give appropriate first aid and treat fevers that last up to three days.

"Infant Mortality Rate has decreased tremendously. Last year, only five children died in 80 deliveries." The nurse staff of the CF Hospital proudly said.

"Since most of the villagers work in the plantations,

peripheral neuropathy, an occupational disease that you get when you work with fertilizers and pesticides, is prevalent among workers in the plantations. We don't have many epidemics here, but there was an epidemic of chikungunya five months ago," says Dr. Mary.

Dr. Thomas George, general physician, says: "We also monitor the sexual health of the villagers. We conduct sex education classes in schools and surrounding villages. The villagers have welcomed it with both hands without any protests."

"Another major issue among these tribals is children having anaemia because of poor nutrition. Ration shops only give rice for free and not pulses and vegetables. We have recommended iron tablets and millets for them, especially for the pregnant women."

The PHC doesn't have facilities for scanning etc, but they willingly refer the patients who need these services to the nearby hospitals.

The PHC is funded from a minimal consultation fee of Rs. 100. A major part of the finances is sourced from Dr. Rajkumar, the founder. He works for two or three months in Australia so that the PHC can function properly. Dr. Mary admits that the salary given to the staff is low due to lack of funding. "We charge only a minimal fee from the tribals, like Rs 100."

Female Senior Citizens of Jambuduraikottai neglected by the Govt

SHREYA HARIDAS

Jambuduraikottai: Basic facilities like ration, widow pension and toilet are denied to the female senior citizens of Jambuduraikottai in Dindigul. In spite of having an Aadhar card, the women usually have to live at the mercy of their neighbours.

Vellaiyamma (70) and Rajamma (70) from Kamalapuram village work for Rs 170 per day under MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) which provides 100 day job for daily wages. They are building Vellaiyamma's son's toilet, but she is

not sure if she'll get the money.

These Tobi women (Scheduled Tribe) do not know agriculture and are entirely dependent on MGNREGS for their livelihood. Even though both are widows, they don't get the widow pension of Rs 1000 per month. Rajamma has an Aadhar card, but is denied ration since she has no ration card. Her children, who are settled elsewhere, refuse to support her.

The services denied are not uniform throughout Jambuduraikottai. Kalamman Koil Theruvu hosts Chandra (58) and Rasamma (80) who have no job at all and are solely dependent on the widow pension. Their children



Vellaiyamma and Rajamma building toilets under MGNREGS | SHREYA HARIDAS

don't support them. They also have Aadhar cards, but don't receive ration since they have no ration cards. These women, who are Christians, live at the mercy of

their neighbours, who sometimes give them food. They apply vicks on their knees to get cured of arthritis and have to walk a kilometre to the field nearby to do

their business.

Anaiyamma (65) from Perumal Koil Petti who also practices open defecation has not got a job under MGNREGS. She goes to her son's field for job. Her husband has no health to go for field work. She is a Hindu, and is completely dependent on her son, whose agriculture is dwindling due to low rainfall.

Eager to get their yearly saree gift from the Village Administration Office (VAO), Andiyamma (70), Lekshmi (65), Malayi (70) and Alakupponnu (70), all from the Gounder caste, wait at the office from early morning, two hours before the office opens. Even among them, there is an irregular pattern

and what they are denied. Some were widows, assigned to widow pension, but denied MGNREGS jobs since they receive the pension. Some receive ration, some don't.

Kanakamma (70) who resides in an aluminium shed just behind the VAO can't go to work because she can't walk properly, and doesn't receive any pension since her drunkard husband, who does no job, is alive. She depends on the rationed rice only, since all other commodities like oil, pulses etc the ration shop are priced. She sweeps the ration shop for rice which is spilt on the floor and

lives on porridge throughout the month. She has no money to buy vegetables, whose prices are surging up. Another appalling way where the women's money is drained is at the water tanker, where drinking water is priced at Rs 5 per pot.

The Jambuduraikottai Panchayat has responded that they have not been told of any problem faced by old-age women. The Panchayat was headless for almost eight years. Pounthai Katturaja, who has been elected as the new Panchayat President in the local elections last week, said he will do whatever was necessary to better the condition of the women.

Drug abuse: the deadly killer of Pulayar tribe

ANJALI RAJ

Adalur: Ponnu Thaaai, 69, broke down while staring at the picture of his only grandson who was a drug addict. Prem Kumar was just 16 when he died.

Kadaiyamalai, a village of the Pulaya community, has been struggling with weed and alcohol abuse for years. A few years ago, the women of the village went on a three-day strike in Adalur, agitating against the government owned liquor shops. Citing domestic violence and its effect on family life, the women of Kadaiyamalai said in unison that alcohol made their men violent. Periyamma says laughing: "After consuming alcohol, they beat us up, and then, some of us beat them back!"

Recalling the memories of Prem, Ponnu Thaaai said he developed the habit of drinking liquor at an early age after returning to the village from Shanarpatti, where he used to study. Prem was only in Class 9 when he started smoking weed. He died because of heart conditions in 2014, leaving the entire family of Thaaai childless. "Access to weed is easy, even for children, as they can climb the hills where weeds are easily found," said Thaaai.

"Smoking is very common at an early age in this village," said Priyammal, who lost her 18 year old younger brother four years ago. The villagers suspect that it was due to weed overdose, though they don't have a doctor's backing for it. Her brother, Sokkarpanadi, who had a hole in his heart, star-

ted smoking weed in the 4th grade. The situation became grave with the increased intake of tobacco and alcohol.

"It's very easy for children to climb up the hills and get the weed, no can restrict them." Priyammal said the village had seen three deaths so far due to drug abuse, all children. But still, no one has stopped drinking and smoking. "We cannot do anything. What rules can we make? Even if we do, no one obeys," said Subbiah, a middle-aged man of Kadaiyamalai.

Mary Ramaswami, a local doctor working with Alandur Health Centre, says: "We can only encourage them to quit. We counsel them to make them realise that smoking is bad which most of the addicts already know."

Beans farming no longer pays farmers

SHREYA SAMTANI
SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Dindigul: With GST levied on pesticides and fertilizers, and increasing taxes in the vegetable market, the expenses of beans farmers in K. C. Patti, Dindigul, have spiked twice - up to Rs. 40,000.

Maintenance of the field requires fertilizers for which the farmers get no subsidy. Pesticides are used thrice a week which amounts to the high production cost of Rs 10,000 a week.

Amber Selvaraj (50) is a samsari (a contract farmer) with three to four acres of land which he himself manages. He has been growing flat beans for 10 years now. Earlier, he used to cultivate chow chow.

For a year, the contract amount for an acre is Rs. 30,000. Preparing the land, including the added expenditure of solar fencing



Amber Selvaraj in his farm | SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

because of the menace caused by bison, amounts to Rs 3 lakh. His profit depends on the market. During a normal season, it is Rs. 40 a kg, sometimes a maximum of Rs. 80, and sometimes as low as



Avarakkal plant | FILE PHOTO

Rs. 10. Even if it is just Rs. 8, he harvests all the beans. But below that amount, it is not possible to break even at all. For one acre of land, he requires a minimum of 6-10 people. Women

are paid a wage of Rs. 200 while men get Rs. 350. The daily wage difference is because "men do more physical work, women do only weeding." The beans season is from January to October.

In January, the farmers start sowing the seeds. After 120 days, they start germinating and are ready for harvest by October. The general climate for beans is sunny.

In December 2019, Selvaraj suffered a loss of Rs. 50,000 due to heavy rains. The beans were affected by halo blight (a disease caused by bacteria resulting in brown spots on leaves and pods) and the market rate decreased.

Selvaraj is very particular when it comes to using pesticides. He uses only cow dung for land preparation. He makes use of the organic fertilizer, Biozyme granule seaweed gel while using negligible amount of inorganic fertilizer. He also practices drip irrigation technique to save water.

Winter retreat for M.P. migrant workers

CHARUDUTT PRABHU

Kadaiyamalai: They have blended so well with the Tamil society that unless you check their documents, you will not believe that they belong to Madhya Pradesh.

They are temporary migrants from different parts of Madhya Pradesh — mainly Ujjain — who, during winter, come to this part of Tamil Nadu to sell warm clothes. They head back to their native place for the rest of the year.

Bahadur Singh (40) of Derkheda says: "We are a group of 15-20 men. We sell sweaters, jackets, and blankets in three districts - Theni, Dindigul, and Madurai - from November to February every year. There is a good demand for our products."



Rahul Nayak on the left and Bahadur Singh on the right in Kadaiyamalai. | CHARUDUTT PRABHU

The group travels on second-hand two-wheelers. The rider ties the woolen wear to his front and back.

Rahul Nayak (19) of Ujjain says: "From 4 a.m. to 8 p.m., we

are on our bikes. We travel 60 to 70 kilometres a day."

"A jacket or a blanket costs anything between Rs 400 and Rs. 800. A person earns around Rs.4000 in a day, of which at least Rs.1000 is spent on food, rent, petrol and other expenses," says Rahul.

He adds that the prices in the hills vary. But the locals don't mind.

"I like the quality, and am okay if they charge an extra Rs.50 since they have to ride through the hills to sell the clothes," says a resident.

A good breakfast or lunch is a luxury. "We don't have the time. We begin our day with a cup of tea and some snacks. It is only when we return from the day's

work that we prepare food," says Bahadur.

Bahadur and others buy the stock wholesale by paying an advance to a company in Ludhiana, which transports it to Salem. "From Salem, we pick up the goods and store them in a warehouse in Palani," says Rahul.

What if they cannot sell the entire stock? Says Nayak: "We send the remaining stock to Ludhiana and get back our money."

"Earlier, I had a problem speaking Tamil but now I am comfortable," says young Rahul who, after his schooling, started doing the job.

Pappu Rai (27) of Shajapur says in jest, "the locals are generally nice to us but bargain hard when they are drunk."

Kill elephants or us: villagers

SHREYA HARIDAS

Adalur: Four persons and two were injured in elephant attacks in 2019 at Adalur, part of the Lower Palani Hills. The elephant menace here has been at its peak for five years now.

Villagers attribute the elephant menace to the low rainfall in the area for the past five years. "Plantain farming is the major occupation here. Plantain stems are rich in water. So they are the favourite for the elephants," says D.N. Bhupati, who cultivates coffee, plantains, chow chow and orange. Recently, his relative in the village was attacked by a wild bison.

"Bisons are manageable, though. If we make noise or protect our farms with solar fences, they don't

destroy our crops," Bhupati says. Elephants cannot be managed since they come mostly in groups, destroy the fences and enter the farms.

The Pillamar tribes in the Lower Palani Hills are the most affected by the human-elephant conflict. They are more developed compared to the Pulaiyars and Palaiyars, who are hunter-gatherers and daily-wage labourers. Pillamars have been carrying out agriculture for 200 years now. They are dependent on the place as they know no other job. The victims of the attacks were promised compensation in the form of money or job by the Forest Department, but nothing has been done.

"Kill the elephants or kill us," the Pillamars say. "For creating

solar fences, we need to take a loan of at least Rs 3,00,000 from the bank. But the elephants destroy them. We want the Forest Department to lay the solar fences for us and maintain them if they want to protect the elephants. Or just shoot the elephants and control their population like they do with kangaroos in Australia."

Bhupati wonders what the Forest Department is doing with all the funds meant for conserving the elephants and maintaining their corridor. He and his tribe are planning to propose to the Department that they together conserve the elephants and keep them in the forest, by letting the Pillamars sow plantains in the forest for the elephants. This may prevent them from coming to villages, he says.



A cultural print is fading

Traditional Kalamkari struggling to survive in its own home

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Pedana: In an era where Kalamkari artisans are looking for paying jobs, R. Kiran Kumar has already begun teaching his schoolgoing daughters the block wood art.

Hailing from a weavers' family, the 46-year-old finds immense joy as children learn Kalamkari. Even though he gets paid only 300 a day, he takes pride in doing this work. Kiran has set up a table at his house and given his children natural dyes and teak wood blocks.

First, grey cloth is soaked in groundwater and naturally bleached. It is soaked in myrobalan leaves overnight so that the dye can set in properly. Then the cloth is treated in water boiling in a copper vessel along with roots and flowers to add colour.

Next, wood blocks are dipped in natural dyes made from alum and other organic substances. Block-makers develop designs inspired by temple works and Persian patterns. This process is 23 days long.

Kiran has been working at Le Coromandel Kalamkari Studio here for five years. The owner of the studio, Pitchuka Srinivas carry



R. Kiran Kumar making a blanket using natural dyes at Le Coromandel Kalamkari Studio | MAHIMA MANIAR

forwards his grandfather Pitchuka Veera Subbaiah's tradition which he introduced back in the 1970s. One of his biggest partners is Mary Mulcahy, a New York-based designer, and owner of Les Indiennes. Srinivas's children P.Varun and P.Uma Devi - both science graduates are currently working with him in the studio.

Pedana is well-known for hand-block Kalamkari. "Today a large number of Kalamkari products we see in the market are mostly screen-printed with chemical colours

including those that you find in Lepakshi Handicrafts Emporium and Fabindia" said Mr.Srinivas.

While Lepakshi is an Andhra Pradesh government undertaking, Fabindia is India's largest private platform known for traditional products.

He claims that he is the only one left in Pedana who still follows all traditional methods, despite facing competition from screen printing. The migration of artisans to cities has been alarmingly high in the past couple of years.

"Without proper support from the government we can't do more to sustain the art," says P.Varun.

Srinivas believes that Kalamkari is better appreciated by foreigners and underappreciated by Indians. "Not only have we got customized requests from customers in Japan, Kenya and Australia but around two years ago two students from the Netherlands had come here to learn the art of Kalamkari," said Uma Devi. The students stayed for six months and went back to display the art in a museum in Amsterdam.

"We constantly keep undermining our culture," said Srinivas. Two years ago, his brother, who fought for the GI tag for Kalamkari, succumbed to screen printing. "There really isn't a lot of money in this but this is an art. And when I do the art right, I am happy," he said.

As it has become difficult day by day to differentiate between original and fake Kalamkari, the studio struggles to survive. One doesn't know when groundwater will dry up and how long block wood Kalamkari will survive in its own birthplace, says Srinivas.



Handloom workers have to sit for prolonged hours, straining their backs | MAHIMA MANIAR

Threats loom over weavers

ARNABJIT SUR

Kappaladoddi: Inside houses of the Weavers' Colony here, the trademark *maggam* (single loom) weaving, popular for its intricate designs, is proof of a conscious attempt at upholding the decades-old art form.

However, health problems, coupled with low income and modernisation, have caused concern among veteran weavers over viability of the labour-intensive trade.

Srinivasan Rao, who has been working on a self-made handloom machine in his one-room house, says wages for every saree woven are inadequate, not to mention rejection of the product for defect. "In spite of me straining myself for hours, rejects pile up due to small discrepancies," he said.

"Weak eyesight becomes one of the major casualties while using handlooms as immense concentration is required to handle these delicate strings of cotton throughout

the day," Rao added.

According to Rao, who takes three days to weave a saree, every part of the body needs to be 'active' and 'functioning' for successfully weaving cloth.

Producing distinctive cotton sarees mixed with nylon, he gets Rs. 2,000 for 5 pieces depending on quality. "There has been no wage increase which further adds to the problems weavers face in continuing the craft," he added.

Rao's neighbour, P. Ramana, along with his wife, produces colourful churmis and sarees. For the couple, low prices are a perennial problem. While a churni is sold for Rs. 300, a saree costs between Rs. 600 and 700. Moreover, "the machine cost around Rs. 80,000 since we have included various designs for weaving cloth but the returns are unsatisfactory," says Ramana.

As for government aid to handloom weavers, it has been a far cry. The previous Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government remained

non-committal on its promise of loan waivers, with only Rs 2.5 crore granted out of a total allocation of Rs. 111 crore. "No additional government benefits are provided and only sale of woven products sustains our livelihood," he said.

Meanwhile, the influx of powerloom machines hastens the decline of hand-woven cloth as they enable large scale efficient production.

Rao said weavers like him were not trained in using power looms, which are expensive but require less labour. "Who will employ a middle-aged unskilled worker like me in a power loom manufacturing unit?" he asked.

S. Ramesh Babu, Assistant Professor at the Gudlavallu Engineering College, said the Le Coromandel Kalamkari workshop used powerloom products for uniformity and mass production. "One of the largest Kalamkari workshops at Pedana also uses machine-made cloth," he added.

SCREEN PRINTING TAKES OVER

MAHIMA MANIAR

Kappaladoddi: The Kalamkari art has lost its authenticity due to cost effective and profitable screen printing.

Eight employees work on a large black slab, pushing a squeegee (a rubber blade attached to a frame) to and fro to produce the design on a saree. The whole process can produce up to 70-

80 sarees a day, which are sold for Rs. 400 each, says owner Meghanathan (50).

The technique involves digitally creating designs on a large rectangular frame. Ink is pressed through a stencilled mesh screen to create a design. The chemical colours are imported from Mumbai. The screens are manufactured in Chirala in Prakasam district.

Screen printing produces both fine and coarse designs, and can be replicated multiple times, unlike in block printing. The design is transferred through the woven mesh. The villagers prefer chemical dyes over natural dyes, as they are more easily available. However, the use of chemical dyes has polluted the Krishna river, thus affecting marine life.

Caustic soda, when added to water to de-starch white yarn, causes rashes and burns on skin. "The accumulated waste water from the dripping cloth leaks through a pipe and seeps into the soil, affecting the environment," said P. Ramakrishna and R. Nagaraja. While dyeing yarn, they do not wear gloves as they are habituated to the work.

Eagerness to keep learning



T. N. Rao with students

MAHIMA MANIAR

Nachugunta: It's a cackle with delight all over the Mandal Parishad Pradhama Unnata Pathshala, a primary municipal school, on this island. There are 23 boys and 32 girls in Standards 1 to V under the care of two teachers, one of them headmaster T. Nageswar Rao.

The children are regularly provided midday meals and are given uniforms every year, one set provided by the government and another by the Rural Relief and Development Foundation (RRDF). This organisation partners with ASSIST, a non-governmental organisation working for poor and marginalised communities in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, in funding the school.

There are four washrooms and a water tank. While the teachers said the responsibility of cleaning the washroom was theirs, some students alleged that Standard V pupils were sometimes asked to sweep the toilets and floors.

N. Roja, a volunteer in the village who takes part in government initiatives, says her two children going to this school don't use the toilets, which are "unkempt" and the water "unclean." They still willingly go regularly despite it lacking water facility and electricity.

One of the reasons being seasonal hostels, introduced in 2013 in a high school at Avani-gadda, where children go after finishing primary school.

Seasonal hostels, which provides food thrice a day, brings children, most of them from backward classes, into mainstream education, says Nageswar Rao, who has been working here for seven years. It frees them from child labour.

Either drought or dirty water

SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: People here have to travel to Maripalam twice a day to get a 10-litre water can for Rs. 16. Cool water cans cost Rs. 30. "We prefer walking 1.5 kilometres twice a day to drinking salty groundwater," says K.Lakshminarayan (32), a fisherman.

This tells the tale of water quality. All waterbodies here fall under 'C' category, the least grade for drinking water sources. In fact, none of the rivers in the entire State has 'A' or 'B' quality status, as per samples collected by the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board.

Water labelled as 'C' category contains higher pH value, lower dissolved oxygen, higher biochemical oxygen demand, human faeces leading to higher count of E. coli bacteria and more turbidity due to higher total dissolved solids. It requires conventional treatment followed by disinfection to make it potable and safe for human use.

A journalist, who works for Telugu daily *Andhra Jyothi*, says ponds at Nagayalanka receive water from the Krishna Eastern Canal system comprising the Eluru canal, the Ryves canal and the Bandar canal. All three flow through

pH is a measure of how acidic/basic water is. In general, water with a pH lower than 7 is considered acidic, and with a pH greater than 7 is considered basic. The normal range for pH in surface water systems is 6.5-8.5, and for groundwater systems it is between 6 and 8.5.

Vjayawada and wastes from meat shops and open defecation cause pollution.

Ironically, villagers are complaining of the same polluted sources drying up during summer, affecting their lives. People have to either use bore water which has become salty over the years or buy water from nearby water plants.

As a result, people get affected with various diarrhoeal diseases. The nearest government hospital gives just basic medication. They have to either travel 20 km to the nearest speciality hospital at Avani-gadda or go all the way to Machilipatnam, if the condition is critical.

According to Jayaraj Yeddana-palli, executive secretary of a Vijayawada-based NGO, ALERT, salinity of water has increased from 3 to 15 per cent now. For fishermen, the problem is hunger, not being able to go fishing during drought. Net weavers do not get fresh orders and majority of the farmers are unable to cultivate their crops.

Over the years, several people died either not being able to acquire basic amenities or have committed suicide fearing the consequences. However, CM Jagannathan Reddy compensated Rs. 10,000 to every household after the drought last summer. Earlier, the amount used to be Rs. 4,000.



K. Veer Raghavalu (60), a fisherman at Nachugunta, takes two days to make his own nets. The process involves knitting meshes from nylon threads, but he does not sell these. "The work strains my eyes and I cannot sit for more than two hours at a stretch," he said. "Due to my heart problem, doctors have asked me not to go fishing," he added. But three women of his family catch prawns and fish and sell them in the local market to support the family. | MAHIMA MANIAR

SREYA DEB

Kappaladoddi: This village in Krishna district greets visitors with a burst of colours and the click-clack sound of wood scraping against metal.

At Kappaladoddi, also known as the Weavers' Colony of Machilipatnam, nearly every house has a room dedicated to a handloom machine.

Handloom weavers dot the narrow streets, and carpenters are building handloom machines in their balconies. These skilled workers have been residents of Kappaladoddi for almost two generations.

Balla Sambayya, 53, helps in making handlooms, while his son does most of the work. "We use vepa or sal wood," he says, "We get orders only from Pedana."

As most families have had handlooms in their homes for many years now, the demand has shrunk with majority of the orders coming

in from new businesses.

He makes the structure and does not incorporate any designs into the machine. He sells his product at Rs. 8000-9000, which is lower than the price of a complete loom. If a weaver builds his own machine, it might cost around Rs. 25,000. A better quality machine, complete with design plates, would be available at Rs.80,000.

A few streets away, the Jhansi Kalamkari Factory is situated where raw strands of cotton are dyed in a workshop. The dye contains caustic soda which is harmful to the



skin. Two men, Lakshman Rao (30) and Jayaraju (35) have been 'boilers' for five years, and look unperturbed by the hazard of skin burns. It takes them more than one hour to complete the dyeing process on one piece of cloth for which they get a daily wage of Rs. 500.

Simultaneously, another workshop is busy making teakwood blocks, carving intricate designs

and drying them in the sun, to be used for printing Kalamkari designs.

Pitambar, staff head at the dyeing workshop, says that most orders within India are for fabrics with chemical dyes, whereas fabrics exported abroad are treated with natural dyes.

Raw cotton, once bleached or dyed, is spun into thread. Old women spin multicoloured spools of thread, which are fed into handloom machines for weaving. Some weavers produce sarees, to be sent to the market for Rs. 300-400 per piece. Other fabrics are sent to the Kalamkari stores nearby, where they are put into a production line, for block or screen printing.

Much of the business run by small independent families is affiliated to the Aruna Sri Sarees office known as the 'Society' which for many years has supported the weavers' culture here.

Providing training and even giving away a few machines, the Society is one of their biggest buyers, followed by wholesalers from Rajasthan, Kolkata and nearby Guntur, Vijayawada and Hyderabad.

A recluse spinning her own life

SREYA DEB

Kappaladoddi: Sitting under the scorching sun in her porch, she spins the wheel with a seasoned hand and rusty tools, and makes spool after spool of thread. But Balla Chendikamma, living in this village near Pedana, does not know how old she is: "80 something."

Chendikamma says the *maggu* (weaving machine) in her house stopped spinning the day her husband died two years ago. Till then they used to weave together. Now, she has resigned herself to spinning spools of thread from cotton strands, and she sells them at Rs. 10 per spool. Her handloom machine sits rusting in one of the two rooms of her mud house, coated with dust.

She flicks a switch and the unused yellow bulb flickers, illuminating thick cobwebs around the machine.

After an accident six months ago, the woman has not been able to even pedal the machine. Her

muscle got infected, and she had to get surgery and skin grafting done.

She lifts her saree to show an unexpected patch of pink skin on her thigh. "They removed the skin from there and put it here," she says, pointing to her foot wrapped crudely in an old bandage. Six months on, her foot still has not healed. Her ankle is swollen, and patches of scarring tissue are visible.

Adding to her woes, Chendikamma is living alone, her barely furnished house sandwiched between two others. Her three children and grandchildren are living far away. One of her sons has moved to Hyderabad, and two grand-

daughters have shifted to Chennai and Singapore. They send her money for her bare necessities and rarely do they come home. Her sons have told her that as long as she can cook for herself, she ought to live on her own.

Only her daughter visits with her children every Sankranti, to celebrate the festival for three days.

Does she miss the days when she used to work with her husband? Dearly. "He taught me how to weave," says the woman as her voice trembles slightly. Even though her parents were weavers, she learnt the ropes only after her marriage.



Ploughing a lonely furrow, Chendikamma has been working in her house | SREYA DEB

Govt. blind to farmers' woes

Their life has "become an endless cycle of taking and repaying loans"

SAYANTAN GUHA

Krishna: Sitting at a distance, M. Venkatesh Rao, looks at his 21-year-old son ploughing his leased two-acre land at Gollapalem. It's been two months, yet Venkatesh Rao has not received his payments from the government for procurement of his yield in the *Kharif* season.

Like every farmer, Rao puts in his money, realised from the earlier season, in the next one. But late payments have made him take loans from a local lender at a high rate.

The latest National Crime Records Bureau report of 2018 suggested that the State recorded 6.4 per cent of the farmer suicides in the country. Rao said, "under the current government, the situation has worsened and we are helpless."

In November, the Government revised the rate for BPT 5204 paddy, which is of a superior quality and requires higher investment, compared to that for MTU 1061, which is an inferior variety entailing low investment. Not only is this unfair on the grounds of va-



Farmers packing bags of a season's yield | SAYANTAN GUHA

rying investments but the move has also killed any demand for the inferior variety.

Talking about crop loans, M. Venkateshwar, a farmer at Seetharamapuram, said, "I went to Krishna District Cooperative Bank, to Indian Bank, to Allahabad Bank but none gave me loans, as the land I cultivate is leased. I have asked the owner several times to help me out, but he hasn't."

J. Venkatesh Rao, who has taken

three acres on lease, echoes similar problems. The owner has been refusing to give the original documents necessary for sanction of a loan. There are seven farmers who have leased parts of the land from this owner and all of them are in similar straits.

"Against every acre of land, the Cooperative Bank gives a loan of Rs 30,000 and the owner avails himself of it," said Venkatesh Rao. The PM-KISAN scheme, intro-

duced in December 2018, has selectively aided farmers. Many have complained about not receiving the promised Rs 6000 per annum (in three regular instalments).

M. Ashok Kumar, who owns 5 acres at Seetharamapuram, is yet to receive a single instalment. Moreover, the scheme, while covering every land-owner irrespective of the size of the holdings, doesn't benefit tenant farmers. Those who lease the land are the ones cultivating the land, yet they are left out of the scheme.

In paddy cultivation, landowners with the help of government schemes, loans and subsidies, make a profit. But, Kumar said, tenant farmers are the worst hit. He gave an estimate of how much a farmer invests and earns from an acre.

The cost of a 75 kg bag of paddy is fixed at Rs 1,250 by the government. From one acre, the yield is approximately 30 bags. According to Kumar, it means a profit of Rs. 7,350 for six months of toil.

But on leased land, a farmer has to pay the landowner 10 bags of paddy and hence rather than profiting they suffer a loss of around Rs.

5000. So, to break even, the tenant farmers have to cut down on labour charges and employ their family members.

In 2019, due to untimely rains in November, the farmers suffered heavy losses in yield. Yet they paid the promised bags to owners.

K. Sivasankar Prasad, who owns around 1.5 acres at Sirivellapalem, said that at that point the government had promised to affected farmers help but nothing was given so far.

Machilipatnam and nearby regions face regular cyclones which heavily affect crops. At the State level, the farmers in unison have alleged indifference on the part of the YSR government towards agrarian problems.

Unavailability of crop loans has forced most farmers to pledge family gold or property to local moneylenders. G. Ranga Rao, of Kanuru, said, "A farmer's life has become an endless cycle of taking and repaying loans. We have no money to send our children to school. And without any education and skills, they also get trapped in this vicious cycle."

Farmers prevail, corridor laid to rest

ARNABJIT SUR
SAYANTAN GUHA

Krishna: For almost 15 years a Masula Sea Port had been on the table, first proposed by the then Chief Minister, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, in 2000s, before being dropped, says Narasimha Rao, a resident of Tapasipudi, a village 10 km from here.

The Telugu Desam Party-led State government in 2018 dropped a 2016 proposal to acquire 12,341 acres of private land for building an Industrial Corridor (IC) and the deep sea port.

The development project was slated to cover 33,177 acres across 29 villages in Krishna district but farmers were wary of parting with their agricultural land.

But, Narasimha Rao believes, "the project would have created job opportunities since the farmers are

facing problems growing paddy due to a lack of water supply. They should've given their farming land."

No, says a 55-year-old paddy farmer from Kothapudi, K Durga Rao, "Where will we go from here since this is what our families have been doing for ages? Our lives will have no value if we do not cultivate."

Almost every farmer in the village echoes similar concerns. K. Ravindran says, "We didn't go to school, nor could we send our children. There is no particular skill we have acquired except farming. The project might have brought jobs but how do we work there?"

According to the villagers, the panchayat notification of the authorities wanting to acquire 30,000 acres for the project was unacceptable to the villagers as it would include most of their landholdings.

Officials from the Machilipatnam Urban Development Authority (MUDA) allegedly tried to persuade the villagers into giving away their land.

P. Ramana, a 35-year-old farmer, said, "My father has been paralysed for the last five years and I had to regularly take him to the government hospital 10 km away. Where were these officials when I needed government support?"

However, as compensation, the administration offered three times the price of land to the displaced, half of the amount payable first and the rest after the registration of documents, Ravindran said. Some persons claimed they got Rs. 25 lakh for 1 acre.

The displaced villagers, according to the proposal, were also allocated 2-room flats along the Manginapudi Beach for relinquishing their land earmarked for the

project.

In April 2017, farmers of Tapasipudi and neighbouring villages staged a dharna against what they said was a blatant attempt to snatch away their land.

Pamu M., a farmer of Kothapudi, said, "The peaceful protest by a group of farmers was soon disrupted by a big posse of police personnel, who arrested them."

"The current regime was under pressure from the farming community to withdraw the 'atrocious order' for fear of losing its vote bank." This, he added, was one of the reasons for withdrawal of the initiative.

For some, the industrial project remains a far-fetched dream offering numerous financial benefits that they currently lack, while others see it as a ploy by the government to capture their land and render them unemployed.

Tenant farmers lament ruling

ARNABJIT SUR

Krishna: The Andhra Pradesh Crop Cultivators Rights Act, passed in November last, has dealt a severe blow to tenants in the district.

The law enables tenants to avail themselves of government subsidies or loans and compensation for crop damage if they get permission from landowners to get the benefits. This provision didn't exist earlier.

"It was the same case previously where landowners deprived us of registration documents required to apply for crop loans and incentives," said T. Venkateshvaram.

It depends on an agreement between the two, but mostly it is the landowners who get the larger slice of the pie. "All power is concentrated in the hands of landowners, who avail themselves of all the benefits," Rao, a farmer from Seetharamapuram said.

Earlier, a Loan Eligibility Card (LEC), which didn't require written consent from landowners, was issued to farmers to apply for agricultural schemes. Now, a Crop Cultivator Rights Card (CCRC) will allow the cultivators to take loans easily.

Farmers, however, say the nexus between landowners and banks has left them high and dry. "I have applied for the LEC several times but the landowner rejects the request by holding up our documents and conning with the banks," said 27-year-old Madas Fidisa Rao, a farmer in Gollapalem.

"Since landlords demand bags of produce under a lease agreement, crop loans will provide a security net in instances of bad yield or climate."

G. Mohan Raju, while ploughing a rented one-acre field, said, "All the government benefits demarca-

ted for us go to the landowners, despite workers making frequent appeals".

"Farmers are threatened if they try to protest as the landowner increases the quota of bags acquired from the yield," he added.

Some unaware of the Act said the system of landowners cornering loans has been normal for several years.

"Malik (Owner) sets an agreement before we work as to how much yield would be procured by him and the quantity that would be sold by us; so we are bound to follow suit, lest we lose our jobs," said M. Naidu, supervising a group of farmers on another paddy field.

Two years ago, S. Subbarao, a farmer in Tapasipudi, applied for a loan of Rs. 50,000 for a 2-acre land, however, bank officials, citing lack of documents, rejected his application. Similarly, G Ranga Rao of Kanuru village sought Rs. 30,000 for a one-acre land and his application is yet to see the light of day.

Rent documents such as Kheti paper or Land Registration Certificates are held by landowners, leaving them without any supporting material.

However, there are few landowners who provide monetary assistance to help cultivators get government benefits.

"While most of the landowners have vested interests, we have never faced any issues in applying for loans," said B. Chennaiah, a farmer in Sirivellapalem.

"All the facilities are provided as per the lease agreement arrived at in the beginning with the farmers," said M. Ramadasu of Golapalem, who owns a 3-acre farm.

"Who would take the enormous burden if farmers fail to comply with the loan obligations due to bad yield?" Ramadasu asked.

Where to defecate? In the open: locals

SAYANTAN GUHA
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: It is a collective decision by villagers of Lankevanidibba, an island two hours from here; to defecate in the open.

The residents have to walk one and a half hours every day to reach the barren land patches which are waterlogged now owing to recent rains.

Even the Panchayat President doesn't have a toilet in his compound. Only a lone Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) doctor's house has this facility.

Most villagers go to the chosen place once a day and defecate around their houses owing to the distance they have to travel just to answer nature's call. "We go there around 6 a.m. everyday," said Kumari (25) sitting with her daughter.

The difficulties increase during winter when infants and elderly people find the early morning trek painful.

The government didn't invest in public toilets across the village, forget providing the statutory money for toilets in houses. "The local politicians don't pay attention to Lan-

kevanidibba at all," fumed S. Mahalakshmi (34), a fisher woman.

Meanwhile, in Nagayalanka, some locals have received Rs. 15,000 under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, to build toilets in their compounds. N. Dassariyya (44), of the fisherman colony, said, "I received funding for my toilet in 2018 and I have seen most of my neighbours also receiving the amount." But the claim is far from the ground reality.

N. Suresh (35), residing in the same colony, said, "I have seen people in the village getting funds, but our turn never came." He said the officials turned him away on every occasion, saying his name was yet to be registered for funds.

Suresh and his family now use a public toilet - the only one in the village - five minutes from their house.

K. Lakshman Rao (52), a farmer here, says, "Authorities are saying that we are ineligible for the funds. But these are just excuses for denying us our rights."

True, the public toilet is 100 metres from his compound, but it is the "unfair distribution of funds" that bothers Rao.

Loans fine, but are women on track?

AMRUTHA KOSURU
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: Women are struggling to become financially independent despite DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) being in existence here for the past 15 years.

DWCRA was launched in 1982-83 in 50 districts to involve poor women in economic activities. The problem, however, is members having to form a group of 10 to 20 women to get loans sanctioned. DWCRA doesn't allow individual registrations. Under this scheme, each mandal receives Rs. 30 to 40 lakhs per month which is divided among the villages. On average, each village receives Rs 3 to 4 lakhs which is further divided amongst 10 or more DWCRA groups.

L. Sindhu (25), a DWCRA member since 2016, got Rs. 15,000 for a year. She invested the money in

breeding crabs which she sold to market vendors, gaining a profit of just Rs. 2,000 for the entire year. Loans are sanctioned depending on

the group's seniority for six months or a year, with the upper limit increased from Rs. 8 lakhs to Rs. 10 lakhs now.

G. Nageswaramma (45), a DWCRA member for the past 10 years, recently received her highest ever amount, Rs. 75,000 which got exhausted in paying tuition fees for her children. Nageswaramma, also the village officer, said, "This scheme is good but it only develops what is already here instead of enabling us to try something new. Providing loans is not equal to providing education or employment."

On penalty for delayed repayment, Sindhu says that it depends on the contract which everyone signs before claiming the loan. In her

group, a monthly penalty of Rs. 100 is levied after a waiver for the first month.

Under normal circumstances, loans are to be paid back at 12 per cent interest. Almost everyone is prompt in a bid to get the next loan sanctioned and also because the amounts are quite negligible, according to Sindhu, who aspires to own a clothing store some day. People allegedly run out of the money in a week.

As for a Community Development Fund, under which the government allots each group Rs.5 lakhs, it is said, the people, despite having the

“ Providing loans is not equal to providing education or employment ”

Why do the dirty on women who keep your village clean?

ARNABJIT SUR

Nagayalanka: A group of 20 women sweepers at Nagayalanka in Krishna district have been toiling without salaries for the past nine months, with the panchayat, allegedly, leaving them in the lurch. For them it has been an anxious wait with no other financial support.

Yella Nagudram, 48, along with three co-workers who are attending the inauguration of a Cage Culture Demonstration Unit here, works from 6.30 a.m. to 12 noon to ensure that every nook and corner of the village remains clean for a salary of Rs. 300 per day. "Not once in the 15 years since we started working have we received our salary on the first of every month," Nagudram says.

As a way out, the women have

found work at a local cage fish cultivation facility every Sunday for the past three months. Their job - catching fish - fetches them Rs. 250 a month.

However, Dasura Venkateshwara (35) says the family doesn't run without borrowing money from moneylenders. With two school-going daughters and a husband who works at the same unit, Dasura complains about lack of payment from the municipality. "Despite our hardwork towards keeping the village clean, daily sweepers remain underappreciated," she says, adding that the popular Clean India Mission of the Central Government "comes at the cost of their wages."

The moneylenders charge an interest at between 5 and 10 per cent for Rs. 10,000. "They double the interest if we don't pay up on

time," says Dasura, who has a debt of Rs. 20,000.

Rubbing salt into the women's wounds, she says, "the earnings from the cage cultivation unit go directly to our spouses and deprives us earning a salary."

Recurrent dharnas outside the Panchayat office have resulted in a severe backlash. "Our supervisors make us do double shifts if we protest against them," says Amma Garu, 52.

"Since we skipped work to attend today's event, Rs.300 has been cut from our salaries," jokes Garu.

The three women complained about unavailability of job opportunities for people on the lower rungs of society. "This is the only job that we have learnt to do, and due to lack of skill training, will have to continue to do so," Amma



The group of unpaid sweepers |

ARNABJIT SUR

Garu says.

The workers say they are not granted leave of absence on health grounds, and an appeal to higher officials is the only alternative.

Continuing with the litany of complaints, Nagudram says that unlike the *safai karamcharis*, their work is much more than collecting waste and throwing it in one corner

of the street. "But even these *karamcharis* skip the area around our houses as they think that they don't need to clean it," she says.

"If people like us are deprived of incomes, how would the city remain clean for tourists to visit the place?" Garu sums up the point.

The Village Panchayat Office has cited lack of funds to pay the salaries. "Due to financial issues and lack of funds, we couldn't pay up salaries to the workers for several months," said a Secretary, who wished to remain anonymous.

He added that the body would start payment from this month as it had begun collecting taxes.

"We expect to get our much-needed salaries anytime soon but media attention should be increased to highlight our plight," Nagudram concludes.

Challapalli sets a clean benchmark

MAHIMA MANIAR

Challapalli: When citizens themselves take up sanitation and cleanliness, it adds to the beauty of this village, near Machilipatnam.

Thanks to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Swachh Challapalli was inaugurated here on November 12, 2014. Its aims to include cleanliness, developing greenery, beautification of walls and tiles while campaigning against single-use plastic. Converting open drainage into an underground facility is another motto.

"Teaching and preaching does not help. Time, money and energy should be invested in society and the future generation," says Dr. Basara Rama Krishna Prasad, managing trustee of the Manakosam Manam Trust who cleans the roads along with his wife and 30-40 volunteers.

In five years, 7,000-8,000 plants and 20,000 flower plants have been planted. Any effort made by residents is, however, credited to the secretary of the Gram Panchayat.

In April 29, 2017, the State government declared Challapalli an Open-Defecation Free (ODF) zone. It gave each household an allowance of Rs. 15,000 to construct toilets. Dr. Prasad and his team were able to construct 55 toilets at Gudem, which is an SC colony. All 4,950 households now have a toilet.

At Challapalli, where the soil is loose, the washrooms have to be constructed deeper. So Dr. Prasad and other volunteers, who work every morning from 4 to 6, met the additional expense. Three public toilets have also been constructed.

For beautification of the village, the trust, established on January 1, 2015, spends Rs. 3 lakhs a month.

A solid waste processing centre has been created at the garbage disposal site where waste is composted and sanitary napkins are incinerated organically.

Dr. Prasad also proposed that there be no raised platform between drains and roads to enable easy passage of sewage, adding that bins should be mounted on a pedestal and not on the ground to prevent littering.

Narasimha Rao (54), a telecom technician, who has been volunteering since the '100th day' that the Swachh Bharat campaign began, says he has been cleaning roads every day for the past five years. "In the beginning I cleaned the roads twice a week. "It is important to first keep our homes clean and then keep the roads clean," he added even as he was on his way to Avani Gadda.

Fishermen sink or swim

Middlemen, meagre wages, and menacing weeds prove trouble

SREYA DEB

Nagayalanka: The fishermen of Diviseema, a coastal village here, live a life bound by the ebb and flow of the Krishna river. Their income depends on the yield the waters will bring. The morning of January 3 saw them all huddled under a shelter a few feet away from the river, with their nets and equipment, waiting for the rain to stop.

Kanna Raghavan (32), earns a daily wage of Rs. 200-500. This is not enough to sustain his family, for whom he is the sole breadwinner, he says. Most of the fishermen are suffering similar day-to-day problems.

Balaraju (30) says the fishermen are dependent mostly on money-lenders and boat owners in the village. Worse, they are at the mercy of middlemen who handle all affairs on behalf of the owners. Regardless of how much time the fishermen spend navigating the waters, they are always paid by the catch. Thus, they sometimes end up earning as little as Rs. 10, Balaraju says.

Besides poor wages, this job has its fair share of dangers. Fishing in the ocean has obvious risks — the



Boats moored on the Diviseema riverside as fishermen-prepare for their work | SREYA DEB

boats are not sturdy enough to withstand extremely harsh weather. Even with a motorboat, it takes much longer to return to the shore. In still waters where weeds grow the fishermen often have to dive

nearly eight feet into the water to pull the anchor free of any weeds that it may have gotten tangled with, says Raghavan.

Diving and resurfacing takes a minimum of three minutes, during

which they have to hold their breath. Those who dive and fish are paid double. They are provided no oxygen tanks or safety equipment. Nor do the fishermen wear the life vests that they are given, simply because, they say, they can all swim and hence do not see the need for it. Raghavan often takes up this job, to make ends meet.

Their catch most often consists of the pulasa, meva, and fingerlings too. When they're lucky and they manage a sizeable catch, or if they catch a goraka fish, they are allowed to take some of it back home. They wait eagerly to catch the goraka, as it is a weighty fish and sells for around Rs. 1000 per kg.

For all their unfavourable working conditions, fishermen have their own leisure activities. For the past five years they have been holding an annual boat race here during Sankranti. Every boat is rowed by four or five people, and the prize money is divided amongst all the winners. The prize money for the top three winners is Rs. 25,000, Rs. 15,000 and Rs. 10,000.

The events were organised by the Telugu Desam Party, the fishermen say they aren't sure if the races will happen this time around as the YSRC Party is in power now.

Poor treatment of Gopalmitras

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Nagayalanka: Gopalmitras (friends of cattle/Artificial Insemination workers) in this village haven't been receiving their salaries since February 2018 despite their fulfilling their duties.

According to the Andhra Pradesh Livestock Development Agency (APLDA), the Gopala Mitra Scheme was launched in April 2000, after a demo in 1999 was a huge success. Educated unemployed rural youth are being trained for 4 months in AI as Gopalmitras. At present, 2,636 Gopalmitras are covering 2-3 villages a day offering AI services on farmers' doorsteps.

B.Nancharaya, one of the six gopalmitras in the Nagayalanka mandal says, "We receive the equipment required for AI on time which is every 45 days, but not our salary". The equipment is supplied by the government but gopalmitras pay for it. A large container, liquid nitrogen, frozen semen and an instrument to insert semen in the cattle are provided. Each bottle of semen costs Rs. 40.

The gopalmitras take Rs. 70 for AI from the cattle owner. They have to pay Rs. 40 to the government for each AI they perform and can keep Rs. 30. When the scheme began, they were paid an honorarium of Rs. 2,000 a month. This increased to Rs. 3,500 during Y.S.Rajasekhara Reddy's rule in 2005. Almost nine years after that, the then Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu announced a hike in the honorarium in November, 2018.

The monthly sustenance allowance was Rs. 6,400 after the hike. However, in February 2019, not only did they stop getting the increased honorarium of Rs. 6,400 but the APLDA website now says the monthly allowance is only Rs. 3,500. The government will provide a Gopalmitra's family with 50,000 if he dies in harness.

B.Anjaneyulu, another gopalmitra, says, "No one talks or asks about the hiked salary anymore. It is a dream that lasted only for two months," he says, "I am sure there are very few who know that this profession exists", he laughs.

The Chief Veterinarian of the Nagayalanka Veterinary Hospital, Dr. M.D.Shafi, says now it has become increasingly difficult for the workers to make ends meet as the number of cattle in the mandal has been declining. He believes that the decline in cattle is due to increasing milk and food prices. According to him, each AI worker is able to artificially inseminate only about 100 head of cattle in two months in three or four villages put together.

"We know that farmers will suffer if their cattle are not inseminated. The dairy industry will fall. It will just get worse," Nancharaya said. He added that his condition is relatively good as he can depend on his family finances. Nevertheless, he has taken micro-finance loans for his children's education.

They begin their day at 7 a.m. and it does not end until evening. They also offer first aid and vaccination services. These men work without any medical reimbursement or insurance cover.

Marooned for healthcare

SAYANTAN GUHA

Nagayalanka: At Lankevanidibba, an island two hours from here, there is only one RMP (Registered Medical Practitioner) doctor for around 250 people — with no other medical staff, centres or facilities.

The RMP is their only hope of treatment for fever or wounds. For better aid, the locals journey for two hours to Nagayalanka, by crossing a river on two stretches, and an arduous road travel.

K. Ratnam (69), says, "Most people who live here are illiterate. They believe the RMP doctor to be a government doctor." He charges money keeping in mind the financial conditions of the patients. But, he is present between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. and after 6 o'clock in the evening.

For surgeries or serious ailments, even a visit to the Government General Hospital at Nagayalanka is not enough. The patient needs to be taken to the government hospital in Machilipatnam or Avanigadda, both 4-5 hours away.

Natives say, in two incidents last year, two patients died while crossing the river in a boat. The bodies were disposed of in the water. Such incidents were frequent earlier. Since ferry services stop after 6 pm, in case of emergencies after nightfall, they wait for the RMP, or hope and pray that the patient survive till sunrise.

S. Rangamma, who travelled to Avanigadda for her delivery a year ago, said, "Even pregnant women have to travel all the way to or the city by ferry. The path is not safe for expectant mothers."

Floods recede, villagers' woes remain

Local fishing and agriculture activities halted for four months

SAYANTAN GUHA
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: The August floods resulted in villages here remaining waterlogged till November, thus damaging property and disrupting livelihoods. The government not providing adequate financial support has worsened the situation, it is alleged.

Heavy rains upstream and huge inflows of water into the Krishna River on August 13 resulted in water entering low-lying areas in the district, leaving hundreds of acres of farm land under a sheet of water. The water, waist-high inside people's homes, did, however, recede in a week but normal activities were not restored. The river banks and agricultural land were submerged till the end of November.

Residents of damaged houses — some of these makeshift ones — and people dependent on fishing and agriculture felt desolate as their incomes came to a standstill for four months. The fishermen were the worst affected as they couldn't go fishing owing to the increased water levels and their nets were washed away. Also, most of the fish, bred under the National Fisheries Development Board funded



N.Suresh and his family have rebuilt their house without any government aid, post-flood | SAYANTAN GUHA

"Cage Culture" in the area, escaped.

What made the people cry foul was the government not providing them any compensation. It did give 50 percent of the amount required for reconstructing houses, but nothing for losses they incurred after getting marooned, resulting in fishing and agriculture coming to a halt.

The only thing the villagers were happy about was that all 20 families had been shifted to the nearby government high school here, where they were served water and

three meals a day. N.Suresh (35), a residing in the fisherman colony, said, "Our only relief was that the food we were served was really tasty."

At Lankevanidibba, a small island village two hours from here, people had to take refuge in a government-constructed cyclone shelter as water had entered their houses.

Usually, the residents make two ferry trips to reach the nearest public medical centre at Nagayalanka, due to a lack of medical help on the island. During the floods, all

ferry/boat services were called off, thus cutting off all links with the adjoining mandals and villages.

(Diviseema consists of three mandals — Avanigadda, Koduru and Nagayalanka. Nagayalanka consists of 46 villages including Lankevanidibba.)

The islanders, however, did stack up supplies as they got prior warning about the floods. During that period, they also received rations like rice, vegetables and some pulses but were insufficient for the entire population, the people said in unison.

N. Nageshwar Rao, a fisherman on the island, said, "Most of us are concerned with catching prawns and fish." He complained that the government did not provide any support or compensation for the damage that we suffered.

ASSIST, an NGO, has taken up the initiative to provide housing to the 298 flood victims in Avanigadda and Nagayalanka. The work is in progress and 26 houses have already been built.

Aquaculture ensures easy trade for the Yenadi tribe

MAHIMA MANIAR

Nagayalanka: The backwaters of the Krishna have become a hub of cage cultivation, with the Yenadi tribe and fisherfolk here practising aquaculture successfully for a decade now.

Each cage, costing around Rs. 3 lakh, is utilised for food culture and fingerling rearing. The Central Government, along with the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB), is providing financial assistance for the project through the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) under the SC and ST sub-plan. It's the first of its kind in brackish water captive fish rearing said T. Raghu Sekhar, a fisherman here.

The project helps in artificially cultivating some of the abandoned fish breeds, restoring aquaculture and the dying mangrove cover, and, in turn, providing economic opportunities to the landless Yenadi community, said Sekhar. "The 24 cages here primarily culture the Asian sea bass, the orange-spotted grouper and the Indian pompano, which are sold at Rs. 350 per kg."

The process helps extract Omega-3, which is known to be good for health, and thereby arrest the decline in fish population owing to overexploitation, Sekhar added.

However, as cage cultivation is a seasonal occupation, the fisherfolk and tribal men catch crabs and rats for farmers during monsoons. "We are trying to help the Yenadi community in catching crabs with traps. The traps can be laid at different places, and the crabs, They are called Scylla serrata, and weigh 100-200 gms, can be collected the next day," said Jayaraj Yeddanapalli, executive secretary of ALERT, a non-governmental organization.

The oppressed Yenadi tribes, 98 per cent of whom are landless, eke out a living by fishing, catching

crabs from mangroves, trapping rats on agricultural land, working as security men in fish tanks and helping to harvest paddy and pluck chillies during the agricultural season.

According to Yeddanapalli, The State Government, however, has recently recognised them on a par with the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) to make available the 90% subsidy for the government schemes.

However, the land purchase schemes involve a 25 per cent loan component. Moreover, the Yenadis restrict themselves to mangroves and creeks with the increase of aqua farms.

Thus, it is a challenge to help them get fishers' bio metric cards and fishing licences. "Conferring community forest resource rights with integrated aqua farming in mangroves will also help to bail them out of poverty," Yeddanapalli added.

At 51, woman travels 51 km to keep up with Kuchipudi

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Kuchipudi: Amid the dwindling patronage for the famous dance form and steady tilt towards western culture, a 51-year-old woman, is pursuing a two year masters programme at Sri Siddendhra Yogi Kuchipudi Kala Peetham here.

A. Eeshwari, who hails from Vijayawada, travels to Kuchipudi, 51 km every day to continue with her tryst with the dance, which she first learnt when she was 16. "Initially I was afraid. But my teachers were the ones to encourage me; they told me dance has nothing to do with age." Now in the second year of Masters in Performing Arts, Eeshwari learnt two of the four parts of Kuchipudi dance.

The four parts are Vachika — speaking, Aahaarya — costumes, Aangika — movements & Body postures and Satvika Abhinayam or expressions.

Eeshwari aims to master the other two arts and teach others. She particularly wants to master Satvika Abhinayam.

It is in this village the Kuchipudi dance originated more than 3000 years ago. It was first introduced by

Siddendra Yogi. It is said that every family here has a dance performer. Initially, only male dancers would perform both as men and women.

This is the only village which has been named after a dance form. Kuchipudi is one of the eleven classic dance forms that originated in Krishna District.

For all the distinction, the tradition and the dance form are gradually fading. Sri Siddendhra Yogi Kuchipudi Kala Peetham produced famous dancers like Shobha Naidu and Yamini Reddy.

Now there are only 120 students.

Dr. Yesewarapa Srinivas Rao, one of the senior teachers, says many parents dissuade their children from learning this art as it is time consuming. "Nowadays children remain in the school for more than 12 hours. With a curriculum like that, it is impossible for them to make time for other activities", he says.

Earlier, the school produced many Muslim dancers like Kai-

lasha Begum from Ongole and Mohammad Khalid from Hyderabad. "Art has nothing to do with religion, caste, creed or colour. In the past, we have had students from other countries as students here", says Dr.Srinivas.

Although all subjects — both practical and theory — mostly pertain to dance, the master's course has "Computer Applications" as a compulsory subject. "This subject was introduced recently to catch up with urbanisation. It is also helpful for someone like me who never knew how to handle a computer. Now I can manage", says Eeshwari.

Most of the students who graduate from here set up their own dance schools. Eeshwari too aspires to do the same. As her son has settled in Canada, she will move there very soon. "To teach an art that is so pure and Indian to a foreigner is something I am looking forward to," she says, "perhaps I can also teach my grandchildren. It will be worth it even if I teach one more person before I die".



Toddy tappers left high and dry

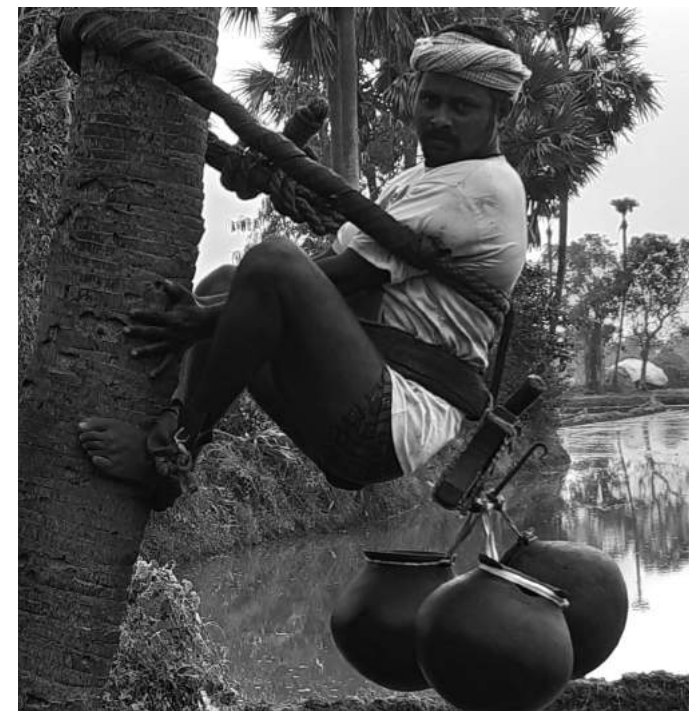
AMRUTHA KOSURU

Kakarlamudi: Toddy tappers in this village, covered with their 10-15 kg protection suit and carrying pots tied to both ends of a stick, can be seen walking towards palm trees in the afternoon.

They collect toddy twice a day (in the morning and evening.) They wear a three-part harness, one each for the feet, waist and to hold onto the tree. The one around the waist — paya — has a hook on the back to carry pots up the tree, and a sickle to cut the sap hanging from it. A bigger belt — moku — is wrapped on the paya.

Sri Ramulu (40), the youngest toddy tapper at Kakarlamudi, is agile as he makes his way up with the equipment. He points to the harness by his feet, and says "Gudi is the most important of all. If it isn't proper, one will fall". He has been tapping toddy since he was 16, having learnt it from his father and elder brother.

He returns to the trees after three days to bring the toddy-filled pots down. He sells half a litre of toddy for Rs. 10. This routine is followed from January to June, irrespective of weather. For Shivaratri, the toddy tapper climbs at least 10 trees a day as toddy is in demand during the time.



Sri Ramulu makes his fourth climb of the day | SREYA DEB

"I work a labourer even now from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. The meagre amount I get from toddy is not enough," Sri Ramulu laments. He said that had he not been a Gouda (belonging to OBC), he wouldn't have been a toddy tapper. "This is my Kula Vrutthi (job particular to a

caste). I couldn't escape from it because I have no education." There are very few toddy tappers left now as they have shifted to other jobs.

M. Sambasiva Rao (52), owns 0.5 acres of land. He still works as a tapper and on other's farms. "I am the only working member in my fa-

mily. After buying land I thought, things will be better but our money has gone to medical expenses." Five years ago, Sambasiva had to undergo an operation that cost him a fortune. Pointing at the healing stitches on his stomach, he says, "I have been collecting toddy for over 36 years, not even once has the government tried to support our livelihood or our medical needs."

Kayathengada Swami fell from a tree while collecting toddy eight years ago and suffered a spinal injury. It cost him almost a lakh for an operation. He is now unemployed, and his wife the sole breadwinner of the family.

"All that the government gave me was a certificate that legitimizes my spinal injury", he said. Since then, he has never gotten any aid whatsoever.

All toddy tappers here hate the only profession they know, as it doesn't pay enough. Their only exposure to the outside world are visits to the Machilipatnam government hospital.

Suffering acute pain in the back, Sri Ramulu says he is averse to his children taking up this occupation. He wishes them a better life. As the sun sets, a pale shadow of the tall tree falls on him as he laughs and says, "We will be the last generation of toddy tappers here."



PHCs abandoned in Kote

Many care centres in H.D. Kote are understaffed and dysfunctional

SAMEER KULKARNI

H.D. Kote: In September last year, the long abandoned Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Annur in H.D. Kote taluk was cleaned up and the pregnant women in the area were informed. However, none of the soon-to-be mothers turned up. They claimed the hospital was haunted.

The health centre, which is supposed to be open 24/7, was abandoned four years ago after the only in-house sister, Seethamma, died. Now, overgrown with wild bushes, empty alcohol packs, cigarette butts, and playing cards lie scattered in the "reception" area, visible through the broken windows.

According to people in the locality, sister Seethamma took care of the pregnant women, the infants and their needs. Once she was gone, the doctor stopped coming in, and with that, the people stopped too.

"If we got sick then we would go to this very hospital but now we have to go all the way to Henur, which is a bus ride away. It is very inconvenient," said Devu, an agricultural labourer, who lives near to the PHC.

For most people, the PHC remains a haunted place. "We had cleaned it," said Sudha, an Anganwadi teacher in neighbouring Bheemanahalli, "but all the women thought it was haunted... we had to go through the meeting here, in the Anganwadi."

The Primary Health Centre in Kenchanhalli shares a similar story. Three years ago, a sister



An abandoned PHC at Beemanahalli | SAMEER KULKARNI

named Philomena, who was housed in the PHC, was transferred to Mysuru and ever since the care centre remains closed.

The heavily under-staffed PHC lacks the basic requirements for medical care. However, as for infrastructure, the building is intact; there is a pump for water supply and uninterrupted electricity connection. But there are no patients, or doctors.

According to Sannaswamy, who lives near the PHC, it is a waste of government money.

"There are no medicines or injections. We do not benefit from this. For every little thing we have to go as far as H.D. Kote, which is an hour away," he said.

People who are willing to travel have to endure the poor quality of roads. Rekha K S, an Accredited Social Health Activist, or ASHA worker, in the village, conducts regular check-ups for pregnant women and infants but the medi-

cine has to be sourced from the PHC in N Begur, which is 20 minutes away.

Due to the poor condition of roads, the ambulances are also reluctant to come, said Rekha. There are three ambulances - in Anthar-santhe, H.D. Kote and Sargur, all 30-60 minutes away. "They are not enough and they take about two hours to come. The drivers say that the road is not good," she said.

Mahesh, a grocery store owner, said "In the past 50 years nothing has changed in this village. The roads are terrible. If they just improve the roads then it will pave way for all kinds of development."

In N Begur, the Primary Health Centre looks bright, shining white on a Sunday afternoon, like a model of a hospital than an actual one. The new building was constructed a year ago next to the dilapidated old PHC. However, one

attendant and a few sisters run the PHC.

Mahadeva M, Health Assistant, or the "attendant," manages everything, from opening the doors in the morning to prescribing medicine to the out-patients. In addition, Machamma, a senior nurse, and one junior sister work in the hospital.

The PHC, in addition to three sub-centres, is expected to cover around 13,000 people spread across 25 villages. There is only one doctor, Dr.Venkatesh, who visits two times a week. However, according to some villagers, he is not regular.

The centre does not have a staff nurse, woman doctor, and a pharmacist and some medicines are not available.

According to Mahadeva, Diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug used to manage pain, is out of stock since six months and "not a single injection has been received from the government."

The PHC does not have a laboratory for conducting tests.

Machamma, who conducts weekly sessions about menstrual awareness and hygiene for teenage girls, said that the PHC is supposed to be equipped for deliveries. "There is no lady doctor or a senior nurse. We have to send patients to Sarguru for everything," she added.

According to Dr Raja, a doctor in Hampapura, the hospital has nothing. "There is nobody in the hospital and no proper facilities, if Mahadeva is on leave, there is nobody to even open the door," he added.

GOKUL G K

H.D. Kote: More than 60 per cent of all the tribal children in H.D. Kote are born anaemic, reveal studies by the University of Mysuru.

According to the sample survey conducted by the university, the prevalence of anaemia is the most among the Soliga tribe, where 91.4 per cent children have the condition. Out of this, 9.9 per cent children were detected with severe anaemia and 74.3 per cent were detected with moderate anaemia.

The prevalence of anaemia among children belonging to the Jenu Kuruba, a major tribe in Karnataka, is 77 per cent. Out of this 15 per cent are severely anaemic.

Anaemia is a condition in which the body lacks enough healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen to the tissues.

Shyamdar, a tribal child belonging to the JenuKuruba community in the H.D. Kote Taluk, was born with severe anaemia.

His mother, an agricultural labourer, didn't have the time and money to take care of the nutritional needs of her growing foetus.

Anaemia during pregnancy is especially a concern because it is associated with low birth weight, premature birth, and maternal mortality.

"Many tribal women don't get enough nutrition while they are pregnant," said E Thameem, a doctor at the Primary Health Centre in D B Kuppe, a village on the fringes of the Nagarhole National Park in H.D. Kote close to Karna-

TRIBAL WOES

Anaemia rampant among women

"I didn't have enough money to give good nutrition to my children; some days we all go to sleep, hungry," said Sandhya

This is because of the lack of food containing iron in diet, like green leafy vegetables and lentils, during the first trimester of pregnancy.

In India, iron supplements such as IFA (Iron Folic Acid) tablets are given for free to pregnant women, through PHs and Government hospitals.

However, identifying these pregnant women among tribals is still a challenge.

"We have managed to give IFA tablets to most of the women in D. B. Kuppe," said Thameem.

According to him, there is a decline in maternal anaemia in the D B Kuppe village.

However, D B Kuppe does not have many tribals. The identification is relatively difficult in smaller tribal majority hamlets.

"Most of them don't even realise that they are pregnant until late into the first trimester," said Yamuna.

Another common form of anaemia which is very prevalent among the tribals is 'sickle celled anaemia,' a genetic disorder of the blood caused by inherited abnormal haemoglobin.

"Unlike the other forms of anaemia, sickle celled anaemia cannot be treated with nutrition supplements," said Thameem.

It requires expensive treatments such as hematopoietic stem cell transplantation.

The transplantation of multipotent hematopoietic stem cells, usually derived from bone marrow, peripheral blood, or umbilical cord blood, which could cost upto Rs 7 lakhs.

taka's border with Kerala.

Sometimes, the PHCs and the ASHA workers (Accredited Social Health Activists) are unable to identify all the pregnant women, thus they wouldn't get treated.

"This is because many, especially the tribals living inside the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, are reluctant in admitting pregnancy," said Thameem.

Many of these tribals have poor prenatal care, resulting in the starvation of the foetus.

Almost all the children in Balle - a tribal settlement inside the Nagarhole National Park - are born anaemic.

Sandhya, a tribal woman from Balle, was 22 when she gave birth to her third anaemic child.

With very poor prenatal nutrition, the infant mortality rate in the area is substantially high, said Yamuna, a doctor working at the Vivekananda Memorial Health Centre in Sargur, a taluk headquarter in Mysuru.

The most common type of anaemia is iron-deficiency anaemia or ferropenic, where a lack of iron in the body leads to a reduction in the number of red blood cells.

ASHA workers are on strike

SAMEER KULKARNI

Kenchanahalli: On January 3, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) from across Karnataka went on an indefinite strike in Bengaluru. Their demands included a fixed monthly salary of Rs 12,000 and payment of the incentives that had been due for over 15 months.

Rekha K S, an ASHA worker from Kenchanhalli, was one among the 46,000 protestors who walked until the Freedom Park from the city railway station. After the government failed to meet the demands, she, along with others, stopped working altogether.

Back in her village, she has been the only reliable source of health care.

After the Primary Health Centre closed, without the doctor, Rekha has been solely taking care of the people. "After sister Philomena was transferred to Mysuru there has been no sister at the PHC, the doctor comes once in a while," she said. She sources medicines, from the nearby PHC in N Begur. It is her responsibility to call for

weekly meetings with the pregnant women and inform them about their medical and nutritional requirements. She also makes sure all the infants in the area are vaccinated.

A fortnight ago, she made attempts to revive the nearby PHC. "There was a lock on the gate and the door, we had to break those locks, get new locks, get the place cleaned up so that it can be useful," she said.

However, Rekha's attempts have not borne any fruit. The PHC remains locked and unused. "If we had our own sisters and doctors then it will be convenient but there has been no response from the government."

The ASHA workers receive incentives for their service, for instance, taking pregnant women for delivery days ahead of the date. But they have not received their payments for over a year now. They get, according to Rekha, Rs 3,500 a month, without a pay raise for over five years.

"We save mothers and children here," she said, "nobody offers us even a cup of tea."

Swachh Bharat - a myth?

ARCHITA RAGHU

H.D. Kote: Mysuru district was declared as Open Defecation Free by the Government in 2016. According to the Swachh Bharat Gramin Mission 2018-19 report, Karnataka is 99.60 per cent Open Defecation Free (ODF). However, several villages in Mysore district have a different story to tell.

In Bheemanahalli village in H.D. Kote taluk, most residents have functioning toilets outside their houses. They were given Rs 12,000 to build a toilet and very few houses have toilets inside their houses.

"We have a toilet inside our house because we saved to build it," Usha (50) said.

However, deeper inside the village is an area built by people employed under the MGNREGS scheme. These yellow houses, constructed in 2018, do not have toilets.

Pavithra (33) a resident of this area said that they defecate on the banks of the lake nearby. The women usually go very early in the morning in groups.

The lake is two kilometres away and another lake is five kilometres away. The younger

children of the area who cannot constantly be taken to the lake or forest defecate on the streets, said Jothi (20).

"Another problem is that tigers and elephants are also there in the forest when we go so we all mostly go in the mornings," Pavithra said. She added that it is unsafe to go to the forests due to this and people often ask officials to build toilets in the village.

According to K N Manjunath, Development Officer, Bheemanahalli, "People have been defecating in the open for a long time. It takes time for people to change, especially old people."

"There are 5-6 homes that are exceptions but overall the area is 100 per cent open defecation free," he said. "Usually, people go out [to defecate] in groups if some of the people stop coming then the others feel bad, that is how the change can happen," he added.

"If nobody is coming with them then they are forced to change," Manjunath said.

In Balle and D.B. Kuppe, the tribal settlements do not have toilets and have not heard of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan Mission (SBAM). The people defecate

near the lake or in the surrounding forest area. Gauri, a Jenu Kuruba woman, said that she has asked the forest department several times about constructing a toilet but nothing has happened so far.

In Balle, the tribals go to the forest to defecate and they prefer to go in groups based on age and gender.

However, in D.B. Kuppe, most houses have toilets. Kadeja (48) said that the officials in her area provided Rs 12,000 to construct a toilet. "But that's not enough. You need at least Rs 1 lakh to build a functioning toilet," she added. Depending on the caste some families were given Rs. 15,000 to build a toilet.

Gendathur and Brahmagiri have toilets built by the local NGO Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement. None of the villagers here have heard of the SBAM. Houses on one side of Brahmagiri have toilets while some in Elisikettahadi on the other side don't. In the flood-hit area of Macchur, several houses do not have toilets.

The houses destroyed by the floods have not been fully repaired.

Menstrual 'unhygiene'

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: The majority of women living in villages in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysuru do not follow hygienic methods during menstruation. Many do not use sanitary napkins since they cannot afford to buy a packet.

Many young women still use a piece of cloth during their menstrual cycle which they wash and reuse. They dry the cloth inside their rooms as they are embarrassed to dry it outside. The cloth should be dried under direct sunlight which is considered to be a natural sanitizer and more hygienic.

Thayamma from Bheemanahalli Haddi says that, "We do not use sanitary napkins during our cycle because one packet cost Rs 30 and we cannot afford to buy one every month. We use cloth instead. The cloth cannot be dried out in the sun because we do not want the men to see it."

There are no toilets at Bheemanahalli Haddi which makes it even more difficult for the women during the time. Many girls have been prone to infections because of the unhygienic methods.

The situation is similar in Balle, a tribal village in the Nagarhole

National Park where the women use dry leaves and cloth instead of sanitary napkins. The people living in the village belong to the Jenu Kuruba tribe.

"The women of our tribe do not go inside the house for 12 days during our cycle. We have to cook and sleep outside the house. Since we do not have any toilets, we go to the forest and dispose the used leaves and cloth there," said Shanta, a villager.

Many girls quit studies after they get their periods because of the lack of toilet facilities at school and also because they are embarrassed to study in the same class with boys. The parents also force the girls to get married.

"My parents forced me to stop going to school and got me married soon after I got my menstrual cycle. They said it is not safe for a girl to study in the same class with boys anymore," said Pavithra, resident of Kenchanahalli.

The women in these villages have not received any awareness classes regarding the hygienic use of sanitary napkins.

The Menstrual Hygiene Scheme, by the Ministry of health and hygiene has apparently not been implemented in any of these villages.

Fighting taboos with street plays

TANISHKA SODHI

D.B. Kuppe: In D.B. Kuppe village where alcoholism and child marriages are rampant, awareness about these issues is raised through street plays organised by school children.

Teachers in the Government Higher Primary School in the village, which is located in H.D. Kote, say that although the dropout rate has decreased, children are still forced sometimes to quit school due to the heavy alcoholism that persists in their households, and the pressure on girls to get married early.

Street plays called *jata* take place once a year highlighting the various issues that affect the community such as child marriage, alcoholism and protection of forests.

The students, after rehearsing for a few weeks under the guidance of their teachers, go to different localities in the village and



Children playing at the Government Higher Primary School in D.B. Kuppe | GOKUL G K

perform the street play. It is as much to raise awareness among the students as it is to raise awareness among their parents and locals.

According to Naveen Aradhya, a primary school teacher, a lot of the children are brought up by single mothers. Heavy alcoholism

and poor food habits of the men contribute to the high widow rate in D.B. Kuppe.

"After class 10th, a lot of the students get married - more girls than boys," said Aradhya. "The girls are not allowed to go to college; they don't have the freedom."

Dr. E Thameem, the sole doctor in the Primary Health Centre in the village, said that most of the men in the village were addicted to alcohol.

"Since this is a remote area, there aren't any rehabilitation facilities," he said. Women come in sometimes

with wounds that are traced back to domestic violence under the influence of alcohol, said the doctor. "They don't tell us where the injuries are from, but we figure it out. Every day, we see at least one or two drunk patients in the clinic too," said Dr. Thameem.

Child marriage which leads to early child birth also results in problems such as premature babies and death of infants, besides causing a negative effect on the mothers, mentally, according to Dr. Thameem.

According to the school teachers, the kids are often influenced by those drinking alcohol.

"We try to encourage them to talk to us about issues at home," said Aradhya.

"The street plays help raise awareness, but it will take another five to ten years for the positive effects to show," she added.

Drunk and violent

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: Men consuming alcohol and beating up women and children is a common sight in several villages in H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru.

D.B. Kuppe village is situated near the Kerala-Karnataka border. Both men and women from this village go for coolie work to Mananthavadi and Bavalli in Kerala to earn their living.

The men spend their money at the toddy shop situated on the bank of the Kabini River where the people take the boat from D.B. Kuppe to Pulpally in Kerala. This spot is crowded with men who are drunk, making it uncomfortable and unsafe for the women and children who take the boat to the Kerala side and back.

Lakshmi (28) from the Jenu Kuruba tribe, who lives in a settlement in the village, says that the men spend all the money they get from work to buy alcohol. They come back home drunk and beat up women and children.

The school in the village is located quite close to the toddy shop. There are a large number of students dropping out from school and getting addicted to alcohol.

Lakshmi says that the women of the village gathered in front of the toddy shop to protest against this. They protested for three days but there was no action taken. "The police do not come to our village to solve our problems," she said.

The situation is similar in Bheemanahalli Haddi where the men are addicted to alcohol.

"My husband is an alcoholic. He does not bring a single penny to the house. I have to go for coolie work in order to run the family," says Thayamma, a resident.

The men buy 90 ml sachets of whiskey or some other tipple from places like Sargur. Some buy them in bulk at Rs 30 a sachet and sell them for a profit of Rs 10. Empty and crushed sachets can be seen strewn around under trees and along main roads in several villages in H.D. Kote.

Man v/s Wild: conflict continues

Despite official efforts, H.D. Kote remains a hotpot for wild animal attacks

ARCHITA RAGHU

Kenchanahalli: Man-elephant conflict continues to affect H.D. Kote farmers

Farmers in Kenchanahalli village are demanding that the Government constructs a solar-powered electric fence to prevent wild animals from invading their fields, which border the forest.

"We want a solar powered electric fence to keep out elephants which destroy our crops," said Srinivas (40), who grows ragi, banana and horsegram.

Srinivas points to a large trench dug by the Forest Department on the boundary between his fields and the forest to keep elephants, wild boars and deer away.

"But now even with the trench, elephants have found a way to come in and destroy our crops," he said, pointing to the spot where he said the elephants had climbed in and out of the trench to get into his fields.

The elephants from the nearby forest had carved out a path in the trench and made their way to the ragi and banana crops.

"The Forest Department is not giving us compensation after the elephants destroy everything so as to ensure that we do not build that electric fence," Srinivas alleged.

The Supreme Court has directed to remove electric fences and barbed wires in critical elephant corridors of the State. The Karnata



A forest official stands next to Ramagowda's cow, killed by the tiger. | FILE PHOTO

taka Forest Department has said that it would conduct a survey, identify the areas with the electric fences and instruct its officers to remove them.

The villagers burst crackers, bang vessels, shout and make other loud noises to drive away elephants.

Lingaraj (40) who cultivates sugarcane and chia seeds in Basapura, said, "Last season, I didn't make any profit because of the elephants. I spent Rs. 80,000 in total and got back that much only."

Jayamma (34) said that these elephants also affect her children when they're on the way to school

and they can't study as the wild animals roam outside their houses.

When the elephants come, the residents usually call the forest ranger who comes to help. "But they don't do much and we get little compensation or none at all after the animals destroy our crops and houses," said Jayamma.

According to a Government order, Rs. 7,000 is a must be given in cases of elephants destroying any properties and a maximum Rs. 1 lakh in the cases of wild animals destroying crops, provided the destruction is not on encroached land. In cases of human loss, Rs. 5 lakh is to be given as compensation.

TANISHKA SODHI

Kalasuru: It was 63-year-old farmer Ramagowda's jacket layer that he says protected him from being killed by a tiger five years ago in Kalasuru, a village in H.D. Kote taluk.

This was not the first tiger attack in the village, and locals doubt it will be the last. Despite efforts from villagers and forest officials, Kalasuru has continued to be a hotspot for tiger-man conflicts over the years.

Ramagowda may have escaped death, but the injuries he suffered in the attack have left him crippled.

His 28-year-old son Jayakumar said, "There should be some sort of protection in the village. My father was on his way back from the farm (a kilometre away from the forest) when the tiger tried to grab his neck but couldn't get a grip."

The family spent Rs 1 lakh on treatment, out of which Rs 15,000-20,000 was given in compensation by the government. The cattle, too, was killed by the tiger a month ago.

Preventive methods such as keeping dog bones as a bait to trap the tiger and tracking the animal's pattern are used.

"More methods should be taken, as it is our lives at stake," said Jayakumar.

He believes that officials should follow research studies

on tiger attacks and take better preventive measures.

Six months ago, a tiger was caught by the forest officials. The tigers usually come out at night, which is why villagers are scared of sending their kids out late.

According to Marigowda, the forest official who guards the area, villagers leave their animals in the forest land despite being told not to, and then claim that tigers attacked their animals. He said that there was also a night patrol group to keep track of the animal.

"They keep lying about the death of their animals. We are living near the forest, how can we call this trouble?" he asked, continuing, "The villagers lay false claims to get money from the government."

Solar-powered wires that can give an electric shock are laid around the forest by the officials to prevent tigers from entering farm lands. However, the animal manages to jump across it anyway.

Some of the villagers are demanding that fences be built around their farms, too.

Eighty-year-old Dhodamma was sleeping in her farm when a tiger attacked her a few years ago.

She suffered head injuries and despite the ordeal, she still frequents the farm. It is, after all, her livelihood.

No electricity despite dam

SUKRITI VATS

Murband: Residents of Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk of Mysuru district endure rampant electricity cuts even though they were promised a steady 24-hour supply when the Kabini dam was built in 1974. They belong to the successive generations of people displaced during the dam's construction.

"My grandfather's land was taken 50 years ago for the construction of the Kabini dam," said Fayaz Pashar, who has been running a grocery shop in the village several years now on land rented from the mosque nearby.

Pashar said that his grandparents, who were farmers before, were promised land for cultivation and electricity as compensation for the displacement, but received neither.

"We were ruined at that time, but over the years things have become better. Though electricity problem still persists causing us a lot of inconvenience."

Murband village, which lies about 10 km away from the Kabini dam near Beechanahally village of H.D. Kote, has a sizable population of Muslims. Spread across 55 hectares, the Kabini dam forced migration of many villagers to other areas.

Abdul Wahab, another shopkeeper, complained that the dam has not been helpful for them

at all despite the Karnataka Government claim on its website that it would cater to the needs of around 22 villages and 14 hamlets, with water and electricity.

"On a usual day, the electricity is available only for a fixed time from 9 a.m. to 12 noon and 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. In between, we suffer from the burning heat with no fans," said Wahad. He also said that during rains it's even worse as they don't get electricity even for those fixed hours.

Thirteen year-old Mohammed Sohail, who studies in a neighborhood school, said that the street lights had not been working since their installation recently. "It's dangerous to go out in the village at night because one can't see anything and can be hunted by wild animals that sometimes roam around in the village."

A former panchayat member Mehrunisa, who can afford to have a refrigerator, has been told by the government to not buy any high-voltage electronic device because it can cause a power outage leading to a blackout for the whole village.

"In 1974, they had promised us land and electricity. We got the land owned by the Panchayat, for which we have to pay an annual rent of approx. 2,000 rupees," said Mehrunisa.

She also said that the much-awaited 24-hour electricity is yet to come.

Panchayat official claims fund misallocation for flood relief

SAMEER KULKARNI

H.D. Kote: Several people affected by the heavy rain and floods last August in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysuru district have either not received the relief funds or the funds have been misallocated by a team of officials.

A C Tirupati, Gram Panchayat Chairman, at D.B. Kuppe village, said that the team consisting of a Village Officer, an engineer and other officials who are responsible for assessing the damage caused by floods in August had failed to visit the affected areas. He also said that the grading system - A for full damage, B for medium level damage and C for minimum damage - based on which the compensation is decided, was done arbitrarily.

The region faced heavy rainfall in the first week of August last year which resulted in flooding from the backwaters of the Kabini river. The houses on the river bank along villages and hamlets like D. B. Kuppe, Anemala, Hosur, Thimmanahosahalli, Macchur, and others were damaged.

Due to the remoteness of the villages which are situated deep in the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, Tirupati said that the team of the officials who were assigned to grade the damage never came.

After the government announced the relief funds, the affected people had only three days to reach the Panchayat office with their documents.

In the three-day window, according to the list obtained from the Panchayat office, 281 people filed for compensation. However, for various reasons like lack of documents or remoteness of the villages and the tribals, over 800 people reached the office later.

They have not received funds as of January, six months after the floods.



Venktegowda, whose home was damaged during the August floods. | SAMEER KULKARNI

Tirupati also alleged corruption at various levels before the fund reaches the affected people.

Among the worst hit during the last August floods in H.D. Kote were the tribals living along the backwaters of the river Kabini in Hulmutlu near D.B. Kuppe.

Residing deep in the forests, the tribals are constantly in tussle with government departments to save their homes and livelihoods. Now, very few have managed to rehabilitate themselves after the floods ravaged their property.

People in Hulmutlu are predominantly tribal and have been living there for generations. However, the Forest Department wants the tribal people of Hulmutlu to move out from the forest, but has not offered them land elsewhere, the tribals say.

Venktegowda, whose home was damaged, has not received flood relief. "We want to get out of here but we need land but they [Forest Department] do not have any place to give us," he added.

The villagers do not benefit from the housing schemes either, as several of them do not possess documents claiming the ownership of the land or the house. Most people own property on lease.

Tirupati said that the panchayat has helped tribals build houses,

bypassing Forest Department's rules. "When they come and question us, we say the tribals built them themselves"

The geography of the village makes the houses susceptible to floods. It is flanked by thick forest on one side and the backwaters of the river on the other. "When the rains are heavy, the streams from the forests flow downwards towards the river and on the other side, the Kabini dam prevents the water from flowing outwards and this leads to floods. We are stuck in between," Venktegowda explained.

Mahadeva, one of the affected people, has managed to build pathways for the water to flow. "We have no other option but to repair the homes ourselves. The government does very little. But many people from the cities have donated clothes during the disaster," he said.

Heavy rainfall was also followed by thunderstorms and strong winds. Venktegowda pointed towards the headless coconut tree and said that the top portion of the tree had fallen through his roof on one of those windy nights.

As the tribals continue the fight for their rights, natural calamities and climate change makes the situation more troubling.

Honeyed dreams of Adi tribes

ARCHITA RAGHU

"Give us proper housing and toilets," says Shantha (35), a member of the Jenu Kuruba tribe inside the Balle settlement of Nagarhole Forest. "The government does not give us anything because we are in the forest," she added.

Inside Balle, the Jenu Kuruba tribes live in mud houses with thatched roofs and wooden doors. The children here scribble their thoughts and homework on the mud walls of these houses. The word "Indira" has been scrawled in Kannada on one, another has addition and subtraction sums. Shanta's house has drawings of different men. They speak Kannada - the local language - but also have their own language.

In a few days, Shantha, along with the other working members of her tribe, will take buses to the Kodagu region to work as daily

wage labourers. They will work through January and February in Madikeri at coffee plantations and earn around Rs 200 to Rs 300 a day. During the honey season, the male Jenu Kurubas climb up trees with large honey combs and carefully collect honey. They sell one kilogram of honey for Rs 300 at the D.B. Kuppe market.

"We all sell at least fifteen bottles a day. The only problem is that bees bite us a lot and the skin swells; but we don't put any medicine, the swelling goes down within a day or two," she says.

Despite this, they earn enough money for only two meals a day. These two meals consist of rice from the ration shop nearby along with sambar and other dals, ragi. Shantha gets to eat her favourite meal only once a year, during Gowri Habba, a festival that celebrates the Hindu goddess Parvati in September. "We get sweet potato from the forest, boil it and eat it like that, it tastes so good," she laughs.

The tribals sleep outside in the open. It is only during the rainy season they sleep inside these mud houses.

During the nights, certain people in the village are designated watchers for the animals. Elephants come and destroy the houses at times too. Kali points to a house that has been reduced to rubble after an elephant entered the settlement two weeks ago. They are slowly rebuilding it. "They came here and shot Rajkumar's film Gandhada Gudi but we also want TV sets radios and all and we have asked but nobody is giving it," she says.

Lakshmi (28) in another Jenu Kuruba village at D B Kuppe echoes similar thoughts. "The Forest Department does not give us any facilities and asks us to leave this area," she says. Here, the women use forest produce to make brooms. Sticks and branches are gathered from the forest floors. They sell one bundle of brooms for Rs 50.

Rain's rage ruins roads

SUKRITI VATS

A road roller makes its way on a narrow mud path to lay a concrete road in Brahmagiri village of H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru district. This path, filled with gravel, is the first to be turned into a cemented road since the tribals from the Nagarhole forest were relocated here ten years ago.

"Due to lack of proper roads and drainage system, there used to be floods during heavy rainfall with water seeping into the huts and damaging the property and cattle," said BM Kalan, a tribal who works as an agricultural labourer.

Kalan said that the villagers had collectively asked MLA Anil Kumar to build a road three months ago after which the construction had started.

Sivana, a mason from the sam-



A Gravel road in Brahmagiri. | SUKRITI VATS

village, said that after the rain the roads would become unusable and vehicles would get bogged in the mud. "The vehicles that would sell grain and vegetables became infrequent, leaving us without required commodities most days."

However, villagers at Brahmagiri were lucky to have their voi-

ces heard, which is not the case in many other villages of H.D. Kote. Gendathur village, bordering the forest areas, continues to have cracked roads that become slushy during the monsoon and water-logged.

"The nearest hospital is very far away, it takes more than an hour for the ambulance to come during an emergency. There have been cases in the past where pregnant women have died, due to unavailability of transportation, and subsequently, access to medical facilities," said Lakshmi, a resident of the village.

Atheeq Ahmed, who drives a cab, said that the only good hospital available in the area was 30 km away in Sargur. "I sometimes carry locals from villages to the hospital there. During the rain, the slush makes it hard for me to drive."

'I want a govt job like my father'



Manju | MARIHA DINS

The Balle tribal village, home for many Jenu Kurubas in H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru, is not a child-friendly place. With a fear of wild animals like tigers and elephants lurking in the surrounding forests and invading the village late in the night.

Manju, who goes to school in Hunsur, said that on his way to school, he encounters elephants crossing the road, and sometimes, they even try attacking them.

"Elephants and leopards come to our village all the time. We burst fire crackers and make loud noises to chase them away," says Manju.

The children have to burn firewood and sit around it in the evening to study, as there is no electricity.

Manju, who likes school, aspires to have a government job like his father who is a forest watcher. His mother, Shantha, goes for a daily wage job at Kodagu.

"A boy from our village finished his education and applied for a job. He did not get it and now goes for bee keeping. I'm not sure why they're not giving us jobs, people are educated here, they should get jobs," says Shantha.

An accident changed his life, Azmat continues to fight for what is right

TANISHKA SODHI

Murband: Azmat Ullah speaks openly about the fateful day that snatched away his independence a year and a half ago, but he doesn't need to. The scars all over his body are grim reminders of the day when a jeep crashed into the motorcycle he was riding.

Azmat pulls up the sleeve of his off-white tee shirt. "There is a rod in my



Azmat Ullah | TANISHKA SODHI

arm right here. As many as 27 people from my village donated blood for me after the accident," he remarks. "What can we do?" he asks, sitting on a porch outside his house in Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk. He lives here with his parents, wife, brother and two kids. His crutch lies besides him, an indispensable part of his life now.

A social worker, 35-year-old Azmat spent most of his adult years helping people get their basic necessities. He

was on his way back from getting a villager his ration card when he met with the accident that left him crippled. Standing in the shade of the thatched roof on the other side of the house, his wife lays out the irony of how he lost his leg getting a man the security of a ration card, but is still unable to have his own card made.

"My father doesn't fall under the BPL category and neither do we," says Azmat, who has so far spent 16.5 lakh

rupees on operations after his accident. "Each time I go to get my ration card made, they send me back. They require documents for proof that I am independent of my father," he says. His family is currently trying to put together money for another operation that he is scheduled to have soon.

Azmat speaks of his plans of going in a few days again to the food inspector to try and get his ration card made, the third time in seven years. He worriedly

speaks about taking care of his brother, who is mentally disabled. Not unfamiliar with politics, Azmat helped his mother get elected as a panchayat member of Murband village, a post she currently holds. At the age of 24, Azmat was the president of the Minority Community of H.D. Kote. He doesn't consider the social work that he does is important, "I'm just making sure that the public is getting what the government is giving," he says.

Tales of resistance

TANISHKA SODHI

H.D. Kote: Every time she walks into the forest to collect firewood, Kamla is reminded of her old school there, which she attended until class three.

Now, 50 years later, she lives in a hut in the Gendathur village in H.D. Kote, her 9 to 5 job feeding all the seven members of her household. Kamla's parents were moved out of the forest when she was a child. Her walks to collect firewood are now the only time she visits her old home.

Kamla's story is similar to that of many women living in H.D. Kote taluk, Mysore district. Stricken by tragedy—often caused by suicide of alcoholic husbands—the single women in this taluk are defying all odds to emerge as the breadwinners of their families.

Abandoned by her husband 14 years ago, Kamla had no choice but to find a way to support her family. The Rs 10,000 she earns a month is not enough to feed her daughter and her five kids, but they pull along, somehow.

"There's not enough kerosene to burn the lamp for the kids to study at night," said Kamla, who had to resort to taking electricity from nearby electric poles.

For 28-year-old Bindoo from N. Begur village, being an ASHA worker is only part of daily struggle.

Along with her family, she used to weave baskets using forest produce and sell them. Now, they are not allowed anywhere near the forest.

"Life has become tough since we are not allowed to make our baskets," she said.

The rest of her family members are daily wage workers—for them,



Kamala and Bindoo are among the women of H.D. Kote who defy all odds despite hardships | TANISHKA SODHI



no employment is permanent. With a fixed job and a salary of Rs 3,500 a month, Bindoo provides much of the support required.

Electricity in this village is irregular and the households receive water only once a week.

"Officials came and enquired about the state of toilets but never came back to build any," she said.

Bindoo's family was moved from the forest 25 years ago. To ensure that they stay away from the forest, the forest department provided them with gas too.

Her husband committed suicide a few years into their marriage, and her father regularly consumes alcohol.

Bindoo's daily life involves dealing with pregnant women and providing medicines and checkups to children and women.

She heard of this job through a friend, and received training for the same in Mysore, four years ago.

Manjula is only 40, but the tragedies in N. Begur have toughened her. Forcibly married off to an older man at the age of thirteen, Manjula's married life was a series

of unfortunate events.

Her husband passed away when she was fifteen and in those two years, they had two children.

"I was cheated into this marriage. He had a drinking problem and was cheating on me with another woman," she said.

In 1998, Manjula became part of the Swami Vivekananda organisation that provided her, along with 39 other women, with skill training.

She learned to make products like chikki and organic jaggery out of ragi. The organisation helps her market her produce directly, without any middleman involved.

Earlier, she would weave baskets. However now, the forest department has stopped them from accessing the forest, snatching them of their livelihood.

It is with money she earned from selling chikki and jaggery that she raised her two children. When her son, who studies in class 10th, met with an accident recently, she arranged Rs. 3 lakh for his treatment after a lot of borrowing and arranging.

SUKRITI VATS

N. Begur: On a scorching hot afternoon, 29-year old Savita sits in a small printing shop at the junction of the main roads in N. Begur village of H.D. Kote taluk, Mysore district.

Without even a fan to give her relief, Savita breaks out in a sweat, sitting under coloured paper flags that adorn her shop.

Savita is the only educated, English-speaking woman in N. Begur, who runs a shop. "I was the lucky one. Generally, women back in my village Matakare were forced to marry after completing school," she said half-smiling.

Savita, now a resident of N. Begur village, first came here 13 years ago after marrying a technician Rudra Kumar. She is the only woman in her village, who has been to college. Graduating with a business management degree, she was offered an accountant job in Matakare.



Savita in her printing shop at N. Begur | SUKRITI VATS

"I didn't take it because I was in love at that time. But I put it to use later after coming here by opening my own printing shop," she said.

"My father is illiterate himself, but he wanted all his children to be educated and get respectable jobs," she said.

Winning a scholarship at the age of ten, she was sent to an English-medium school in Chamrajanagar, 200 km away from her village.

She then enrolled herself in the Maharani College in Mysore to

pursue BBM.

Likewise, in N. Begur, Savita has turned out to be quite an entrepreneur selling all kinds of ornaments and hair accessories for the women in the village and doing well for her family. "I do part-time tailoring also, which I learned in skill development classes offered by NGOs in our district," she added. According to Savita, her desire to work with NGOs began from there and this made her join

Foundation for Educational Innovations in Asia (Fedina). In her role as the sponsorship coordinator, she helped with the rehabilitation of children who would drop out from their school.

"Apart from focusing on tribal education and community development, I organized camps for children involving cultural and sports activities," said Savita.

However, due to time constraints she had to leave Fedina, where she volunteered for almost three years. Nevertheless, Savita soon plans to join another NGO called Shri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development (SKDRDP).

Savita, wishes to work with their women empowerment wing called Sevaprathindhi to teach young women life skills that can help them find employment.

"Not everyone is lucky like me. That's why, I want to help empower girl children by persuading their parents to not marry them off early and let them study, and even go to college, if possible."

Dreaming big from a small village

GOKUL GK & ARCHITA RAGHU

Murband: Anitha from Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk is very different from most girls in her area. So is her father who, unlike most parents in the area, has supported his daughter's dreams.

Anitha is the first girl from Murband to pursue Civil Engineering at the Mysore University. The 19 year-old said "I chose engineering because of my father."

Her dream is to either pursue journalism or write the IAS exam. During her holidays, she helps her mother around the house. Her father is a farmer and grows cotton, ragi, and maize.

"But he does not let me help out in the farms, they want me to study," she said.

Anitha studied in a school at Kenchanahalli village. "Buses didn't come here so every day, I would walk to school one kilometre away," she said. When she went to Mysore to study, culture shock and homesickness hit but that soon subsided and she began loving the city.

"Mysore is the proper place to study," she said and her determination to study other subjects like journalism persists.

"My problem is the English language but I'm learning and will continue to learn," she said.

"We need to encourage students to keep studying," she said. When asked if anybody was pressuring her to discontinue college, she says there have been people from her area who have asked her why she hasn't gotten married yet.

"But I don't listen. I know exactly what I want to do and I will," she said. In her free time, Anitha loves to read novels and listen to Karnataka folk music.

"No matter what, I will definitely accomplish my dream," she smiled.

Many of the girls from Murband are married off immediately after the tenth standard. Some of my very brilliant friends were married off just because their parents could not afford their education," she said.

She feels that many students from the area are not getting enough opportunities to learn.



19-year old Anitha

Lack of teachers in H.D. Kote

GOKUL GK

H.D. Kote: Primary schools in H.D. Kote are facing a shortage of teachers for the past ten years. There are over 40 single teacher schools in the taluk, today.

In the Government primary school at Kalasur, H.D. Kote, one teacher who is also the principal of the school is teaching 26 children and managing official matters of the school.

Ravindran (46), the principal cum teacher, has been managing the school, all by himself, for more than five years. Even though the school recently got a guest teacher, Sushmita (23), the faculty is struggling to run the school.

The primary school has students from first standard to the sixth. First to third-grade kids are taught together in a single classroom. Fourth and fifth standard students are in a separate building, nearby.

"The principal has to travel frequently to the city for official purposes, and there is no one to teach one set of students," said Sushmita.

Whenever a parent comes to school to enquire about their kid's studies or a plumber comes to fix the school pipe, the teacher has to leave the students and attend to it.

"How can I complete the portions in time?" asks Sushmita.

Sushmita has to teach all the subjects including English and Kannada. "It's extra pressure on me," she adds.

For more than 30 high schools in the 398 villages in the H.D. Kote



Female students of a single teacher school during their extra-curricular activities | GOKUL GK

taluk, there are only five English language teachers.

According to S Sundar, Block Education Officer of the Taluk, many students now prefer English medium schools. "We are not able to provide seats to all of them because of a shortage in English teachers," he said.

This year, 30 students were admitted to one of the English medium schools through a lottery system.

"Many teachers don't prefer the H.D. Kote as it's a rural locality," said Sandhya, a mother of two primary school children.

Even as teachers' counselling is being held at the Department of Public Instruction, the number of teachers opting for transfers out of H.D. Kote taluk is high, compared to other taluks.

According to an assessment carried out by the NGO, DEED (De-

velopment through Education), 15 to 20 per cent of students have evinced interest in English medium schools.

Even the anganwadi in the Taluk face a shortage of staff. Rekha, an anganwadi teacher is managing two centres- one in Kalasur and one in Kenchanahalli. She has to travel to Kenchanahalli and back every day. "It's hard to keep up with the timings," she said.

Most of the schools don't have teachers for arts or even sports.

"There are many children who are interested in cricket, but they are not getting proper training," said Sushmita.

However, in a school in the Bidranahalli village in the Taluk, there are six teachers for 135 students. That is 22 pupils for every teacher. This is better than the national average of 24 pupils for every teacher.

Rise in dropouts, parental pressure

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: The number of students dropping out from schools in several villages in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysore district is rising mainly due to parental pressure and lack of transportation facilities.

In Murband village, Rakaiya Bhanu (18) said that, her parents forced her to drop out from school after standard 10. She had secured admission for standard 11 at Government High School, H.D. Kote. But her parents wanted her to stop studying and get married.

Nagina (21), another resident of Murband village, said, "In my family girls do not go to school and get educated. I am the only one to pass standard 10. After I dropped out from school my parents got me married and now my child is one year old. I have four sisters who are not being sent to school instead they are being taught how to do household chores."

Even the boys are unable to study further because their parents don't have the money.

Sadiq Pasha (22) and Siddique Pasha (18) are two brothers from Murband village who stopped going to school due to poverty in their family. Sadiq left school after standard 10 and Siddique left school after standard 6. Their father is an alcoholic and does not go to work. This forced the two brothers to stop studies and work in farms to support their family.

"If we go to school our house will not run. Even if we want to study we cannot," said Sadiq.

Sarojini (38) from Udbur village said that her son wanted to become a teacher but could not study because she and her husband could not afford to pay the fees.

She said that the panchayat only helped well-to-do people.

There are other problems affecting the children's education.

The children here cannot go to school because there is no transportation available from Udbur to Machhur, the nearest school.

There has been no electricity supply in the area after the electric post with the supply wires fell down in last year's flood. After 6 pm, wild elephants start coming to the village and therefore the children cannot sit and study outside.

Sumaiya (20) quit studies after standard 8 because the road condition in the village was worse and she had to travel 6 kilometers to catch a bus.

Priyanka (26) from N. Begur village said that she was forced to stop her studies the day she got her menstrual cycle. She studied till standard 8.

Lakshmi from D.B. Kuppe says that the female children do not go to school for five days when they are on their menstrual cycle. Also there are some who drop out because their parents do not approve of sending their daughters once they start menstruating.

A house built with sweat and mud



Bhagya single-handedly building a house to live in out of bamboo in Nagarhole forests | GOKUL GK

Labour over life

MARIAH DINS

Bheemanahalli Haadi: Ten year old Suchitra sat on her doorstep watching other kids of her age playing catch with a ball on the street. Trying not to make much of a conversation with the others, she slowly gets up and goes back into the house to finish her chores.

Suchitra, from Bheemanahalli Haadi, stopped going to school when she was in second standard. She has been going to work with her parents in the tobacco field nearby for daily wage for the past one year. She gets paid Rs 200 per day.

"Amma said don't go to school from tomorrow," says Suchitra with a look of grief on her face.

Her eyes went up looking at the villagers surrounding her, to the question if she liked going to school. Very quietly she said "yes".

Suchitra is not the only child who has been forced by parents to quit going to school and go to work. There are many others of her age in a similar situation.

Manjunath, Panchayat Development Officer, said that, "Every year 5 to 10 students drop out from school and go to work in fields. They get Rs 200 to Rs 500 per day including lunch. Therefore the parents do not show any interest in sending their children to school."

Manjunath added that even though the officials tried to convince the parents to send their chil-

dren back to school, only a few of them agreed. For the rest of them it was more money and that was important.

"The main reason why the community and parents force the children to go work and bring money home is because of poverty. There are people who cannot eat three meals a day. In such cases children are forced to quit school and earn for the family," said Manjunath.

Thayamma, a resident of that village, said "Who will bring us money if they go to school? We will get Rs 300 or Rs 200 extra if they go to work. With that we can fill our stomach everyday. We cannot afford to send these

kids to school."

According to Manjunath, the nearest school is two kilometres away from Bheemanahalli Haadi. The government is providing all facilities including breakfast, mid-day meals, two types of flavoured milk (chocolate and pista) and a basic school kit.

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A fun school in Gendathur

GOKUL GK

Gendathur: A government primary school in a tribal hamlet in Mysore district of Karnataka is focused on the holistic development of its students through, art, sports, and nutrition.

The school situated in the Gendathur tribal hamlet in the H.D. Kote taluk was established in 1981 as a lower primary school.

Apart from providing knowledge, it looks at the overall physical and mental development of the students. With the help of some NGOs and an annual government fund of just Rs 25,000, the school authorities manage to feed the children and nurture their artistic talent.

According to S Gokul, a teacher,

the students are given a "nutritious mid-day meal." They are also given milk, five days a week through a programme called 'ksheerabagya.' Of the five days, they get cardamom and chocolate flavoured milk on four days.

All the students belong to the Bedar tribal community, an indigenous Kannadiga community. The school has 151 students with 75 boys and 76 girls. The teachers arrange an annual art expo, where the students display their painting and models ranging from a simple house to a three feet PSLV rocket.

"Sometimes we would have to help them with these projects but most of them are done solely by the students," said Gokul.

English, Hindi and Kannada are

taught along with maths and science. "We are now finding it very hard to find Hindi teachers," said P Prakash, another teacher in the school.

The school arranges regular parent-teacher meeting.

"The teachers inform us about everything happening in the school," said Radha Devi, a mother of two school going children. But even with all these reforms, many teachers complain that the students don't end up in higher education.

"Most of them will get married after completing SSLC, some of them will go as agriculture labourers," said Gokul.

However, most students were interested in pursuing higher education and becoming professionals

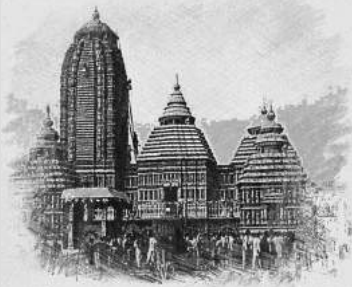
like doctors and lawyers. "I want to become a police officer," said Manoj, a student of the sixth standard. Teachers like Gokul and Prakash are of the opinion that there should be a strong campaign against child marriage, which is a major reason why students do not pursue higher education. "The former principal of the school was an active social worker and spread awareness regarding child marriage," said Jyothi an ex-student of the school who was married at 16.

Five children—three girls and two boys—from the village have gotten admission into different colleges, last year.

"School is not boring, it's always fun with games and activities," said Sneha, a student.



A PSLV rocket model by students | GOKUL GK



Swachh Bharat a far cry

Toilets few and far between New house, no loo

SHRIJA GANGULY

Brahmagiri/Satyabadi: With toilets constructed here and there, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has failed to make a mark in Fani-affected villages in these blocks that have to battle discrimination, harassment, and financial burden. Three months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared rural India open defecation-free, villagers of Biswanthpur continue to ease themselves in the open.

Baidyanath Sahu said, "We have never had toilets. Even before Fani. People did come along with our sarpanch and took our names and signatures. We were told that toilets will be built. Nothing happened after that."

Even a non-governmental organization working with the villagers, SWAD, has not carried out any programme of awareness of the Swachh Bharat Mission, says he. Kamala, a mother of three, said, "Even if we did have toilets, who would maintain them? It is tough for us to even afford two square meals a day, let alone a toilet."

At Gola village, the problem is harassment. A group of women burst into laughter on hearing a giggling Mamuni, who, while drawing water, said: "Once my friends and I were defecating on a nearby field when a man came from behind and hit me in the back. Before we could even react, he and his friend fled on their bikes."



No toilet, only construction materials | SHRIJA GANGULY

Incidentally, the land used by the villagers for relieving themselves belongs to Khandayats – a local equivalent of Kshatriyas of Siyaara. This has become a bone of contention between them and the Harijan village.

Sebakpur and Pandhapokhari, on the contrary, have structures of toilets built within the compounds of their house. With a better financial standing as carpenters and with a compensation by way of cement, sand and bricks worth Rs 12,000, villagers of Sebakpur built toilets and septic tanks. But there's a catch – water supply.

Jaganatha Maharana, 63, said: "Now that we have begun building new houses we can't afford to spend on water supply. The septic tanks that they [government] built for us are so small that they tend to overflow at times. We have to clean it all ourselves. What is the use of having toilets if we have to clean our own excreta twice? We would

rather go out in the open."

Most of the toilets are either unused or used by two households that pool in money for water supply. Government toilets can be distinguished by asbestos roofs and a pair of glasses painted on their walls.

At Pandhapokhari, dependent on fishing and related business, Subhasini complained of unaffordability and lack of water supply. "They just built toilets for the sake of building them. [They] did not even ask us where we would like to have it, whether or not we have enough space. We need space for building our new houses and these [two] toilets stand in the way. Moreover, our houses will stink. No one wants that. They could have just given us cash."

As for menstrual health, women at Biswanthpur use cloth. The concept of using a sanitary napkin is still foreign, apart from being unaffordable for most.

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Pipili: Delays and irregularities in disbursement of funds for the construction of pucca homes and toilets in Ward 7 here undercut Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of the country being open defecation-free.

Households that completed constructing homes funded under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, have not received their last instalment.

This even as the ward is yet to be surveyed or sanctioned toilet grants under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

Ruksana Biwi (30), a beneficiary of the housing scheme who finished the construction on Sahi Masjid Road two months ago, says Rs 40,000 is still to be released to her, an amount with which she planned to fund a toilet with functional water supply.

"We received no separate funds for toilets under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, so we were waiting for the money to build the same."

Another woman in the neighbourhood, Amina Biwi (60), said the Rs 20,000 due to her after she completed her house was still not paid. Nor does she have a toilet, and like several other women facing her plight in the ward, resort to defecation on a field near a canal one kilometre away.

"We get teased and harassed by the people who live near the field. It is unfair and disgusting that there are people here who have multiple toilets and storeys in their homes



Canal? No, it's a defecation spot | ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

while we have to relieve ourselves in the open." Both women said they were tired of repeated requests made to their ward member, who kept assuring them money would come soon. Being a beneficiary of one Centrally sponsored scheme (housing) whilst being excluded from the other, has resulted in a loss of dignity for women of the largely Muslim-dominated neighbourhood.

Areas demarcated for construction of toilets in homes lie empty or have incomplete structures. For months, there has been no sign of functional drainage pipes and latrines being put in place.

Penury forces girls to drop out; pads mostly out of reach

MEGHA MALLICK

Brahmagiri: Subhasmita Bhoi, 18, of Mangala Sahi village dropped out two years ago after completing Standard X because her family does not have the means for her to continue her studies.

At Talamala, Parvati Sau, for the same reason, has been staying home after passing Standard X examination last year though she is keen on pursuing her studies.

These are common stories heard in poverty-hit families in this block.

Parvati's mother, Ranjalata says, "We do not have enough money to feed ourselves, where will we get money for education?" Eight months after Fani ravage, the family has not received a single penny from the government to rebuild its houses, she complains.

Puja Ghatia, 16, of the same village has ended her school career to take care of her younger siblings. She does all household work as well.

None of these girls are engaged in any paying work, such as sewing or tailoring. Arun, one of Puja's neighbours, says, "There is no work other than farming in this village. You cannot find any other livelihood options. What will the girl do?"

Let alone barriers to education, these girls are putting up with problems of personal hygiene.

At Mangala Sahi, women are not using sanitary pads during



Fani-damaged toilets | MEGHA MALLICK

menstruation. After the cyclone, some NGOs and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers distributed sanitary napkins, two packets per household. But, the residents say, these were not enough. They reverted to using cloth when these were exhausted. A use-and-wash cycle has become the order of the day, for lack of any further supply of sanitary napkins, the women say.

Next, open defecation. As the cyclone damaged toilets, built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the village is back to the age-old practice. Some people have created plastic shacks for women to use. No new toilet has been built.

Dilapidated toilets are a common sight across Fani-hit villages.

Kids sing and dance to beat trauma

Anganwadi becomes child family shelter to help children post Fani



Putting behind Fani memories, children have a happy time here.

| SHRUTI SUNDAR RAY

AATREYEE DHAR

Krushnaprasad: A building at Arakhakuda village here reverberates with nursery rhymes recited in Odia by 47 children. It's a typical anganwadi curriculum, except that the classes are held in a Child Family Shelter (CFS).

It's a transitional arrangement meant to build resilience in and support the well-being of children post-cyclone Fani through activities such as playing, drawing, painting and story-telling designed in harmony with the local milieu. This space is provided by the Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), an NGO working to improve the lives of the tribal, rural and urban poor in Orissa.

CFS facilitators, drawn from local communities and appointed by CYSD, are provided training in child psychology to engage children in creative activities to help reduce their trauma. "The CFS training course will operate for three-four months from January," says Bipin Kumar Behera, who is a resident of the village.

At Arakhakuda, those playing the role of teachers are anganwadi workers Jayanti and Rulilakshmi Behera, and CFS facilitator Mili Behera.

Students aged 3-5 display physical and motor skills enthusiastically, doing acts asked of them by their teachers such as physical education exercises, walking like an old woman, ploughing a field like a farmer,

churning curd and grinding batter for pitha (a type of rice cake made in Odisha) like the womenfolk do in their families.

Five-year-old Ankit Behera, who attends the sessions daily, says, "Dancing is my favourite activity". Unlike most of the boys in the class, Sairam Behera prefers listening to pronunciation of alphabets in Odia to playing bat-and-ball games.

It's not just about following preschool teaching practices. The anganwadi lunch for the children includes plain rice and dal as per the weekly midday meal calendar. The menus vary between rice-dal and rice with either a mixed vegetable or egg curry depending on the day of the week. Breakfast comprises biscuits, roasted moong

dal and sphere-shaped sweets made of almonds and puffed rice.

One problem at the CFS: With no proper toilet in the area, children defecate on the open ground in front of the building. "When the children want to take a leak, they raise their hands. Either another teacher or I accompany the children with a bucket of water to the ground," says Jayanti Behera.

According to the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), an anganwadi worker is trained in nutrition and immunization, providing supplementary health care to adolescent girls and pregnant women. While the anganwadi workers are paid Rs 7,500, the CFS facilitators get Rs 4,000 every month from CYSD.

Boatmen turn fishermen but earnings poor

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Krushnaprasad: Nandu Kumar Malik is giving the final touches of repair to his motorboat when a whiff of wind blows sawdust on this face. "Never an off-season for strong air to blow onto one's face in Odisha." The 25-year-old drops his tools.

It is, however, an off-season for both tourism and fishing in the State. Nandu from Mirzapur, and others like him - from the villages adjoining the Chilika Lake - depend on the Mirzapur Dolphin Centre for employment. A day there would involve a trip taking tourists to areas with dolphins, which would be at least 8 hours of sailing. After the cyclone hit the State in April/May last year, their means of earning Rs 150 a day crashed to a sudden halt, as boats were fully damaged, the lake turned salty, killing fishing prospects, and tourist inflow saw a significant decline.

"We were left with nothing after Fani," Nandu says, pointing to a pile of damaged boats in the area. "With no form of compensation for our boat, we are struggling to pay back Rs 50,000 that some of us arranged as a collateral-free loan from the Government. I have, therefore, been forced to turn to full-time fishing from a part-timer."

Incidentally, the little money they did get (Rs 10,000) in a combo of Fani relief for boats and houses, was deposited in bank accounts that are now "blocked" at the behest of the District Collector of Puri on account of alleged irregularities by ward members and block officials. The Collector, Balwant Singh, said there was no policy or scheme currently underway to address the slump in fish selling post-Fani.

Brothers Gandarbha and Hemakanta Malik from Parbatipur echo the magnitude of these issues. "Even during peak season, we would get a maximum of only five trips a month individually. Now even that is gone after Fani," says 35-year-old Gandarbha. His elder sibling adds that income from fishing is irregular even now, 8 months after the cyclone, and is just Rs. 5000 a month, not enough for diesel and boat maintenance cost. All three fishermen said that their catch is sold only to businessmen

(Mahajanias), who sell it in markets.

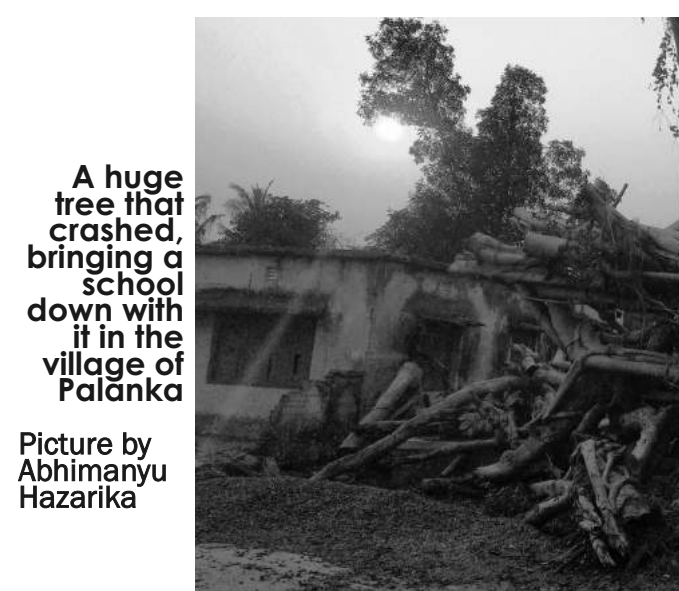
FALLEN PIECES KEEP NIGHTMARE ALIVE

Fani-broken infrastructure across villages, awaiting repair funds



Damaged electricity poles right outside the Panasapada electricity office in the Brahmagiri block

Picture by Shrija Ganguly



A huge tree that crashed, bringing a school down with it in the village of Palanka

Picture by Abhimanyu Hazarika



A tubewell still out of action in the village of Talamala

Picture by Kanishka Bhat

Painter gets Rs 2 lakh from a foreign art-enthusiast fan

KANISHKA BIRAT

Raghubir: Fifty-year-old Gandadhar Maharona had sent photos of his toilet and portions of his broken house, damaged during the Fani cyclone, to his friend Dhundya Saheb in London over Whatsapp. He immediately received an amount of Rs 2 lakhs directly into his bank account.

Maharona is a renowned national awardee pattachitra painter who has been into this art

form for the last 30 years. It is because of painters like him that Raghubir is known as a heritage village in Odisha.

Saheb is a former client of Maharona and business man residing in London. They came in contact with each other when Maharona had gone to the UK in 2001, and in 2003 at an art exhibition organised by the Indian Embassy in London. Since then, Saheb has been regularly ordering pattachitra paintings from

Maharona. He donated the amount out of loyalty.

Maharona also got Rs. 10,000 for the same reason from another former client of his, 'Sooraj Singh', from Chennai.

Maharona has been working for KAARU, a New Delhi based architectural firm, for the last 20 years. He has been bringing glory not only to Odisha but also to the whole country. In an art exhibition in Thimphu, on behalf of India, 'Jeevan Chakra' made by him was

gifted to the then Queen of Bhutan in 2007.

Maharona is disappointed with the Government of India as he feels his guild is left to fend for itself in the end.

After some years he won't be able to teach classes due to old age. Thus, he won't be having any source of livelihood.

His family would only be left to survive on his savings alone, putting at risk his financial and familial stability post 'retirement'.

Stay put or face eviction

Landlords have warned Fani-hit villagers against building pukka houses

SHRIJA GANGULY

Puri : Landlords at Biswanathpur in Puri district have allegedly discouraged villagers from making pukka houses for themselves after Fani ravage, as a pre-condition for their continuing to stay on the owners' land.

This adds to the misery in the Satyabadi block, where the workforce of agricultural workers and construction labourers has been left unemployed. Although officials claim that all affected people have been compensated, people in the SC village say they have received nothing more than Rs 3,000, a "pittance" that is not enough to buy cement, sand and bricks for building new houses.

At Biswanathpur, with 150-160 households, the villagers are living in makeshift shelters, made of tarpaulin and plastics, right next to their ruined houses.

Due to surge of water and heavy rainfall that led to inundation, the new houses now stand on elevations of mud, supported by



Villagers trying to rebuild their houses after Fani | SHRIJA GANGULY

barks of coconut trees that fell during the cyclone.

However, the land on which these structures are put up belongs to a well known man in Puri and is managed by a relative. The land is not leased out to the villagers; hence, they do not have to pay rent.

After Fani, they were asked to leave the place on the grounds that there was nothing left there for them. However, upon insistence, the landlord let them stay there on condition that no proper houses be

built. There seven people share the same space as do their cattle and livestock.

The villagers say that in the absence of government efforts to clear agricultural land of fallen trees, they were forced to work as masons and daily wage labourers in other towns and villages.

Baidyanath Sahu, 70, said, "We don't have the money to afford two square meals. Where do you think we will be able to afford bricks, cement, and sand for our houses

from?"

No different is the situation at Gola that comes under the Panaspadha Gram Panchayat. Worse, unlike other villages, it does not have even a cyclone shelter. The nearest shelter is located in the next village, Khandaayat- the local equivalent of Kshatriyas- populated by Siyaara, who allegedly did not acknowledge the Harijan population at Gola.

During Fani these villagers sought shelter at a nearby uninhabited building. Asharani, member of a Self-Help Group, said, "After the cyclone subsided, most of the women and children stayed here for days on end," pointing to an elevated platform which, it seemed, could not accommodate more than 15 people.

"We did not receive anything from the Government. Only people with a roof did. We had nothing to show as evidence of a roof (here, a pukka house). People have built tents with plastics and bamboo sticks," she told a team of visiting reporters. In contrast, at Sebakpur,

a village of carpenters, two km from Dahikia, people own pukka houses made of cement and bricks, to government specifications..

But Meena Maharana, wife of a carpenter, said, "Our coconut cover is lost. Whatever we have, we use it for our personal use. Earlier, selling coconuts in the market would fetch us Rs 1,000 in three months. Now, even that income is gone. We have used the dried leaves of the fallen trees to cover our houses." Most of the asbestos roofs were either blown away by Fani or were drilled by the heavy rains. The houses now stand covered with tarpaulin, as they cannot afford a new roof.

The Panaspadha Electricity Office was destroyed in Fani due to strong winds. While new poles are installed, officials are waiting for the water to dry up to avoid accidents. District Collector, Balwant Singh said, "We lost three people during electricity restoration." Consequently, all the nine villages draw power from the Sunamuih station, leading to frequent cuts in power.

One size-fits-all policy in schools

Post Fani, no power, no toilets

MEGHA MALLICK

Rayapur: Nineteen students of classes 1-3 study in the same room at the Government Primary School of this village. Eleven other students in the school, in Standards IV and V, have separate classes.

Pratima Rani Jena, one of the three teachers of the school, says it is a big challenge to teach all five subjects—Odia, English, Maths, Science and Environmental Sciences—to all 19 students together. To Prabhat Kumar Jena, another teacher, this doesn't matter. He cites the Odisha government's education policy stipulating a student-teacher ratio of 25:1 even if the children are from different classes.

For the students also, there is a problem: learning all five subjects at one go. The teacher needs to make adjustments. Also, all

teachers need to teach all subjects as the government policy says that no separate teachers will be posted for different subjects up to Standard VIII.

As for infrastructure, electricity has not yet been restored in the school since Fani happened in May last year.

Nor has any toilet been built in the place of the ones destroyed by the cyclone, and the students have to resort to open defecation, behind the school building. Mercifully, there is one toilet for the physically handicapped.

The teachers say the School Improvement Grant Committee has been informed of the problems but no step has been taken.

Schools which have classes from 1-5 have received Rs 10,000 for repairs. But no separate investigations have been conducted to look into the state of physical infrastructure of the school.

Eight months on, discrimination dogs relief efforts

Caste divisions also play havoc in Satyabadi village

ARKATAPA BASU

Satyabadi: Fani knew no caste barriers when it struck every villager at Bidyadharpur in this block. But caste counts for restoration and relief, allege people.

The village itself is segregated along caste lines. Brahmins are very few, living in clusters of pukka houses, while. Bhois, belonging to a Scheduled Caste, are in kutcha dwellings made of mud, plastic and thatched roof on the outskirts of the village. Pradhans, a dominant OBC group, live in their own area in semi-pukka houses where a couple of rooms have concrete roof.

After the cyclone, almost every household was given a compensation of Rs 3000, 50 kg of rice and one sheet of tarpaulin. However, the money allotted under the State Disaster Response Force and the National Disaster Response Force for fully or severely damaged houses went to households which did not suffer severe damage.

"When we asked for it [compensation], we were told that money has stopped coming," says Lily Bhoi, whose family lost its livelihood. It was practising mushroom farming but after Fani cultivation of this crop has not been possible as the plant needs cooler temperature. Trees which provided a shade for mushroom farming were destroyed because of Fani.

Lily's husband, a coconut tree climber, has been robbed of his source of income. Adding to his distress, a Rs 11,000 compensation given by the government for destruction of coconut trees allegedly went to the Pradhan household, which owned a tree, and not to him. "If a 60-metre coconut tree falls, we will obviously feel the pain," says Lily.

Bhois are employed by Pradhans, who individually owned 1-2 acres of land, raising wheat, mushroom and coconut. However, after Fani, both sections are plagued by unemployment. The



SC area in Bidyadharpur recovering from Fani | ARKATAPA BASU

Bhois more so due to inaccessibility to entitlements.

Basnatamani Nayek, 70, a Pradhan, points to his roof made of asbestos, plastic and cloth. "The [original] roof started quivering violently and broke when Fani came. The roof of the toilet built by the government was [also] blown away."

Asked about the number of toilets built by the government under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,

Maagi Bhoi, Lily's sister-in-law, said only some houses in the village had the facility. Maggi said the sarpanch had taken all their names but when the list of beneficiaries of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was published, many households were left out. Some of them use toilets that are built in other households.

Others defecate in the open. "The fields are always open, anyone can go anytime," she said with a laugh.

You voted for BJP? Forget compensation

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Brahmagiri: Are you a supporter of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is dominating panchayat committees in this area? If yes, it is no surprise if you have been short-changed in disbursement of benefits and relief from the State government ruled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), say locals.

Subhash Chandra Jere (36), a BJP functionary for wards at and around Balanga village, told this reporter that he and several other farmers were excluded from the lists of beneficiaries. "Farmers here have not even received money under the PM-Kisan scheme. Only those who wear the party [BJD] affiliation on their sleeves stand a chance of making it to the lists. Not people like us who their workers know as not having voted for them."

These concerns were reflected when our team visited the house of 57-year-old Basant Pattnaik, who

was a coconut seller before Fani felled the trees on his yard. "There is definitely a political motive behind providing relief. I did not get anything despite our losing our family's only source of livelihood. The entire 1.5 acres of land on my yard was affected. Here only those who do politics get their due."

He added that his brother, Prashant Pattnaik (60), who was in government service, has been unable to get his family's name back on the ration card list owing to party differences.

In neighbouring Brahmagiri, villages under the panchayat complained of inconsistent rehabilitation for damage to houses. Prasanna Kumary Ray (49) alleged that only 10% of those who were actually affected received compensation for broken houses. "We fill the required forms and send the names to the sarpanch, and, where needed, to block officials as well. But to no avail. The surveyor they send took notes

but only those close to the ruling party in the State got houses."

Jere said the partisan treatment began during the campaign for the 2017 local body elections. "Mutton and booze were supplied to villagers to influence votes; those who did not take them were noted and, accordingly, we discovered our exclusion from the beneficiary lists, scheme after scheme."

Apart from Fani relief money, many in these villages are entitled to a house under the Awas Yojana, rations and Rs 6000 per year under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan scheme, all of whose implementation has been hit for partisan reasons, say locals. The elections to the local bodies and gram panchayats in the State were last held in February 2017, in which the BJP, from a negligible vote share earlier, emerged as the second largest party behind the BJD and well ahead of the Indian National Congress. Out of the 846 Zilla Parishad seats, the BJP won 297 up from 36 earlier.

FANI ROCKED THE BOAT



Balabhadrapur: Over 150 boats were destroyed in the village of Balabhadrapur when Cyclone Fani hit Puri on May 3, 2019. Even after eight months, debris can be seen strewn along the banks of Chilika. Severely damaged boats, stray bamboos and uprooted trees are a common sight. Efforts to rebuild the lives of the once thriving fishing communities can also be seen simultaneously. At right, a half finished boat is supported by bamboos in order to facilitate drive nails on its underside. A few feet away (below), salt encrusted nets have been put to dry. Once they are dry, salt is beaten out and they are used again.

| ARKATAPA BASU



Will Chilika fishing be the same again?

AATREYEE DHAR
ARKATAPA BASU

Krushnaprasad: Is fishing in the Fani-hit Chilika lake fading into nostalgia? A genuine fear among fishermen at nearby Satapada Bhoisahi village with 85 families in the Brahmagiri block.

As fishing activities suffered a setback with most of the boats and fishing equipment damaged by Fani, the fisherfolk recollect the times when their livelihood depended on the Chilika which had a healthy ecosystem with large fishery resources. Among five different types of traditional nets, barrier net (Khanda) is the most dominant practice here.

Khanda is made up of a long leader line with fish catching traps kept at fixed intervals. These traps are made up of High Density Polythene (HDP) nets called 'box nets'. Different mesh size nets are used to make traps depending on the target species.



Traditional methods of catching fish | AATREYEE DHAR

Sarat Chandra Bhoi (49), who hopes to resume fishing after his boats are repaired, says, "We take the boats early in the morning and set up the barrier nets in shallow areas of the Chilika. The next day, we go back to the location and find fish, prawns and crabs caught in the Khanda." Once caught in the box net, the target species cannot escape as the mesh size is small.

Before Fani struck, Sarat's catch

included tiger prawns, khainga (silver mullet fish) and kamda (catfish). In the nearby Balugaon market, khainga fetched him as much as Rs 100-Rs 150 per kg and tiger prawns Rs 600 per kg. He earned over Rs 500 Rs 1500 a day before the ingress of salt water, a consequence of Fani.

Among women in the village, the fishing practice was different. Chandrakalakandi, 50, gets off her

boat in shallow waters, bends down as she walks and picks fish by her hand and puts them in a wicker basket tied around her waist. The women also clean and dry the catch and sell it in nearby 'haata' (market).

Coming back to the uncertain present, Sarat hasn't received compensation for his damaged boat from the State government much like the rest of the fisherfolk whose applications have been "forgotten". Like everyone in the village, Sarat got only 50 kg rice, Rs 3000 and a polythene sheet.

Though the fishermen feel abandoned by the government, they won't abandon their damaged nets. The villagers are using them to strengthen damaged structures. The asbestos roof Sabir Khan's house (32) had flown off during Fani. His kutcha house is now covered with the tarpaulin given by the government. To prevent the sheet from being blown off by again, he used worn-out nets and a tree branch as a cushion.

From husk to rope, a deft job

AATREYEE DHAR
MEGHA MALLICK

Biswanathpur: On the pyol outside a thatched roof hut, Sanju Bhoi (40) showed a rope she made out of dried coconut husk. She is one among her family members engaged in this deft skill for supplementing livelihood at Biswanathpur village in the Mangalsahi block. In fact, she made a demo, converting coarse fibres into a fairly strong rope.

However, this source of income has dried up in the wake of Fani. As coconut trees were felled in their thousands, women in the village are buying over 100 pieces of ripe coconut husk for Rs 200 from a godown nearby.

For making one rope, four pieces of coconut husk are required. The husks are dried, then soaked in water for one or two days until they turn black and pulpy. This is beaten with a mallet to separate the fibres which are rolled into a rope.

The women take around 3 hours to make one rope. Depending on the requirement, they roll 1-3 ropes a day.

"Businessmen come to collect the ropes after 5 days of processing. They pay around Rs 20 per rope

and sell it to a coconut-based factory in the Sakhigopal area," says Basanti Bhoi (30), a resident.

But Sanju had no luck with Fani relief. Unlike the rest of her community, she couldn't get a Rs 95,000-compensation announced by the State Government for completely damaged houses. "Going to the block office and repeatedly asking for my entitlement didn't work."

Brahmins own the land in these villages, and the 'lower caste' people pluck coconuts. Sarath Bhoi, 52, says he climbs at least 20 trees every day and is paid Rs 250-300. Not being aware of government concessions, he has to pay Rs.24000 a year for his son's technical diploma course.



Three ropes a day for Sanju Bhoi | MEGHA MALLICK

A tribal way of life



TANISHKA SODHI

Balle: Deprived of basic amenities, everyday life is a struggle for the tribals living in the hamlets of Nagarhole forest in H.D. Kote. Some have been provided with Aadhar cards, but still live in *kaccha* houses with no electricity. Food is cooked by burning firewood collected from the forest. Bathrooms are small spaces with cloth wrapped around wooden sticks (right). There is the threat of being attacked by wild animals. The houses may be covered with dirt, but there still exists the tradition of removing footwear outside before entering.

Child love marriages is the new radical change

SAMEER KULKARNI

Balle: The elders in Balle hamlet inside the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve had gathered under one roof. Ammu, 15, and Ganesh, 19, had returned from their weeklong escapade in the forest. They had eloped after falling in love and now, they had come back to talk marriage with their parents.

If a girl from the tribal hamlet even goes across the road to another village, she is considered married off, said Shivaraj, Ganesh's older brother, who stood outside the hut.

In between loud arguments, Ganesh came out,

"There is no money among families here. They cannot afford to take the boy and the girl to wedding halls, invite people and feed them and celebrate. So the girls run away with the boys into the forest. It is an escape for them." - Shivaraj

visibly disappointed, and aggressively walked towards the forest. "You think you have become a man now!" the older brother yelled, his voice echoing in the silence of the woods.

The boy's parents had rejected Ammu saying she is too young.

Balle has about 30-40 landless households with people who do agricultural labour for a living. The hamlet is untouched by any sign of modernity, with no electricity, roads, or pakka houses. The only sign of these people moving with the times are the empty 90ml whiskey sachets scattered here and there.

However, a ten-minute walk uphill, there is a primary school where the children can study up to sixth grade. But for further studies, they have to travel outside the reserve.

However, most girls stop studying after their sixth grade and keep themselves engaged in domestic work.

According to Shivaraj, after the girls finish their schooling, they do some menial work like cooking and washing vessels. They meet some boy and fall in love.

"There is no money among families here. They cannot afford to take the boy and the girl to wedding halls, invite people and feed them and celebrate. So the girls run away with the boys into the forest. It is an escape for them," he said.

What happens when they go into the forests? The couple's friend, who also goes by the name Ganesh, said some of their friends in the area already know about the "plan". These people supply food, clothes, and other necessities discreetly without the parents' knowledge.

"They know their way around the forest," he added.

What happens when they come back?

Shivaraj said that generally girls are too young to get married, so the boy's parents refuse to accept them. "Once they are in love, they are stubborn, so they part ways with their family and start one of their own," he said.

The couples get married despite the opposition from their families, but often they have to fend for themselves without support from the elders.

The newly-wed couples also have challenges like housing and getting a ration card, which gives them access to food and other facilities from the government.

"It is difficult to get a ration card once you are married," said Shivaraj, who is newly married. While child marriage was the norm for several generations, child love marriages are the standard now.

Caught between a well and a pond

Poor quality of water blamed for stomach ulcers, skin diseases

SHRIJA GANGULY

Puri: Lack of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and hospitals in villages in Puri district here has resulted in incorrect diagnosis of skin diseases among individuals, thereby, affecting their employment prospects.

In Gola, 16 people have suffered from stomach ulcers so far and the villagers blame it on the quality of water from the only well located in the village.

In Sebakpur village, people draw water from a bore well, both for consumption and other uses. Cases of skin diseases emerged after Fani led to stagnation of saline water that seeped into the ground.

Consequently, water is boiled before consumption.

Meena Maharana, a carpenter's

wife from Sebakpur, said, "While boiling water and even afterwards, a layer of white gets formed on top. It is due to high levels of salt and iron content in water."

Sanket is 14 years old and has not been going to school for the last two months now. His mother explained, "He faces a lot of embarrassment due to the itching and the irritation on his skin. His friends made fun of him."

Sanket's entire family suffered from a skin disease right after Fani. Unaware of the disease, they used certain ointments as prescribed by volunteers who had set up a medical camp. All of them were given the same ointment to use. While it worked for the others, the situation worsened for Sanket who developed rashes all over his body.

His mother said, "He can hardly



Sanket's hand | SHRIJA GANGULY

step out of the house during the day. It is still better in winters. We are worried for the summers and monsoon when the rashes would get worse. Moreover, we have stopped bathing with water from the bore well. Instead, we go to the nearby pond. Although the water is saline, it is the only alternative we are left with."

The water from the pond, according to Sanket's mother, has not improved her son's condition. The ointments are their only resort, despite being unaffordable.

Their only access to medical treatment is either through the medical camps set up by Sham Hospital in Bhubaneswar or through Girija Medicine Store in the next village, Dahikia.

Twenty-one-year-old Arjun's state is worse as his skin ailment has left him unemployed due to his frequent breathing and digestion issues.

Apart from health, nutrition levels remain relatively low among the villagers who can buy only the poor quality kotal rice sold at ration shops at Rs 2 a kg. The good quality usuna rice costs Rs 30 a kg. Puri Collector Balwant Singh

said, "Fifty kilograms of rice and a cash compensation of Rs 3000 were distributed to each affected family."

The only ration shop in the area provides 5 kilograms of rice per member in a family per month. However, the rice gets over by the first half of the month. They have to buy rice from elsewhere for a higher price.

Bhabanimoni, a 42-year-old villager from Biswanathpur has five stomachs to feed and only one pair of working hands which belong to her husband who is working as a mason in nearby villages.

She said, "There are times when we cannot afford three square meals a day. To compensate for a filling dinner, we eat atta with water and sugar for lunch."

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: Ravi dreamt of becoming a fritter-seller to earn a living. Setting his bajji stall along the main road outside Kuyanvadi village where he lived, he earned a decent income to sustain his family. His prosperity was, however, short-lived.

When the word spread that Ravi belonged to the Kudavar caste (SC), people stopped buying from him. His business came to an abrupt halt. He tried moving his cart farther but his caste caught up with him.

People would ask him, "Why do you Kudavars do our work? Do you ever see us going into the gutters, sweeping or beating the drum as you do?"

Despite the government banning manual scavenging in 1998, the community that was engaged in the profession earlier still faces discrimination. Jobs such as those of typists or clerks for which the Kudavars are eligible on the basis of reservation are given to the OBC candidates on the sly. As the upper castes say they cannot stand to have a Kudavar work with them as equals, they are given only sweeper jobs.

R. Rajamanickam, an activist working for the sweepers, says, "Even though manual scavenging is gone, the Kudavars are confined to cleaning and sweeping." He claims that despite protests and complaints to the government, nothing has been done.

"Even in self-help groups, Kudavar women make sanitary pads or bleaching powder," he says, adding that even though the activity itself is banned, the upper castes can only think of them as sweepers and cleaners.



Ravi's Fritter stall | VALLARI SANZGIRI

In municipal offices, most of the sweepers are Kudavars.

"Sweepers from OBCs are assigned desk jobs," claims Rajamanickam.

When officers of the National Commission of Sanitation Workers come for inspection, the sweepers are trained to answer them and are not allowed to speak to them directly.

Many of them are employed on a contract-basis and get a meagre Rs. 6500, that too only by the 28th of every month. Money is deducted from their salaries, presumably for health benefits, which they do not get.

"Even in rape cases, an FIR is not registered by the police unless people come to the streets," says Rajamanickam.

Abused and driven to a corner, a villager converted to Islam. However, when he entered a barber's shop, the barber refused to cut his hair as he knew of his caste.

The villagers thus resort to hiding their identity, like Ravi has done. He has leased a small hotel near his house. He has appointed a Muslim to pretend to own the place.

For this, he pays the man Rs. 1,500 per day. Ravi stands outside his shop, serving, cleaning and sweeping, fearing the day someone will find out that he is the real owner of the shop.

For fishermen, there's a catch in the coal jetty

RITUPARNA PALIT

Thoothukudi: Romil, 51, who has been fishing in the waters of the Bay of Bengal since the age of 16 and catching sardines for a good return from the Alanthalai market, now returns home empty-handed on most days.

"They are feasting on our lives," sighed Romil, pointing to coal jetty work on the Kallamozhi coast, around 5 km from Udangudi.

The captive project, stretching up to eight nautical miles was proposed as the most economical way to ferry coal to the Supercritical Thermal Power Project, Udangudi Stage I. ITD Cementation India Limited, that won the contract, started work in September 2018.

The Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation stated in a report that the coal jetty worth Rs 1902.87 crores would directly employ 550 persons. The thermal power plant is expected to improve power availability in the state, TANGEDCO mentioned.

The Hindu reported a human chain protest by 300 women on the Alanthalai coast and around 350 boats picketed the construction area at Kallamozhi. Several protests followed in vain.

Danabalan Fernandez, Village Committee head, said, "Fishing is the only occupation for our entire village of 650 families. There is no other source of income."

Romil, who earned around Rs 1000, sometimes even Rs 5000 per day, now struggles to make Rs 500.



Fishermen forced to hire tractors | RITUPARNA PALIT

He said, "Earlier, travelling anywhere between one and 15 kms into the sea assured us of a good catch. We are now forced to travel up to 30 km to look for a catch and end up spending more on fuel. We, however, can't cross the jetty."

Furthermore, noise and water pollution from drilling work have harmed the seabed. The fish's nesting grounds now lie broken and are getting covered in concrete, said Rev. Fr. M. Jayakumar, head

priest at the Alanthalai Sacred Heart Church.

The Alanthalai fishermen who have practised only net fishing for centuries, might have to start looking for other techniques like hook fishing. Their nets often get torn after getting stuck under the jetty due to high current.

"We are paid a minimal compensation for our torn nets, but repairing nets or getting new ones within a short time isn't easy," Romil said, adding, "When huge ships restrict us from moving this deep into the sea, the fear of small boats running into them looms large."

The coal jetty construction has also worsened coastal erosion. Sea water has intruded into the village, turning shores steeper.

"The location of the jetty, poses a danger of sea intrusion. Half of the village's palm trees have already been damaged," said Jayakumar.

"We now spend Rs 100-150 rupees on tractors to pull boats out of the sea," said Tendulkar, a boat owner. The shallow water has come nearer, hardly leaving space to keep boats, he added.

Jayakumar said after several meetings with District Collector Sandeep Nanduri, a proposal for building groynes at a cost of Rs 48 crore was sent to the government in early 2019.

More than half a year on, the work hasn't started. "All we have now is our village. The whole village will suffer if they don't start building the groynes immediately," said Fernandez.

Standing up for the tribal school students

PHURPA LHAMO

Vellore: When classes end in the Government Tribal Residential Middle School (GTRMS) at Jamuna Marathur in the Jawadhu Hills, Vellore, students stack their books in a corner. They then sweep the floor, walk barefoot in the room and lay their sheets for a goodnight's sleep. When dawn breaks, the sheets go away and notebooks return.

This routine continues today for about 420 tribal students coming from nearby villages to the school.

In GTRMS, the classroom doors have pictures of Ambedkar, Marx, and Thiruvalluvar.

When the school was first instituted in 2014, Mahalakshmi, a teacher, visited individual homes of the community encouraging the parents to enrol their children.

"Before the school was built, Mahalakshmi gathered students and taught them under trees," said V Jaya Balan, a teacher.

When GTRMS started, the school had less than 50 students. The school now has about 420 students.

"We personally visit the families and convince them to have their child admitted in the school. Of about five students, four would listen," he added.

Lack of interest in education and financial constraints are the major reasons for students dropping out.

The school occasionally organises campaigns, and takes the students for a sports meet.

Jaya Balan said that folk dance unique to the tribal community is taught in the school.

"Kabaddi is popular in the school. More than academic

education, we try to see the student's requirement," he said.

To keep these events going in the school, the teachers seek funds through an official Facebook page.

Students of the school come from villages upto 40 km away. The Tamil Nadu government scheme to subsidise bus fares for the students doesn't reach the community.

"That is why some of our students are forced to stay in the school," Balan said.

"I had to ask for money from my parents because I wasn't being paid.

I also needed to invest in school materials such as books for the students," he said.

Jaya Balan alleged the proprietor had misused school funds. He had complained to the chief district education officer of Vellore against the proprietor.

"The parents were supportive of my decision. Parents of all the 30 students came out to support me when the proprietor threatened me," Balan said.

Today, he is paid Rs 10,000 for working at the GTRMS through sponsors of the school.



Jaya Balan along with his students | PHURPA LHAMO

Teaching kids the moves

Chess helps concentration, says ex-Grandmaster

SRINJOY SANYAL

Machilipatnam: Chess is not just a two-player strategy board game or a hobby. "It helps improve concentration, maintain calm and gain some extra energy," says former Grandmaster N.Sridhar, who wants to spread this message through his chess academy in this town.

The 44-year-old said his parents and acquaintances failed to realise the underlying virtues of playing the game. Learning from experience, Sridhar has trained his children in a certain way, so much so that his son can now play blindfolded. His grades kept improving, along with a growing urge to play the game amid examination preparations.

"Cricket and football have much more viewership than chess," regrets Sridhar. What works against chess is that neither the government nor any private firm is willing to invest in it. "Worse is the lack of patience and awareness among the youth today," says Sridhar.

Though muscular dystrophy, with which he was born, cut short his playing career, Sridhar boasts the highest Elo rating of 1400. His undiminished love for the game has now transformed him into a professional coach.

In the Pooja Chess Academy, which he set up in his house at Srinivas Nagar Colony in 2016, enrolment is waxing and waning over the years. There are six internationally rated players among the current crop of 15.

While the normal course is four



The former Grandmaster at his academy | SRINJOY SANYAL

days per week, the rated players come for practice every day.

Asked about the daily schedule, Sridhar says he makes his students solve six to eight puzzles of various levels, before making them practise the three formats - Rapid, Blitz and Classical. He plays with the rated players for five minutes every day, while letting the others play among themselves before correcting their mistakes. The former Andhra Pradesh champion conducts three digital classes every month for students to watch clippings of some of the greats of the game.

Sridhar, an admirer of Viswanathan Anand, wants his students to accomplish what he wanted to but was left hard done by. Apart from collecting newspaper clippings of

his students' achievements, he is on a WhatsApp group where he keeps a meticulous check on his students and keeps them abreast of upcoming events.

"Whenever they go for tournaments, I follow their performances on chessresults.com and discuss entire games including mistakes they might have had committed," says Sridhar, smiling. Students' achievements enhance his satisfaction.

At the same time, Sridhar complains of children attending coaching for "time-pass". "Game is game. Study is study. The former assists the latter." This is what he tries to make parents, who want their children to miss [chess] classes during exams, understand.

"Last summer, I had a total of 45-50 students divided into three batches. But I was left with only 15 by the end of the summer vacation," he said. Feeling like the "king" on a chess board, powerful but can't move around much, Sridhar's only dream is to see the number of chess players in Machilipatnam surge from four at the time he was playing to at least 10 times now.

If he were to have administrative and political powers, Sridhar would make chess compulsory in schools all over the country and encourage children to play the game at least for 30 minutes every day.

As if endorsing his view, certain schools in Chennai have introduced chess. The city has produced the world's fourth and second-youngest Grandmasters in Gukesh D and R Praggnanandhaa.

A fading tradition in Chinnalapatti



NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: Chinnalapatti is a village in Dindigul renowned for its lustrous sarees, called poor man's silk. Weaving Chinnalapatti sarees was once a lucrative of businesses. Nowadays with the introduction of new material like Kora silk, the industry has taken a big hit.

Sulochana, 64, (right) is a saree weaver from Chinnalapatti.

The saree weavers of Chinnalapatti are all past their fifties and are the last generation of workers. No one from the next generation has learnt the trade from them.

Weaving Chinnalapatti Sarees might very soon become an extinct art and business.



Students at the Arakhakuda village school run by the Odisha Government | AATREYEE DHAR

Struggling to keep up with standards

AATREYEE DHAR

Krushnaprasad: Lack of teachers and inadequate space plague the government-run school in Arakhakuda village struggling to live up to the minimum standards of a public education system.

The Arakhakuda U.G.U.P. School acquired a cyclone shelter beside a playground to start teaching for the ninth and tenth standard last year. Before that, the villagers sent their kids to schools located in other villages at least 3 km away.

The government sends in a part-time teacher to attend to the combined two classes. Yet, his presence is unreliable, leaving the school committee to choose volunteers from unemployed teachers in the village to help children complete their education till the tenth standard.

Balram Behera is one such educator who fills in for the guest faculty and takes private coaching classes for students in the evening.

As opposed to the 35:1 pupil-teacher ratio under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the school has one teacher for 120 students.

"The school has to do with 12 teachers for 620 students from first to tenth standard for now, which is cumbersome when there are over 10 subjects to teach in each class," says 56-year-old Chakrapani Behera, who is the headmaster.

Kanhaacharan Behera, who teaches Science, Maths, English and Oriya to students of seventh and eighth standards, says the dropout rate is around 50 per cent.

He adds, "Out of 49 students who enrolled for the matriculation exam in 2019, only 32 students

filled the forms." Most of the boys drop out when they reach tenth grade to work as fishermen whereas the girls end up outsourcing boys in overall performance.

Mama Behera, who studies in the seventh standard aspires to be a teacher after completing her education.

The school turns into a space for Balram's private coaching classes as dusk closes in. Waiting for the power to be back, he explains how he runs his coaching centre.

Initially, the fundamentals of the students are strengthened until the fifth standard. If their basics are clear, they are taught from the sixth standard according to the books recommended by the State government. He prepares the smarter students for the government-sponsored scholarship programmes such as the Pathani Samanta Mathematics Talent Scholarship Scheme and the Navodaya Vidyalaya Scholarship.

Pathani Samanta Mathematics Talent Scholarship Scheme identifies meritorious students from government schools and provides scholarship to the qualifying students for their further studies.

On the other hand, the Navodaya Vidyalaya Scholarship funds the qualifying student in the fifth standard till he completes his 12th standard in the Navodaya Ucha Vidyalaya.

Balram says one of his girl students qualifying for the Navodaya Scholarship was forbidden by her parents from pursuing further education in Konark.

"For the parents here, their daughters staying at home is more important than her career", he explains.

'Lock-city' loses the key to the future?

ANJALY RAJ & CHARUDATT PRABHU

Dindigul: Once a booming lock industry hub, Dindigul no longer enjoys that status but it is still called the 'Lock City'.

First, the blacksmiths of Aligarh and Rajapalayam copied Dindigul locks and sold them at a lesser price. Then the machine-made locks ensured the famous handmade Dindigul lock market dwindled.

Today, four retired employees work in the tin-roofed workshop at the Lock Workers Industrial Co-operative Society.

"Some three decades back, this place [workshop] used to buzz with 50-60 employees," said Nigitan (62), who is a third-generation lock-maker.

"If we [retired employees] sit at home, the lock making art will become extinct," he added. His children, he said, "are into other professions, and little do they know about making locks."

To revive this market, Venkatachalam, the in-charge of the factory said, "If the State



Nigitan and bespectacled Karpanna still at it | CHARUDATT PRABHU



Government says they will only use Dindigul locks for all their purposes, our factories will get back their glory."

The society once regularly used to receive orders from temples, banks, dams, Government offices, and the department of Railways. "Last year," Nigitan said, "the Public Welfare Department gave orders for 857 locks but due to lack of workforce, we couldn't meet the deadline."

"There was a time when in and around Dindigul, there used to be hundreds of lock-making units in villages. That is because the resources were easily available," he observed.

Nigitan said, "The machine-made locks are irreversible. If the key is lost, one has to break the lock. Whereas in handmade locks, one can break it open for repair, and we still issue a new key."

Graduates but no jobs

APOORVA SUDHAKAR

Thillaiyadi: Every other household in Thillaiyadi in Nagapattinam district has one problem in common - unemployment among educated youth.

Selvanazhagi, a B.Com graduate, works an eight-hour shift at the Jio manufacturing unit in Chennai for Rs. 10,000 a month. Her job is to check the quality of mobile phones. "There are many graduates here who work for low salaries or do no work at all. The village has no job opportunities related to our area of study," she says.

Indeed, most graduates in Thillaiyadi end up as agricultural labourers or masons. Some migrate to neighbouring States or Gulf countries and do the same job for a better pay.

Unemployment here is not just about the government. There is a social pattern in the village. Women, many of whom studied nursing, worked for a few years and stopped working after they got married. They turned to agriculture labour or stayed at home. Women get Rs 200 a day for farm labour while men get between Rs 400 and Rs 500.

Sophia Rani, Selvanazhagi's neighbour, studied teacher training and is now a home-maker. She says, "We cannot move in search of jobs because we look after our children. Even if there are jobs, the salaries aren't enough. Some schools hire teachers for Rs. 2500-3000 a month."

In some families, men do not go to work. The woman runs the family on her farm labour income, money from MNREGS and loans. "The educated do not get suitable jobs. There are those who earn just enough to drink. If we don't give them money to buy fish to eat with their drink, they beat us up," says Sagila, a farm labourer.

"There are no companies in the vicinity. One company can provide jobs for at least 50-100 people. We voted for our MLA because we were promised jobs. I guess all the votes went in vain," she adds.

But young boys do not seem to understand the gravity of the problem. Prabhu, from Kattuchery's Samathuvapuram, a diploma holder, jokes about not having jobs. He says, "We are VIPs. *Vela illa pasangal* (We are jobless). It is a jolly world out here anyway."

His sister disagrees, "One cannot always rely on parents to provide for their children. This colony alone has around 20 unemployed youth and their parents struggle to make ends meet."

"Our problems do not end with getting a job and saving money. We have to marry our girls off for which we need to give the groom's family gold, money and everything to start a household," she adds.

G. Usharani, Principal of the Panchayat Union Middle School, says, "The young boys here live in a comfort zone. They are too used to this culture and do not want to go out to cities in search of jobs."



Ajay Behara not catching much in the Chilika lake | ARKATAPA BASU

Fani made it worse for them

ARKATAPA BASU

Puri: Decreased catch and inadequate relief compensation has affected fishing communities.

Ajay Behara, 36, of Arakhakuda village in Puri, has just come off the boat from an unsuccessful fishing trip.

On his way to wash off the sweat and the salt from the day's work, he said that the number of fish has decreased by almost 5 times over the last few years.

It is even worse after Cyclone Fani hit the district of Puri on May 3, 2019.

"Earlier, we used to get about Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 in a season but after Fani, we hardly manage to get Rs 5,000 to Rs 6,000," Behara said.

A study conducted by Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in 2014, predicted that the catch will drop by 40 percent in the tropics despite an

initial spike due to increase in temperature in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

Due to Arakhakuda's proximity to the Chilika lake and the sea, fishermen go to both the places for fishing.

Chilika is preferred during the night as the water is calmer whereas the fishermen go to the sea in the morning for salt water fish.

Behara's boat was partially damaged during Fani for which he got a compensation of Rs 4,100. However, this was not enough to repair his boat.

He had to spend approximately Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 to repair his boat properly.

In Balabhadrapur village of the Satyabadi Gram Panchayat, fishermen face similar problems. Paresh Kumar Jally, 34, is the spokesperson of Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangh which is an association for the fishermen of Chilika.

"We make locks of steel and copper. There are ones with and without casting. There are a variety of locks we make," said Venkatachalam.

Karpanna (69), has been working in the lock-factory for over four decades and barely manages to earn Rs 4000 a month.

"Our work depends on the orders we get. We, at least, make two locks a day. For each, we earn Rs 50," said Karpanna.

Nigitan added, "For making the locks we get material from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, and other materials from Madurai district. We don't make keys here. The keys come from Aligarh, and each key is unique."

"It is good if the customers give orders; that is rare. Otherwise, the government is our only customer, even if the orders are less in number," said Nigitan.

"Due to the dust, the workers have suffered from tuberculosis in the past, and respiratory diseases," said Venkatachalam.

"The chances of a hand getting injured is high. If we get distracted for a second, we can get injured," said Nigitan.

According to him, the funding that was allotted by organisations like the World Bank for fishing communities was distributed to all Fani-affected areas equally by the government.

Each household in the fishing community got Rs 2,600 for repairing fully-damaged fishing nets, whereas the actual cost of repairing amounts to Rs 3,000.

According to the government each household is given Rs 9,600 for replacing fully-damaged boats. However, it takes Rs 1.5 lakhs to repair a damaged boat and around Rs 3 to Rs 4 lakhs to build a new boat from scratch.

Puri Collector Balwant Singh said, "The relief against damage is usually allotted less money but if a household is a beneficiary then they can avail themselves of government schemes to get fishing nets and boats at a subsidised rate of 50 percent."

From worn out cloth to masterpiece

The art of Pattachitra, believed to be as old as the Jagannath Temple, is practised by 150 households

SHRIJA GANGULY

Raghuburajpur: The walls of houses at Raghuburajpur have come straight out of the shastras. With intricate images of Vishnu's Dashavatar, and the life of Lord Jagannath painted all over, the villagers speak of the Mahabharata with as much passion as you or I talk about Marvel or Game of Thrones today.

This is the heritage of pattachitra which had its origins in Puri. Master Craftsman and State Handicrafts and Merit Awardee back in 1998, Kelu Charan Mohapatra states with pride, "Kabi (poet), Pandit (Teacher or Priest), and Kalaakaar (artist) produce and manufacture art. The poet composes, the priest preaches, and the artist gives it shape."

His g--uru Jagannath Mohapatra had won a competition for the best pattachitra design that was held among artists from Puri, Raghuburajpur, and Talasahi.

Kelu Charan is assisted by his wife and kids, all of whom are trained artisans as well.

Kelu Charan's wife, Umalakanti Bariki, (45) has been producing pattachitra works for 30 years now. Not suffering the conventional fate of married women, she is recognized for her contribution and not treated as another mouth to be fed.

She said, "Daughters are taught the art as well. But they can continue doing it after marriage only if their husbands' families sustain themselves on the same art form."

Kelu Charan has an idiomatic reference to his "unfortunate" guru, who has three married daughters and no son: 'deep tale andhaara', meaning, 'the lamp that enlightens lives in darkness.'

Pattachitra is now practised by 150 households at Raghuburajpur, whereas earlier, the art was confined to occasions of marriage



Umalakanti Bariki one of the many female artists of Raghuburajpur | SHRIJA GANGULY

and thread ceremony.

The art is believed to be as old as the Jagannath temple. There is a collective effort to create three

different pattachitra pieces for the three lords during *sahanujatra*—or the duration of absence of the idols from the main temple. These come

as a replacement. This time precedes Rath Yatra, the main festival of the State. The artisans working on these pattachitra pieces have to be ritually pure while working—wear new clothes; menstruating artisans cannot touch the work.

In terms of sale, Pattachitra artists get (and prefer) foreign customers for the simple reason of affordable business.

"My last work sold for 300 Euros or Rs 27,000. We do not prefer going to exhibitions anymore. Initially, transportation, accommodation and food were paid for. Now, we are made to pay the rent for the shops as well. The cheaper ones get sold but hardly cover the losses. Carrying the expensive ones means extra expenditure," Kelu Charan says.

The prices vary according to the intricacies, and not the size, of a pattachitra.

Natural colours extracted from

sea shells, stones, oil lamps and liquid from wood apple trees are used, instead of synthetic colours. Crushed tamarind seed mixed with water coats the cloth, thereby, averting its being destroyed by moth or spillage of water. Usually worn out sarees and tassar cloth pieces are used to make patta.

This village comprises terajati or thirteen non-Brahmins sub castes—Tanti, Pradhan, Patra, Baniagar, Nayak, Seol or toddy tappers, Maachhakeuto or fishermen, Choorakeuto or the ones who clean husk off the wheat, and Chitrakaar, to name a few.

Consequently, the designs reflect upon the occupations with fish designs dominating the market.

Since Fani struck the village, there has been a decline in patronage by foreign customers. With Government assistance being scanty, the artisans now seek to engage directly with their customers abroad.

Little land, low margins in Harijan village

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Krushnaprasad: Even as the Centre is trying to get the State Government to improve its local agriculture marketing efforts using the E-Nam platform to sell produce online, lack of registration has meant rice farmers of predominantly SC villages in this panchayat stick to agriculture just for subsistence. The rice farmers have small landholdings.

"Large family size and low margins, from selling the little quantity remaining after personal consumption, discourage people from relying on farming as an occupation," said Ganesh Sahu, 27, a vegetable seller, who gets his stock from nearby Puri town.

Ishwar Palai (50), a rice farmer, said, "We get Rs. 1500 a quintal from the Odisha State Agricultural Marketing Board. The money does not suffice and we have to take loans to meet our other expenses, because the 10,000 rupees we get under the Kalia scheme [for farmer welfare] is spent on machinery and fertilizers."

A social worker and member of the NGO, Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Manoj Malik, said that historically SC farmers had owned small holdings and in Odisha were never familiar with commercial agriculture of any kind. "Fragmented landholdings and lack of support systems in terms of local government proactively with agriculture marketeers or boards mean the rice farmers here literally eat what they sow."



Farmers at work | ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Carving out a future

ARKATAPA BASU

Raghuburajpur: In the vibrant village of Raghuburajpur, 10 km from Puri, the traditional art of wood and stone carving is dying a slow death. Of the 300 artisan families, only 10-15 practise carving. The rest are engaged in Pattachitra and other art forms like chariot making.

Chandrashekhar Swain, 56, has been in this craft for the past 38 years. He sits in the courtyard of his house, carving a piece of white cedar with a gunitagi (flat-headed iron instrument) to make a rendition of the Jagannath temple. "Interest in learning the craft has increased over the past few years but the younger generation does not have the same dedication. They don't want to work so hard."

Women are likely to pursue Pattachitra more than wood or stone carving. Working with stone and wood causes blisters, callus and cuts which might hurt their marital prospects. Even if one is inclined towards the craft, managing the household and continuing with car-

ving becomes difficult after marriage, according to villagers.

Swain himself got interested in stone carving during his childhood. As a young boy, he would see people buying stone and wood carvings and thought it would give



Chandrashekhar Swain | ARKATAPA BASU

him, a better livelihood than his becoming a farmer like his forefathers.

The smallest stone carvings cost Rs 300, while one of his biggest and most intricate pieces costs around Rs 3.5 lakhs. Swain has stopped making bigger statues as they are difficult to sell. A four-

quintal Ganesh idol worth Rs 3 lakh has been lying in his courtyard for the past seven years. He has spent 2 years making it.

Moreover, stone carving has affected his eyesight. At workshops and training courses that his guild members and he attend, protective glasses are provided. "Before these glasses were given," he says, "stone dust from cutting and polishing the stone hit eyes."

During Fani, some of his stone sculptures broke after a piece of asbestos crashed into them. A section of the boundary wall crumbled down.

Swain's family received a compensation of Rs 85,000 under the State Disaster Response Fund. However their bank account got blocked before he could withdraw any money.

Commenting on the relatively small number of wood and stone craftsmen at Raghuburajpur, Swain says, "Konark and Puri temples could not have been built without craftsmen like us. If we are not supported, then how will monuments or temples be made later?"

When Modi took tradition to Paris

MEGHA MALLICK

Raghuburajpur: Recognition by the Indian Prime Minister was all that was needed to bring this man's brilliant work into the limelight. Bhaskar Mahapatra became a star overnight when Narendra Modi gifted his French counterpart with a Pattachitra painted by this artist.

Mahapatra says, "Pattachitra has been a tradition in our family since the days of my great-grandfather. The Chitrakar community of Maharana and Mahapatra created this art form. The lore of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra is depicted in most of these paintings. Natural colours, derived from conch shells and stones from the sea, are used."

For the past 10-15 years, he has been painting scenes from the Ramayan, the Mahabharat and Krishnaleela on Tussar sarees. The 'Tree of Life' painting that was gifted to the French Prime Minister was in the likeness of the topmost structure of the Jagannath temple. Figures of the gods were drawn in the middle.



Bhaskar Mahapatra displays his artwork | SHWETA DUBEY

How the gift reached France is another story. Mahapatra narrates, "I have many German customers. One of them asked him to paint a picture for him, without payment. I agreed to give it as a gift, and painting what came to be called the Tree of Life."

This picture was then sent to Delhi for an exhibition, for which he received Rs.25000 in cash. It was then displayed in an exhibition in France, where Modi chose it as a gift for the French Prime Minis-

ter, in 2015. Mahapatra has many students working under him. It takes at least four years to complete the course, upon which he gives certificates.

He has his wife and four daughters, one of whom paints on glass bottles and earrings.

"When I start painting, I don't think that I have to finish it within a given time. I will paint at a stretch, or at times, I will leave a whole day without painting. It all depends on my mood."

Is this heritage village losing glorious canopy?

MEGHA MALLICK
SHRIJA GANGULY

Pipli: The heritage village of Pipli, located between Bhubaneswar and Puri, did not wait for Fani to see an economic slump, as a result of which the daily income of artisans has dropped from Rs 30,000 to Rs 2,000.

Ironically, one of the reasons for the slowdown is the national popularity gained by local artisans. The construction of a bypass, connecting Bhubaneswar and Puri, also meant diverting customer traffic, say locals. Earlier, Pipli was on this route but now one has to drive back from Puri on a different route altogether to reach the village.

S.K. Aashik, an artisan here, says "Our participation in handicrafts exhibitions across the country undoubtedly made for cultural cohesion. Consequently, a lot of artisans brought handicrafts from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, and West

Bengal to sell them in our local market at higher prices."

Competition has increased over time. While there were just 10-15 shops earlier, now around 50 shops are selling the same product. The establishment of state handloom and handicrafts stores in other parts of the country has also led to a drop in customer footfall at Pipli.

Forget business prospects for a while. The artisan community here is renowned for its appliqué, which is about putting together cloth cutouts to produce tapestries with images of Gods (mainly Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra) stitched on them. Dating back to almost four centuries, appliques are made in two ways. The traditional appliqué is made entirely by hand. Newer styles have laces sewn on the raw material using machines.

Canopies are the costliest product, says Zaheer Khan, a 30-year-old appliqué maker who was initiated into the art when he was



Appliqué works at Zaheer Khan's shop | MEGHA MALLICK

10. The cost of a canopy, used in big programmes, ranges from Rs 20,000 to Rs 50,000.

"When ministers come here, as did Naveen Patnaik [Odisha Chief Minister], or there is some festival, we make umbrellas and canopies with appliqué and sell them, says

Khan. Alongside men, 15-20 women, work for him. Their salaries range from Rs 5,000 to Rs 12,000, depending on the quality of the product they make.

Most tourists come during the winter vacation from Mumbai,

Goa, Rajasthan and also America. They prefer lamps and other handicrafts with an image of Lord Jagannath sewn on them.

During Dol Purnima or Holi, a canopy was made for Lord Jagannath using appliqué. This was how it was initially used. Now, the art is in demand a lot more among tourists.

Sunil Pradhan doesn't limit his products to bedsheets, canopies and sarees. He sells kettles and bottles with tribal art drawn on them.

In Pradhan's workshop, a subtle amount of gender segregation remains. Pradhan says women are paid less in his workshop as they cannot devote full time to appliqué handicrafts.

Aashik said though artisans here did not suffer huge infrastructural damage due to Fani, a month-long power cut put back their production and sales targets. All artisans-cum-businessmen have received a compensation of Rs 12,000 each.

A musical mission

KANISHKA BIRAT

Krushnaprasad: A fisherman's daughter, Shreya Malik, coming from Mirzapur in the block, bagged the first prize in a singing competition held in Odisha last year. The class 9 girl from the Bhavakundawar Dev Vidya Niketan in the village is among the participants from 42 higher secondary schools from all over State in the contest organised by the All Odisha Teachers' Association (OSTA). Malik dreams of making it to Indian Idol one day and is recording her songs in preparation. This in spite of the fact she has never attended any music class as her father couldn't afford it. Nor could she appear for any audition for singing competitions at the national level, for the same reason. She wants the Odisha or Central government to provide her with a harmonium to hone her skills. Her teacher Laxminandan says "She is good in both studies and music."



Shreya Malik dreams big | KANISHKA BIRAT

Malik is thinking of starting her own Youtube channel to upload video recordings of her songs for showcasing her talent. Tapan Jali from the same school won the first prize in javelin throw at the block level, organized in 2014 by OSTA. The association, started in 1946, has been holding various competitions at the block, district and State levels to encourage latent talent among students coming from a humble background.

Fani or no, temple project goes ahead

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA AND KANISHKA BIRAT

Krushnaprasad: A temple dedicated to Lord Ram here has collected over 40 lakhs for the past decade and a half now, with several locals contributing small sums frequently.

Once complete, the Mandir, coming up on a stretch of land that acts as a three-way dividing Rayapura, Mirzapur and Parbatipur villages of the block, will add to the 'grandeur' of the area, the priest claims. The temple will house the idols of Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman.

Locals on condition of anonymity said that idols were brought here from Ayodhya nearly four decades ago. The temple is now in a race for completion with its namesake at Ayodhya, even as residents of the fishing village have been

struggling to make ends meet months after Fani. Villagers are awaiting more relief, than the Rs 3200 given for their fully damaged boats and houses.

"Known earlier only for an idol of the Lord [Ram] and its poverty, our village will soon become very well known. Our own sons of the soil from Berhampur are the skilled artisans and sculptors behind the holy building. We have not received help from any religious trust or the government. We're on our own to add to our village's grandeur," said the priest.

Incidentally, neither the priest nor the men surrounding him have received their due compensation post-Fani, nor do they have alternative career options.

Gumption to preserve ancient Gotipua

Guru Basanta Kumar Maharana reviving dance form in gurukul style

AATREYEE DHAR

Raghuburajpur: Eight out of 10 students drop out of a dance school here, drawn by the lure of quick money promised by newer institutes. But its master is determined to preserve an endangered dance form, 'Gotipua,' by maintaining the traditional Gurukul system in his 'Abhinna Sundar Gotipua Nrutya Parishad' in this heritage village.

In Oriya language, "goti" means "single" and "pua" means "boy". For centuries, this unique dance has been performed by young acrobat boys dressed up as female to worship Lord Krishna.

Guru Basanta Kumar Maharana (35) teaches the dance to 30 students, from different villages in the State, who reside in his institution-cum-residence. In recent times, encroachment by business on the gurukul system has led to its systematic destruction, he says.

Regretting the dropout episode, Basanta says, "A couple of institutions have come up

in the district but they are not gurukuls in the real sense as they are run by students who didn't complete 10-15 years of his Gotipua training."

A precursor to Odissi, Gotipua involves acrobatic formations (for example, a human pyramid) called 'Bandhas' inspired by the figures of Radha and Krishna. Apart from rituals associated with the Jagannath temple, this dance is performed on special occasions such as Chandan Yatra and Rath Yatra, based on verses from the Gita Govinda by Jayadeva. To master the stunts, the boys have to start training at the age of 5 in the gurukuls for enacting postures from the 17th century manuscript Abhinaya Chandrika.

Basanta says the structured training in his institution begins with meditation followed by feet exercises, oil massage, acrobatics and voice culture. It also provides for formal schooling for boys up to Standard X. Although Gotipua hasn't been accorded the status of a classical dance yet, there is no other dance form where the trainees can sing,



The 'Gotipua' Master | AATREYEE DHAR

dance, play music and teach, all in one, he adds.

Ten years ago, the 'Gotipua school' was started by the institution when the dance was on the wane due to a lack of financial support from the government and the collapse of

gymnasiums or 'akharas' across Puri. The institution uses income from performances to cover the expenses of the gurukul. It earns over Rs 60,000 from every international performance whereas a national show fetches only, Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000.

Basanta's troupe has performed at world events in the Royal Festival Hall (UK), at the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music (Morocco), the Omar Festival and the Spring Festival (Belgium). On a Fes Festival performance held in the palace of the King of Morocco, Basanta recalls, "On a stage graced by the likes of Birju Maharaj, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Zakir Hussain, audiences around the world exploded in applause that couldn't stop till the end of their performance."

Basanta's father Guru Lakshman Maharana saved his earnings from his Pattachitra paintings to pay off the expenses of the institution. A new institution, on the way to Raghuburajpur from Puri, is in the pipeline. H adds, "We cannot bribe officials as it tampers with the values taught in the gurukul system."



Beautification vs livelihood

Fishermen face displacement threats in the Sangumal beach

ANSHUL GUPTA

Rameswaram: Amidst privatization and the threat of being permanently uprooted, the fishermen of Sangumal beach here are left seeking the right to their land.

The beach is a natural fishing point. The water here is shallow and fishermen from around 10-15 villages engage in fishing. It is one of the safest fishing points even during cyclones, claims a fisherman.

According to Karunamoorthy, a fishermen leader, the fisherfolk stay in a settlement opposite to the beach, allotted to them by the government.

"The idea of privatization has resurfaced and the government has asked the fishermen to move from the settlement," says Karunamoorthy. A resort has been constructed behind the settlement. In order to "beautify" the beach, the government wants to remove the temporary houses in front of the resort. It has even pulled down a few huts. But the fishermen refuse to



The government wants to remove the huts to make way for the resort (behind), claim fishermen | ANSHUL GUPTA

leave the place as it is their only source of livelihood.

In the past, the government tried to occupy the fisherman's land on the Sangumal beach. It proposed to construct a children's park where the fishermen lived, amid the coconut groves they had created, but dropped the idea when the locals threatened to hold an agitation.

The issue came to the forefront again when former President Pratibha Patil came for a visit. Citing security, many of the huts were removed and the fishermen were given land opposite to the beach.

"Now, they want us to move further from the sea to beautify the beach," says Sagayaraj, a fisherman whose family has lived here

for generations.

"We demand that the government either restore our original land or let us stay at our thatched shelter to which it moved us," added Sagayaraj.

The government, instead, has built a fisheries building "to address the fishermen's grievances." The issue is pending in the court.

The households here depend on the coconut trees they have cultivated over the years to earn money during the fish breeding season, when fishing is banned.

But the government has leased out the land to a private party, who has constructed a pathway to the resort. It also offers boating to tourists.

"We used to earn a few extra money by taking the tourists for boating, Rs. 200-300 per ride," says Sagayaraj, "even that has stopped now."

The fishermen here are left fighting for survival and live in the hope that they will get access to the land that rightfully belongs to them.

We take pride in our job: seaweed divers

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Globally recognized but neglected by the government. This is what the seaweed divers of Chinnapalam village, Pamban, say. About 350 women of the village are engaged in the ancestral practice for a living.

They are wives of fishermen and they proudly say, "This empowers us. We do not depend on our husbands to buy us things".

Only Hindu women practise this as livelihood. Christians, who constitute almost 90% of the fishing community, do not collect seaweed.

Seaweed divers work for 12 days a month. During rains, they do not go into the sea. They collect 10 kg of seaweed a day. The quantity shrinks to 5 kg after the seaweed dries up. For every kg, the women get Rs. 50.

The divers collect "marikozhundu/kadalpaasi," the only variety harvested on their shore. Since they



Seaweed diver at work | MANTHRA KOLIYER

can find seaweed only in shallow water, most of them also go to the nearest island. The boat ride costs them Rs. 60 each.

Bhagavathi, who has been working since she was 15, is the head of the seaweed divers' association.

She says, "Nothing stops us. Forest officials, snake bites or even menstruation. We believe that the sea is as impure as we are during that time of the month".

In the past, there were only 40 boats but today there are 400. The

women say, "the quantum of seaweed has gone down badly due to climate change and pollution".

The Tamil Nadu government does not provide any assistance or even recognize seaweed diving as a means of livelihood. The health facilities provided to the women are next to non-existent. They are forced to go to Pamban as doctors aren't available in the village round the clock.

K. Murugesan, a fisherman, says, "Private hospitals charge Rs. 2,000 for medicines but they are better. Some government hospital doctors give the same injection to humans as they give to buffaloes."

Nagarani, assistant of the seaweed divers' association, had to undergo a hysterectomy last year.

"I carry 10 kg of seaweed at any given time and this has taken a toll on my health. It is difficult, but I am still working".

Besides collecting seaweed, women polish seashells and make garlands.

Challenge of dwindling fish, low returns, climate change

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Climate change, global warming and excessive use of non-biodegradable plastic have led to the decrease in the number of fish, making many species extinct in Rameswaram.

Irudhayaraja, a fisherman, says: "Many species are on the verge of extinction. Varieties like sardines (mathi/chaale), seer fish (neimeen), vanjaram and ayla are not available on our coast at all." In the past, one boat would get 5-10 tonnes of chaale in four hours. Today, getting even 10 kg is difficult, he says.

The fishermen of the island town have always been dependent on the variety of sardines, abundantly available on their coast. In 2019, they did not get a single sardine fish. Now they are dependent on prawns, the quantity of which has

also dwindled from 100 kg to 50 kg a catch. Christmas orders for fish export from various countries have declined in the past two years. "It is because of the decrease in the availability of fish that we have to venture into the Sri Lankan boundary, though, the Indian government has not permitted us to do so," claim the fisherfolk.

Sesuraja, head of fishermen association, says, "Plastic has also caused immense trouble. Now, we have banned plastic. No fisherman uses polythene bags."

Some country boat fishermen use monofilament nets. The net emanates sound that disturbs the fish. Monofilament nets are banned by the Sri Lankan government but Indian government hasn't banned them yet. The boat owners say they have no options.

The fishermen also blame the

north-eastern winds for the decrease in the number of fish. Raja says, "There was no lightning and thunder this monsoon. Only when it rains, and there are heavy winds one can see a lot of produce".

The fishermen of Nagapattinam and Cuddalore are at the start of the bay, from where they fish using mechanised boats, leaving the ones in Rameswaram with very little fish altogether.

They believe they do not get back even what they invest. Irudhayaraja says, "90% of us are in losses. My heart sinks when the men on my boat do not answer the phone."

The fishermen also point out that while there were only 40 boats at the harbour once, there are 400 today. "The number of boats has increased and the space for fishing has decreased."



Fish produce unloaded from a fishermen boat at Rameswaram harbour | KRATI PURWAR

Private tanks, the only fresh water source

KRATI PURWAR

Dhanushkodi: This ghost town of Ramanathapuram, which housed the old harbour in the past, has around 350 families. All belong to the fishermen community. They stay here "illegally" to earn a livelihood, which they cannot do if they shift to the quarters provided by the Tamil Nadu government near Rameswaram town.

Since Dhanushkodi is flanked by the Bay of Bengal, on one side and the Indian Ocean, on the other, fresh groundwater is not available. Nor is electricity, another basic requirement, available. Muthumaniyai, a resident, says the Tamil Nadu government has never bothered about people's plight here. "Political parties turn up when the elections are around the corner but they forget us soon after."

Since the government has made no move to provide fresh water, "we went for private desalinated water tank supply," Muthumaniyai says. However, the government feels that the town became unsafe after the 1964 Rameswaram cyclone. Hence, it wants people to leave and hasn't offered even the basic amenities to them.

Three water tanks come to the settlement every day. A pitcher of unfiltered water costs Rs. 5 whereas, a pitcher of filtered water costs Rs.10. The filtered water is used for drinking and cooking. The unfiltered water is used for bathing, washing, and other household purposes.

Priya, another resident, says that a family spends around Rs. 80-100 a day on buying fresh water.

Earlier, the residents used to go across the road, dig a well, and use the water until it reached the point of salination. And repeat the exercise in another location. It used to become hectic for women, especially during pregnancies. The water tank is a better option even though they have to pay for it.

First step towards menstrual hygiene

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Dhanushkodi: The use of sanitary pads, even in the absence of toilet facilities, has put the Dhanushkodi Old Harbour fisher community a cut above the rest of Rameswaram.

While rituals such as keedakarai (the first three days of menstruation when a girl is kept isolated) are still practised in this small hamlet, it is interesting to see how people's attitude towards menstruation has changed.

At the old harbour, the girls do not shy away from the topic of "monthly problems".

"We are taught about menstrual hygiene in school. They play an old DVD although the teachers don't talk to us about it," says Maruvarasi Mariappan (14), a Class 8 student of P. U. Middle School.

Government schools are supposed to provide free sanitary pads to the girls. However, according to Sethalachi (16), who studies in a

high school at Rameswaram, "some government schools give free pads and some don't. The middle school near our house does not."

The girls travel to Rameswaram to buy their monthly supply of two sanitary packs worth Rs. 35.

The practice of keedakarai affects the attendance of girls in school. As per the dropout rate of Dhanushkodi, girls continue education while most boys quit. Yet, during keedakarai, girls are not allowed to go out and are forced to miss three days of school.

The custom is practised inside homes as well where the women are in-charge of cooking, cleaning and cutting fish.

"We never suffer any menstrual cramps or back pain," says Muriesshwari Chermurugan, a mother of one of the girls going to school. But she has no answer to why women are not allowed to touch the tools and utensils on "those three days."

Nets and boats, backbone of fisheries

KRATI PURWAR

Rameswaram: Harbour. A place where the day starts even before the sun has risen. While some fishermen come back to the shore with loads of catch, others get ready to go deep into the sea. Whirring motorboat engines, men loading and unloading the boats, nets getting untangled, and fish containers being transferred to a wagon to be carried into the city dot the scene as another day starts.

Fishermen depend heavily for their day to day activities on net manufacturing companies and boat makers. They, in fact, form the backbone of the fisheries industry.

At the Rameswaram harbour, there is a net making company that not only makes nylon nets from scratch but also repairs, remakes, and alters them. The nets are sold around other coastal areas like Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam.

About 240-250 people work here every day to build eight different types of nets for fishermen to catch varieties of fish, crabs, etc. A net



A labour giving a final touch to a fishing net | KRATI PURWAR

can be 90 yards long and weigh up to 500 kg so that it can hold 15 tonnes of fish at a time, says John Britto, owner of the company. The company gets Rs. 50,000 worth of work every day.

Afrem Ricky, a mechanical engineering student in Coimbatore,

says fishermen have a preference for individual net makers. They believe that they will catch more fish if a particular person crafts their nets. Afrem works here part-time during his mid-term breaks.

Each net takes about two hours to complete. The price varies bet-

ween Rs. 40,000 and Rs. 85,000, depending on the type. Like fishing, net making techniques also depend on the season.

Mada Swamy Shop at the harbour makes small boats and parts of bigger boats. It also makes wooden furniture. Selvam, the shop owner, uses the hashini wood to craft the boats.

"Assembling is the difficult task," says Selvam.

Once the structure is laid, he says, cotton is filled between the cracks, and plastic pipe coating is done twice to prevent the boat from getting damaged in water.

It takes around a month to build a boat which costs around Rs. 85,000. Selvam was 20 when he started work and has built 50-60 boats. Currently, he works with two other men and earns Rs. 800 a day.

As the breeding season (June-September) brings a temporary halt to fishing, the two professions are affected as well. Fishermen get a subsidy from the government but net makers and boat builders don't get even a penny.

"Till the end of my life, I want to serve my people"

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Rameswaram: A 55-year-old man in a crowd of a hundred, sloganeering for the national strike declared across the country on January 8. To strangers, he might have seemed like an ordinary man but ask the people around and they will recognise him as S. Karunamoorthy - the hero of Rameswaram's fisher community.

A member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI(M) - he and his party are known for their continued support to the labour communities in the area.

Karunamoorthy's first significant work as a party worker was to help two fishermen who were

raped by Dhanushkodi policemen in 1995. He ensured that the policemen were convicted. "One of the proudest moments of my life was when those men were brought to justice," he said.

He joined the CPI(M) in 1984, nearly five years after his 10th grade. He was inspired after reading an article called "Taraku" by a communist in a Tamil newspaper. He then joined the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Later, when he took up the work of a fisherman, he joined the Tamil Nadu Fishermen Federation (TNFF). He was the first in his family to join the CPI(M). "My family is well connected with the Indian National Congress but they never said any-



Karunamoorthy | RAHUL MANOJ

hing about my joining the CPI(M). As long as I don't join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it is fine," he said.

Currently, the CITU member is acting as an arbitrator between fishermen using traditional fishing

boats and trawler boats. His party first took up this issue that started in 2008.

In December 2012, he helped the families of Indian fishermen who were imprisoned in Iran. Out of the 19 held, 16 were from Tamil Nadu. An NGO had advised the families of the fishermen to invest Rs 5 lakhs to take the legal approach.

However, Karunamoorthy dismissed the idea as he felt the families would lose ground due to international border laws. He prevailed upon the Tamil Nadu government to deal with the problem through the diplomatic, not legal, channel.

He issued a statement saying that he, along with the fisher folk,

would picket the Iran embassy in New Delhi. The Jayalalitha government paid an interim relief of Rs One lakh to the families of imprisoned fishermen. Of this, Rs. 2000 was claimed by the Fisheries Department as "expenses." Thanks to Karunamoorthy's intervention, the department returned the money. However, the government failed to help the families further.

Karunamoorthy renewed the threat of picketing the Iran embassy. This time, he managed to get a contact from Iran who told him in which jail the prisoners were and by which plane they were to be sent back. "This was brand new information even for the government," he said.

RAHUL MANOJ

Rameswaram: When you see the man clad in a blue towel and lungi, you may think he is just another senior citizen. But Nambu Rajan is different. He was an elephant mahout for 40 years in the famous Arulmigu Ramanathaswamy temple of Rameswaram. "There were three elephants in the temple in the 1990s but there is just one elephant now named Ramalakshmi, who is 17," says Rajan.

"If the elephants suffered any ailment in the past, we used to give them Ayurvedic medicines, but now the veterinary doctors of the Animal Husbandry department give them vaccinations which lead

to a shorter lifespan", claims Rajan. Ramalakshmi does not get proper fodder and is not treated properly, alleges Rajan. It is harassed by the temple authorities to perform different pujas. Recalling the death of Bhavani, 52, in November 2012 at Thekkampatti where the annual Arulmigu Ramanathaswamy temple takes place, Rajan says the elephant died due to the long journey and climate change.

Denying any harassment, Muniyasaamy, Assistant, HR&CE, says the temple provides grass, chow-chow, palm leaf, raw rice, ragi flour, sugarcane and banana to Ramalakshmi every day. Rajan's son, Ramu (37), takes care of Ramalakshmi now.

Oppressed even in the 21st century

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: The houses on the left side of the Muthuramalingapuram village in Paramakudi remain unoccupied. "Nearly 20 of the 25 families have left the village," says Kitnaraasa (53), secretary of the Tamil Puligal party, nodding towards the *kaacha* houses arranged in a line.

Like in many villages of Ramanathapuram, such houses act as a symbol of oppression. They bear testimony to those who gave up and moved to cities like Madurai, Thoothukudi and Chennai, where "no one asks you your caste," to start anew.

"This place was given to us by the District Collector after the Reddians tried to take the land away from us. Now, we work for them as agricultural labour. They make sure that we, the Arunthathiyars (Dallits), know who our 'master' is," says K. Sangreswaran (21).

His father was allegedly attacked thrice by the Reddians when he was fighting the case for the land *patta*.

"We are isolated from the village [commonly known as colony]. The Reddians, the dominant caste in the village, abuse our women. They have even usurped a part of our burial ground. We take a long route to the school, burial ground and hospital as they circumvent the main road," says Balamurugan (30). "The people of Ramanathapuram boast that this is the birthplace of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. But what is the point of him becoming a



K. Sangreswaran and his community talking about their experiences at Muthuramalingapuram | VALLARI SANZGIRI

scientist if his own village is backward?"

These voices come from the less caste-sensitive areas. The situation is more volatile in places like Kamuthy where the main occupation is farm labour.

The Appanur Indira Nagar of Kadaladi taluka has been complaining about the lack of water for some years now. The women of this village have to pull their water wagons to the nearest river or water body (sometimes using waterbodies near the road) to fetch water for daily use.

"We have to draw the water at 3a.m. so we can start our day. The wagon can carry only four to five pots and we can't store more than one litre at a time. Had the upper caste complained to the municipality, the problem would have been resolved by now," says Pushpavalli Mukandi (45).

The upper castes also keep the residents from building concrete houses in place of their thatched sheds as they believe that even the government-sanctioned land belongs to the Thevairs, who originally owned it.

"Most of our children drop out of schools after Class 8 or 10 to help support our families. We try to encourage them to finish their education. At least in schools, instances of caste abuse have lessened," says Perumal Sonai, the present Indira Nagar colony chief.

Indira Nagar does not have a dustbin. The only one at the entrance of the village was taken away a year ago. The villagers have complained but the municipality has done nothing to help.

"We just burn the garbage," says Rajalaxmi, mother of a three-year-old. "The villagers suffer from respiratory diseases because of that."

Migrants cry maltreatment

RAHUL MANOJ

Rameswaram: Physical exhaustion is at its peak as the two conservancy workers slog in the heat collecting piles of garbage on the road.

"We get Rs. 8,000 a month cleaning garbage," says Renukabei and Shantabai, both from Latur, Maharashtra. The two migrated to Rameswaram two years ago in search of employment.

Their working hours - from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day - are "very long," adds Renuka. Though the Rameswaram municipality provides coats, mugs and uniform, Renuka and Shanta say they are not treated with respect since they are temporary workers. Full-time sanitary workers with the municipality earn around Rs. 17,000 a month.

The two collect, segregate and dispose waste in a godown at Vadakadu, around 3 km from Rameswaram. Hotels, households and petty shops dump their waste on empty grounds making their work more strenuous.

"While permanent employees of Tamil Nadu get their salaries credited in their bank accounts, we get them in cash," says Shanta.

Their salaries are disbursed by their contractors. Some contractors allegedly siphon off money.

When Renuka questioned the municipality officials, she was asked to collect garbage in two more streets.

To this, Muthukumar, Sanitary Inspector, Rameswaram Municipality says, "Workers should approach me with their grievances in a time-bound manner and prompt action will be taken against corrupt contractors."

We prefer India to Sri Lanka, says refugee

ANSHUL GUPTA

Mandapam: "The children of those who have lived here for more than 30 years know only this place. If they go to Sri Lanka, they will feel alienated," says K. Mathivathanam of the Trincomalee village of Sri Lanka.

Working as a coordinator in the Organisation for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OfERR) since 2007, he considers India a home that will never abandon the Sri Lankan Tamils despite their exclusion from the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019).

Mathivathanam was in Sri Lanka until India intervened in the Sri Lankan Civil War by sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force to the island nation. Although many Sri Lankan Tamils came to India after the start of the civil war in 1983, most arrived on the Indian shores around 1990.

"We did not know where we were heading. Thousands of us were brought here in buses and other modes of transport. We lived in godowns. People would go to Dindigul, Coimbatore. Camps in Tamil Nadu were distributed across the State," he adds.

The Mandapam camp is the largest Sri Lankan refugee camp in Tamil Nadu with nearly 500 families.

OfERR started in 1984 to aid thousands of Tamil refugees who were forced to flee their homeland and take refuge in India during the conflict that went on for 25 years.

"When we came here, we did not have the right to education, em-



Mathivathanam outside his house | ANSHUL GUPTA

ployment. Later, we were promised education for our children. They said they would help with medicines and education," says Mathivathanam.

OfERR helped the refugees start small scale jobs and gave on-the-job training to develop extra skills. "People who graduated from here are working in Sri Lanka now. Those who didn't hone their skills here are facing employment issues there," says Mathivathanam.

The refugees who have stayed back here have taken up jobs like painting, carpentry and masonry. Women from the Mandapam camp have begun working in crab and prawn industries to support their families.

Mathivathanam has been living in the Mandapam house for 13 years. "We have no issues related to water or electricity. We pay no rent. The Tamil Nadu government gives

the head of the family Rs. 1000 and we get 20 kg of free rice every month," he says.

Citizenship is the primary issue for the refugees - a topic that is the talk of the country today. A child born in the camp doesn't get citizenship in either of the countries.

As one not born in Sri Lanka, he cannot get citizenship there and because he is a refugee here, he is not eligible for Indian citizenship.

After much struggle, some refugees have got the Sri Lankan citizenship, as their parents are Sri Lankan.

"In Sri Lanka, we are also a reason for the problem. The Tamilians are divided and the Sinhalese united. In government jobs, education, etc., 65% is reserved for the Sinhalese. That is why we prefer to live here rather than in our own country. At least, we don't feel alienated here," says Mathivathanam.

SBA toilets in poor shape

RAHUL MANOJ

Ramanathapuram: The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is meant only for small, landless labourers, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the physically challenged.

People belonging to the Above Poverty Line (APL) cannot apply for these toilets but some of them do, depriving the Below Poverty Line (BPL) families of their right. The toilets are not permanent structures.

The government gives Rs 12,000 for constructing toilets under the scheme. "It is an incentive, not a subsidy," said S Navaneethan, District coordinator, SBA, District Rural Development Agency, Ramanathapuram.

"The government provides dustbin and toilets but the public lacks awareness and is not using them," added Navaneethan. "Sub-standard construction material is used to construct toilets," said Sathyabhama, a resident of Lakshmi Nagar, Kuyavankudi village.

K. Rajamanickam, who runs the Arul Foundation for the uplift of sanitation workers, alleged that he was forced to spend his personal money in order to construct a toilet for his house. He added that contractors under the SBA siphoned off Rs 2000 each per toilet.

In places such as Peraiyur, Aapannoor and Saayalkudi, low quality toilets constructed under the SBA have been converted by the public into animal sheds and godowns.

Armed with education, Kilakarai girls move towards an empowered future

KRATI PURWAR & ANSHUL GUPTA

Kilakarai: "We went from door to door begging parents to send their daughters to college after Class 12," says Dr. S. Sumayaa, principal of the Thassim Beevi Abdul Kadar College for Women in Kilakarai, Ramanathapuram.

Since 1988, the college, as well as the town, has come a long way in women's education, empowerment and self-sustenance. The institute provides education and voice to underprivileged women belonging to the minorities.

There are families in which girls are married off early or are not permitted to go for higher studies. Syed Aziz Mohammed, Accounts Manager of the college, says that this mindset is prevalent among many communities, especially Muslims. "That is why the need to change people's perception is very important."

"The NAAC accreditation of 'A' grade has helped in more families accepting the credibility of the college in achieving the overall objective of education for the underprivileged and minority households," says Mohammed.

"In the name of religion, people refuse to send their girls to college. They face severe restrictions," says Naseema Farveen, Head, Department of Arabic and Islamic studies.



Thassim Beevi Abdul Kadar college is one of the leading educational institutions for minority women | KRATI PURWAR

She says people are not aware of Islam which says education is a mandatory activity for this and any other future life.

But many parents are afraid of possible sexual abuse of their daughters.

The college, therefore, follows a strict dress code of *churidar-kurta* and offers a safe bus ride to commute to and from college. It is compulsory for Muslim students to wear an abhaya.

Srimathi, Head of the Department, Chemistry, says Kilakarai women are now getting increasingly educated, becoming entrepreneurs, starting online business, getting jobs in multinational companies and working abroad. Teaching, however, remains the most preferred profession.

Families in Kilakarai do not prefer to send their girls to co-ed schools or colleges.

"Interestingly", Srimathi points out, "among the Muslim community here, it is the boy's family that

gives dowry (known as Mehr) to the girl's family." Also, it is the man who moves to the wife's family after marriage.

"This is because most households here have men working abroad. And women are better placed at their mothers' homes," says a school teacher, who wishes to remain unnamed.

In the Labbai community, women are allowed to study but not allowed to work. Aaynun Farida, a resident, says: "Women are not allowed to interact with men because, for us, marriage is the aim of life."

Once women finish school, they are married off. But early marriages have taken a toll on the young women. A gynaecologist at the Kilakarai government hospital says women have two children by the time they turn 22-23. "Many turn up for family planning and even report polycystic ovarian disorder (PCOD)."

The women, however, are politically well-informed. "We organised a protest a few days ago against the Citizenship Amendment Act," says Farida. Even so many, prefer to stay quiet.

Some believe that their God is with them so they will get by. Others believe the BJP government considers Muslims "parasites" and wants to throw them out of the country by exercising the CAA.

Caste pervades rural classrooms

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: K Sangreswaran had never imagined that he would be reminded about his caste in the fifth grade at a private school. Yet every day of that year he faced discrimination at the hands of children belonging to the Reddiar community, an upper caste, in Muthuramalingapuram.

Sangreswaran was hit on the back of his head, made to add the suffix "master" to his classmates' names and even asked to address his juniors of the Reddiar caste as "master." He never retaliated. He was too scared.

"I now study in a government college," says Sangreswaran, "The uniform in the Government Arts and Science College, Kadaladi, keeps caste discrimination away. But I can never forget how these people treated me in the past."

Such stories illustrate not only how deep-rooted caste still is in our country but also the many ways in which caste discrimination has hindered the lives of the oppressed.

"For my middle school years, I used to cycle a route of 11 km to go to the local public school although it was only 3km away," he says. "I had to do this because the Arunthathiyars [his caste], are not allowed to walk on the main road. This is the law of the land as laid down by the Reddians."

Be it in Muthuramalingapuram,

Sayalgudi, Kamuthi, Mudukulathur or any other caste sensitive area of Ramanathapuram, the discrimination towards them is similar throughout the district, albeit with varying levels of intensity.

An example of this is given by activist Rajamanickam who works for the betterment of the Kudavars, a community that used to engage in manual scavenging until the government banned it in 1998 - in the hope that it would result in a better quality of life.

However, the upper caste continued to view the Kudavar community through the lens of manual scavenging - a group of manual scavengers by virtue of their caste. A young boy, whose parents were sweepers, bore the brunt of this perception 10 years ago, when he was asked by his school principal to clean the school toilet.

Disturbed by the fact that even his principal had failed to draw the distinction between caste and individual, the boy quit his education and now works as an agricultural labourer.

In Panaikulam, on the eastern side of the Ramanathapuram district, men engage in manual scavenging, women work as domestic labour and children never study beyond Class 10.

The government has turned a blind eye as the people are too scared to voice themselves against marginalization.

Asia's first community radio for Rameswaram fishermen

KRATI PURWAR & ANSHUL GUPTA

Pamban: Rising above religion, politics, and caste, Kadal Osai 90.4 FM Radio Station is operated for the fisherfolk, by the fisherfolk, says Gayathri Usman, head of the station. The driving force - empowerment of the fisher community.

The Central Ministry of Fisheries and Research Institute considers Kadal Osai Asia's first community radio for fishermen. CMFRI, along with the marine police and Coast Guard, is the major content provider for the 24x7 radio station with a listener reach of about 45,000, stretching from Uchipuli to Dhanushkodi in the Ramanathapuram district.

Armstrong Fernando hit upon the idea of the community radio station. The shows are dedicated to

youth empowerment, sea conservation, and sustainability. For instance, the show "Samudram Pazhagu" (get used to the sea), conducted by Zeenat Rabia, educates the fisherman on how to go fishing, undertake safety measures and not pollute the sea.

Along with updates on the weather, fuel rates, foreign exchange, fish rates, areas for a good catch and areas of demand, Kadal Osai educates people on women empowerment and child welfare.

Another talk show, 'Adhikale-subhavele' (early morning, auspicious time), is conducted by Madhumita. It is about positive quotes from Swami Vivekananda and the Tirukkural, followed by talks on kindness, healthy lifestyle, etc.

The women's programme, *Parandhu Sellava* (Come, let's

fly), features women achievers, safety rules, right of choice, inheritance laws, education, etc.

In partnership with the United Nations International Children's Education Fund, an initiative on the importance of education, Kadal Osai runs a programme called *Kutti Chutti Express* (little naughty express). It stresses on the importance of education, talks about child marriage and its disadvantages, good touch and bad touch.

In June 2019, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan Trust conducted four episodes on climate change and its effects on day-to-day lives. They included interaction with local fishermen, journalists and experts.

One of the major issues, which the community is concerned with, is fishermen venturing too deep into the sea to catch fish. Kadal Osai actively takes part in warning



Team of Kadal Osai Fm. (from right) Gayathri, Madhumita, and Zeenat Rabia | KRATI PURWAR

the fishermen against going too far, as greed might cost them their lives. In the last six months, three

fishermen have died in the sea. Majorly funded by the Trust and some advertising, Kadal Osai has

also started conducting public shows, creating awareness on open defecation through a skit by school students.

Under the Swachh Bharat Scheme, the station helped build six public toilets. This led to queries for six separate toilets for women and dustbins in public spaces.

Recently, the FM carried out a campaign on the government's policy of Poshan Abhiyan that focuses on nutrition.

Health check-ups including blood pressure monitoring, haemoglobin tests and weight measurement, were conducted. It hopes to focus on menstruation problems in future.

Kadal Osai is working towards getting the fisherfolk interested in recording and doing their own shows on the radio.

Gurudwara in temple town

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: The Sikh gurudwara in Rameswaram is open to people of all religions and *yatis*. Rebuilt in 1990 after the demolition of the old gurudwara, which had become structurally weak, the new gurudwara has been involved in social welfare work.

"The Khalsa flag atop the gurudwara is a symbol of Sikhs," said Granthi Sanjay Singh, chief priest. The gurudwara is a branch of the Chennai gurudwara in T.Nagar.

Sanjay Singh said from January 13 to 15, the gurudwara would conduct a reading from the Guru Granth Sahib. The gurudwara would also take out a procession of the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied by recitals around the Rameswaram temple.

Earnings over education

Children of Dhanushkodi believe that school is a waste of time

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Dhanushkodi: Manikandan (12) hates going to the Panchayat Union Government School near his house at Dhanushkodi Old Harbour. "It's a waste of time. I'd rather help my father with fishing," he says, fiddling with the marbles he was playing with a few minutes ago. "I'm in Class 6 now but as soon as I finish my 12th and get a passport, I'm going to work." Why does he want a passport? He looks away and says, "I want to go out of the country."

Manikandan is not the first from the fishermen community to have such an attitude towards education. According to the parents, none of the boys in the hamlet has finished his education. Says Nambrani, a village elder: "They just want a luxurious life, they don't study. The girls are more hard-working. They finish their education."

While factually correct, Nambrani misses the point. Manikandan's first statement, "It's a waste of time." Children from rural areas turn their back on education not because they find it difficult but because they don't see any use for it.

Like Manikandan, most children



A 4-year old helping his father with his daily chores. (Right) Sethalochmi and Maruvarasi | VALLARI SANZGIRI

watch their parents work and earn, and prefer to help with the family income rather than understand the complexities of the Pythagoras theorem.

Sarathy Munuswami (18) is another student who has no ambition to study. He studied until Class 12 but dropped out at the last minute. He barely remembers what he learnt in school. "Sarathy has studied till twelfth, and his older brother, Anay, till the eighth but in the end, they will fish like us. What's the point in sending them to study far away from home," asks Sarathy's mother as she untangles a fish from the net Sarathy is packing.

Local schools in Dhanushkodi

teach till Class 8, after which the children go to Rameswaram to study. Sarathy's sister is the only one in the entire hamlet who holds a B. Com degree. "She never got a job with that degree. She's married now and lives in the neighbouring village," says her mother.

Regardless of education, marriage is seen as the end goal for girls here. In the fishing community, women are not allowed to enter the sea. They clean the fish, the house, help in net-making and cook. Thus, it stands to reason that more girls prefer to study than boys.

However, their dreams are seldom treated seriously. When Maruvarasi Mariappan (14),

studying in Class 8, voiced her wish to become a police officer everyone around her laughed. "People from the neighbourhood often get drunk and harass others. That's why she says she wants to be a policewoman," says Nambrani with a laugh.

According to Maari, perhaps the only member of the fishermen community who understands English in Dhanushkodi, girls are simply married off. "Look at what happened to Sarathy's sister," he says.

Murishwari Chermurugan, though, has a different dream for her daughters.

"I sent my daughters, Jayastremadi and Saranyamadi, to study and get office jobs. One of them already works in Rameswaram. I don't want them to clean and gut fish like I did all my life."

Under the Indian Constitution, education is the fundamental right of children.

That children in rural Tamil Nadu of south India prioritise job opportunities over their fundamental right not only creates a bleak image of India's future but also presents an apt picture of India's current economic status.

The solitary horse cart rider of Rameswaram

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Dwindling livelihoods and dying culture of people engaged in age-old occupations are the norm in rural India today. In Rameswaram, one man holds on to the age-old profession of driving a horse cart. Subramanian, 65, is the only horse cart rider in the bustling town.

His day begins at 4 a.m., when the first train arrives at the Rameswaram railway station. He works till 1 p.m. every day. A survivor of the 1964 Dhanushkodi cyclone, Subramanian has been living in Rameswaram since then.

"I have been riding a horse cart for 40 years. There were 300 of us before the [Pamban] bridge was built. Today it's just me," he says.

The Indira Gandhi Road Bridge, built in 1988, connects Rameswaram with the outside world by road.

After the bridge was constructed, horse carts were replaced by autorickshaws and cars. Many also quit horse cart riding as they could not find "mechanics" to repair the carts anymore. Thanks to the bridge, they opted for other jobs.

Subramanian has gone in for



Subramaniam outside railway station | MANTHRA KOLIYER

newer wheels and has made many changes to his cart since he purchased it. This has helped him stay in the business.

He changes his horse every two years (male or female). A horse costs him Rs.15,000. For the first 10 days, he trains the animal. He calls his horse "Raja". He names every horse he rides. "It creates a bond", he says.

Subramanian charges Rs. 50 per ride for four persons. His income is around Rs. 100-150 every day. He pays Rs. 1,000 as tax and licence every year, to park his cart at the

railway station. Subramanian is well versed in Hindi, thanks to the north Indian tourists who through the pilgrim town.

He says proudly, "I'm very famous in Rameswaram. I have appeared in TV interviews, and my photo has come in newspapers."

Looking at Subramanian, one cannot but recall the words of A.R. Venkatachalapathy, professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies, "Given how quickly Tamil Nadu is urbanising, protecting our culture is tricky, as it often flies in the face of new aspirations."

Karankadu eco-tourism, step forward for locals

RAHUL MANOJ

Thondi: Karankadu is a hub of colours as brown boats, white birds, blue backwaters and green mangroves congregate at East Coast Road, Thondi. The economic development of fishermen and conservation of rare species were the main objectives of the eco-tourism project introduced by the officials of the Gulf of Mannar National Park in August 2017.

"I was engaged only in fishing earlier but this project has given me an additional income of Rs 400 per day," says Sengol Rajasekhar, 55, of Pudukattinam fishing village. He ferries tourists on the island.

His income from the project, which is around Rs 12,000 a month, touches upto Rs 40,000 in April-May.

The initiative has benefitted the fishermen community in other ways too. Self-employment opportunities have increased, says Vijaya Baskar, a Forest Watcher. Activities like kayaking and snorkelling have been introduced

for tourists but heavy rain played spoilsport last year. "There were only 20-30 tourists a day in July 2019 due to heavy rain but the number has increased to 100 per day now", says Rajasekhar.

Only one boat is available to ferry the tourists, as the other boat is under repair. Despite multiple representations to the government, no steps have been taken, says Rajasekhar. A boat can ferry a maximum of 15 people at a time and tourists are unhappy if there are delays.

It is interesting to see natural mangroves on one side and artificial mangroves on the other, built by the forest department to attract more footfall.

Asked about the water shortage in the nearby areas, Baskar says, a borewell was built at the cost of Rs 30,00,000 by the corporation but it was a total failure. "Pipelines increase water consumption and tourists suffer as there is less water." Mandatory rainwater harvesting for all hamlets can solve the crisis, he feels.

The Thadupu Sevaru (compound wall) which was to be built after the 2004 tsunami is yet to materialise. Baskar says the wall will be useful for identification and can help the fishermen return home safely.

Situated at a distance of 3 to 4 km is a 40-foot watchtower on the Kuvaangu Island that monitors criminal activities such as trespassing and smuggling in the 900 square metre region. Baskar, who was involved in raids earlier, says cases filed for poaching rare species such as sea horse have increased.

The fines have increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 50,000. But the forest department is under-staffed and it is tough to monitor activities at night in the absence of lighting. The lighthouse is also dysfunctional. On the flipside, the scope of eco-tourism is bright in Karankadu, thanks to the aggressive promotion by the Eco-Development Committee of the Forest Department.

Faith drives centuries-old dargah

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Erwadi: The Erwadi dargah in Ramanathapuram district has been in existence for 950 years. It is famous for faith healing. People affected by "black magic" and "satanic illnesses" and their families through the place in the hope of getting cured.

Currently, the 16th generation of Al Qutub Hamid wal Gausul Majid Badhusha Sultan Syed Ibrahim Shaheed is handling the administration of the dargah.

The 950-year-old dargah is considered a haven for mental patients.

Many families leave their mentally challenged relatives at the doorstep of the dargah and go away. For believers, the dargah is the solution to all their illnesses.

Besides people from Tamil Nadu, devotees from Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, cutting across religions, visit the dargah.

The administration record reads, 50% of the patients are from Kerala.

But Buddhists do not come here. Syeed Ismail, one of the administrators, says, "Hindus use other measures and keep the dargah



Erwadi dargah, Ramanathapuram | MANTHRA KOLIYER

as their last resort." Most of the residents are women and infants.

The only form of medicine provided in the dargah is sugar crystal with water. People who suffer from physical pain are given oil that is considered "blessed."

The Tamil Nadu government recently built a hospital on the land donated by the dargah's trust.

The hospital has been active since 2014, and has a rehabilitation centre. Alcoholics and others who can be cured medically are transferred to the hospital.

The patients at the rehab centre are made to do light work like basket making.

Hospital officials say, "The work keeps their minds diverted."

Forty-five-year-old Selvi* has been in the dargah for years now. She was left at the dargah by her son-in-law since she would run to the sea every day and not want to return.

After years of prayers, she says she has now been cured but is waiting for the time to return.

According to the norms of the dargah, patients can only leave when they feel they've been cured completely.

Syyed Ismail says, "The watchman of the dargah was also a patient a few years ago. Today he is fit and fine and serves happily"

What drives the people and the dargah is 'faith'. (*Name has been changed.)

Homes turn into lodges, eateries

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: Roadside eateries and those operating outside homes, are aplenty in Rameswaram for visiting pilgrims.

"November to December is the Sabarimalai season and that is when we do a lot of business" say couple A. Velmurugan and V. Madhavi, owners of Hotel Velan in the Agni Theertham Street. "Apart from this, we see huge crowds during the annual school vacations."

Even houses have been turned into low cost lodges for pilgrims.

"On the East Street, out of approximate 400 households having a ration card, 60%-70% are running as cottages, and in the roughly 1,200 houses with voter identification cards, 50% are running as cottages," says D. Karthikeyan of Ishwarya Lodge, Agni Theertham Street.

The official number

According to K. Lingavel, Food Safety Officer of Rameswaram, "there are 355 eateries in the town and approximately 50% of them don't have the mandatory food safety licence to run an eatery."

Demonetization & GST, a twin attack

KRATI PURWAR & V. GANESH

Rameswaram/Dhanushkodi: Even while experts are worried about the slowing down of Indian economy, fishermen here continue to struggle with cash crunch, reduced labour, and high diesel prices - the aftermath of demonetization and the Goods and Services Tax.

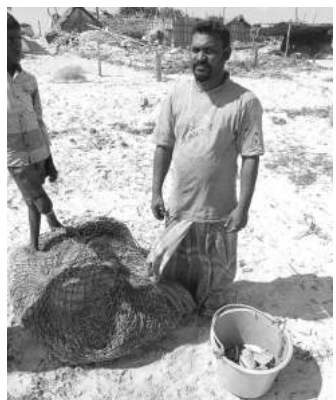
When the fishermen lost their business for a continuous period of four to five months after demonetization, other businesses that depended on fisheries were also adversely affected. Due to lesser flow of cash in the market, nearly 30-40 per cent of their business dwindled.

Hike in excise duty

The fisher folks somehow overcame the cash flow crisis. Now, it is GST that has become a larger issue. It is levied on all equipment. In 2019 alone, the Central government increased the excise duty three times, says Nathan, a 33-year-old fisherman.

He says during the UPA government, a barrel of diesel was bought at \$140 and sold at around Rs. 44 a litre in India. But after the NDA came to power, the cost of a barrel has reduced to \$90 while the price of diesel, along with tax, has increased to Rs. 73 a litre.

This is despite the consumption of diesel remaining the same. Depending on the size, boats



Sankar at Dhanushkodi harbour | V. GANESH

consume around 600-1000 litres of diesel every day, says Sesuraja, head of Fishermen's Association.

Nathan says 70 per cent of the money the fishermen earn is spent on diesel and 20 per cent on ice, wages and maintenance. The rest is their monthly income.

According to his friend Sankar, fishermen lack knowledge about bank loans, money transfers, etc. Balamurugan informs us that since banks insist on some known person for granting loans, Maari, an educated fisherman, has got half of the loans approved for them.

Fishing industry is an informal sector where labour demands to be paid in cash. Due to cash crunch, availability of labour has declined.

Fishermen in the Dhanushkodi Harbour earn only Rs. 3,000-4,000 a month after meeting the expenses on motorboats and fuel.

Fond memories of Abdul Kalam

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: The A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Memorial here is flooded with people. "We are proud of the memorial," says S. Karthika who has come with fellow student M. Ramamurthy to visit the memorial. Both of them are students of SIT College, Ramanathapuram, pursuing a diploma in lab technology.

K.G. Derekar of Pune, who is here with his friend Ruhidas Ramachandra Kodhre, says: "The description in English along with Tamil is useful" for people like him who come from outside Tamil Nadu. Another Pune resident, 70-year-old P.M. Bhagat, was all praise for the missile man. Bhagat was particularly happy about the free entry to the memorial.

J. Sheik Saleem, grand-nephew of Kalam, who lives a few kilometers away in their ancestral house, has fond memories of the former President. "The memorial was made in nine months," he says. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds him [Kalam] in high regard. Theirs was a personal friendship."

Saleem recalls Kalam's two visits to Rameswaram as President. "He instructed the police not to stop anyone from visiting him in his house."

However, intelligence had been collected before his visits, the waters of Rameswaram blocked by the Navy, and a no-fly zone created by the Air Force. "Only military helicopters were allowed to fly when Kalam was in Rameswaram," Saleem said.

Toddy tapping, no longer lucrative

ANSHUL GUPTA

Thamaraikulam: "I am not proud that my son is a doctor, as toddy tapping is in our blood. My father, my grandfather... all of them were involved in tapping," says S. Balasingam, Chairman of the Tamil Nadu State Palmgur Cooperative Federation.

There are more than 720 primary societies of toddy tappers (or panayaris) across Tamil Nadu, of which 96 are in Ramanathapuram, which has the highest concentration of palm trees in the State.

"Comprising around 7,000-9,000 members, these societies exist for the welfare of the tappers and their families. Most of the tappers are landless migrant farmers who settle near the palm tree areas from February to September, which is the season for tapping," he said.

Toddy tapping was never a lucrative profession and a ban on it has further dampened any chances of its revival. It has been banned on the ground that it intoxicates, which is ironical because liquor is sold in Tamil Nadu government outlets.

When tapping toddy liquor was not banned, the government used to help the tappers through programmes like Haritha Haram (Plantation of Palm trees), raising money through auctions, etc.

According to Mr. Balasingam, income for toddy tappers has become a challenge after the ban. "A tapper used to earn Rs. 100-300 a day, depending on the number of trees he tapped. This was not enough but as they say, something is better than nothing," he says.



T. Kamaraja, M. Subramaniam and S. Balasingam (Right) Murugandi, the blind toddy tapper from Thamaraikulam | KRATI PURWAR

Some tappers go on to work as coolies, drivers, etc. but the community wants the profession to be revived, which is possible only if toddy tapping is legalised.

Women in the family, apart from separating the distilled portion of the toddy sap, also involve themselves in the sales of the articles made of the palm tree leaves, such as bags, caps, fans, seats, etc. of which prices start from Rs. 50. The articles made from palm leaves are not very durable but still the women sell to make the ends meet.

The government doesn't give sufficient funds for the sustenance of this profession, because of which even the primary societies are shutting down.

Most of the tappers belong to the Nadar community. They start tapping quite early in life. "There is a 92-year-old man doing it, there's a blind man who did it for a long

time. So you see, the passion which people have for the profession is such that no one wants to leave it, but when they are cornered, they don't have any other choice but to leave it," claims Balasingam.

Tappers are trapped in a conundrum. They don't want to leave the profession but they have to earn a living.

There are licensing issues, since only a licensed person can climb a tree. The societies have become helpless as the government isn't doing much.

The tappers wait for the February sun every year, in the hope that things will change.

Story of strength

Murugandi is blind by birth. Amid the bushes and off a narrow road in the Thamaraikulam village, the 58-year old man sits near the entrance of his house in the evening

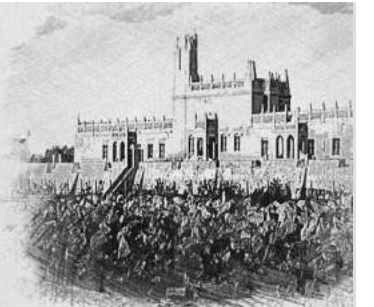
sun. Murugandi was 12 when he started tapping toddy.

He doesn't belong to the Nadar community, so it was more difficult for him to start. "I learnt it on my own, on the field," says Murugandi.

He last tapped in 2009, after he spent 39 years palm climbing. The ban on toddy has only worsened his plight.

He has two daughters. Although Murugandi gets some income from the MGNREGS, it is not enough for the education of the girls. Television news channels and other media outlets often visit him. Some have even undertaken to educate his daughters.

Last week, a news channel came on a visit to see him on the job. Despite being out of practice for over 10 years, he showcased his skill to the best of his abilities.



Where are the weavers?

None left to take the handloom tradition of Thillaiyadi forward

ABHIRUPA KUNDU
S. SHIVANAND

Thillaiyadi: The Kamadika Thuru lies deserted as weavers of Thillaiyadi have retired or shifted. The parts of the wooden handloom machine are strewn around. The yarns of vibrant, colourful "pattu" (silk) have been forgotten as machine made sarees have taken over the market.

"Every house in the street had a handloom machine, with women, men and children engaged in weaving," recalled G. Durairaj, as he sat in his stationery shop, his current occupation that he is not interested in.

K. Paneerselvam, who was a weaver for four years, said after leaving the business, he taught handloom weaving to children at the Valliammai Higher Secondary School in Thillaiyadi, where he worked as an art teacher for 10 years.

Once a weaver, Durairaj (70) talked about how the business declined with time, from 2010. Weaving "pattu" sarees had been his ancestral business. From the age of 12, he first helped his father and then started his own business at 39, employing 20 women. The women worked in pairs on one material for a week.

Initially, he earned a meagre Rs. 30 per saree, which gradually



Settle, weaving machine (top), N. Veerasamy, weaver (bottom left) and G. Durairaj, weaver (Bottom right)
| ABHIRUPA KUNDU

increased to Rs.300 during the 1990s but, as the demand declined, he started earning lesser.

When asked about the increasing price of sarees and thread looms along the years Durairaj said, "Both gold and silver are used to make the borders (Jarigai) of a pattu saree. They are bought from Surat, Gujarat. Whenever there is a hike in gold and silver prices, the jarigai prices also increase."

"But the masters in Kumbakonam never increase our pay. It takes around a week to complete a saree and we are paid around Rs 300-500 for one saree," he added. N. Veerasamy (78),

another weaver, was involved in handloom weaving till 2015. He was the last in the village to give up

Both gold and silver are used to make the borders (Jarigai) of a pattu saree. They are bought from Surat, Gujarat. Whenever, there is a hike in gold and silver prices the jarigai prices also increase.

the tradition. "When I started, there were around 50 families in Thillaiyadi, who were in this business. The business started

declining gradually around 2010. I continued till 2015 but I couldn't sustain it," he said.

Veerasamy brings hand-woven sarees from Kumbakonam and sells them in areas around Thillaiyadi and Thirukadayur. "Weaving is the only job I know. Even after I stopped weaving, I wanted to be part of the tradition," he said.

The increasing cost of silk and cotton thread looms was the main reason for the extinction of the weaving tradition in Thillaiyadi, he said. "The masters of this business are in Kumbakonam, they used to buy the thread looms and supply them to weavers in Kumbakonam, Kanchipuram and Thillaiyadi. We made sarees and sent them back to the owners. We worked as daily wagers. In the 1990s, when the business was at its peak, we were paid around Rs. 300 for a silk saree and Rs. 200 for a cotton saree. The wages later reduced," he added.

Veerasamy suggested that the government should take a census of the existing weavers in Tamil Nadu and allot some crores to help them. "When the business comes under the government, more weavers will be benefited and more shops like Co-optex will function which will help in saving this dying tradition," he said. Durairaj added that interest free loans to the weavers might help them in recovering from their current plight.

Wage delays mar employment guarantee

MGNREGS payment comes after two months

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Thillaiyadi: For three months every year, 60-year-old Balakrishnan works thrice a week in his paddy fields at the Thillaiyadi village near Tharagambadi, and the remaining days in someone else's fields. But once he finishes harvesting the crop in January, he doesn't know what to do for the rest of the year.

"I have built shamanias for weddings, sometimes even huts for people like me. I also stitch coconut leaves to earn money," he said. Asked about the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), he shook his head. "No, I won't go there. People who work there get paid after two months," he added.

Thillaiyadi panchayat officials admitted that the MGNREGS, which aims to provide 100 days of employment to every household, has had its share of instances of late disbursement. "If funds are available, the payments are done within 10 days. But sometimes there is a lack of funds," said Kalavelan, People Welfare Officer at the panchayat. Which might explain Balakrishnan's reluctance. He is not alone. Dhanapal (52),



Sita, a brick kiln worker | ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

a farmer who owns over five acres of land in the village, cultivates paddy and black gram for three months each. Even he does not seek work under MGNREGS, preferring to work in construction.

"Men in farms don't go for that kind of work, only women do. My wife goes for it as well," he said. According to him, payments came in for five to eight days of work at Rs. 150 a day, since work available under the scheme was never in one long stretch of the promised 100 days. Dhanapal's claim of women seeking work under MGNREGS

was seconded by panchayat officials. Applications for registration under the scheme were last sought in 2016-17, when 801 people had applied for the MGNREGS card. Kalavelan confirmed that most of the applicants were women.

"Men don't apply as they prefer jobs such as carpentry, masonry and construction, which pay more. It's ideal for women as the work of cleaning streets and temples is mostly in the village, so they don't have to travel too far," he said.

Sita (30), who works primarily as a labourer in a brick kiln, supplements her income through work in farms and MGNREGS.

"I get paid close to Rs.700-800 a week under MGNREGS, much lesser than my daily wages in the kiln or the fields. But the payment takes up to a month," she said.

Jiva (35) and her husband Peter (40) work as farmhands in harvest season, but do weeding and desilting of farms as part of MGNREGS. Peter said it was easy money, despite payment lags.

"We get work for a maximum of 25 to 30 days in a year under this scheme. But the work gets done in a couple of hours at most, which suits us fine," he added.

Deserted Dalits of Poochathanur



Children crossing the wooden bridge built by the residents in Poochathanur | S.SHIVANAND

S.SHIVANAND

Thiruvaidakazhi: About four kilometres from the village of Thillaiyadi lays a small Dalit village, Poochathanur, housing around 40 families. The deserted village is located on the outskirts of Thillaiyadi, with no link to the main village.

A narrow path between two paddy fields leads us to the village from Thillaiyadi. The path can be travelled only by foot and two-wheelers. There is no direct bus facility to the village. Halfway through the road, one has to remove his or her slippers to cross ankle-deep mud and knee-deep stagnant water.

There are two sides to Poochathanur, divided by a water passage. There is a weak wooden bridge built by the residents to cross over. Residents of the village have been living here since their ancestors' times and most of them are related to one another.

The village comes under the Thiruvaidakazhi taluk, which is 4 km from the village. Though their livelihood is near Thillaiyadi, the villagers go to Thiruvaidakazhi for buying ration and other facilities.

Children have to cross the path between the fields to reach their schools every day. They leave home two hours before school to reach in time.

"Due to the muddy path, children often fall and skip school," said M. Asaithambi, who left his job as an agricultural labourer and recently started working as an autorickshaw driver due to better

pay. There is another main road to the village, but it takes an extra 2 km to reach Thillaiyadi. During rains, people use that road. The nearest bus stop on that road is 3 km away.

Most of the people living here are agricultural labourers who work on the paddy fields in Thillaiyadi and Thiruvaidakazhi.

"We have only four months of agricultural work, that too depends on rain. The rest of the months we remain jobless or our men go for construction jobs," said M. Kayalvizhi. Most of the residents

"We have only four months of agricultural work, that too it depends on rain. The rest of the months we remain jobless or our men go for construction jobs."

- M. Kayalvizhi

are part of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). They are usually sent for construction work, sanitation work and agricultural work. They are paid around Rs 150-200 as daily wages.

"I am yet to be paid for the work I did three months ago under the scheme. We don't get continuous work for 100 days, we still remain unemployed for most of the months in a year," said K. Rani, who is currently unemployed.

A. Kalaimagal, a newly-elected ward member here, said the government had not fully supported the village's development.

"Only two families have got houses under the AMMA solar powerhouse scheme, which are half-built. Just 10 houses have toilets under the Swachh Bharat scheme, that too without water," she said.

Rage against the machines

APOORVA SUDHAKAR
ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Kahiyappanallur: The driver parked the mini truck beside the brick kiln's furnace chamber. Two women jumped out and started loading the broken bricks on to the truck, their hands swinging with ease.

Thud. Thump. Thud. The truck started filling up as the two remained engrossed in conversation, while their hands kept tossing the bricks with clockwork precision.

Latha (36) and Sundari (30) have been working at MKB Chamber Bricks, Kahiyappanallur, for 10 years. "We usually work in and around the furnace. We separate the good bricks from the damaged ones," said Latha, without taking a break from her work.

Though MKB is a mechanised brick kiln, most tasks require manual labour. The women in the factory unload the machine-baked bricks and stack them for drying.

The bricks are then transferred to another shed for further drying, after which they are transferred to a mini truck to be taken to the furnace. Here, women unload the bricks and hand them over to a mason, who arranges them in a particular pattern.

"We pay the women, who do most of the light manual work, Rs. 350 a day. Men operate the



Latha offers manual labour for eight hours a day | ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

machinery and get paid Rs. 500 a day," said M. Kaliyamoorthy, owner of MKB Chamber Bricks. Asked about the difference in the pay, given that the women shouldered most of the manual labour, he insisted it was strictly due to the nature of work.

Sita (30), who works at MKB, said when the workers needed finances over and above their wages, the owner allowed them to borrow up to 10000. But the repayment schedule was steep. "Those who have taken a loan get only three months to repay it. Depending upon the amount, the

owner deducts weekly instalments from the wages," she added.

Wage gaps do not exist in manual kilns. Paramasivam (37), who owns a brick kiln in the Thillaiyadi village nearby, employs three persons and pays them per brick. "They get 80 paise for every brick they make," he said. However, two of his kiln workers, Peter (40) and Jiva (35), said they also worked as agricultural labourers to supplement their income.

P. Ganeshan (55), from Karaikal commutes daily here, owns a brick kiln that has 10 workers. He highlighted how the whole setup was dependent on sunny weather, else costs would go up. "The usual season for us is between January

"We pay the women, who do most of the light manual work, Rs. 350 a day. Men operate the machinery and get paid Rs. 500 a day, - M. Kaliyamoorthy"

and September, even October if it does not rain. The wet bricks need to be dried in the sun before we put them in the kiln for baking. If it rains, it takes more time to make the same number of bricks."

None to pass on my talent: Thillaiyadi art master

ASHREYA PATIAL
SANCHARI SAMANTA

Thillaiyadi: Paneerselvam (82) spends time riding his brakeless cycle across Thillaiyadi. He was an art teacher until 1997. He is adept at drawing, paper work, kolam making, handloom, and even acting. "The authorities feel it is not necessary to have an art master. The post of the art master in the school was never filled after I left it," said the retired teacher.

Paneerselvam, a self-trained actor worked in the Tamil film, Parashakti (1952), as a child actor.

"I was posted in Vadakari, which is 20 km from my village. After work, I would go to practise acting without telling my family. I would get scolded but I loved acting. Now, when I try to teach my



Paneerselvam holding his own picture | ASHREYA PATIAL

grandchildren acting or art, they show no interest," he said.

Unlike acting, drawing happened

to him when a friend pushed him to find a job. He filled the vacancy of an art master in a school and learnt art while teaching.

Learning drawing enhanced his theatre display, as he could now design his stage props. With time, his family came to accept his choice. He recites a five-minute monologue, which he delivered on stage when he played the female friend of Kannagi, the legendary character from the play *Silappathikaram*. He would dress up as a woman, as Tamil theatre had no female actors at that time.

Paneerselvam's career might have stopped but his art lives on, through his very few students in and around the village. Shanbagum (64), one of his favourite students, thrives in his carpentry business. Predominantly engaged with huge

machines, he works almost through the day in an extended space at the backyard of his concrete house.

"I used to travel 20 km to practise acting. Now, when I try to teach my grandchildren acting or art, they show no interest."

- Paneerselvam

Age and weakness come in Shanbagum's way of delivering his orders in time. He hires local carpenters for Rs. 600 a day to assist him, especially during wedding and festival seasons. He said: "People come in search of me

Thillaiyadi villagers leave in search of greener pastures

ABHIRUPA KUNDU

Thillaiyadi: Many residents of this village migrate to foreign countries in search of better livelihoods. Some of them also work as contractual labour for companies who send them abroad for some time.

The villagers generally migrate to the Gulf countries, besides Singapore and Malaysia, said R. Vinayak Murthi (39), who worked as a labourer in a Dubai oil and gas company.

There were not much job opportunities here and the pay was meagre. "People work abroad as masons, marine labour. Some also do farming and other agriculture related work."

Sumathi, a resident, said she had to manage her household and her two children by herself since her husband Karman had migrated to Dubai three months ago. The opportunity came to him through her cousin who was already working there as a farmer and gardener.

She said she had pawned her jewellery to buy 14,400 square feet of land worth Rs 3 lakhs. She grows groundnuts and sells them to neighbours or friends. Her husband

works as a mason in Dubai and earns Rs 20,000 a month, out of which he sends home Rs. 15,000.

Most of the people who migrate to gulf countries work in oil reserves there. They go in contracts as they are not given citizenship in GCC countries. The people who migrate to Malaysia and Singapore work in farmlands and ship yards.

P. Rajashekar (34) worked as mason for a year in Dubai. He earned Rs 35,000 a month. He sent most of it home. "There is no work here, the pay is very less. Many of my friends and relatives went abroad in search of work. I got the idea from them," he said.

The working conditions, he said, were a lot better in Dubai. He was provided with safety shoes, gloves, helmet, and goggles while working in the buildings, whereas construction workers in India were not given proper equipment. Nor did the company take any liability in case of an accident.

Rajashekar paid Rs 45,000 to an agent who arranged for the job. "It included the amount required for visa, passport and other paperwork," he said.

Shanbagum does not want his children to continue his business. "My son and daughter are educated. My son works in CTC, Chennai, as a software engineer."

S. Subramani (61), a student of AKM School, where Paneerselvam taught, used to work as a drawing master in Janakya Ramachandran Kalalaya school in T Nagar in Chennai.

Suffering from heart disease, he had to quit his job in Chennai and return to Thillaiyadi where he had hired teachers for the children to take tuition but the students never turned up.

According to Subramani, Kanadigar street has the largest number of painters in Thillaiyadi but students now are not interested in art and culture.

'We follow samathuvam here'

Residents at Samathuvapuram claim that caste and class do not matter to them

APOORVA SUDHAKAR
ASHREYA PATIAL

Kattuchery: The arch over the entrance at Kattuchery's Samathuvapuram sports a temple gopuram, a cross and a crescent with stars symbolising unity among the three religions. Ravi Chandran and his neighbours are sitting on the street under the scorching sun, chatting away, while children play nearby. This is their routine.

Samathuvapuram, a housing scheme, was launched in 1998 by the Tamil Nadu government under Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. Literally translating to "equality village," Tamil Nadu has established 145 Samathuvapurams, each with 100 houses. The government started the Samathuvapuram scheme to include people from different communities. Homeless people, mostly from the Scheduled Castes (SC) and the Other Backward Classes (OBC), were identified and provided shelter and basic amenities.

According to the scheme, people who live in "houses with mud walls with thatched roof, brick walls with thatched roof, mud walls with tiled roof, and brick walls with tiled roof" are given preference in the same order.

Most residents in the Kattuchery Samathuvapuram were relocated in



Entrance to Kattuchery's Samathuvapuram depicting equality and unity among different communities | ASHREYA PATIAL

2000 from the nearby Nagappan Nagar, a colony mainly meant for Dalits of the area. The colony also houses Christians and Muslims, mostly belonging to the OBC category.

"The most downtrodden families were moved to this Samathuvapuram and the concept of samathuvam succeeded," claims Ravi, a daily wagger who has been working in Kozhikode for 17 years. His wife Malarkodi recently won the local body elections and the couple are in a celebratory mood.

"The DMK initiated the concept. Every time the AIADMK comes to power, developments in Samathuvapuram are put on hold until the DMK comes to power again," she says.

Samathuvapuram, as a provision under the scheme, must have adequate water supply, a ration shop, and fine roads. Patta, or the title deed, is issued in the name of the woman of the house.

Prabhu, a boy in his 20s, says the concept of a samathuvapuram was introduced to honour Periyar's

ideals of social justice and equality.

But the residents of Nagappan Nagar, most of whom are not in contact with the people who were relocated, believe that the upper caste residents of Samathuvapuram do not mingle with the ones belonging to the lower castes.

On the lane parallel to Ravi's house live Mahadevi and her family. They were relocated in 2000. Her daughter, Kanimozhi, remarks "Samathuvam? Yes, but..." and breaks off when her mother interrupts.

"We had no proper house in Nagappan Nagar. Nobody there stopped us from moving. Without a doubt, there were space constraints too over there. Here we live in harmony. That is enough," says Mahadevi, and Kanimozhi sighs. The Panchayat Union Middle School in Samathuvapuram tries to uphold the harmony.

G. Usha Rani, the headmistress of the school, says "Children in this school come from Hindu, Muslim and Christian families. Most of them belong to the SC and OBC categories. They all follow the common religion of samathuvam. All the students sit together here." The school has a total of 154 students in classes 1-6, of which 71 are boys and 73 are girls.

There are separate classrooms for all classes. The noon-meal scheme is a full-fledged one here.

There are separate toilets for boys and girls.

"But we do not have a compound wall or an incinerator. It is easy for anyone to come in or any child to walk out."

Except for the school's infrastructural problem, the people of Samathuvapuram seem satisfied.

Inside Samathuvapuram, they are one, and they claim that caste and class do not matter to them. But are such pocket establishments enough to spread the message of equality?

It's a content community life

ABHIRUPA KUNDU

Kattuchery: Malarkodi has been a resident of Samathuvapuram for 20 years since the houses were built in the settlement under the Tamil Nadu government's social equality scheme. In 2019, she won the local body elections against three men and became a member of Ward 2 in the Kattuchery panchayat area. She won 85 votes out of 300.

Malarkodi (45) came from Thirupariyalur, Sembarkoil, a town in Tharangambadi taluk. She had studied up to Class 10. "I want our children to get educated so that they don't suffer like us," she said. "The government expects us to get educated but doesn't provide jobs. You need a bribe and a recommendation to get employed," she added.

Her husband, Ravi Chandran, has been working as a daily wagger for 17 years in Kozhikode, Kerala. Malarkodi and her elder son work at their paddy field. She supports her widowed sister and mother, who shifted here after her brother and father died. She also takes care of her daughter Devi, who was beaten daily by her husband under the influence of alcohol and returned to stay with her. Devi trained as a nurse but is not working.

Malarkodi said she liked living



Newly elected ward member, Malarkodi | ABHIRUPA

in a community without discrimination. Along with houses, the area has an Anganwadi, a community hall, playground, primary school and a ration shop. A stadium also exists for sports activities.

Most of the residents do not use the bathroom as it is inside the house. Some have turned it into a puja room. She said that the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan scheme did not come to their help. Many of them had built separate bathrooms outside their homes or defecated in the open when they went to work in the morning. The anganwadis provide sanitary napkins to children from Class 8-12. There are no electricity and water supply issues.

Caste adds to Jaya's woes

SANCHARI SAMANTA



Jayavally | SANCHARI SAMANTA

Thillaiyadi: While the other households of the Valliammai Nagar Dalit colony get ready to celebrate Pongal, Jayavally amma returns from the fields, humming songs that narrate old stories of women farmers.

It has been at least three months since Jayavally slept. The image of her elder son lying in a pool of blood with nerves pulled apart disturbs her all day long.

Shivakumar J, her son, a college student in Porayar and part-time farmer, was in love with a non-Dalit girl for two years. Jayavally claims that the two received several threats from the upper castes. Depressed, Shivakumar committed suicide.

51-year-old Jayavally, with her hair in an untidy knot, is small built. She is mostly engaged in chasing her four chickens and slamming a board over the disobedient ones.

She says, "They [the upper castes] didn't allow me to take my son's body to the burning ghat because we needed to travel through a common path in the village."

Jayavally has been working as an anganwadi helper in a Dalit primary school since her husband died in an accident in 2000. Her monthly income is Rs.4000.

Her 21-year-old young son hardly comes home, as he works as a lorry cleaner in Andhra Pradesh.

She has now taken up farming in a plot for an extra income of Rs.50 a day.

"The government could provide the plots to only 30 households in this colony of 150. The mixer-grinder and the table fan stopped working after a month," she adds.

Sumeetha S, another resident of the colony, says that Dalit widows receive Rs. 1000 every month from the government.

"But the money is insufficient for us, as most of us have to spend a lot on medicines," she adds.

Caste follows them in death

S SHIVANAND

Thillaiyadi: Caste is a major dividing factor in many rural areas of India. Thillaiyadi, the hometown of famous freedom fighter Valliammai, is no exception. Valliammai fought with Gandhiji against the discrimination of deprived Indians in South Africa. Ironically, in her hometown, there are two separate colonies for Dalits.

A small colony in the main part of the village is Valliammai Nagar where houses were built for Dalits under the DMK rule in 1970. Another area is Nagappan Nagar, housing up to 500 families.

Most of the people living in the colonies are uneducated and daily wage workers. People in Nagappan Nagar don't own their land. They work as agricultural labourers and a few earn a living under the MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme).

"The land belongs to an upper caste rich family which gave it to our ancestors who worked as agricultural labourers for them," said M. Kalavani (55), who has been living in the village for 35 years since her marriage.

Men and women are paid differently. "Men get around Rs. 300-400 per day whereas we get only around Rs. 150-200. Men are also preferred in better paying construction work where they get paid up to Rs. 500 a day," she added.

When asked about the reason behind the difference in the payments, Kalavani said, "When

we ask the employers about this they say that men come to work early in the morning so they get paid more. But, we can't go to work at seven in the morning as we have to get our children ready for school and prepare breakfast."

Inter-caste marriages are opposed by the people of Thillaiyadi. One example is that of S. Preetha* belonging to Nagappan Nagar. She recently got married to

The Dalits of Thillaiyadi, like the oppressed sections of other districts, face discrimination even after their death, as there is a separate burial ground for them.

an upper caste man.

She said, "I was just 19 and my husband was 22 when we got married. We had to get married early as my in-laws found out about our love affair and threatened my husband, pressuring him to marry an upper caste girl."

After Preetha got married, her husband's family threatened to kill them, she alleged.

"So we shifted to my house. It has been two years since we got married and we have a child. Even

now, my husband's parents refuse to talk to us," she said.

G. Vasudev (43) of Nagappan Nagar, who is working as a bus driver in a private college in Chennai, said the Dalits of the village were treated much worse than they were in the late 1980s and 90s. "The upper caste people we used to work for treated us as untouchables. They used to keep separate plates and didn't allow anyone, other than those who worked as maids in their houses, into their homes."

People of Nagappan Nagar face water problem frequently. In such cases, they have to travel 3 km to fetch water. Another major problem they face is unemployment for educated youths. K. Rajalakshmi (20), an English literature graduate, said this was another reason for early marriages of girls in this village.

K. Lakshmi, Rajalakshmi's mother said, "Our position as slaves in the '80s and '90s was changed only when some of our people got educated. We understand the value of education and despite poverty, we manage to provide education to our children. Earlier, we had to agree with whatever the government officials said when we approached them with our queries but now, the educated youngsters know how to ask questions."

The Dalits of Thillaiyadi, like the oppressed sections of other districts, face discrimination even after their death, as there is a separate burial ground for them.

(*Name changed)

AN ACHIEVER SPEAKS

First Under-19 cricketer of Nagapattinam dreams big

S SHIVANAND

Thillaiyadi: The village recently came under the spotlight when the South African cricketer, Senuran Muthusamy, claimed Nagapattinam district as his origin, which was traced back to this village. Another contribution to the game by the village was J. Jayakumar, the first Under-19 cricketer from Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu state team.

Jayakumar (32) is currently working as a Social Science teacher at the Valliammai Higher Secondary School in Thillaiyadi. He is also the cricket coach for the school team.

He started his cricket career when he was 15. He did his schooling from the Hamidia Boys Government Higher Secondary School in Thirukkallachery.

His father, K. Jagadeesan, was a farmer and his mother, J. Abirami, was a homemaker. Another cricketer from his family is his brother J. Rajkumar, who works as a teacher in a private school at Thirukadaiyur. His wife J. Illavarasi is also a teacher and they have twin daughters, Sivanya and Sivani.

Kapil Dev and Sachin Tendulkar were Jayakumar's inspiration to



J. Jayakumar | S. SHIVANAND

step into cricket. His first break came when he and his brother got selected in the district team, after he hit a half-century in an inter-school cricket tournament.

"My game improved when I was playing for the district team. When I played an inter-district selection match, where around 300-400 people participated, district secretary Julius Vjay Kumar encouraged me a lot," said Jayakumar.

Talking about support from his parents, he said, "Cricket is a costly game. My father couldn't afford the white tracks, shoes and cricket kit. I used to help my father with farming and my mother in household work to get money for my kit."

"In fact, the first pair of white shoes that I wore for training after getting selected to the district team

was a borrowed one," he added.

Recalling the most interesting match he played early in his career, he said during an inter-district match against Thiruvannamalai, his team's score was 80 for 7 wickets.

He and his brother got down as the 8th and 9th batsmen and finished the innings at 240 for 9. That match got him huge recognition and served as one of the main reasons for his selection in the U-19 team.

When his shoulder got dislocated in a bike accident, his coach asked him to make use of the time to concentrate on his studies. Jayakumar graduated in history from the S.R. K.V. College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore, and also completed his B.Ed.

Due to his injury and the financial situation of his family, he couldn't continue his cricket career. He passed the CTET (Central Teacher Eligibility Test) and started working as a teacher.

"One of the best lessons that sports can teach you is to face failure and move on. Even if I couldn't pursue my career in cricket, my education backed me and, here I am, training young students in the game," said Jayakumar. His aim is to open a cricket academy for rural talent.

Tharangambadi's Requiem for a Railroad drags on

Petitions for reviving the line to Mayiladuthurai yet to bear fruit

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Tharangambadi: In a song sequence from T. Rajender's acclaimed 1980 romance movie Oru Thalai Raagam, the protagonist Raja (played by Tamil actor Shankar) croons, "Koodayila karuvadu, koonthalile pookadu" (dry fish in the basket, flowers in her hair). Shot on the erstwhile Mayiladuthurai-Tharangambadi railway line, the lyrics remind Tharangambadi resident Veronica Raphael (63) what the train compartments always smelled like.

"They were shooting [the movie] here when I first came to Tharangambadi from Chennai in 1979. I remember taking the train to Mayiladuthurai so that I could go home for Christmas," she said.

More than three decades since the Southern Railways shut down the line between Mayiladuthurai and Tharangambadi in December 1986 citing unprofitability, many old residents have been petitioning the government to restart the 28-km long service that was started in 1926.

M.A. Sultan (70), who owns the popular Danish Shop in Tharangambadi, initiated a campaign back in 2011. Collecting signatures of residents from places like Porayar, Thillaiyadi, Thirukadaiyur and Sembarkoil which used to be stations on the railway line, he has been vocal about the need to revive the train service.

"We formed a citizens' group and wrote to everyone, including



Erstwhile Tharangambadi Railway Station | ABHINAV

the President of India and the Railway Ministry, of course. We even received responses that they had arrived at an estimated project cost," he said, as he flipped through the pages of a folder with copies of

petitions, official responses, and cuttings from newspapers chronicling the progress made.

In March 2019, a Times of India report had quoted Southern Railways officials claiming that

work would start soon. But Sultan was not too optimistic.

"All these letters over the years, they have been of no use. Every year, we hope that there will be an announcement in the Railway budget. But it never happens," he said.

According to P.A. Maria Lazar, a retired professor from Porayar who has written a short chronicle of the history of Tharangambadi called Tales of Tranquebar, the closure of the line had a deep impact.

"There were 10 services (six passenger and four cargo) throughout the day. It was very convenient for students, as well as for moving rice, fish and cottage industry products. With a fishing harbour being built here, resuming

the line would make things easy for the people here," he said.

L. Amuljothi (31), who works at the Maritime Museum here, was born after the line shut down. But she remembers her mother talking about transporting dry fish to the weekly market in Mayiladuthurai using the train.

"The train should be started again so that many more people could come here. Right now, the museum sees only 50-55 visitors daily but that would increase if we had a train service," she said.

Shankar Renganathan (50), curator of the museum, felt that trains were more convenient than buses to attract tourism. "We need a direct train to Chennai. Then, definitely, more people would come to Tharangambadi," he said.

Lunch becomes casualty

Thillaiyadi school girls miss mid-day meals during menstruation

SANCHARI SAMANTA

Thillaiyadi: For not less than three days every month, 16-year-old Rajeshwari Swetha has to forego her meal in school. She travels at least 2km from her school in the lunch break to reach home, to use the toilet on her menstruation days.

But she isn't the only one. Menstruation in India remains taboo and not many discuss it. According to a 2014 report by the NGO, Dasra, titled Spot On!, which was covered by Swachhindia ndtv.com, nearly 23 million girls in India drop out of school annually due to lack of proper menstrual hygiene. It also said only 2 to 3 per cent of women in rural India used sanitary napkins. More than half of the students who comprise the female population of the Thillaiyadi Valliammai Higher Secondary School and other schools in Thillaiyadi travel miles, sometimes on foot, to change their sanitary napkins during menstruation.

M. Pallavi, a Class 12 student of the TVGHS, tells us, "We were



Girls of Government aided schools say the sanitary pads given to them every month are of poor quality | ASHREYA PATIAL

supposed to get bicycles from the government in Class 11, which would have made it easier for us to go back home during periods. But last year, only 30 per cent of the students received bicycles and other government aid. The extra transportation cost incurred on going home and returning to school is impossible for us to afford." As per the government policy, government-aided schools provide one pack of sanitary napkins to every girl student every month.

Ajeetha, a Class 12 student of the Valliammai Government High School, says: "The sanitary pads provided by the schools are thin and extremely poor in quality. We buy better quality napkins from Karaikal, a town in Pudukcherry. They are far more expensive, but we can't use the pads provided by the government." Ajith S, a doctor at the Thillaiyadi hospital, says, "Due to poor sanitation in the school toilet, girls are often advised by their mothers to use other methods like filling up

socks with sand to absorb the blood or use pieces of cloth. This increases the risk of cervical cancer in them." Unable to use the school toilet, M. Manisa, another student of the TVG HS School, says most of her friends remain absent during periods. There is no water supply in the girls' toilet of her school. Going home also means missing the mid-day meal. Many girls, therefore, go to their friends' houses nearby to use the toilets provided by the government. Gopalakrishnan Ayer, Principal of the Valliammai Government High School, Thillaiyadi comments, "I am trying to improve the washroom infrastructure and ensure sufficient availability of water so that the children, especially girls, do not face any problems regarding sanitation." Under the SBA, menstrual hygiene has been given importance but according to media reports nearly 60,000 cases of cervical cancer deaths have been reported in India, two-thirds of which are due to poor hygiene. Yet, menstrual health remains unaddressed.

Midwifery out, hospital delivery in at Thillaiyadi

But some women still give birth at home: doctor

ASHREYA PATIAL
SANCHARI SAMANTA

Thillaiyadi: It is four in the morning. Heavily pregnant Defany of Thillaiyadi holds a huge metal bucket of water in one hand and drags along with her, her one-and-a-half-year old son to the fields to defecate.

This is her routine. The half constructed toilet, built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, has been standing at the corner outside her hut for a year.

According to Defany, people use the fund for constructing the toilet for personal needs.

Despite caution by the doctor, under whose watch Defany will give birth to her second child, open defecation remains the only option for her and many like her. "I have to control my bladder for long almost every day, which is not recommended during pregnancy. But it is difficult to go to the fields often in this condition."

Dr. Abhinaya of the Porayar



A 10-month pregnant Defany looking forward to her delivery | ASHREYA PATIAL

Government Hospital says: "Ninety nine per cent of women here choose the fields for defecation. Unless they are provided with some education, making them aware of the risks, including losing their babies, this won't stop."

Defany wants to have her baby

at the government hospital, as her cousin's child died due to wrong treatment by the midwife. "Midwives do exist but very few people opt for them now."

Dr. Abhinaya confirms this. "The concept of midwife has declined here now, but still there are many who practise midwifery in the village. At least 20 per cent of women use their services."

There is no government hospital at the village. It has a maternity clinic which offers facilities for immunization and check-ups for children.

Anita works as a nurse in Chennai but belongs to Thillaiyadi. She says: "The facilities for childbirth have improved over time. Women get proper medicines. But nutrition is still a cause for concern." Anita's sister, who gave birth to a child a month ago, weighed only 30 kg and her child weighed just 1kg. Even after a month, the child weighs the same. "The health of mother and child is not given importance," she says.



A sketch depicting child labour and alcoholism | SANCHARI

Little minds and big responsibilities

APOORVA SUDHAKAR

Thillaiyadi: "If he goes to a shop, he should at least know how to do the basic calculations. He doesn't," says 14-year-old Vishwa's* mother.

Vishwa of Thillaiyadi dropped out of school when he was 12 because he was not interested in studies. He did not fare well and his parents thought it was better for him to work instead. His father set him up a job where he had to change tyres of JCBs and trucks. After realising that he could not do the heavy work, the 12-year-old decided to go in search of a new job.

Today, Vishwa works in a fireworks factory. "I roll the powder into the paper and make out-vedi (crackers which go out into the air and burst)," he says with a twinkle in his eyes and a smile.

Folding up his lungi, he runs out of his house to meet his friends. His mother, who works as an agriculture labourer, says "Vishwa's father does not work because he has high diabetes. We spend Rs 2000 on his medicines. My daily wages and Vishwa's Rs 200 are our sources of income. The rest depends on what we get from the kuzhu(an organisation like the self-help groups)."

As she begins stirring the boiling rice on the stove, Vishwa's younger brother looks on. He is a Class VI student. He nods his head when asked if he likes going to school. "I love English," he smiles.

A few houses down the street lives Vishwa's friend, Harish*.

Harish, 17, dropped out of school after Class V. "Nothing would register in my head after Class V. My dad passed away when I was a child and my mother remarried," he says, looking away for a moment. He dropped out of school four years ago and lives with his sister and grandparents.

Harish works as a mason. He earns Rs 450 whenever he is called by his mestri. "I think I will go back to studying given a chance. Maybe become a Collector. I am not sure though," he says. Harish's sister, who is 19, dropped out after Class IX to look after their grandparents. Nanditha* started working in a banian company in Tirupur and earns Rs 8,000 a month. Aatha(grandmother), 70, still goes to work in the fields while Thatha (grandfather), 75, suffers from a skin problem and does not work anymore.

"I'd be happy if Harish went back to learning. I want to see him as a Collector. And me? I want to be a doctor. Aana chancey illa," says Nanditha.

Vishwa knows others of his age who work in the factory. Yet others work in the fields to contribute to the family income. Many pick up drinking and smoking. Though Harish denies drinking (and said many of his age drink), Nanditha says he has lately been coming home drunk.

J.J. Kannan, Special Sub Inspector of Porayarpolice station, says: "No cases of child labour are registered here. They are registered in the Wing Head Office in Nagapattinam."(*names changed).

Early addiction is order of the day

ABHIRUPA KUNDU

Thillaiyadi: The children of the village in Nagapattinam are under the heavy influence of alcohol, beedi, cigarettes and tobacco (hans). They get into accidents while bringing alcohol from Karaikal, a town in Pudukcherry. "They get it there for cheap, at 50 per cent discount," said J.J. Kumar, Special Sub Division Inspector at the Porayar police station.

Most residents of the village are alcoholic, which is why children take to the habit. Right from childhood, the children see their parents, especially the father, consuming alcohol every day during lunch or dinner.

Inspector Kumar said that at a tender age, children didn't know that it was alcohol and would sometimes "pick up the glass and drink from it."

The principal of a higher secondary school in Thillaiyadi,

Gopalakrishnan Ayer, said some parents were not aware of the problem.

Even when informed, they would deny or were themselves too drunk to stop their children.

"The children bring alcohol in their school bags and drink or smoke while returning from or coming to school," he said.

Even 11-year-old and 13-year-old boys had been caught smoking beedi in the school premises. Some children studying in Class 11 consumed alcohol and usually got it from the local wine shop (TASMAC), three km away in Thirukadaiyur.

"Their friends come and tell us, and then we check their bags. They make money, working as part time labourers in paddy fields

or construction buildings on weekends or after school", informed Ayer. The children earned Rs 400-500 a day and spent it on buying local brew like arrack.

Boys as young as 11 and 13 are caught with beedis and arrack bottles in their school bags

The children who are into such habits generally belong to the age group of 15 to 17. They hire bicycles, motorbikes, cars or take buses to reach the Karaikal checkpoint, 15 km from the village, said Vijay (21), a resident of Thillaiyadi.

Seventeen-year-old Harish (name changed) said he had seen people of his age group drink sarayam (local alcohol).

Most children, he said, befriended the elders or went with their brothers. "They drink while they are alone at home," said Harish. Some children die due to alcohol overdose.

Inspector Kumar talked of an accident that took place three months ago in Karaikal in which an 18-year-old boy died. He was travelling alone on a motorbike. "Most of these people do not have a licence."

He said that the police filed a case and the family had to pay a fine of Rs 25,000 for underage drinking and driving. "Most of these children belong to the Scheduled Castes or the Most Backward Classes."

Cases are registered against shopkeepers selling tobacco products to children under the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA).

They are arrested for a day and fined an amount of Rs 500. "There is no use. They go back to selling these products again after some days," said Kumar.

Though awareness programmes are conducted in schools by the police, the principal said: "The parents have to stop drinking; only then will the children stop."

Herbs are "life-savers" in this village



Amaravathee, a tumor patient, with herbs | SANCHARI

SANCHARI SAMANTA

Thillaiyadi: "She lay pale, eyes opened, poison oozing from her mouth. All because of her misdeeds! We treated her with lemon and dry chillies but nothing happened," says Amaravathee amma of Ranjeetha. The incident happened two years ago.

Amaravathee amma has been treating her 20-year-old tumour on the neck by herself.

Convinced that Ranjeetha was cursed and killed by a witch, people in the Thillaiyadi Dalit colony have been "warning" everyone, including children and young girls. Ranjeetha (19), who was married to a Dalit here, allegedly had an extramarital affair with a man in a neighbouring village. But, after post mortem, it was found that she had died of a snake bite.

Myths, natural treatment, black magic and belief in witchcraft have existed since the start of human civilization and continue to hold sway in villages.

Dr. Abhinaya of Porayar Government Hospital says: "People here are rigid about using traditional methods of treating themselves. Even if they have a hospital just 3 km away, they don't go."

Children are mostly treated at home. "Most of the time, people bring the patients so late that it becomes impossible to save them. As a result, the villagers think hospital treatment and medicines are useless," says Dr. Abhinaya.

People here keep the herb, nochilai, scientifically known as horseshoe vitex, under their pillows to treat headache and body pain. Tulsi is commonly used as a remedy for cough and cold, while applying turmeric all over the body is believed to make a person fair.

Soundarya, a nurse in Chennai's Priya Nursing home and a resident of the village, says: "There is a widespread misconception regarding breastfeeding. Colostrum (first milk) is considered impure. People prevent the newborn from consuming it." Doctors, in fact, say colostrum provides the baby with the key nutrients and improves the immune system.

Of alcoholism and domestic violence

ASHREYA PATIAL

Kattucherry: S. Murugvedi, 29, was charged by the Porayar Police with driving under the influence of alcohol and causing an accident. The police fined him Rs.12,000. In another instance, Sathish, a man in his 30s, attacked his family violently in a drunken state. He has been admitted to the Porayar hospital.

These two cases were recorded between January 6 and 7. "Alcoholism is highly prevalent among the youth here," said J.J. Kannan, Special Sub Inspector, Porayar.

Sophia Rani, a villager, said, "Boys aged 15-17 take to drinks. It feels unsafe to be around schools and colleges in the village. Alcohol affects the health of men adversely. Ulcers and vomits are frequent. Men go to work but contribute nothing to the family. Pressure increases on women to earn more for the family. There are many young widows. Hospital is at either Porayar or Tiruchi, both of which are far. So, the victim cannot stay in a de-addiction centre for long."

According to the Porayar police, a total of 90 to 100 cases of domestic violence are registered in the area each year. "Men want fish to be served along with liquor every day. If we forget to prepare it, we are beaten up," says Shanthi, a Samathuvapuram resident.

The police first try to counsel both the parties and most cases are resolved this way. But if they are not resolved mutually, the accused is supposed to serve six months in jail.

SBM toilets are non-existent or unusable in this village

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Thillaiyadi: Toilets under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), built for Rs 12000 each by the government for those who cannot afford one, cost only Rs 1500 to Rs 2000 in Thillaiyadi village near here. The catch: residents bear the cost instead.

"I was told that the government builds these toilets but I paid Rs 2000 to get a toilet in my house. The pit dug below the toilet is too small, so we cannot use it for a long time. It is there only for an emergency," said Deepa, a resident of the village's Valliammai Nagar.

According to Thillaiyadi panchayat officials, the panchayat is responsible for building toilets under the Central government's SBM through contracts. "Earlier, the money (Rs 12000) was sent to people's bank accounts but they ended up using it for other purposes. We now send it straight to the contractors' accounts, which is a common practice among all other panchayats here," said Kalavelan, People Welfare Officer at Thillaiyadi panchayat.

But residents alleged that these contractors built the foundation of the toilet and then demanded between Rs1500 and Rs 2000 to build the rest, which is a cemented cabin with a green metal door.

"Look at those toilets once. Do you really think they cost Rs 12000," asked Gandhimati, who herself has worked at the panchayat for the last one-and-a-half years as a Sanitation Officer.

Dissatisfied with the toilets that



A welcome sign that reads 'No open defecation in Thillaiyadi panchayat' | ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

were built by the government and reluctant to pay the bribe, she took a loan to build a toilet in her backyard - along with water supply.

Panchayat officials said there were around 1500 households in the village, of which 900 had toilets. Another 600 had been allotted in 2018-19, of which 400 had been built so far.

Kalavelan admitted that there was open defecation. But he did not believe that community toilets could help alleviate the problem.

"Since a majority of the households have individual toilets, no one really needs community toilets here," he said.

Kasturi, another resident of Valliammai Nagar, grew up in Ambagarathur village in Pudukcherry's Karaikal district where there were community toilets. Post marriage, when she moved to Thillaiyadi, she realised that open defecation is the norm for

a lot of women like her.

"We did not pay the contractor at first but eventually gave in. But it has been more than a year since the foundation of the toilet was laid in our house. So, I have gotten used to doing it in the open," she said.

Fellow resident Sophia Rani felt that panchayat officials were indifferent to complaints and just asked them to pay the contractor.

"Even the clerks refused to listen to us. We have no choice but to do it in the open. Men have to go further, while women go somewhere close by," she said.

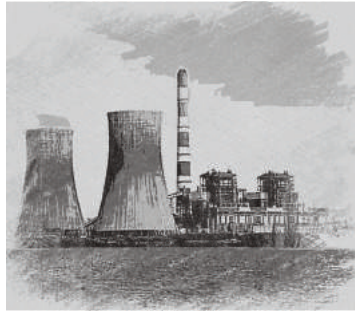
Panchayat officials claimed that the Block Development Office conducted video awareness sessions in the village. But residents claimed otherwise.

R. Sekar, a mason employed by the contractors, said, "They never tell us how to maintain them. As a result, the shallow pits below the toilet remain filthy. This might lead to diseases."

Elixir of life



Students of a Thillaiyadi school at a water break | SANCHARI



Eroding waves uproot fishers

RITUPARNA PALIT

Tiruchendur: One year from now, D. Anthony's three-year-old son Selvan might not be able to play on the sands of the Patnam beach. The fisherman's family, which has been living on the coastline in St. Xaviers Street, Virapandianpatnam for five generations, is now forced to look for a place as far from the sea as possible.

Out of about 450 families of the hamlet, around 150 with homes close to the sea have been facing the brunt of erosion of the shore for 15 years.

"The Coastal Regulation Zone rule prohibits habitation within 500 metres of the sea. The sea that was 200 metres away from our houses, is now only 50 metres away," said Wellington Menessa, president, Fishermen's Committee.

Anthony's is one such house and might be flattened by either the government or the sea. "Sea water en-



Erosion-formed sand dunes at Manapad | RITUPARNA PALIT

ters our homes during rough weather. Staying here is getting difficult. We have no option but to relocate," he said.

Educated up to Standard V, Antony knows nothing but fishing. "If forced to relocate, the fishermen will face competition in the market, and might not be welcomed by fishermen from other villages," said Menessa.

After Virapandianpatnam was

hit by the 2004 tsunami, two groyne designed by IIT Madras were put up to check erosion.

"But the groyne has been of little help as its mouth is 120 feet wide, which hardly checks sea intrusion. A narrower mouth half the size would have solved the problem."

A 750-metre stretch that has been worst hit by erosion is now left with steep concrete elevations. "Of Rs 1,000-1,500 we make daily,

we now pay Rs. 150 for a single operation by a tractor to either push our boat into the sea or pull it out. So we spend Rs 300 every time we go for a catch," said Gabriel Sridhar Rodrigo.

"The only street light that was here on the coast was submerged. Neither can we start work too early in the morning, nor work long after sunset. Often our boats got damaged after hitting the concrete in the dark, but we realized it only after we were in the sea," said Rodrigo.

"We are waiting for the government to start working on its 1.2-crore proposal for sea mitigation measures," said Menessa.

While the fishermen here watch the sea inching closer to their homes each day, 20 km away, fishers at Manapad are falling short on access to the sea.

"Manapad's location north of Virapandianpatnam's groyne has resulted in the receding shoreline. Sand dune formation increases bet-

ween March and October, the high tide season," explained Miraj Husain, a resident of Manapad.

These are cleared by locals using earthmovers.

I Vinnarasal, a fisherman, said, "Within a year, our access has been restricted by around a kilometre. We rely on tugboats for pulling large boats into the sea."

"The bottom of the boats often gets scraped out when we accidentally run into the sand dunes," he added.

N Sandhyaraj, 40, added, "Boats with full catch get stuck in sand dunes. We then arrange people or tugboats to pull them out. Earlier, 20-30 boats could enter the sea at a time. Because of restrictions on seawater access, all boats leave and come back one by one. So even if we return early, we can't go for the next catch because of traffic congestion. We are now forced to be content with one catch a day instead of three."



The conch blows out: Divers of Threspuram plunge into a depth of 10 metres into the Bay of Bengal to collect conches, used in temples. But the product is losing its value, with the advent of fake ones. | MAHERA DUTTA

Onions bring tears in farmers

ANMOL ARORA

K Sundareshwarapuram: Farmers look up to the skies as their life hinges on a good monsoon. But in Thoothukudi, rains, when they happened, turned out to be a bane for onion growers. Due to excessive showers this northeast monsoon, the onion yield suffered here.

"We sow seeds in September or October and harvest the produce in January," said R. Navneet, who grew onions and chillies on four acres of his land. Half of his crops got rotten because of the rains and he could harvest only 70 kg.

In a good crop year, if the farmers here sow 100 seeds, they get 1000 kg of onions (a ratio of 1:10), he said. To ensure a good crop, they have to spend a premium amount of Rs 900 per acre.

Many farmers have yet to receive compensation for loss in 2018 and 2016, say the growers.

P. Ramakrishnan, 54, who subleased land from landowners to grow crops, said he incurred a Rs. 1.5 lakh loss over three years.

He grew onions on two acres but the output is a mere 25%. Since he is not insured, he would not get any compensation, he said.

Painter Ram Raj, who spent Rs. 5500 on inputs, would not get a paisa for the onions he sowed, he said.

The Assistant Director of Horticulture (Planting Materials), Sundariya, said the rainfall was excessive. Since onion crops are only 15-30 cm tall, the rotting disease occurred. "Stagnation was as much as 20 cm that killed the crops," she said.

Maize crop under siege from marauding pests

Entire State hit, farmers switching to other crops

ANMOL ARORA

K Sundareshwarapuram: As Ram Subbiah (69) peeled off layers of long stalks of maize from his field, this reporter was curious to see full-grown corn. But what he saw was destruction.

Worms have eaten the plants from within, leaving them to rot—a common sight across maize fields here and neighbouring villages in the Vilathikulam block.

Subbiah says much of the harvest this year was destroyed. Last time, farmers got Rs. 1000 per quintal of maize.

But this time, the price will be much less, depending on the quantum and quality of harvest they could salvage, they say.

Landowners and farm labourers believe that the worms attacked the plants through seeds. They bought seeds primarily from government-owned shops, they say.

Even pesticides, for which farmers did not receive any subsidy, could not control the destruction, Subbiah says.

The Fall Armyworm (FAW) is responsible for corn farmers' woes, says Jebastin, who works with the National Food Security Mission.

He says this insect pest has been ravaging maize fields for the last two years. It was first reported in North India.

Not only the Vilathikulam block but the entire State has been hit by these worms, which attack other crops like "Kambu"



The rotten crop, after pest attack | ANMOL ARORA

(Pearl Millets) as well, says Jebastin, whom this reporter met at the Thoothukudi Collectorate.

After the insurance company assesses the damage and uploads information, compensation would be decided. There is no deadline for this process, the farmers say.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations, FAW prefers to infest maize fields but it can also affect rice, sugarcane, and millet.

It was confirmed in India in July 2018. "There was information in Tamil papers that there will be infestation

of these worms but some still sowed [maize] seeds," said Subbiah, who along with others reiterated that they had never found these worms in the past.

While these farmers said that no one had reached out to them, Jebastin said the government recommended certain measures to protect the crops from FAW including treatment of seeds — five to ten grams to be soaked in pesticide before sowing, growing border crops like sunflowers, and using pheromone traps to kill the insects.

Farmers have also been advised to plough their land during summer months as doing so brings the insect eggs to the topmost soil to get them killed under bright sunshine.

But since this is a rain-fed area, farmers plough their land only in October, which marks the beginning of the northeast monsoon, says Jebastin.

As a way out, farmers have been switching to other crops like pulses, he says.

Agricultural workers across Vilathikulam generally grew maize for local use.

Sometimes, the yield was collected by locals and sent to factories for processing.

With many of them taking land on lease, they could not even get their crops insured to get compensation for crop failure. So, they depend on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for a living.

Headlong plunge for a living

MAHERA DUTTA

Threspuram: Sayagraj, 57, was inspired by a video on seaweed harvesting done in Indonesia 12 years ago. He tried to replicate the procedure in a business venture along the Threspuram coast by designing plots in the sea. It paid off.

Sayagraj, who began as an amateur some years ago, is now well equipped with technical knowhow and machinery provided by big companies which have tapped into the profitable export business.

Seaweed harvesting, a traditional occupation in Tamil Nadu, sustains a global market of \$4 billion, as per 2017 estimates. Particularly, the extract from red seaweeds in Tamil Nadu is employed in the manufacture of agar, a gelatinous thickener in beverages and ice creams.

Seaweed, collected in bottles tied along a 15-metre rope, has to be harvested for 40 days. It is of value only in its spongy form and not when it becomes brittle.

The job, done in 21 villages along the Tamil Nadu coast, is laborious, calling for tact, skill and observation. "We have to constantly guard the seaweeds from a shoal of fish which can pass by at any given time. This requires monitoring and repeated diving into the ocean waters," said Sayagraj, ex-



Thankless job | MAHERA DUTTA

plaining the process of harvesting.

Before dividing 18 feet deep into the ocean, ropes have to be anchored properly to ensure they are not loose. Sayagraj's son, Paularaj, 34, complains of injuries he suffered during harvesting. "The wounds on my feet sting in salty water. There are times when sharp and poisonous weeds get in the way of harvesting. We rub extracts from

seaweeds, with antiseptic properties, on our feet," he said.

Let alone physical injuries, it is a thankless job, say seaweed harvesters. While major industries rely on seaweed, the harvesters' labour remains unrecognised. As per government norms, they are neither fishermen nor farmers.

Harvesters claim that harvesting is a lot tougher than fishing.

"Fishermen through their associations get compensation in an off-season or during bad weather. But we are given no such benefits. Late rains in November and December affected harvesting but we had to live with it," said Paularaj.

Among the other problems are rising sea temperatures, falling seaweed yield and labour shortage. "Many fishermen don't want to get involved in this tedious work. Younger people are now migrating from the village in search of better job opportunities, leaving only a few of us behind," said Sayagraj, who was formerly a farmer.

In another development, harvesting is no longer a Tamil Nadu monopoly. Seaweed is now being exported from States such as Gujarat also. Exporting companies have begun to mushroom in Ramnathapuram and Madurai.

"The demand for seaweed is rising but the odds are mostly against us," said Paularaj.

Rural government schools a let-down

Poor staff strength, woeful toilets, kids driven to private schools

ANEESA P A

Thoothukudi: Government schools across villages in this district are in a poor condition, say parents, adding they are forced to put their children in private institutions.

Villagers at Panayadipatti in Vilathikulam taluk say the Panchayat Union Primary School there has only two teachers to handle five classes.

"There is no headmaster," says Nancy (11), adding there are only five students in her class 5. Most of her friends from the village are studying in English medium schools outside the village.

The villagers complain that teachers from Kovilapatti and Vilathikulam do not come regularly, citing various reasons including long travel.

"We are taking loans from the local moneylender to send our kids to the nearest English medium school," said Amalpuspam, whose grandchildren are studying in one such school.

Arogyasami(31), who dropped out after Standard V from the primary school, says there was no one to complain about the state of affairs due to delay in holding pan-



Locked toilets at a Vembar middle school | ANEESA P A

chayat elections.

Suresh Kumar, a BBA graduate from Amarapuram in Udangudi block, says kids from his village have to travel five km to Tiruchendur for education after Standard V. "Our village doesn't have proper bus facility, but still everyone struggles to pursue education," he said.

At the Hindu Adi Dravida Middle School, Sivagalai, "the student strength is decreasing year by year," says headmaster S. Devarajan (53) It fell from 573 to 120 over 27 years. The number of teachers

dropped to seven. He attributed this to a lack of an English medium section. Nor is this school getting any grant for maintenance from the government.

"The scholarship for Scheduled Caste students also stopped three years ago," the headmaster said, adding that 90% of the students of the school belong to the SC.

Also, students in rural schools have to sit in classes which are either separated with wooden slabs or not separated at all.

In the absence of non-teaching staff, teachers themselves are doing

clerical work. Students are asked to ring the bell and clean the classrooms.

As for toilet facilities, the less said the better. "The teacher told us to use the urinal outside," said Muthupriya K (13), a student at the Hindu Adi Dravida Middle School. Along with her friends, she goes to the urinal which is outside the school. But the toilet doesn't have proper water facility. For 62 girls, aged 5 to 13, the school has only one toilet with a closet which doesn't have water. "We go to open field for defecation," says Muthupriya.

At St. Peter's Middle School at Vembar in Vilathikulam, a block of five toilets was locked for both girls and boys.

A Superintendent at the Chief Educational Office, Thoothukudi, said, "Two teachers are enough for primary schools with up to 60 students each." The official, who didn't give his name, said issues of infrastructure and quality would be resolved after the yearly inspection of each school. There is no issue regarding the facilities, he said. "If there is any, government funds will be allotted to the particular school [in need]."

'For ISRO, we lose space'

RITUPARNA PALIT

Kulasekarapattinam: "Of all the lands, why did they find only ours to take away?" cries Chitralkha.

Chitralkha's mud house is one of the 35 houses at Koodal Nagar, Mathavankurichi, that the ISRO wants vacated to set up its spaceport at Kulasekarapattinam.

An area of 2,233 acres covering Mathavankurichi, Pallakurichi and Padukkappaththu will be acquired for this spaceport, to launch the Small Satellite Launch Vehicle.

District Collector Sandeep Nanduri assured the inhabitants of adequate compensation and relocation, the villagers said.

"They will give us an alternative land, but our lives are dependent on this land, and not any other," says Rajesh R, a palmyra farm owner.

Residing here for five generations now, the villagers are mostly engaged in animal husbandry and palmyra tree cultivation.

At Alagapuram, "Even if our houses are saved, the revised ISRO plan eyes our grazing land and palmyra trees, putting livelihoods of 100 families at stake. Not only us, but labourers from nearby villages who work on these farms, will also be affected," says S. Kamraj, former Panchayat President.

However, not everyone fears loss of livelihood and houses. Jagadish, 54, and Bhujji, 41 believe that relocating to an urban place might ensure a better future for their children. "Leave alone a primary clinic, there's not a single shop around. We have to travel at least 5 km for a medical checkup or buying rations," he said.

Trawlers cut into fibre boat business



The less fortunate fibre boats | KEERTHI KRISHNA

KEERTHI KRISHNA

Thoothukudi: The blue ocean for fishing, their fuel for boats and the market for selling their catch are the same. But vast economic disparities exist in the lives of trawler fishermen and fibre boat fishermen.

Trawler boat fishermen use a conical net that collects fish when dragged along or through sea water. On the other hand, a fibre boat fisherman places nets at a particular spot and waits for hours.

Michael S, owner of two trawler boats in the Thoothukudi fishing harbour, invests around Rs.1.4 lakhs every day and makes a profit of at least Rs.20,000. For Anthony R, owner of a fibre boat at Inigo Nagar, anything more than Rs. 2,000 is a good profit on an investment of around Rs. 1000 a day.

"My daily profit, on most days, equates to my educated brothers' monthly salary" exclaimed an unlettered Michael, stressing the profits trawler boat owners usually make. But for Anthony, low or no income harms daily life. "Trawlers have caused significant losses to us," he said. Trawler boats, sailing into deep waters, tear the nets

of fibre boat fishermen, for which no compensation is paid.

Trawler boats and nets cost around Rs. 2 to 2.5 crores, while fibre boats, much smaller in size and power, entail Rs.5 to 5.5 lakhs.

Despite venturing 30-40 nautical miles into the sea, trawler boat owners do not face any problems from the Sri Lankan Navy. However, Esakki Muthu, leader of a fishermen's association at Threspuram, says, the island Navy is strict and even minor intrusion into Sri Lankan borders, caused by winds changing boat direction, lands fishermen in prisons. Arrests of fibre boat fishermen and treating them harshly are a regular occurrence.

S Suvinth, a fisherman from Inigo Nagar, said his uncle Baskar was captured twice. Both trawler boat and fibre boat fishermen fight for increased compensation, more protection against the Sri Lankan Navy and better GPS equipment to keep track of borders.

Trawler boat owners want their thoondil valayam (stone structures that protect boats from wind by reducing its speed) extended by 100 metres into the sea.

In villages, toilet claims don't wash

ANMOL ARORA

Thoothukudi: Though toilets have been built under the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) at Vijayapuri in the Kovilpatti block, people still defecate on open fields as there is no regular water supply, says Panchayat Secretary Kanniyammal.

Vijayapuri and many other villages in the district were declared Open Defecation Free (ODF).

That is just for the sake of it; it does not prove anything, said Kanniyammal about an ODF board that welcomes people to the village.

S Geetha (61), a resident, said her family could not get all the signatures required to get the funding for the toilet. No official came to verify or help them get the toilet. Therefore, they went out to defecate; women from 5 to 7 a.m. and 7 to 9 p.m.

At K. Sundareswarapuram in the Vilathikulam block, Valliamman (41) said she had never heard of SBM. Though a meeting was held at the panchayat to sensitize people to the ills of open defecation, nothing came out of it.

She and her family went to a forest near the village for defecation, including her 14-year-old daughter, who went there to change her sanitary napkins.

A Kannadasan of Vilvamarathu, however, said toilets were being built under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flagship programme, but there is no monitoring process.

"Elderly will only go out [for defecation]. They are not in the habit of using toilets and compulsion won't work," he said, giving the example of his mother.

Chanmuran (40) of Vembar said that everyone in her family went near the wetlands behind her house for defecating. She had never heard of any scheme to build toilets.

"If there is money, I am happy to use it to build a toilet," she said.

This is in sharp contrast to what the newly-elected Panchayat Presi-



A toilet built adjacent to a house, under SBM | ANMOL ARORA

dent, Jayanti, who stays just two houses away from that of Chanmuran, had to say. All households have a toilet, she claimed, while also suggesting that there are public toilets.

A public toilet she mentioned about was found locked, with no caretaker present.

Then, there is Appanasamy (67) of Panayadapatti, who said he built a toilet under SBM: "Modi told us; so I did." He called it Modi toilet.

Water supply made on two days would be stored inside. A pit is attached to store the discharge, which is "neck deep". He had to spend Rs. 6,000, from his pocket, besides the funds given to him (Rs. 10,000) to get the toilet built, he said.

A septuagenarian from Madhavakurichi of Udangudi block said that she had to give officials Rs. 3,000 to build the toilet. Still, she was going only to the public toilet because she could not use the facility, Indian-style, in the house.

Residents of different villages gave conflicting figures for the amount transferred to their bank accounts to build the toilet from Rs 9,000 to Rs. 12,000.

Senthil Kumar, District SBM Coordinator, said every household

that could not afford a toilet was given Rs. 12,000, with a provision for an interest-free additional loan of Rs. 5,000. Sixty percent of the funds come from the Central government and 40 percent from the State government.

Claiming that 403 villages of Thoothukudi were declared ODF in 2017, he said field officers/motivators were going to almost 2,60,000 households, which were given sanitation cards, every month. These officers would sign the card after verifying if the families were using the toilets.

The only constraint to the success of the mission in the district, according to him, is that many houses did not have enough land to build toilets. "Toilets are built — individual ones — on government land," he said.

The most important criterion to build a toilet is to have two leach pits, which are maintained at a distance of at least 15 metres from drinking water sources.

As for increasing sensitization among women, he said 445 out of the total 463 motivators are women. Film actors were roped in and a song was composed as well to spread awareness.

The cards are stacked against the minors

Five children work for 12 hours in a match unit

ANEESA P A

Kovilpatti: Fourteen-year-old Meena* puts a handful of cards on the machine. Her hands move fast without touching its sharp edges and the cards flow as a stream of matchbox frames into a large blue can. She puts the filled can outside the air-conditioned room and comes back with an empty can.

The room has been airconditioned lest the cards stick to one another, said the girl, who is among five minors working at Manikandan Matches at Kovilpatti.

Working from 8.30 a.m. to 8 p.m., she earns Rs. 200 a day. Meena's mother is bedridden and her father died eight years ago. She has a brother who is in standard II. Meena dropped out after Standard VIII as her family depends on her. Her uncle sends some money once in a month.

The minors, four girls and a boy, are working for nearly 12 hours a day with a one-hour break for lunch for which they go home. Sunday is a holiday.

According to the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, children under 18 are prohibited from working in hazardous conditions which include manufacture of matches, explosives and fireworks.

Children who have not completed 14 are prohibited from any form of employment.

Daya* (12), a class VI student, and her sister Divya* (14) in class IX, said their parents sent them to work here as they were having a vacation after half-yearly examinations. They stack up finished



Three girls at the factory ... spending vacation after exam | ANEESA P A

matchboxes and pass them on to a woman for packing. Daya earns Rs. 150 and Divya Rs. 180 a day.

The wages will be given to their mother, who works in a garment factory, weekly, said the elder sister.

Raja, who called himself an all-rounder at the factory, came in between this reporter's interaction with the two girls, and asked them to mention their age as 14.

Kaleeswari(27), a co-worker and neighbour of the sisters, said their parents went to their village, after collecting the girls' salary advance, to clear a loan. They are staying in a maternal uncle's home now, Kaleeswari said. The girls' father is in a cinema operator. "My friends make matches at home during vacation," said Daya.

Factory owner M. Paramasivam

said children worked here only during vacation. "I don't allow children to work unless their mothers are here," he said, adding Daya and Divya's mother were present.

But when this reporter sought his permission to see their mother, Paramasivam said he could not allow a meeting.

He said he always gave every worker wage advance at the time of school reopening and other festivals, and did so to the children's parents as well.

When contacted, Labour Inspector S.S. Fathima said there is no child labour in Thoothukudi district. "If we find such any case, we will penalise the owner and will send the kids back to school," she said at the Labour office.

*Names changed to maintain anonymity.

Salt workers' lives don't pan out happily

MAHERA DUTTA

Thoothukudi: Light from the scorching sun gleamed on heaps of crystalline salt stretched across salt pans at Rajapandianagar. The edges and walls of the many makeshift straw huts were bleached white with salt. Onshore breeze was the only respite from the heat.

A distant chatter of salt pans workers could be heard on our entering the harvesting area of the pan on an off-season day. Both men and women workers beamed with enthusiasm.

The men at Rajapandianagar are responsible for loading, unloading and packaging a day's production. Men and women collectively harvest the basic and yet prized commodity. Their work begins at 3 a.m. and is completed around 1 p.m. What follows is an intensive period of drilling, blasting and cutting with shafts sunk into salty grounds in an effort to make perfect check-board patterns, after which salt is removed, crushed and

packaged.

Uma Maheshwari, 47, spreads a mat for her visitors in her straw hut. A social worker, she heads the Uzhaikumpengal iyakkam (the working women's association). "I want to ensure that all salt pan workers fight to attain their dignity and rights. For 11 long years we have been demanding an increase in wages and adequate compensation during the off-season," she said.

Salt pan workers have to face the harshest of conditions to make ends meet. They work barefoot under the excruciating heat, suffering blisters and cracks on their feet, and their coarse hands are affected with fungal infections. Direct exposure to sunlight and its glare through salt granules weakens eyesight.

Few toilets are in place for women workers. They are given no less than one month to return to the pans after delivery. These hardships for wages of 340 per day!

Torrential rains from October to December wiped out the workers' livelihood. They have no option but

to go to moneylenders.

"Construction workers can make Rs. 640 a day. I still continue to work for less money in the salt pans" said S. Kumar, who is responsible for packaging the finished product. He has to strain his knees while bending down to oversee the packaging process done by machines.

Esakkimuthu, an aged worker, rued the lack of cooperatives for their community unlike fishermen and farmers who have the facility. "Our demands are being brushed aside. Our struggle for ESI cards, a provident fund and pension after 60 years of age is ongoing," he said.

"A compensation of Rs. 5,000 is always promised during the off-season but the promise does not move beyond the fancy manifestos of both the DMK and the AIDMK", complained Krishnamoorthy, a local leader and activist.

"Salt pan workers do not receive the respect they deserve. Society looks down upon them", he added. Most of their children are using

In need of job, women put up with fumes

PRIYADA K.S

Kovilpatti: Low wages and health issues at workplace keep men out of the match industry. This area has more than 20,000 workers, most of them women.

After 29 years of privatization of the match industry, around 2,000 manual factories shut down. Small scale production has stopped in most parts.

Pollution from chemicals used in matches production makes it difficult for people to work. But women have no way other than working even in conditions hazardous to health.

M. Kaleeswari, who has been working in Manikandan Matches, Kovilpatti, for the past two years, says her income, Rs. 260 a day, is the only support for the family as her husband is an alcoholic. She also takes care of education expenses of her daughter, studying in Standard IX in a neighbouring government school. She doesn't want her daughter to suffer the same fate. Likewise, Gomathi, 23, working for three years, could not pursue her education beyond Standard X because of financial problems.

A. Kalaiselvi, who has been in the factory for the past one year, works for seven to nine hours a day and gets Rs 220.

Some workers like Gomathi don't have specified work hours. Once they complete their daily quota of eight boxes, which job takes eight hours, they can leave.

In comparison, men are getting more in the factory, around Rs 400 per day. "Men have more mechanical work to do. Women can't do power-driven work, so they are paid according to their work," says M. Paramasivam, owner of Manikandan Matches.

WADING THEIR WAY ... IT'S A ROAD



Villagers of Amarapuram in the Udangudi block crossing a 30-metre stretch of a flooded road. Every year, when it rains heavily, they take a four-km detour to reach the nearest health centre. | RITUPARNA PALIT

End in sight to child abuse

ANEESA P A

In the background of setting up of a special court to deal with POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) cases in Thoothukudi district, child rights advocate E. Athisaya Kumar(50) talks about the special courts and the prevalence of the crime.

What is the status of POCSO cases in Thoothukudi after the setting up of the fast-track court?

I can't say on the improvement as it's been only one month since the one-judge special court started functioning here. In terms of trial and facilities, the entire set-up of the court is different from other courts and it is child-friendly. The special court has a panel of Government-appointed public prosecutors. The accused person's face is covered so that the victim does not see him. These courts will be set up for each district.

How many POCSO cases are pending in the district?

Over 200. Thoothukudi has the highest reported cases of child abuse in Tamil Nadu. Police are also lukewarm at times. In one case, we had to move a PIL to change the status of a POCSO case that was registered by the police as suspicious death. The Madras High Court, while delivering the verdict, advised that awareness be created among police officers regarding POCSO.

Do we see any improvement in police functioning after that?

It is a process. They are getting awareness and instructions. Child abuse cases should not be tried in the station and there should be a counsellor for the victim. These instructions are not followed properly. The quality of investigation is poor in these cases. Under POCSO, an FIR should not be published and every detail of the victim including parents should not be released. Police have violated this instruction sometimes through the media.

Does the increase in reported cases imply an increase in awareness among the public?

It is certainly a reason. Especially, children, more than their parents, are more aware and report the issues. Cases are going unreported because parents fear that it is bad for the future of their kids.

What is your personal experience in dealing with such cases?

I help in drafting complaints more than appearing for the victims. We are working to make compensation compulsory and accessible to every child irrespective of gender. Only a small part of the compensation fund has been allotted here so far under the Tamil Nadu Women's compensation Scheme (2018). The rest of the money has been sent back. Compensation has to be given after the filing of an FIR. In POCSO, the victim gets compensation after trial and there is no provision for compensation to a male child under the Tamil Nadu Victim Compensation Scheme (2008). This has to be gender-neutral. In most cases, victims do apply for compensation. Rarely do they end up getting the compensation on time. We found through RTI that compensation has been given only in one case in Thoothukudi.

Grasping at straws

RITUPARNA PALIT

Vembar: "I don't know how we will repay the loan without the MGNREGS job. We don't want to sell away this house that we so lovingly built," sighs Andani Selvi, 32, leaning on tiled walls.

Around 100 families live at Siluvaipuram, in the, Vilathikulam Block. Selvi and her husband Yohan Abraham's house is one of the few concrete houses here.

Abraham earns Rs 10,000-12,000 a month toiling at salt pans in Thoothukudi. Till September, Selvi made Rs 150-200 per day from gardening, through MGNREGS.

Two years ago, tired of the poor conditions in their thatched house, Selvi and Abraham took a Rs 7 lakh loan from banks and moneylenders, to build a concrete house. The couple now has a Rs 11 lakh debt, and only 90,000 has been repaid.

It has been three months since Selvi stopped working. "The panchayat keeps mum when we question them," said Selvi.

"Many families, like mine, now face financial crises, as most of the village's women worked under MGNREGS," said Anna Maria, a toddy tapper's wife.

Climbers don't make it to top

Bitter existence for palm sugar production

KEERTHI KRISHNA

Vembar: From climbing trees as children while playing with friends to scaling palm trees for a living, the workers living around Thoothukudi have come a long way. No doubt, it is a struggle for existence.

Approximately 1000 men are involved in this profession across Vembar taluk and surrounding villages in Thoothukudi. Palm tree climbers, on a typical day, cover around 50 trees thrice (in the morning, afternoon and evening) to collect palm sugar (karupatti in Tamil).

The height of a palm tree ranges from 32 to 50 feet. In effect, it is a Himalayan effort round the year. All this with minimal safety precautions and dogged perseverance.

Marimuthu S, from Subramaniapuram, says the profit from palm sugar is not commensurate with the ordeals the workers undergo in climbing so many trees. They are climbing up trees with a sickle and a tin around the waist to collect an extract, solely on the strength of their hands and legs.

The climbers are faced with a lack of electricity at night, no health or medical insurance, no compensation for accidents or deaths and little or no help from the



Daily drudgery, and risky too | KEERTHI KRISHNA

government. Their petitions have not been heard yet.

The risks apart, palm tree climbing is a seasonal occupation, maintaining a family becomes all the more difficult. For six months a year, Marimuthu and other climbers look for jobs in salt pans, on farms or any other job.

Women have a key role in the lives of palm tree climbers. They are tasked with boiling the extract (paadhai in Tamil) until it becomes palm sugar.

Boiled palm sugar is the source

of annual income for the climbers. Earlier toddy (kallu in tamil), an intoxicant the sap of a palm tree ferments into, used to be an additional source of income. But toddy has been banned in Tamil Nadu since 1987. This was done, it is said, to increase profits for the state owned TASMAL, which has monopoly over alcohol sale in Tamil Nadu.

R. Raja, a palm tree climber, says toddy making is non-existent. Most of the palm tree climbers are hell-bent on their children not getting into their profession..

THOOTHUKUDI

Caste, not yet past

Tensions also exist between communities

KEERTHI KRISHNA

Thoothukudi: Palm tree climbers in and around Thoothukudi are predominantly from the Nadar community. But the community has its own upper and lower caste segregation, according to M Muthu, a palm tree climber from Subramaniapuram.

Palm tree climbers belong to the lower hierarchy and have a difficult time finding brides, he complained.

"Engaluku padipu arivu illa, panayeri dhane nu pesuvanga" (We are not educated, we are just palm tree climbers) said Mani R.

According to Mani, there is not a single palm tree climber below the age of 35 and youth from this community are getting educated and take up jobs elsewhere casting huge doubts on the future of this profession.

Palm tree climbers are not the

only ones fighting against inequality. Fishermen, agricultural labourers, salt pan workers are some of the few working communities facing problems.

Paravars and Nadars constitute the fishermen community of Thoothukudi. More than 90 per cent of the fishermen belong to the lower caste Paravars. Historically, Paravars have been the main fishermen community of the Gulf of Mannar region with inscriptions from as early as the Pandyan dynasties lending evidence. Nadar involvement in fishing, on the other hand, is very recent, according to The History of South India by K A Neelakanta Sastri.

In 1996, caste-based violence erupted between the two communities. Four Paravar men were shot by the police.

Suvinth S, a Paravar fisherman from Inigo Nagar, said "We still

think a lot about that day. We are still waiting to retaliate, avenge the deaths." But the protests against Sterlite eased the tensions between the communities and united them.

Tensions also exist between Palars and Devendra Kulla Vellalars, two communities involved in agriculture.

Murugan M, a farmer from Sivagala, said "The government needs to take steps and initiate action against social inequality".

Salt pan workers say it is a case of the society, by itself, looking down upon them.

"Intha samoonga engala alakshyamahvey pakudhu" (The society looks down upon us). We used to struggle a lot while talking to officials or filling up bank forms earlier but now our educated children help us out," said Uma Maheshwari, a salt pan worker from Rajapandianagar.

MAHERA DUTTA

Udangudi: The under-construction Udangudi Supercritical Thermal Power Project located in Udangudi Village, 45 km away from Thoothukudi, will affect the livelihoods of over two lakh people involved in fishing and farming, claim people. The 1600 MW coal fired power station is currently being constructed in a natural catchment area in Tiruchendur which is a source of water for many farmers. With heavy rainfall in the past few months, the entire region remains flooded and cranes remain submerged.

The lakes in Tiruchendur and the natural catchment areas serve many purposes: they prevent sea water from entering the area and destroying the fresh water reserves and also help restore groundwater which is fast depleting.

The power plant was sanctioned by the DMK government in the year 2009. The construction is now being over seen by the Bharat



Under-construction Udangudi power plant

MAHERA DUTTA

Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and the government of Tamil Nadu.

Udangudi is known for its palm trees which yield jaggery along with karupatti which is palm sugar. The fly-ash which will be produced in large quantities when the power plant is running will settle on the trees, the villagers say.

The lakes in Udangudi and Sathankulam are overexploited, said V. Gonasalen, an Aam Aadmi Party worker. "It is wrong for the go-

vernment to allot the catchment area for construction of this power plant. The catchment area is viable for efficient farm production."

He also claimed that the Environmental Assessment Report did not assess properly the damage that will be caused when the power plant is operational. Its effluents will contaminate ground water.

"Most farmers are ignorant of the many problems they will have to face because of the power plant.

A total of 5,000 jobs have been promised but at the end only about 100 people will be employed in non-profitable jobs of driving and load lifting." He also claimed that farmers remain disunited in their fight.

The construction of a jetty for loading and unloading coal for the project can be detrimental to marine life and fishing, says Father Jayakumar from Alanthalai, who organized two protests against the BHEL voicing his group's concern.

Life falls out of climber's palm

KEERTHI KRISHNA

Vembar: He fractured his right leg with a bone protruding and severely injured his right hand while climbing a palm tree in 2016. All his savings went.

After that, he was unable to climb palm trees and had to settle for working in gardens and farms to make ends meet. But nothing stopped 50-year-old Vedanayagam S from walking around with his head held high.

Born into a family of palm tree climbers from Siluvaipuram near here, he knows these palm trees inside out. "When one looks at a palm tree, one sees a branchless tree which is thicker at the bottom and thinner at the top. It might look like an unsolvable mystery for most people but it is child's play for me" said Vedanayagam.

"Karupatti dhan enga vazhka, enga vazhu ellam" (Palm sugar is our life, livelihood, everything), said Vedanayagam, who climbed palm trees for 30 years.

Vedanayagam used to climb the palm trees six months a year to get padhaneer, a drink that is bottled and sold in places like the Khadi Gramodayog Bhavan. Unlike palm tree climbers in places like Coimbatore and Salem who use belts while climbing trees, Vedanayagam usually climbed without any safety precaution solely depending on his hand and leg strength.

"Ever since my accident, life has been on a downhill," said Vedanayagam as he saw his finances dwindling yet could do nothing about it. From earning around Rs



1000 a day, he gets Rs 100.

Vedanayagam said he was indebted to his wife Nyanammal, who has been working as a cook in a college canteen ever since he stopped working on palm trees. Earlier, she used to be involved in boiling the padhaneer to make karupatti.

Vedanayagam also remarked that life was good before the toddy ban in Tamil Nadu.

Palm tree sap when fermented gives called toddy (kallu in Tamil). In 1987, the Tamil Nadu State Government banned production and consumption of toddy as it brought down the profits made through the state-owned TASMAL liquor shops.

According to Vedanayagam, palm trees depicts the flourishing nature of a state.

"Lack of palm trees in a country indicates an impending drought," he said.

He also believes one can predict a State's downfall just by looking at the number of palm trees. Generally, palm trees require very little to zero water for growth.

"Every time I see a palm tree, I see my life in it," he remarked. Palm trees are revered by the climbers across Tamil Nadu and it is the State tree of Tamil Nadu.

She is in politics, against the grain

PRIYADA K.S

Srivaikuntam: Distributing jalebis to visitors who have come to her house to congratulate her, S. Pratibha is a bit nervous about the new duty conferred on her as Panchayat President of Sivagala. The village has around 3500 voters and she won with a majority of 258 votes. Panchayat members before her, including her mother, who was president of a nearby village from 2001 to 2006, concentrated on health issues.

M. Krishnan, a villager said, "As her father is involved in politics and social work, I think he will be able to guide her."

Haidar Ali, a villager says Pratibha is from a nearby village, and has got only two votes in this village, but still "we voted for her hoping that she will be able to solve our issues."

"Even though I have no interest in politics, I stood in the election because of my father," said Pratibha. Her desire now is to help the people in the village, which has a population of 4087.

Pratibha says "The main issue is lack of a proper drainage system; the pH value of water is not up to permissible standards, and this leads to shortage of drinking water."

Water with a pH lower than 7 is considered acidic and with a pH greater than 7, it is basic, the permissible range being 6.5 to 8.5.

"The roads too are in a bad condition. Being an engineer, I can suggest better solutions."

It appears Mathivanan has a de-



cisive say in her life. Earlier, Pratibha wanted to pursue B.Pharm from a college in Coimbatore, but her family objected.

A choir performer in her school days, Pratibha says that she gave up singing after class 8 as her father disapproved of it.

However Mathivanan is now in a fix. "I had fixed her marriage for March 2020 with a doctor from the nearby village. But now I am confused," he said.

Another concern is about the conditions of women. "Educated women in the village don't work as they are not aware and notified about jobs. I would like to help them by putting up notice boards on job opportunities."

Pratibha said "My father will guide me as I am new to politics."

People have high expectations from her and welcome her as she is educated.

The 23-year-old completed civil engineering from the V.V. College of engineering, Thisaiyanvilai, in May 2019 and was preparing for TNPSA grade II exam when her father, Mathivanan, asked her to compete in the just-concluded local bodies election.

Alanthalai waits for compensation

Health care another problem

ANEESA P A

Alanthalai: The road that runs through Alanthalai Village has gutters throughout and stones strewn on it. The road ends at the seashore where fishermen repair boats. Women are dispersed along the beach busy with drying fishes.

Alanthalai was in the news for the fishermen's protest against the coal jetty that is being built.

The fishermen village formed a human chain at the beginning of 2019 to urge the government to stop work on the jetty.

The village in which, all the residents depend on fishing, say the construction of the coal jetty would affect fishing, their livelihood, and the natural eco-system.

Only men know about big issues. They will discuss the problems on the village committee and will find a solution, said 70-year-old Jesintha.

According to her, women won't raise any issues on the village committee.

"The church informed us about the coal jetty and how it is going to affect us, and we protested," said Romil (51), a fisherman from the village.

Rev Father M. Jayakumar Head Priest at the Alanthalai Sacred Hearts Church, said, "Since the

work has already started, we can't stop it. We are mobilizing people to demand compensation which includes job opportunities and money."

He said that one of the demands we raised is for an English medium school in the village and a community hall. "We need 10 per cent of the total project fund as compensation and we are planning to build a new road and a net repairing shed."

The village in the Udangudi block lacks even basic facilities.

Twenty-four-year-old Sivani, who completed 12th from Thoothukudi, which is around 40 km away, says that she had to travel so far because the village didn't have a school at that time.

All her peers went to Tiruchendur, which is around 5 kilometre to complete their primary education and most of them stopped their studies soon.

"The new school built near the village six years ago was a great help," she said.

The village doesn't have an Anganwadi and the women said that they haven't heard of ASHA workers, nor seen a nurse coming to their village.

For health care they travel to the Tiruchendur Government hospital. Most of the time they end up going to private hospitals because of the lack of a Primary Health Centre (PHC).

Anganwadis do their mite

Doctor, nurse attend on pregnant women

ANMOL ARORA & ANEESA P A

Vilathikulam: The anganwadi at Vilvamarathupatti in this block occupies a spacious space near the lake. In a spacious room, alphabets — both English and Tamil — are painted on the walls. Nine children lay down on a single mat and some of them were sleeping, as teacher Ramasudha R talked about health issues faced by women and the children of the village.

With no Primary Health Centre (PHC) in the village, people have to go to the Vilathikulam Government Hospital a few km away, for immediate remedy. A doctor and a Village Health Nurse (VHN) come once a month to attend to pregnant women and young children.

"Pregnant women come themselves to get registered for the programme," says the teacher/worker, while talking about supply of sathu maavu, a nutritional powder, on the first and 15th days of every month.

Malnourished children also get it after identification of the problem during a monthly check-up of their weight by the VHN, she said.

Anganwadi is one of the important centres for maternal and child healthcare in the villages of India. It was started as part of the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) in 1975. There are about 1.3 million such centres in the country, catering for about 400 million kids.

The picture is not as tranquil in



A temporary shelter for an anganwadi | ANMOL ARORA

the anganwadi at neighbouring K. Sundareswarapuram, where 25 children come daily. It is a temporary shelter, sans a toilet.

The building does not have water and electricity. The children are taken to a public toilet nearby, said teacher P. Chanakkevi.

The anganwadi keeps records of pregnant women in the village for providing medical help, she said.

Kanakalakshmi (23), who is six months pregnant, registered herself with the anganwadi after the first 2 months.

She gets 30 iron tablets a month from the centre to counter anaemia. She got a tetanus shot as well during the third month to avoid postpartum infection.

"After marriage, the anganwadi workers came to my house to ask me to register with the centre on getting pregnant," she said. She vi-

sited the anganwadi doctor for a regular checkup during her first pregnancy as well.

But most anganwadis do not keep a record of adolescent girls and their activities remain limited to distributing sanitary napkins and iron tablets to them.

Muthupriya (13) at Srimalakkarai village in the Srivaikuntam block said she was never called for a meeting to the nearby anganwadi to talk about menstruation.

At Vembar, Rajendra Prasad, who is associated with the local NGO, People's Action for Development (PAD), said anganwadis were not working really well in the region.

Some of them do not have permanent teachers as they are deputed for other jobs too, he added.

Normal deliveries in the village, between 10 and 15 every month, take place at its PHC. It has two doctors, from another PHC in the absence of a permanent doctor.

With fever and diarrhoea common among children, the doctors provide them primary care. They administer oral solutions and fluids to newborns. Other cases are referred to hospitals, said Dr. Honest Rubert.

Anganwadis and VHNs maintain data on stunting and undernourishment of children aged 0 to 5, said health inspector Balakannan.

However, some people of the Vilathikulam and Udangudi blocks say they do not have an anganwadi in their villages.

Dying Culture?

PRIYADA K.S

Srivaikuntam: The younger generation in Sivagala, a village here, which is highly dependent on farming, is leaving for other jobs.

Mathivanan, a farmer who owns 30 acres of land, says he hires people from nearby villages for labour. "Local people are not available for farming as they go for better paid jobs in companies."

Farm labourers are paid very less. Shanmugakani, 60, has been working as a labourer in farms from the age of 12. "I normally get Rs 200 per day and if I do two days work together, I get Rs 400."

People like Shanmugakani go for work under MGNREGS in off seasons. There they earn Rs 200 a day and mostly they get work for 90 days. Farm labourers are generally above 40 years of age and have health issues like joint pain and back pain. But they don't have a choice.

Esaki Ganapathi, a 70-year-old farmer owns 50 acres of land of which, 40 acres is under bananas and the rest under paddy. His son Esaki Maharaja (Raja) supervises the farm labourers. No one in his family except Maharaja took up farming. One is a doctor; one is a sub-inspector and one is doing PhD.

Ganapathi earns Rs 60 lakhs annually from banana farming and Rs 30,000 per season from paddy.

"The main issue faced by the farmers in the area is the lack of go-

vernment help," says Raja.

As for the wages his farm labourers earn, men make Rs 400 a day and women get Rs 180-200. Men work from 7 am to 11 am and women work from 7 am to 12:30 pm.

Chinnabommu a 49-year-old marginal farmer, gets a profit of Rs 6000 from his three acres of land. During poor rains, it becomes difficult for him to repay the debts incurred. "I have been suffering from a very young age. But my children shouldn't face any problems like me. Everyone wants their family to be happy. I am educating my children so that they wouldn't be like me," said Chinnabommu.

Ajith, an ITI graduate from the village said everyone in the current generation in Sivagala is getting educated and preparing for government jobs. They prefer working on the fields only during this period. Agriculture is their last option.

The farmers get 1 to 1.5 tonnes of paddy from one acre. The middlemen fix the price for the produce and the minimum support price fixed by the Government does not matter, say the farmers who sell the paddy to the middlemen for Rs 2000 per 160 kg.

The middlemen sell the rice for Rs 1000 or 1500 per 25 kg, depending on variety and availability.



Chinnabommu, a marginal farmer runs a cracker shop to supplement his incomes

Big farmers use machines, expensive fertilizers and pest control methods. But small farmers cannot afford to practise mechanized farming, which leads to poor produce and returns. Furthermore, inadequate storage infrastructure often forces small farmers to sell off produce at lower prices.

While Mathivanan said that he made 30-40 sacks of paddy per acre and sold each of them for Rs 1500, Alagappan said that he got only 16-18 paddy sacks per acre and sold them for Rs 1200 each.

Talking of the losses incurred, Chinnabommu said, "When the harvest is good, I make a profit of Rs 2000-3000 per acre. Paddy farming requires good rains. Last year, I lost 15,000 to poor rainfall." Chinnabommu complained of not receiving Rs 2000 that was promised to farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna. "Loans are getting waived only for big farmers. It is we who are made to struggle," he added.

Poor targeting of government policies has left large farmers the sole beneficiary.

Recommendations often help large farmers enjoy easy loan ap-

provals.

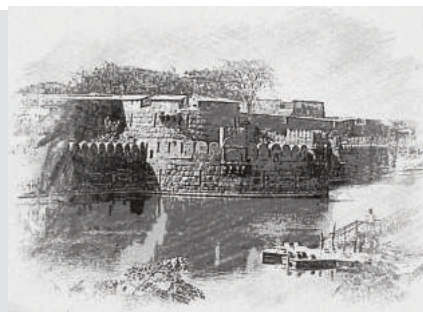
With last year's poor harvest, Chinnabommu could save little and has now run into a debt of Rs 4 lakhs. To supplement his income and pay off loans, he runs a fire cracker shop in the village. "I have only a year's time and I haven't paid a single penny. If I don't earn enough from this season's harvest and the cracker shop, I might have to mortgage my wife's jewellery again. That is how I paid off my previous debts," he added.

Esaki Ganapathi, 70, owns 50 acres of farmlands in Sivagala. "Banana, being a perennial fruit, gives good returns. So we bring 40 acres under banana, and the rest under Ganapathi's son. He makes a per acre seasonal profit of Rs 30,000 from the biannual paddy fields, and a yearly income of Rs 60 lakhs from the banana plantations.

With Thoothukudi being the highest banana producing district in Tamil Nadu, bananas are planted by many farmers. However, the requirement of huge landholdings, large number of labourers and high input cost hinder small farmers from investing in banana farming.

Discontented with inadequate returns from farming, Chinnabommu, educated till Std. V, plans on educating his children well.





Free sanitary napkins not usable

ANITA SHRESTHA

Agaramcheri: Every month, when 22-year-old Preeti Kumar menstruates, she has two choices: either using the free government-provided pads or buying the private ones stocked by the local medical store.

However, over using the free pads provided by the government, she always opts to buy. This she says is because they are more comfortable and more effective.

Despite the Tamil Nadu government's scheme of providing free pads for adolescent girls—in a bid to better the menstrual health and ensure the reproductive health of women, girls nevertheless prefer buying pads.

"Although the government provides free sanitary napkins, it is not comfortable. The sanitary napkins do not have wings on its sides," said Kumar.

TN government implemented the free sanitary pad scheme in 2011. Kumar's dilemma with the government-issued pads points to a major problem in the State's claims to have done something for female hygiene and sanitation.

It is ironic that this is happening in Tamil Nadu - a State that has revolutionised affordable feminine hygiene products. The blockbuster Hindi movie Pad Man was based



Government free pads
| ANITA SHRESTHA

on Arunachalam Muruganatham, from Coimbatore, who created the cheap and easy-to-use sanitary pad that doctors say is critical for reproductive health.

Muruganatham even took to wearing his invention to ensure it was comfortable. This experience of the girls in Agaramcheri also shows that pads must not only be made more accessible but also should be user-friendly.

The government supplied ones are definitely not, Kumar says.



Pads in the market

"It is uncomfortable to use government-provided napkins without wings. Lack of wings always keeps me in fear of leakage," shared Kumar.

Not only leakage, but overflow is also another concern, she said.

According to her, the government issued pad is made of cotton, which can easily get torn, and it doesn't last more than two hours. "The pads we buy from shops last for more than six hours and we don't have to fear leakage and over-

flow."

She added that she used the government provided napkins only when she didn't have stocked pads or when she was unable to buy them.

Preeti, is one more among the many girls and women of the village, who share similar issues with the pads. According to Census 2011, there are 2,980 females residing in Agaramcheri village.

Priya, 19, also fears using the free napkins. "It is difficult to change the napkins every two hours. If we don't change, there is a high chance of leakage and overflow."

She said, "It is awkward to talk about menstrual health even with our friends. So how could we possibly bear leakage and have them seen by strangers?"

Priya, however, uses cotton cloth instead of pads. "I am using cloth pads since my childhood and I am comfortable using it and I cannot afford to buy pads," she said.

Priya learned using clothes pad from her mother who also uses

clothes during menstruation.

Menstruation is still a taboo in the village and girls continue discussing menstruation only inside closed doors. This is a common narrative faced by women across the country, especially in rural areas.

Every year, the government of Tamil Nadu spends almost Rs 60 crores to provide free of cost sanitary napkins.

The government provides three packets of sanitary napkins per person in a month. In the village, girls collect the napkins from a nearby anganwadi where teachers distribute them.

Ambigya, a teacher of the anganwadi in the village who distributes pads in the village said that she has been distributing pads only to the girls.

She said, these napkins were not of good quality and were usable only for a couple of hours. The pads were distributed to girls despite them not preferring it, she added.

Today seven girls in the village take the free napkins. But these are kept only for times of emergency at home.

“The pads we buy from shops last for more than six hours and we don't have to fear leakage”

Jawadhu Hills: Too far away for medical help



The health centre also conducts regular medical awareness programmes | BHARATH THAMPI

NIMA

Nammiyampattu: The people of Jawadhu Hills need to walk some two hours to reach the nearest road and travel a further 12-14 kilometres to get to medical help.

It has been that way for a while now. The area, home to some 20,000 so called schedule tribe people has among the worst connectivity in the district.

It has reached the point where local newspapers talked about mass protest by tribals about the lack of medical help.

That will change now. Christian Medical College, Vellore plans to set up a full time mobile clinic (as opposed to the earlier part time one) for the tribal communities of Jawadhu hills. It is doing this to strengthen its community health and development programme in the district.

The programme is aimed to improve the life outcomes of children born in the tribal areas, provide them with the required health support, and assist during emergencies.

CMC's Head of department, Outreach program, Dr. Vinod Abhram said, "Bus services are limited, only once or twice a day. It's difficult for them to avail health services."

Not even ambulances and trucks could reach certain areas of the hill. The absence of good road and bus service has become a challenge for the people and health workers attending medical emergencies, he said.

Located over 50 kilometers away from the Vellore district, Jawadhu Hills, home to over 20,000 schedule tribes in the district is still hours away from primary health centres even today.

The population of over 80,000 has poor access to health care and basic amenities because of difficult mountain terrain and the lack of health workers, as they are not willing to work in the hills, according to a survey conducted by Christian Medical College (CMC).

"All health indicators are significantly lower than in the plains. According to the survey, 98 percent of children are born at home and only 20 percent complete immunisation before the age of five," the survey stated.

CMC's Department of Community Health runs a health care programme in the hills, which started in the 1980s to provide better health services, focused on improving the socio-economic condition of the community.

The community health programme also conducts education and awareness related to health care services and their right to avail public health services.

CMC's early outreach programme in Jawadhu Hills was successful in addressing leprosy diseases and tuberculosis with their mobile clinic services, according to Dr. Vinod Abhram.

Even today, the mobile clinic reaches to screen tuberculosis and leprosy cases every day from Monday to Friday in a week.

While the programme might not increase the number of doctors or trainees working for the mobile clinic services, CMC is planning to continue the programme by setting up a center for the community in the upcoming years.

Ramalinga, a resident from Jamnamarathur said that it was difficult to get a proper check when admitted at the primary health centre. "A nurse mostly runs the health centre and doctors won't treat patients properly," she said.

She added that the centre referred patients to Vellore district hospital without giving proper check-ups.

"It's difficult when we have to travel to Vellore for the illness that could be treated here," said Ramalinga.

"Expenses become higher and I don't prefer to go that far for a minor health problems."

However, the residents said that the ambulance services provided by the health centre benefited the people during an emergency in a place without a reliable public transport service.

Anand Kumar, a 14-year-old student said that access to health service has improved with the start of ambulance services. "However, better health services would benefit the people here," he said.

The mat weavers of Agaramcheri

BHARATH THAMPI

Agaramcheri: The village of Agaramcheri in Vellore district, with a population of less than 6000, is well-known for its extensive mat weaving business.

The most common use of these straw mats are for sleeping or resting on the floor, and in Masjids during prayers. The grass used for these straws are usually the 'Kora' type, found regions like Trichy, Kumbakonam, Madurai, Karur and

Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu.

P. Kumar (47), owner of one of the numerous small-scale mat weaving establishments in the village, has been in business for more than 20 years. Kumar's family has been traditionally associated with the weaving trade (Mudaliar community). He has a thriving business now which makes more than Rs 2 lakhs a month.

Kumar's and many other business establishments sell their products mainly to the big-market

wholesale sellers in cities like Bangalore, Chennai and across the state to Kerala.

En route to Kumar's factory and his house is located a Bazaar street, straws of various colours are laid on roads to dry in front of the houses - the main raw material used in mat manufacturing.

The long straws usually come in 14-inch round bundles, each costing around Rs 1300 to Rs 1400. When water is scarce, the price for the grass shoots up, like it went up

to Rs. 2000 in 2018, Kumar says.

Kumar's factory has three mat weaving machines, manufactured by companies like South India Mat Machineries, with an ingenious straws to perform the whole weaving process.

The straws are stitched together using white thread fed from one side to the machine. Each mat is then given a thick reinforcing on all sides on a stitching machine for a complete look, and is then stacked away for export.

The mats are produced in single and double forms. Apart from having a thicker surface made by compressing the straws for the double mat, there isn't much difference between them. A 6 by 4 meters single mat sells for Rs. 130 whereas a double coloured mat of the same dimensions sells for Rs. 200, Kumar says.

The mats they make will easily last for at least 6 months, according to him.

Sohail (29), one of the machine operators in Kumar's factory has been weaving mats since he was 10. He is paid Rs. 300 a day, and makes around Rs. 8000 a month, with Fridays off. However, the working hour stretches from 5 in the morning till 5 pm.

The woven mats are stitched by many, largely women, for an average wage of Rs 300 for 100 mats.

The mat weaving industries of Agaramcheri provide jobs to more than 300 households in the village, instead of automating or outsourcing the work.

Although there is a good percent of the population who still prefer straw mats, the advent of plastic mats in recent times saw the traditional mat weaving industry losing some of its earlier importance, Kumar says.



1 The home grown Korai grass is segregated and sturdy grasses are selected for mat weaving



2 The dried korai grass left to drying along the roads, often after dyeing



3 Colours are weaved together in the factories



4 Final touch to the mat which is sold across India

SUJATA SAVES THE DAY

KRITHI KANNAN

It was summer of 2014, when Ramanathan's mat-making business in the village of Agaramcheri (Vellore) collapsed. As a result, the labourers he had employed, chose to desert him for better paying contract jobs.

Being relatively new in the business, he did not receive as many orders as his counterpart Kumar Raja, whose family had been in the mat-making business for generations.

Fortunately for Ramanathan he had an acre of land on which he grew paddy. But that fetched him a meagre Rs 7000 a month, whereas his mat-making business had fetched him Rs 35,000 a month after subtracting labour costs.

With the sudden lack of funds, Ramanathan and his wife Sujatha couldn't pay their electricity bills, they couldn't pay the monthly installment of their housing loan and Sujatha had to pawn her jewellery to

procure temporary funds.

Refusing to accept the collapse of Ramanathan's business as final, Sujatha invested her and Ramanathan's savings into buying a cow. Soon she received an additional Rs 4000 a month from selling the milk that the cow gave.

She also started tailoring. She stitched women's blouses at Rs 60 per blouse and children's uniforms at Rs 100 per uniform. Sujatha had finished a course in tailoring before marriage. However, she had given up on that as Ramanathan had been making enough money for both of them. Today Sujatha has a dairy, which she manages with 5 cows. She sells each litre of milk at Rs 22 and she sells about 12 litres of milk a day.

Today from her dairy alone, Sujatha makes Rs 8,184 a month. And her tailoring work helps her earn an additional Rs 5000 a month.

Because Agaramcheri is a small village, Sujatha is one of

the only two tailors in her locality. This she says, works to her advantage as a shortage of tailors means more work and income for her.

"My daughter also helps me with some of the stitching work. You never know when it will come handy, so I am teaching her sewing," says Sujatha.

Sujatha comes from a family of Naidus.

Her parents have been land owners and farmers for generations, except for her husband who chose to focus on mat making business, which the village of Agaramcheri is known for. "We are one of the few people in the village, who have a dairy farm and a tailoring unit" said Ramanathan.

"Because almost the entire village specialises in mat-making, competition is tough. If Sujatha had not taken the initiative, we would have had to rely on our farmlands, which do not yield much anyway," he added.

Ranan's story: Polio might be eradicated but victims live on

PHURPA LHAMO

Ambur: Fifty-six-year-old Ranan is on his bed, legs dangling. He doesn't move for hours.

When he wants to go somewhere, he uses the support of a four-legged walker, dragging his legs to their destination.

Ranan was infected with polio-virus in 1968 when he was 5 years old.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), poliomyelitis (polio) is defined as a highly infectious viral disease, which mainly affects young children.

The virus is transmitted easily and is usually caused by eating things with the virus in it.

It is now six years since India was declared polio-free in March 2014. Its universal immunisation

programme cost Rs 3,446 crore in 2011, according to a research paper published in The Indian Journal of Medical Research.

The achievement is attributed to the pulse polio immunisation programme launched in 1995.

But by 1995, Ranan was already paralysed on both legs. His case is one of many overlooked as people celebrate India's success in eradicating the disease.

At 56 today, he is at a shelter for homeless—no wife, no siblings, and no parents. "When you are in this kind of state, who would give their daughter to you (in marriage)," Ranan said.

Despite his illness, Ranan started working as a cycle mechanic when he was 21 years old. He continued to work until he turned 45.

Ranan said that after 45, he was



Ranan, 56, is among the ten homeless men in the shelter home in Ambur. Because the centre in Ambur doesn't accept women and children, they are directed to the centre in Vellore | PHURPA LHAMO

ill and bed-ridden for several years. "I sought help from my relatives and spent about 4 years with them."

When his health improved he moved to his village in Alangayam, located about 51 km from Vellore. Six years after, he is part of Tamil Nadu's over 50,000 homeless people.

Today Ranan is settled with 10 other homeless men in a shelter instituted under the government's national urban livelihood mission.

"I heard of this homeless shelter from my neighbour in my village. He suggested me to go here as I had no one to care for me," he added.

While Tamil Nadu became polio-free in 2004, a full decade before India was certified polio-free, the State continues to have a high number of homeless people. Disability is a major factor contributing

to homelessness in India, India Today reported.

According to the Census report of India 2011, about 2.68 crore individuals are persons with disability. This is about 2.1 percent of the total population.

Although the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) seeks to improve living environment of the persons with disabilities, a questionnaire and response to it conducted by the Housing and Land Rights Network shows that homeless people continue to face discrimination and stigmatisation.

It further shows that policy such as the Delhi Police Act 1978 and the Tamil Nadu Prevention of Begging Act 1945, allows the police to arrest a person loitering on the street at night.

While the shelter home benefits

Ranan, he requires more medical assistance today.

Another shelter resident K. Mani, said that while the shelter provides meals and a home for them, lack of medical assistance was a concern.

"We help each other in the shelter. We go to a nearby medical centre but as all of us are here because we cannot work or are in bad health conditions, it is difficult."

Apart from the shelter in Ambur, the nearest shelter home is located in Vellore. Today, the shelter in Vellore provides home to over 300 people. The centre also conducts funerals for the homeless.

Ranan said that because he didn't have anyone to look over him, the shelter was a savior. "They give me nice bed and three meals. I am happy for it," he added.

Tribal ways: They are a-changin'..

NIMA

Nammiyampaattu: The house that Vijaya walks out of, as the sun begins to hide behind the dark evening clouds, is very unlike the houses surrounding it. Vijaya's house is round and has the tapered, conical roof typical of tribal houses in Vellore.

But Vijaya's is among the last in the village. Her neighbours have a concrete and cement house. So do many people in this village of more than 3,000 people.

Locally known as Peelure Kuri, the traditional roofs of tribal hut in Nammiyampaattu, one of the tribal villages in Jawadhu Hills is getting gradually changed to modern roof-tops.

The aesthetic traditional thatched roofs of tribal huts made from bundles of lemongrass, crafted with unique patterns are abandoned and covered by plastic tarpaulins today.

However, the community has managed to preserve the basic features of a tribal hut: doors and the walls made from mud and boulders, surrounding the hut have remained largely unchanged.

The doors are made from woven bamboo and the walls height of the wall is about two metres high.

The locals say the changes are because most people now cook in-

doors, which results in building of chimneys on the roof- something that cannot be done in the traditional tribal roof.

The traditional rooftops are made from lemongrass and cost Rs 15,000 while the rooftop built using the CGI sheet cost Rs 20,000, according to Vijaya.

The village of over 3,000 people is one of the 38 blocks of Jawadhu Hills.

With better road connectivity compared to the rest of the blocks in the hill, Nammiyampaattu, which lies along the Vellore road is slowly turning into a small town. The people from the nearby tribal village travel down for health and other required services.

Vijaya earns over Rs 7,000 in four months by selling rice and spends rest of the year cultivating cotton. People have started to grow agricultural produces at a commercial level, she says.

Agriculture is the main occupation for the people but with change people have also started to venture into small businesses by opening roadside stalls and shops near the primary health centre.

Unlike in the past, almost all children in the community are enrolled in school. However, for many of them, going to school involves hours of walking in all weat-



Nammiyampaattu has better road connectivity than the other blocks in Jawadhu Hills | ANITA SHRESTHA

hers.

C.B. Shakti, 14, walks more than 18 kilometres to reach his school from Odamangalam; his village is not connected with a motor road yet.

The people have realised the importance of education. Shakti's mother works as a coolie to support his education. The 14-year-old had

to leave school for three years following the death of his father. However, he is back in school now.

Shakti said that it was worrying to see people leave the village as migrant workers to other states because of poor socio-economic conditions and in search of better working opportunities.

"I feel education can solve this

problem in the village," he said. "Today men work in construction sites as coolie while women are engaged in agricultural works."

Nammiyampaattu is among several tribal villages located in the Jawadhu hills, about 83kms away from Vellore, with the nearest "town" being Jamuna Maruthur.

Self-sufficient inmates of TN prisons

PHURPA LHAMO

Vellore: As a motorcycle approaches the 'Freedom Fuel Station,' a man in his 60s, sporting a thick grey moustache and wearing a neat blue and white striped shirt, picks up the fuel pump.

He collects the money from the



The Freedom Bazaar located near the Vellore Central Prison | PHURPA LHAMO

motorists, and puts it in his weathered sling bag.

Of India's over 40,000 fuel stations, 'Freedom Fuel Station' accommodates a unique set of workers. They are Vellore Central Prison's six prisoners, serving life sentences.

According to prison personnel Rajinikanth, the convicts were selected based on their good conduct. The convicts, kept on an 18-day parole, are provided with a sum of about Rs 10,000 every month for their work.

This income, according to Rajinikanth, mostly goes to the families of the convicts.

Near, the 'Freedom Fuel Station' is the Freedom Bazaar, a store selling leather shoes, jute bags and other products, under the brand name Freedom.

The variety of products come from the nine central prisons in Tamil Nadu.

This includes Vellore, Puzhal I and II, Cuddalore, Trichy, Coimbatore, Salem, Madurai, and Palayamkottai. They are sold for prices between Rs 500 and Rs 10,000.

A news report by The Times of India in November last year, showed the harsh reality of life after prison term. The released prisoners said that social stigmatisation, and lack of employment due to that, were some of the major issues faced by them.

Rajinikanth said that the amount from the sales in the bazaar each month, was divided among the prisoners and either sent to their families as money orders, or deposited in their personal account.

Prior to the production, the inmates are provided 4 months of training. Today, the Vellore Central Prison has carpentry, weaving, shoe making and bag making trainings.

The machine and equipment were brought for rehabilitation purpose for the prisoners in the past.

Besides the petrol pump and the store, there's also a small shop selling dairy products as part of the Freedom Bazaar.

Tale of neglect at health centre

BHARATH THAMPI

Nammiyampaattu: The Nammiyampaattu Government Primary Health Centre (PHC), which is supposed to be operational 24 * 7, has a total staff strength of - four doctors, four nurses and a couple of support staff. The PHC is the only one available for a village with a population of 3,983.

Uma Maheshwari is the only staff nurse available on this Sunday, which only receives the emergency cases unlike other days of the week. All the four doctors have been away over the weekend to attend their National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET), she says.

According to Maheshwari, even at full strength, they lack the manpower to attend to the roughly 200 cases they receive daily.

The PHC resides in an area of just less than an acre, with the health centre building on one side and the staff quarters taking up most of the rest of the space. A small yard near the gate has benches for the visitors to rest and several notice boards placed with instructions.

Nammiyampaattu village, part of the Jawadhu hills of Tiruvannamalai district, comprises of a Scheduled Tribe population of more than 99 percent. Many of them belong to the Malayalee tribe named so because *Mala* means hills and *yalee* means rulers.

The PHC - opened 10 years back as an alternative to a smaller one that existed near the village - provides the basic treatment for any case that comes up. According to the seriousness of the case and depending on the need for further treatment, the patients might be referred to the main centre in Jamuna



Faces of the Nammiyampaattu village | BHARATH THAMPI

Maruthur, Uma says.

There are only 10 hospital beds and hence they cannot accommodate too many patients at a time. The 24*7 operation is only supposed to be for birth cases, Maheshwari says. But the in-house system of the hospital and staff means that someone will be around always to attend to emergencies.

There's also an ambulance on call just 10 minutes away from the clinic.

According to Maheshwari, girls under the age of 18 giving birth is not an uncommon occurrence in the area, though it has reduced over the years.

The village community has only a literacy rate of just over 25 percent, but numerous studies done on the Jawadhu hills tribal population indicate that marriage and cohabitation even before reaching adulthood is a cultural specificity here.

Maheshwari who joined the hos-

pital four years back, is still on contract, like the other nurses here. There was a much lesser population who visited the health centre to give births when she first came here, she says.

Although it has changed considerably for the better now, there are still those who'd rather give birth at home or visit private clinics over in Vellore district, according to her. Many of these people approach the health centre to get a birth certificate issued for all other practical purposes.

The use of sanitary napkins in girls has also been on the rise in recent years, which the health centre also provides as part of the government health initiatives. Camps and awareness programmes are also held from time to time regarding health and sanitation.

A pattern of suicide attempts has cropped up among the village people, especially amongst teenage

girls, according to Maheshwari. Many of the cases, involving self-poisoning, arise due to domestic conflicts. These cases have to be registered and reported by the health centre to the authorities.

Alcoholism among the men in the community here is another major category of cases the clinic receives. The primary occupation of the villagers is Agriculture and the challenges associated with that might play a role in this.

According to a 2018 survey on Common mental disorders and risk factors in rural India, performed on 12 villages by the National Center for Biotechnology information - anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation affected 10.8, 14.4 and 3.5 percent of the participants respectively.

Of the nearly 70 percent of India's population in rural areas, only 1 in 27 received care for mental disorders such as depression.

Water shortage forces tribal people to migrate

KRITHI KANNAN

Jawadhu Hills: Every summer, the tribal people of the Jawadhu hills face a familiar problem. There is no water here. Since agriculture is their main occupation, many of them are forced to migrate to Kerala or Ooty to make ends meet.

Nammiyampaattu is one of the thirty eight villages located in Jawadhu hills. The village is set on the side of a hill with a dirt path dividing the people from the field. The houses of the people are made of concrete with CGI roofs. Children play around the winding dirt path as chickens squawk inside their pens.

The tribe of this village are called the Malayali tribes, because their people (called Aali in tamil) live atop a mountain (called malai in tamil), the entire area surrounding Jawadhu hills does not have a check dam. So there is almost little or no access to water in Nammiyampaattu and the other villages during summer months.

Only two borewells exist in the entire area, according to Raja Babu, a farmer. He said that even if there are borewells, it is uncertain because they don't have water all the time.

According to Murugan Kandaswamy, another farmer in the area, only those who are aware of the fact that government loans can be sanctioned to build bore wells, utilise this opportunity. He says that since most of the people in the area

are uneducated, they are not aware of the facilities and avenues available to them.

Professor S Janakarajan, an economist and professor at Madras Institute of Development Studies and the president of the South Asia Consortium For Interdisciplinary Water Resources is an excerpt in one of

Aparna Karthikeyan's books 'Nine Rs an Hour' says that groundwater can become a dangerous issue for farmers. If the farmers are lucky, they can strike groundwater in a single stroke and irrigate their land. However if he is not lucky he may have to dig trial bore wells and try to get access to water.

So, if a farmer takes a loan of Rs 5 lakhs to invest in a borewell, and he gets water only for two years, he will still have to end up not only paying interest on his loan, but he will also have to try to dig another borewell to irrigate his crop. So that he can sell his crop and pay his loan.

Ramana Babu, another farmer, says that he and his wife had to leave their children with their relatives and migrate to Kerala and work in a tea plantation field as they were not able to irrigate their crop due to scarcity of water.

K. Duraiswamy, another farmer, in the area says that most households in some cases both husband and wife migrate to far away urban places to work as labourers and generate additional livelihoods.

Tribal farmers switch trades

KRITHI KANNAN

Jawadhu Hills: Fifty Eight year old Chinaiyya is a resident of Jawadhu hills who cultivates ragi and bajra (kinds of millets) on a small plot of land half a kilometer from his house.

He sells the surplus crop in a nearby town, Jamuna Maruthur, where he is paid Rs 30 per kg of ragi and Rs 35 per kg of bajra. "We sell our crops to middlemen. Since we do not have access to customers directly. The middlemen pay us Rs 30 for our crops and sell them in places of demand for Rs 130 a kg," says Chinaiyya.

Owing to the seasonal rains and lack of proper water facilities in Jawadhu hills, Chinaiyya, has been forced to resort to tailoring.

The exploitation of these farmers by middlemen, is something that has forced many of them to resort to alternate professions, or migrate elsewhere to make ends meet. Chinaiyya's 20-year-old son, now works in a rubber plantation field in Kerala instead of helping in his father's farm.

Selling the crop, fetches Chinaiyya a paltry sum of Rs 4000 a month. So he tries to supplement his income by stitching blouses for the women of the village, and uniforms for the children that go to the nearby government school.

The tailoring work that he does brings him an additional Rs 5000 a

month. One of the reasons why farmers such as Chinaiyya are not paid as much for their crops is because crops such as ragi and other millets are not as much in demand as rice or wheat.

P. Sainath founder and editor of People's Archive of Rural India in Aparna Karthikeyan's book Nine Rs an Hour in fact states that - "During the British rule, since the British did not understand the incredibly rich cereals and millets available in India, they started feeding them to livestock.

They saw millets as inferior food and recognised only rice and wheat. As a result generations are craving rice and wheat today, and it is very difficult to get rehabilitated to ragi."

Another issue facing farmers like Chinaiyya is the easy availability of millets and ragi in his village of Nammiyampaattu. "Since everyone grows the same crops here, the middlemen have plenty of choice because it is so easily available, we are given throwaway prices for our crop," says Chinaiyya. Tailoring on the other hand,

requires skill, according to Chinaiyya. Since there are not that many tailors in the village as there are farmers, business picks up for Chinaiyya. Most of the villagers have to come to him to get their blouses and uniforms stitched. Looking back today, Chinaiyya is glad he learnt tailoring ten years ago.

A self help group: What's in theory and practice

MEENAL VASHISTHA

Vellore: Thirteen women of Danvapanni, one of the three Self Help Groups in the Ramanayanikuppam village, have taken a loan of Rs 10 lakh in the name economic expansion of a business they don't even own. They work as daily wage

workers.

The group plants saplings of lime trees, guavas, and jasmine among others, from 6 a.m. to p.m., sold for Rs 5 per sapling. Meanwhile, Mohan Kumar, the owner of the land controls the overall revenue, from a business that on paper belongs to the SHG.

The SHG used their share from the loan to improve living conditions including building toilets for their homes. The village has no public toilet.

According to the Rangarajan Committee on Financial Inclusion, based on the NSSO data, over 51 percent of the total households in

the country do not have access to credit either from institutional or non-institutional sources.

As daily wage workers, the members each earns Rs 250 a day, working for twelve hours straight. "I work in another place carrying 'mannu' (soil) from nine in the morning till 1 p.m. Until then, star-

ting at 6 a.m., I work here (in the nurseries)," says T Prema, 32, an SHG member.

At present, each member pays Rs 4000 as monthly share for loan repayment. If one of them fails to do so, the entire SHG is affected, Prema added.

"If we can get one more loan

from somewhere, we can expand this business," says A. Vimala, 39, and the women in the tent start laughing.

Although the women earn salaries, their say in the households hasn't changed.

"The gents don't plant saplings. Only women do," A. Vimala added.

The taste of Ambur: A tale of biriyani's cultural significance

BHARATH THAMPI

Ambur: A google search for the popular cuisine of Tamil Nadu will usually throw up vegetarian dishes. But one walk through the streets opposite the Ambur railway station, in Vellore district, will change that perception. Everyone loves Biryani in Ambur.

The Ambur biriyani, widely acknowledged as one of the delicious biriyani dishes in India, dates back to almost 130 years influenced by a strong Muslim culture, from the period of Nawabs of Arcot.

In a country like India where one's food choices are being forced to be identified with religious and cultural beliefs, biriyani is one dish fighting a lone battle to strip itself of such tags.

Biriyani lovers often say that no two biriyani taste the same. The Ambur biriyani for example, boasts of the traditional "Dum" preparation.

The meat, mutton or chicken being the delicacies here, is cooked in an enormous vessel in a low flame, by burning logs of wood and charcoal. The use of cooking gas is

a strict 'NO' for them, says Mohammad Salim, whose family owns the restaurant "Original Star Biryani" in the street. They have been in the business for around 50 years.

The general recipe and process of preparation followed is the same here. While the meat is being cooked, a similarly large vessel by its side will cook the rice. The garlic paste and the masala used with the meat is also made alongside. A feature of Ambur biriyani that differentiates it from other dum biriyani is the rice used for it - the

seeraga (Jeera) samba rice.

The cooked rice is added to the meat in the vessel which is then closed with a lid, sometimes sealed at its mouth by dough, allowing them to mix properly. Some also spread the burning coal on top of the lid as an added measure. After 20 minutes or so, the biriyani should be ready.

The love for their regional biriyani is immense, that many restaurants are simply named - Ambur Biryani (as it's spelled here). Nooruddin, who owns a restaurant named so says - "We don't need

any other name. People come here for biriyani only". His restaurant, more than 50 years old, was started in 1940 by his grandfather in the core Ambur bazaar.

Many restaurateurs like him agree that there's absolutely no religion, or class distinction when it comes to love for biriyani due to the diverse crowd here. They have tremendous sale during Eid, but sales rise up during Diwali and other regional festivals as well.

When demonetisation hit the biriyani market in 2016 like the rest of the country, they had a small dip in

the sales, which picked up though within no time. Salim also mentions that his father, who manages the restaurant, refused to increase the prices even when the GST implementation threatened to affect their sales last year, feeling it would be unfair to his loyal customers.

Many of the restaurants in the street have a bold statement against its name on the board - "no other branches."

This is a good way to describe the cultural uniqueness of the dish - you cannot separate the place from the biriyani and vice versa.

Overlooked by govt, crab catchers live off charity

A forgotten community- they have lived in tents for past 15 years

SREYA DEB

Kona: In the rural part of Machilipatnam, situated near Palleshummalapalem, lies a patch of barren land, littered with tarp tents arranged haphazardly all over it. Amongst these tents, one ground level concrete construction stands, with 'Crab Tribal Community Shelter' painted across the front. A closer look reveals a community of 20 families — without land or housing, eking out a living from their sparse means.

These 60 odd people, including about 10 toddlers, have been living in makeshift tents for the past 15 years, catching crabs and making a mere Rs. 100-500 a day. Families of three are cramped into a tent that they can barely stand up straight in. Old women are seen sitting outside their tents at sundown, blowing into a *chulah* under a copper vessel to prepare their meal.

Both men and women, and teenagers are engaged in crab catching, and they are paid according to the size of the catch. They take out boats that they have to pay Rs. 30 for per day.

Forty-two-year-old Krupa Rao says he doesn't know the name of



Krupa Rao with his granddaughter | SREYA DEB

is employer. All he knows is that a man named 'Raju' shows up to collect their catch twice a week, and pays them as he sees fit.

"We have requested the volunteers to provide us with some land, but there has been no response." The state government-assigned volunteers in the remote villages in Machilipatnam are generally restricted to the office, but appear to be the only authority

that the villagers can reach.

The whole concept of the Swachh Bharat campaign is alien to them. A dearth of any public toilet in the vicinity and the idea of a private toilet seems like a far-fetched dream, so the people resort to open defecation.

Krupa Rao has been engaged in catching crabs with his wife Sudha, and while he did not want the same life for his children, he believes that his hands are tied.

The entire settlement has one lamp post that illuminates it come evening, which too is solar powered — leaving the residents in pitch darkness during rain and overcast skies. The lone water tank meant to serve more than sixty people has salty water, that too only on alternate days when they are lucky. It is only when someone

feels charitable enough to donate a few blankets that they are able to withstand the winters.

Some of the lucky ones have received some government help, although at a terrible price. Balaraju has had an injured ankle for three years and has not been able to walk in that time. His wife Lakshmi points to a young boy in the distance, identifying him as her son Isaiah, who she thinks is "probably sixteen years old." He does not look much older than 13.

The inconspicuous lone concrete construction nestled among the tents is actually a chapel, maintained poorly on the inside. A pastor, who also doubles as a teacher for the young children visits them every Friday and Sunday. Balaraju's family converted from Hinduism to Christianity a month ago.

"Staying Hindu was not working for us, so we thought we would see if converting helped," Lakshmi explains nonchalantly.

These people have even exercised their voting rights but in vain. "The candidates come to get votes, but once elected, we become a forgotten community," exclaimed Rao.

Beedi workers of Ambur asked to vacate lands

Workers unaware of govt. housing subsidy

ANITA SHRESTHA & PHURPA LHAMO



S Shankar rolling beedis | PHURPA LHAMO

Ambur: S Shankar, 46, today is living with the fear of losing his home in Ambur, Vellore. He and his family have been living here with 45 other families for decades. However, the residents were asked to clear the property by the landowner. Barely making Rs 6,000 a month by rolling beedis, finding a different home would be difficult.

Despite the Revised Integrated Housing Scheme for Beedi Workers, 2005, which provides a subsidy of Rs 40,000, availing the benefits is a challenge.

According to the scheme, for a beedi worker to get the subsidy, she/he must have worked as a beedi worker for at least one year, possess own land or free patta issued to him by the government in his name or his spouse and hold a Provident Fund Account.

Although, Robit (68) has been working in the beedi industry since childhood, he cannot get the benefits. Robit and his wife Manormani (56) roll about 1000 beedis everyday and earn Rs 170. The couple says that they were not aware of the scheme. Even if they

were, they didn't fulfill the criteria as they didn't have land. Although satisfied with the earnings they make, the couple says that having a house would secure their future.

Sitting in a cramped claustrophobic room, with a woven bamboo tray on his lap, R Manavel, 60, spends the day rolling beedis and makes Rs 200. "I have been doing this since I was 8 years old," Manvel says.

Although paid less and unevenly, they are forced to work to make an income for the family. R Manavel, said that his only son stays away from them and doesn't assist in financial issues. "To put food in our stomach, I have to do extra job," Manvel added.

Besides disparity in the wages, every worker working from home is registered under a contractor who visits them once to deliver the raw materials and take the rolled beedi sticks.

Similarly, S Shankar, who is paid Rs 150 for rolling 1000 beedis is paralysed in his legs. After he met with an accident about two years ago, he had to quit his job as a daily labourer.

"Rolling beedi doesn't bring as much income but we don't have an option," he said.

According to a report titled Economic Status of Beedi Workers, wages of beedi workers are not guaranteed because they are paid under the Piece Rate System.



A shrimp farm in Rameswaram | ANSHUL GUPTA

Shrimp farmers fight for resources

ANSHUL GUPTA

Rameswaram: Shrimp farming in Rameswaram has put farmers, fishermen and other stakeholders in a serious dilemma because of the soil erosion, groundwater pollution and destruction of vegetation. But, despite large scale protests, the shrimp farm owners are in no mood to give up the lucrative business.

Karunamoorthy, a fisherman leader working in Rameswaram, alleges that the shrimp farm along the sea near the Olaikkadu Road, Light House, destroyed the lives of about 65 households who were living in small settlements near the Church opposite the farm. They have since moved to another location. The shrimp farm, he claims, is not licensed.

"The government does nothing. The officials are heavily bribed," he says. However, many proposed farms have been prevented by the

fisherfolk in recent times because of the damage they can do.

Shrimp farming has had disastrous consequences. The demand for natural shrimps has gone down. Fishermen's income has, thus, taken a hit. Shrimp farmers use medicines like Moltin and Immuno-Vita to enable shrimps to fight against other organisms in the water bodies and make them bigger and more saleable.

Shrimp farming has destroyed the groundwater, as a result of which farmers in the area, particularly palm growers, have left farming. It has also made drinking water from the ground unusable.

Another major hazard is the release of chemical effluents into the sea.

"The shrimp farmers are supposed to treat the effluents but they hardly do it," says Karunamoorthy.

Children in Nagayalanka high on cough syrup

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Nagayalanka: Several children here, as young as 11, are addicted to drinking cough syrup for intoxication. According to locals, they drink more than one bottle of syrup at a time and discard the containers by the river side. For most of the kids the syrup is a substitute for alcohol, which they cannot buy because they are either minors or from a poor economic background.

"For the past 20 years I have been seeing

children gulp down bottles of cough syrup just to feel the rush", said Raghu Sekhar, a 39-year-old fisherman. He said that he reported this issue to several government authorities but none have taken any action. Last year, he also informed the local media of this. "But the reporters refused to cover it as it isn't extremely hazardous".

One of the most common cough syrups found here is Tossex, which contains 10 mg of Codeine Phosphate and Triprolidine. Both drugs, when consumed in excess cause

dizziness, and produces a 'high' after a strong dose. These are generally hard to get without a prescription.

Doctors at the Primary Health Centre here claim that high dosage is generally not prescribed.

Dr. Saranya says such medicines are prescribed only after a thorough check-up. "We are aware of the increasing consumption of cough syrup and we have been told that many medical shops sell cough syrups without a prescription." It is difficult to

contain the situation as the syrups are available over the counter, she adds. Dr. Saranya's says excessive consumption of the cough syrup, which produces a calming effect, can slow down activities in the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord).

"The major drug - Codeine Phosphate - attaches to the same cell receptors as do opioids like heroin.

Over time, it takes more and more of the drug to get that good feeling. This is how addiction starts", says the doctor.

GST blamed for slowdown in Ambur factories

NIMA

Ambur: There are stacks of rubber shoe soles in the storehouse of Top Latex products, a rubber products maker in Ambur. The stacks have acquired a thin coating of dust because no one has touched them for a while. The factory is also idle despite it being peak work hours.

This is a common scene across Ambur town today. India's second largest producer of shoes and leather products is silent and mostly locked.

Many leather and rubber manufacturing units in the town have started to lay off workers and reduced their production capacity since the implementation of Goods and Service Tax in 2017, according to a rubber factory owner, Jalal Mohammed Kashif.

Kashif's Top Latex Products, one of the rubber-producing units in town had reduced the number of labourers working in the factory, from 150 in 2016 to 90 today.

Kashif's factory specializes in producing shoemaking components

like shoe soles and supplies it to the nearby shoe manufacturing unit.

Kashif said that the monthly revenue from his factory came down to Rs 5 lakhs from Rs 100 lakhs under the new tax regime. "It had a huge impact on credit rating, making it difficult for us to get loans. Whereas big corporates could easily get loans and continue working," he said.

The factory's business has been affected by a seasonal decline exacerbated by the implementation of the GST, said Kashif.

Leather factories in Ambur town run below their full capacity at this time of the year because of the decrease in order for the products from Europe in winter and during holiday seasons.

With the domestic market being dominated by big companies, small and medium factories like Top Latex Products earn their revenue mostly by exporting their products.

Kashif said before the implementation of GST, his factory used to record an annual profit of 10 percent. However, after the



Kashif's rubber factory in Ambur | NIMA

GST, there was only about 3 percent profit. "The business has come down by 60 percent. There is no cash flow in the market. We are incurring losses year on year."

He added that GST was a move to consolidate big corporates and it is against the government's aim to support and encourage small, and medium scale industries.

Factory owners said that the GST refund continues to be a challenge. There are pending refunds from as many as two years in some factories.

Top Latex Products has already closed three out of five factories. But Kashif says he could neither expand nor close the units completely. "The government could have implemented GST by considering the issues faced at the ground level by small and medium industries," he said.

The situation is no different for Ahmed, who owns a stitching unit in the same area. He had to downsize his unit after GST came into effect.

There were over 25 labourers

involved in the stitching of shoes and sandals at Ahmed's unit. Now, there are only three or four part-time labourers.

Ahmed said that with the introduction of GST came increased auditing and taxation. "I had to pay the tax even when there were no orders from the companies for the stitching. Therefore I stopped stitching shoes three years ago," he said.

His unit earned close to Rs 2 lakhs in a month before GST was implemented. Today, he makes only Rs 60,000 a month. The order for stitching had also decreased over the years.

The implementation of the GST has affected everybody in the value-chain, from factories to retail outlets.

A leather shop owner, Tabrez Ahmed said that the number of people purchasing shoes got reduced over the years. "Retail business has become slower. And it stopped us from ordering additional products from the manufacturers," he said.

Not much to light up the lives of matchstick makers

ANMOL ARORA

Kovilpatti: The sound of roaring machines and noxious smell of chemicals fill the air at a match factory here, where matchsticks in their thousands are made and packed into hundreds of boxes every day. One matchbox costs Rs. 1 at a roadside shop but a lot of work goes into the finished product.

Kannan, 41, put his bare hands into a chemical mix to smoothen it for even coating of the tip of matchsticks. A 'patient' operator, showed a thin yellow mask from his pocket, dirty and battered, but he said he was not using it.

"This is for the smell," he said. He worked with sulphur, potassium chlorate (white powder), powdered glass, and glue

and earned Rs. 400 per day.

Kannan is one among many workers, mostly daily wage earners, who toil throughout the day at Manikandan Matches without any safety precautions.

"This machine also corrects the 'tipping' size, which has to be a minimum of 5 mm," he said while pointing out the process of matchstick formation.

At the other corner of the hall sat 16-year-old Sanjana, selecting usable pieces of matchsticks that are otherwise discarded in the process.

"It hurts to breathe because the chemical dust flies in the room," she said, adding that it was giving her a headache. She came here from Bihar six months ago. She had to earn a living despite all the issues here. She made Rs. 250 per



Chemical mix for coating match sticks. (Right) A daily wage earner packing matches into boxes | ANMOL ARORA

working day, she said.

In another section of the factory across the street, many women and even children sat, working both with machines and manually,

packing matchsticks and matchboxes for sale.

Lily, 57, who wrapped 300 units or 30 sets per hour, said she had to finish 200 such sets. She faced



back pain and knee pain but the chemicals did not bother her as she had been working in the industry for 30 years (from the days when everything was done manually).

"This is the only work we

know," she said about her daily drudgery.

M. Krishnaveni, 37, working here for seven years, said that she had to fill matchsticks into the boxes — 100 matchboxes make one plate — she had to finish eight plates for the day. Women mostly did the packing job, she said.

Respiratory problems and skin allergies are common among the workers, who handled chemicals, she said, while picking bunches of matchsticks and arranging them.

Lakshmi (42) said that she had pain in the leg and back but she never sought any treatment.

M. Paramasivam, owner of the factory, agreed that there were chances of harm and injury to the workers.

"We have made them aware of the dangers." Since these workers

had been working for long, they were alive to the risks, he added. As the factory made "relatively safe" matches, the workers were not given gloves or masks, said Paramasivam.

However, some people complained of headache, stomachache, and fever, for which medicines were kept ready, he stated.

As for insurance, he said that the workers were covered under the Employees' Provident Fund and the Employees' State Insurance, but he did not clarify if these benefits were extended to daily wage earners.

Estimates suggest that there are nearly a thousand match factories at Kovilpatti and its neighbouring regions, which employ about 1.5 lakh people.

Dumpyard makes life difficult for residents

They find it hard to breathe in polluted air

SAYANTAN GUHA & ARNABJIT SUR

Rajupet: Living next to a dumping ground, the residents of Rajupet in Krishna district seem to suffer a silent death with lack of infrastructure coupled with abysmal living conditions haunting their everyday existence.

Pointing towards the garbage mound which rag pickers had set on fire for sorting out waste, P. Sivakumar (34), living here since 2016, said that health problems are rampant among the residents.

"It is difficult to breathe in such a toxic atmosphere as the air here is polluted due to the frequent smoke from the dumpyard," he added that throat and eye problems are a regular occurrence among two of her children.

Mosquitoes pose another menace, with fumigation drives – last held two months back—remaining inadequate to curb it.

"Everything from dengue to malaria is prevalent here, especially during the monsoons when water stagnates everywhere," rues

50-year-old J Sulochana, a farmer.

Pleas to municipalities, however, have fallen on deaf ears with the authority turning a blind eye to the woes of residents living in and around the dumping ground.

The residents claim that the



The Rajupet dumpyard.

| SAYANTAN GUHA

municipal authorities dismiss requests by them to get the garbage mound cleared.

"Whenever we complain, they ask us to vacate our houses saying that the dump was present before we shifted here so we have to bear the consequences," Sulochana

added.

Standing beside the hill of waste which accounts for Machilipatnam's total garbage load, K. Kavitha (28), living here for the past 15 years, said a major fire took place in 2007. It spread from the dump and engulfed her house, leaving her children with burn injuries.

"Shifting out of this area seems impossible as we have set up our livelihood here and with lack of proper assurance of rehabilitation from the government, we have nowhere to go," she lamented.

Reportedly, around late last year, a girl died due to what people say was suffocation due to toxic gases. "The government had sanctioned a wall in order to prevent the garbage from entering our neighbourhood but the work on it has been stalled for several months," she added.

Mohammad Akbar, a resident, said his daughter was falling ill frequently. Lack of streetlights and the nearest government hospital being situated in Machilipatnam, adds to their misery.



YOU HARVEST WHAT YOU SOW

Golden Harvest: With the Pongal festival around the corner, it was harvesting time for the farmers in Paruvathahalli in the Dharmapuri district. The sieving of the Ragi crop is a prime step in the cultivation process.

| SASHWATA SAHA

Contaminated water affects kidneys

JASMIN NIHALANI

Sellamudi: K. Lingeshwar (40) suffers from renal dysfunction. Approximately 60 per cent of his kidneys have stopped functioning. He is not the only one from Sellamudi village in Dharmapuri district and can count to at least 12 others, some of whom have died of the same disease.

Lingeshwar and several others living in Salem, Erode, Dharmapuri, Coimbatore, Tiruchirappalli, Vellore, Madurai and Virudhunagar—the fluoride belt of Tamil Nadu—are exposed to high contents of the mineral in ground

water.

Fluoride is a naturally occurring substance found in water in some concentration. Consumption of fluoride beyond the permissible limits of 1- 1.5 mg/l can lead to dental or skeletal fluorosis. Nearly 11.53 million people across 14,035 habitations in India are at risk according to data provided by the Ministry of Health Family and Welfare.

According to the Tamil Nadu Water Supply and Drainage Board, 56 per cent of habitations in Dharmapuri have excess fluoride in groundwater sources, making it the fluoride capital of the

state.

He is forced to shell out Rs 7000 per month for his medical expenses even when his crops fail.

B. Mani, the newly elected president of Manjarahalli panchayat, under which Sellamudi falls, says that there are more than 100 such cases in the village. The village also faces a shortage of water. Some residents are hence forced to buy water from those who have 'good bore wells.'

In an attempt to provide water to drought prone Dharmapuri and deal with excess of fluoride in groundwater, the State Government implemented the Hogenak-



K. Lingeshwar

| JASMIN NIHALANI

kal Water Supply and Fluorosis Mitigation Project with an aim to provide safe and potable drinking water from the Cauvery river.

However, even seven years after its completion, residents do not receive water regularly while the government continues to maintain that 120 million liters of water is distributed daily in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri.

S. Monika, a resident of Oddanur, says that water supply is so erratic that they don't know when it will come or when it will stop. Often, water comes only once in 15 days and people have to collect it in 50 pots.

On the horns of a citizenship dilemma

SUKRITI VATS

Hunsur: Refugees of Rabgayeling Tibetan Settlement in Hunsur Taluk of Mysore district are divided on the question of obtaining Indian citizenship. First established in 1971, the settlement has nearly 4000 Tibetans today, housed in 16 villages on 2000 acres of what was once forest land.

"The Tibetan government has advised us not to take Indian citizenship to preserve our culture and traditions," said Lhakparabth, a resident of the settlement who runs a momo shop.

Lhakparabth wishes to attain Indian citizenship so he can run the business on the land he owns.

"I have taken my land on a lease, which has to be renewed after every 30 years. I feel it's unfair that I can't buy or sell land because of my refugee status."

However, he understands the concern of the older generation, including his parents, about the loss of their identity in becoming an Indian legally.

Ngawang Dhoundup worries about the future of his daughters, aged 9 and 12 years. He thinks that third generation Tibetans do not have many job oppor-

tunities and as refugees, are denied government employment.

Dhoundup doesn't want his daughters to move away but he recognizes that for a well-educated refugee, the scope of getting successful is less, unless they move to

bigger cities with better and increased job prospects.

Another reason some Tibetans are willing to take Indian citizenship is to avoid uncertainties while travelling abroad.

Some Tibetans have encountered problems with immigration officials in the past when travelling to other countries either for higher education or to meet their spouses.

Nyima Chokey, a farmer in Rabgayeling, said, "I consider India my home; my family has been living here for 49 years. I would like to travel with ease as an Indian when I go meet my husband."

Nevertheless, there are still those, who, despite such difficulties would never relinquish their Tibetan identity. Tashi Tsering is one such person, who fears ostracism from the community.

"Once I take up Indian citizenship and start mingling with Indians, then I would no more be a Tibetan. That is something I simply can't do," he said.



Tibetan refugee Sonam Dolma.

| SUKRITI VATS

Incomplete home is where the heart is

RIZVI SAIF

Nochikuttai: With a load of cement on her head, 40-year-old Valarmathy wearily walked towards her half-built house. She scolded her grandson who was trying to scoop cement with a shovel.

Valarmathy and her husband Nataraj have been trying to build their own house for the past two years now. "The government had promised us Rs 1 lakh for building our house as part of some government scheme. But we have not received anything so far," said Nataraj wiping the sweat off his forehead.

Living in the hilly regions of



Valarmathy holding her grandson in front of her incomplete house. |RIZVI SAIF

Nochikuttai, a village 10 km away from Sitheri Panchayat of Pappireddipatti Taluk, the family has been staying in Nataraj's brother's house for the past few years.

Sitheri predominantly constitutes of Scheduled Tribes. People here are therefore eligible for the government scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Under this, people belonging to SC, ST and other economically weaker sections will be provided technical as well as financial assistance to construct houses.

The scheme is thus supposed to help people like Nataraj in providing funds for construction and in getting loans at lower interest

rates.

When the government failed them, they were forced to take a loan by mortgaging half an acre of their ancestral land. "We have now spent at least four and a half lakhs on the house and it is not even half way through," said Valarmathy. Being daily wage labourers, they do not earn much in a remote village like Nochikuttai. Meagre job opportunities and difficulty in transportation drove Nataraj out of his native place.

Nataraj, therefore, goes to Kerala and Karnataka looking for jobs. Today, he works in Kerala and earns Rs. 600 for every 30 trees he cuts.

"We are in debt. We have borrowed money from family and friends. But we have no other way," said Nataraj pointing to a heap of cement in front of their house. As much as 14 tonnes of cement has already been used for the construction which alone cost more than Rs. 20,000. They have to give extra cash to bring in the loads of cement as there is no proper road connection with the panchayat.

Both their children have moved out of the village. They managed to give college education to their daughter but financial issues forced them to get her married resulting in her dropping out.

They moved out to make space for their kids

ASHREYA PATIAL

Thiruvidekazhi: Raasayan (60) and his wife Kaviyazhagi (42) complain that snakes and insects enter inside their electricity less thatched mud huts at night here, at the Poochathanur colony in Nagapan Nagar Dalit colony.

A total of 32 huts have been constructed alongside a pond by the old and middle aged people here. These ramshackled mud and straw huts are 500 meters away from their original houses. These people said they were forced to build their house outside their original village of Nagapan Nagar, due to lack of space. Some said they came out on their own to give their children more space.

"We built our huts ourselves. The government promised to relocate us. It has been 10 months since we have been

shifted but no action has been taken to build new houses. No government benefit reaches our colony," says Raasayan.

His knee swells abnormally. His wife, Kaviyazhagi, has developed deformed feet, after years of strenuous farming. There are no toilets built nearby and people defecate in the open. The men go farther into the fields whereas the women go to nearby places.

Kaviyazhagi says, 'I earn Rs.150 per day for my work, and the work is seasonal. My husband and I have registered under the 100 day scheme. Since he is sick on most days, I work for his part too.'

Her husband and she used to sow seeds but now, machines have replaced them.

A water tap was installed in Poochathanur only a month ago, from which people are allowed to draw water from only

once a day. Previously, a tap was installed nearby but it gave salty water—thus the villagers had to move to Nagapan colony in search of water.

Lalitha (38), a resident, says "The problem of less housing space has been there for the past 15 years. It is only now that the decision to shift has been taken. It is compulsory for every Patta holder elder to build a hut, and stay here. It acts as a proof that they had a house in their original colony. For my children, the school bus comes here. That is the only benefit of this place."

Lalitha says "15 years ago, a resident tried to grab the land and raise a small building here. It caused a dispute between him and the Dalits, but the AIADMK government intervened and safeguarded the land for them. Eventually, they got the land back."



Elderly woes: The inside view of a hut in Poochathanur (top), Raasayan's swollen knee and Kaviyazhagi's disease stricken feet and Raasayan looking towards his home. | ASHREYA PATIAL