

COVERING DEPRIVATION

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NO TIME FOR TEA BREAKS
Long hours of tiring work and minimal pay for tea estate workers in Jhapa flout Nepal's labour laws

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Arsenic in the groundwater has been poisoning rural people in the eastern border districts of West Bengal

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Pokkali farming battles extinction

Ecological factors, lack of profit incentives make farming of this GI-tagged paddy unviable in Kadamakudy

SOPHIYA MATHEW

Kadamakudy (Ernakulam): "The present generation does not know the basics of farming; they even ask us what is a njar (sapling). There is barely anyone to work in the Pokkali fields as it requires a lot of traditional expertise," said Lakshmanan, a 73-year-old Pokkali farmer from Kadamakudy.

Pokkali is a centuries-old farming technique that has earned worldwide recognition. The salt-tolerant varieties of rice are grown in tidal wetland regions in an alternate seasonal pattern with shrimp cultivation. It is the first rice variety from Asia to get a Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

"The GI status of Pokkali is under threat. Challenges such as shortage of labour, lack of government incentives, unsustainable agricultural practices etc. are pushing this ecologically fragile farming practice to extinction," said Parvathy M R, research scholar in geography, Madurai Kamaraj University.

Pokkali has unique properties of saline resistance and it is a climate resilient rice variety, which makes



STANDING TALL

Pokkali in Malayalam means 'the one who stands tall'

- Pokkali farming, a 3000-year-old climate-adaptive organic method that has earned worldwide recognition, is the first variety of rice from Asia to earn a Geographical Indication tag

- The salt-tolerant varieties of rice are grown in the brackish waters of tidal wetland regions in an alternative seasonal pattern with shrimp cultivation

- During high tide, water with prawn larvae is let into the field by opening sluice gates.

- The rice has several medicinal properties

DUAL FARMING: Shrimp farming under way on Pokkali fields at Kadamakudy | PHOTO & GRAPHIC: SOPHIYA MATHEW

it a model crop in times of climate change. It was the only rice crop that survived the 2018 floods in Kerala. The farming involves rice cultivation from April 15 to November 14, followed by a five-month phase of shrimp or fish

farming. Prawn and fish excrement enriches the soil, and crop remnants serve as feed for shrimp or fish, completing a sustainable cycle. Rich in antioxidants, iron, zinc, manganese, and fibre, Pokkali rice has several medicinal properties.

Despite regulations in the Paddy Conservation and Wetlands Act prohibiting shrimp cultivation in paddy fields during the agricultural season, a 2022 Kerala government order favours extended shrimp cultivation. "The shift towards

monoculture impacts aquaponics and diminishes the nitrogen content vital for Pokkali field aquafuna, potentially affecting quality," said Parvathy.

K A Joseph, vice president of the Pokkali-Chemmeen Karshaka

Sangham, a panchayat level farmers group, says, "The prevalence of White Spot Syndrome Virus in shrimp cultivated may be a result of unsustainable farm patterns."

"We used to easily get a catch of

100 to 200 kg of shrimp in a day, but nowadays it takes more than three days to get the same quantity," said Dilip, a fisherman at Kadamakudy.

"In regions like Devasampadam, Pokkali farmers make sure not even a single drop of salt water enters the Pokkali fields during high tide. The sluice gates are covered with tarpaulin sheets. No such care is given in Kadamakudy because the farmers no longer have a say, and paddy field owners dominate." As shrimp cultivation gives better returns, there is a push for it.

The neelakozhi (grey-headed swamphens) is a menace, and can destroy a one-acre Pokkali field in a few days, says Joseph. The cost of spreading protective nets all over the field makes it financially unviable."

P.R. Mony, retired Joint Commissioner of Matsya Board and a Pokkali farmer for more than 50 years, said, "Local farm hands are no longer available"

"We won't stop Pokkali cultivation even if it provides a meagre profit; if we stop it, the practice will come to a standstill in a matter of time," said Mony.

Shattered lives still unmended in Nepal

BIJEESHA BUDHATHOKI

Laikham (Nepal): It was midnight. Dharma Raj Singh stirred in his sleep as the first tremors hit Laikham. He could feel his house shaking; fear and panic took over, as the enormity of what was happening sank in.

"It's an earthquake. Run!" Dharma Raj heard his younger brother scream. He and four other family members scrambled out of the house. The house, built with stones and mud, didn't collapse. But, with wide cracks on the walls, it was no longer safe to live in.

The 6.4-magnitude earthquake that shook western Nepal, with its epicentre at Ramidanda, took the lives of over 150 people and injured several hundred others. It destroyed around 10,000 houses. "There is no house in our rural municipality that is liveable. Almost all need to be rebuilt," said Bir Bahadur Giri, chairperson of Barekot rural municipality.

Paddy, wheat, corn and millet worth over Rs 92.6 million stored in over 34,000 households were destroyed, in the district, besides livestock worth over Rs. 54 million. There were some exceptions like Dipak Prasad Sharma, a resident of Laikham. "We somehow managed to rescue our cattle." But one of his two houses collapsed burying stored paddy and corn.

That was on November 3, 2023. Two months on, the survivors are struggling to rebuild their lives against all odds.

Man Kumari Bhandari, 70, who has been living in a tarpaulin makeshift place since the earthquake, said, "My legs and hands are swollen. My back aches unbearably. I wish I could live in my house."

As the cold is intensifying by the day, the survivors living under tents are falling ill.



The rubble of houses destroyed in Jajarkot | PHOTO: BIJEESHA BUDHATHOKI

Durga Bhandari, 25, a resident of Barekot, complained of bias within the rural municipality in distributing relief packages. "Some people with clout in the village are getting a lot of relief packages. But, we have received just one tarpaulin shelter and one blanket, that too two weeks after the earthquake."

As per reports from primary health care centres, 29 earthquake survivors from Jajarkot have died. This includes a month-old baby and an 89-year-old woman.

The government had promised to build temporary shelters within a month of the earthquake. For this, they were to provide Rs 50,000 in two instalments, first before building the shelters and the remaining Rs 25,000 after the shelter is built.

Khim Prasad Sharma says, "I made the house just five years ago from the money I earned working in Malaysia. Now it's gone. If we could manage to stay for some time in the temporary shelters promised

by the government, I could again take up work elsewhere and build a new house for my family."

He says he has not received any money from the government yet. "We are sleeping in the cold on the field."

However, chairperson Giri claimed they have prioritised building temporary shelters. The Barekot rural municipality has already deposited over Rs 100 million in the bank for providing the first instalment promised, he said. "About 60 per cent of those affected have received the amount and the others will get it soon. Government procedures take time."

According to him, "People are complaining also because non-governmental agencies are offering relief packages only for vulnerable groups like elderly people, children, and people with disabilities."

He added "There is the greedy nature of people who want to hoard all the packages even if all members of their family are well-off."

SHRIYA MURMU

Basdiha (Godda): It is a double blow for the villagers of Basdiha in Jharkhand; they have been displaced due to mining in their area, and the children in their resettled colonies have no access to education.

The lone government school at Basdiha, which is 34.5 km from the district headquarters in Godda, has been shifted to Hijukita, where the Muslim community from Basdiha is relocated. The rest of the villagers were relocated in September-October to Dakaita, Lohandiya, and Hurka, which have no schools.

Sanjhli Murmu, a villager, says, "They have made new villages for us, and shifted us to three to four places. They need to build schools in all those villages for the children," says the 55-year-old housewife. "We have somehow managed to educate this generation, but what about the next generation?"

Sanjhli and other villagers have written letters and are constantly interacting with Eastern Coalfields Limited (ECL) demanding schools for the displaced community.

Nolina Minj, a reporter at Scroll.in, says, "This very much shows the divide of caste and ethnicity, especially in terms of adivasi and other backward communities. A layered marginalisation can be seen here — those suffering are adivasis, and they are small in number."

The Rajyakrit Madhya School in Basdiha had around 200 students, out of which 181 are Muslim. The remaining 20 students were from the Santhal community and other classes in the village, says Rita Kumari, an anganwadi worker.

"But the school was shifted to Hijukita just because of the Muslim majority. If only one community from a village benefits, where would the other people go?" says 28-year-old Rita.

The rest of the residents have



The remains of a house in Basdiha village after it was demolished due to mining | PHOTO: SHRIYA MURMU

been asking ECL for a new school in each of the resettlement areas. "Until they give us a new school for all the displaced communities, we won't let them demolish this old school," says Rita.

According to a research paper by Portia Oware Twerefoo, an ESL teacher and researcher based in Spain, children within mining communities never go back to school and instead join the labour force at an early age. This chaos of relocation also distracts parents from the concerns of their children as they struggle to reconstruct their physical and productive environment.

Nolina Minj says, "One of the many consequences of displacement is that social and economic networks that would enable them to have social mobility and access to education and jobs are being taken away from the community. All of it just condemns them to be the lowest community in terms of socio-economic value and work."

Nolina said the narrative being sold is that what is happening is for the sake of development. "If someone should benefit from the land, it should be the people who have cultivated it for generations."

ECL has not set up any school apart from shifting the existing one to Hijukita, says Dinesh Kumar, a 23-year-old auto driver. "Though

schools provide mid-day meals with eggs twice a week. They have also recently started to provide raagiladdoo or halwa on Wednesdays. Students of classes 1 and 2 get two sets of free uniforms, one sweater, socks, and shoes along with an annual stipend of Rs 1,500. Students in classes 3-5 get only an

additional stipend of Rs 1,500 a year instead of uniforms. Students of secondary classes get an annual stipend of Rs 2,500. "All the displaced children are deprived of these initiatives that the government took to uplift marginalised communities. While mission schools give better education, they are not affordable for the already displaced families," says Esther.

Esther Marandi, a government school teacher, said government

The displaced children are deprived of the initiatives taken by the government to uplift marginalised communities

Turga Dam Project will impact 28 adivasi villages

500 families in Ajodhya Hills fear displacement and loss of livelihood

ARITRA BHOWMICK

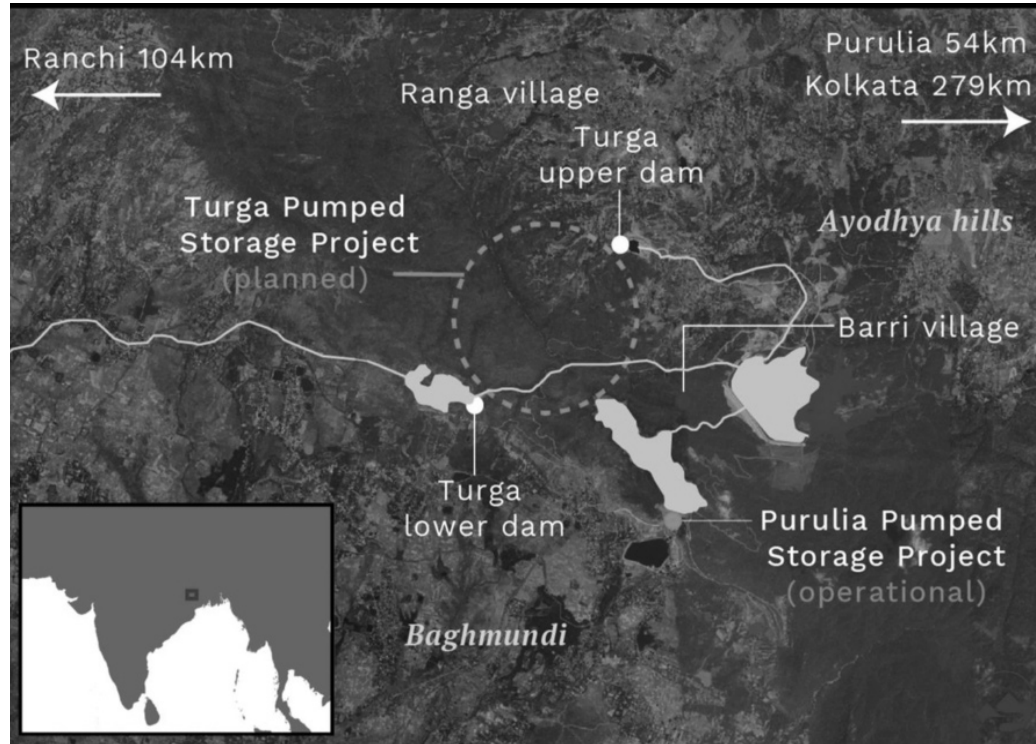
Baghmundi (Purulia): Deep in the verdant folds of West Bengal's Ajodhya Hills, nestled amidst ancient forests and echoing with the whispers of tradition, adivasi communities are facing a threat. The communities, who call these hills their ancestral home, face displacement if the Turga pumped storage project proposed by the state's electricity development corporation materialises.

Since its launch in 2007-2008, the 900 MW Purulia pumped storage project has been a symbol of success, powering homes and businesses with clean, renewable energy.

Hence, the West Bengal State Electricity Distribution Company Limited (WBSEDCL) is planning to develop another 1000 MW Pumped Storage type Power Project at Ajodhya Hills under Baghmundi block in Purulia district.

For the adivasis, the Ajodhya Hills are more than just geographical coordinates. They are the bedrock of their cultural identity, the source of their livelihoods. But the proposed project casts a shadow, threatening to unravel this delicate web of life.

The project's footprint could lead to the displacement of approximately 500 adivasi families and impact around 28



HILLS UNDER THREAT: The map shows the location of the proposed Turga Dam project | GRAPHICS: ARITRA BHOWMICK

villages, with some facing submergence by the planned reservoir.

But, on June 13, 2017, the Purulia district magistrate released a letter stating that the inhabitants affected by the Turga pumped storage project had no opposition to the land being acquired for it.

The adivasis refuse to let their

voices be silenced. Their resistance manifests itself in peaceful protests and unwavering determination.

The newly formed 'Prakriti Bachao Adivasi Bachao Mancha' (Forum to Save Nature and Tribals) amplifies their concerns and demands their rightful place in decision-making.

According to them, the state government did not follow FRA rules while acquiring the 234 hectares of forest land for the Turga pumped storage project (TPSP).

Sushanta Laha, a 45-year-old farmer from Bari village (a member of the PBABM) also mentioned that they were

promised several facilities such as jobs, better roads, better development, free electricity within the 8 km radius of the project.

But they didn't get any of those facilities.

He added that the last petition was submitted on the letter-heads of other representative gram sabhas as well, asking mainly for securing the forest rights of adivasis in Ajodhya.

Additionally, water diversion raises alarm bells in a region already battling aridity. Deforestation and habitat fragmentation loom large, jeopardising the rich tapestry of flora and fauna, including the Asian elephant for which the hills are a vital corridor of existence there.

Kamala Murmu, a 32-year-old Chhau dancer from Muskhosh Gram (a member of the Sabra tribe), said they were also facing water shortage.

Due to the construction of these dams, the elephants have lost their habitat, and there has been a frequent rise in cases of elephant attacks among the nearby villages also, resulting in the death of some people.

Marang Burung, a 43-year-old school teacher from the Ranga Village said, "We want forests, not dams." He said that till date there are no developments on this issue, and they are being suppressed.

Healthcare is the casualty at Jhargram hosp



The general ward of the hospital | PHOTO: MEGHA GHOSH

MEGHA GHOSH

Jhargram: The Super Speciality Hospital in Jhargram district is being criticised as it falls short in providing oxygen and appropriate medicines. Patients say they are only getting generic drugs for all illnesses. The emergency ward is not in good shape, and families say that enough doctors are not there. They said that there is only one doctor for general treatment.

Jitesh Mahato, 32, his 55-year-old father, Suben Mahato, was admitted in October 2023 to the hospital because he had breathing trouble and didn't have enough blood.

The tough time started in the emergency ward when the hospital didn't give him the oxygen he needed.

On the second day, they shifted him to the general ward but still didn't provide the necessary oxygen. Suben's health got worse.

On the third morning, they shifted him to the ICU, and gave him oxygen. However, Suben passed away at 5 pm that day. Jitesh said,

"The hospital's neglect shows how poor people can be left helpless. They are waiting for people to die"

- Jitesh Mahato

Sneha Ghosh, 28, a dental student and resident of Jhargram, is concerned about the healthcare at the hospital. She went there for a stomach problem and noticed that they don't suggest medicines like

Omeprazole, Pantoprazole, or Rabeprazole, which are for specific stomach issues.

She says the doctors always recommend Phimosin 40 for anything - headaches or stomach pain.

Ghosh pointed out that the hospital does not have any ointments for pain relief, so patients have to buy them from medical stores.

"Many people in the area choose the hospital instead of nursing homes because of financial reasons," she said.

While the hospital has general medicine, ENT, dental, and gynaecology departments, it lacks specialists like nephrologists and cardiologists.

Hari Sankar, 45, whose mother was hospitalised for gastritis, said the hospital is good in treating fever and gastritis, but falls short when it comes to cardio and neuro problems.

Sankar stated, "If patients have cardio problems or other serious issues, it is not manageable in Jhargram, this hospital refers them to Medinipur Medical College and Hospital, located 54 km away from Jhargram."

Sunita Mondal, 50, a working single mother, expressed concern about her son Rakesh's week-long hospitalisation due to stomach cramps and vomiting. "There has been no improvement in my son's health over the past week. Nurses are administering only one medicine thrice a day. Although he gets eggs for breakfast, there's no provision for fish or chicken in his other meals," she said.

"I and Rakesh stay alone. He doesn't have any siblings, but in the hospital, someone has to stay with the patient overnight. Unfortunately, they are not allowing me to stay with my son because I'm a woman," she added.

She said, "The nephrology treatment is very bad in this hospital." She shared that her husband's kidneys were damaged due to excessive alcohol consumption.

But the hospital authorities referred him to Medinipur Medical College and Hospital, which is very far. Mondal said, "Patients in the emergency ward are adversely affected as it is difficult to reach Medinipur hospital on time."

Many people die on the way. My husband also died on the way to the hospital," She added, "Once, all Salboni villagers had protested about it, but nothing changed."

Prof. Dr Susmita Bhattacharya, principal of Jhargram Medical College and director of the hospital, said the Oxygen Plantation Centre was set up in 2020. "After the Oxygen plantation, there is no lack of oxygen in this hospital."

She said the hospital ensures a steady supply of eggs on a regular basis and fish on all alternate days to the patients.

Panikhaiti battles water woes

BHABNA BARUAH

Panikhaiti (Kamrup): In the hills of Panikhaiti, Guwahati, Assam, a close-knit community is dealing with challenges that have persisted for years, and their pleas are yet to reach the government.

The condition of the area continues to worsen every year.

Nirmala Saikia, a 33-year-old resident of Padmini Path in Panikhaiti, shares the daily struggles faced by her community in the village.

Water scarcity and inadequate road connectivity remains a constant concern.

The community is compelled to buy water. Nirmala, a housewife and mother of two children, is disappointed with the lack of development in the area.

One noteworthy aspect is that a lone household bears the responsibility of supplying water to 50 families - Edul Ali, a 53-year-old resident.

He has a borewell from which residents draw water upon paying a sum.

Only two families within the entire hill have access to water tank facilities.

They receive their water supply from a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) project.

In the absence of a steady



Fetching water is an uphill task for the villagers of Panikhaiti | PHOTO: BHABNA BARUAH

supply of water, Nirmala collects rainwater in two tanks.

In times of emergency, she boils the water before providing it to her children, aged 9 and 13.

Unfortunately, the children often fall ill and experience stomach ache after consuming this water.

Mamata Chettri, a 63-year-old resident of Padmini Path, echoes similar concerns about inadequate roads and water problems in the

area. Living with six family members, Mamata's family, like others, depends on Edul Ali for water.

When Edul Ali is away, families in the region have no choice but to buy water, a practice common to Mamata's household.

Procuring drinking water for eight people becomes a laborious task as they have to navigate the challenging terrain to carry this

heavy load uphill, given the inaccessibility of vehicles.

For three consecutive years, Mamata has diligently applied for the Assam Orunodoi Asoni, a government scheme launched in October 2020.

Intended to benefit over 24 lakh poor households in the state, the scheme provides monetary support to women from low-income groups.

"Unfortunately, in the first two years, I received no assistance. This year, I received Rs 1,000 for two months, only for the support to be abruptly discontinued," Mamata said.

But even when this aid was there, it was barely enough to cover electricity bills which have touched Rs 600-700, and the cost of a gas cylinder which is Rs 700 under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

Her family has suffered a financial setback due to medical expenses.

"Despite my niece's persistent visits to the councillor's office seeking financial aid for a kidney stone operation, we received no help."

"We had to use all our savings, amounting to Rs 3 lakh, to cover the operation cost."

If there is a medical emergency, especially with elderly people, Mamata says two or three people

HT cable makes Amtala jute wig makers tear their hair out

SAPTAK MUKHERJEE

Aamtala (South 24 Parganas): Jute hair makers of Aamtala are demanding the removal of a high-tension electric pole from their area as it burns the jute - their main raw material - and causes a huge loss for them.

Located 40 km from the Sundarbans region, Aamtala is a small village in South 24 Parganas of West Bengal. People from a Muslim community of this village use jute to make hair wigs for idols. Their business has been affected as the presence of a high-tension electric pole in their storage shelter is burning the highly flammable jute.

"Several times due to short circuit our storage shelter got burnt and all the products destroyed. We faced a huge loss. We buy the jute from the Agarpura jute mill near Barrackpore and it costs a lot",

says Shamsuddin Seikh, whose family is known for inventing the process of making these wigs.

"Several times due to short circuit our storage shelter got burnt and all was destroyed"

- Shamsuddin Seikh

This community has requested the government repeatedly to remove the high tension pole from their area but they did not get any response.

Besides, the pond water they use is polluted. This dirty water affects the quality of the jute.

According to them they are able to handle this problem now, because recently they started using a water purifier chemical.

Razia Bibi, who is a worker in that community, said, "I do the sharpening of iron comb and earlier it caused a huge problem during the sharpening as it broke."

According to them, only Muslim women have skills to make wigs. This hair making process is laborious. It takes 15 days to make one set of hair.

The process has different stages.

First, they bring raw jute and dye it in a light colour. Then it is cut according to the size of the idol and sharpened with an iron comb so that it looks fresh. After that, it is put together with a metal pin to make a single strip of hair. After pinning, it is placed on a low



A jute wig maker at work in Aamtala | PHOTO: SAPTAK MUKHERJEE

flame and after three days it is dipped in coloured water. Then it is kept for drying, which take

almost two days. After it gets dry again it is again run through the iron comb to remove the excess

parts. At last, it is packed for selling to the idol makers.

The worker gets only Rs.6,000

a month after this hard labour.

They believe that their ancestors discovered this idea of making the jute hair of Hindu deities. So, they want to continue their heritage.

Shamsuddin says, "my grandfather invented this process. For 75 years we have been running the business. Our products are hand-made; we do not use any machine."

He adds, "nowadays, men also work under us, not just women."

"During the time before Durga Puja, our work load becomes heavy, we have to work for 24 hours. It is not an individual-run business, we work together as a community and the profit is shared."

Together, they named their community "Adi Mohila Kuthir Shilpa".

Shamsuddin became their head manager and took care of the business.

Officials, not tigers, a threat to Moulis

Community of honey-gatherers from Sundarbans pushed further into debt due to an archaic licensing system

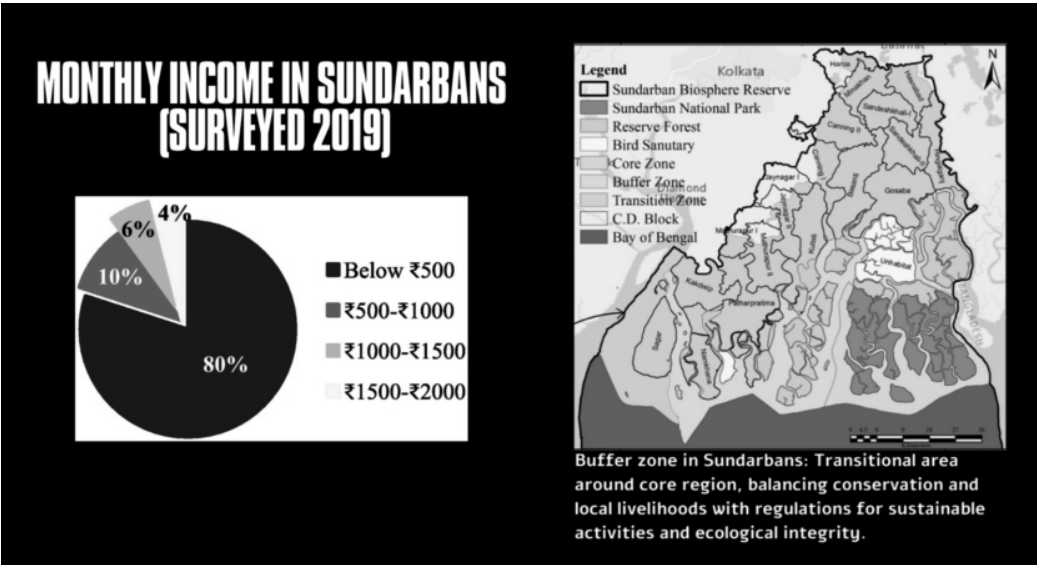
ABHIRUP SENGUPTA

Jharkhali (South 24 Parganas): "We are not scared of tigers or crocodiles when we go to the forest to get honey. What worries us is the exploitative treatment of the forestry officers," said 70-year-old Nirmal Halder, a Mouli (honey collector) from Jharkhali village of the Basanti block in South 24 Parganas.

Halder's concerns highlight the controversial dealings of officials handling the Boat Licensing Certificates (BLCs), which are legally mandated for local people venturing into the forests of the Sundarbans through surrounding rivers.

The veteran Mouli, who had started venturing into the forest since his pre-teens, alleged that the permission required to enter the rivers under the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) is mainly given to fish dealers who own multiple boats.

As a result, many 'Moulis' have no option but resort to enter the Sundarbans delta illegally, either without BLC or by renting BLCs



GRAPHIC: ABHIRUP SENGUPTA

from others. Thousands of Moulis have to venture out to gather honey from the forests in the months of Falgun (late February/March) to Joishtho (mid-May/June).

"We have to rent these BLCs for around Rs 80,000 to 90,000," said Halder. With six members in

his family – his wife, two sons, one daughter-in-law, and one grandchild, their family could have earned a total of Rs 20,000 to 25,000 if he had a BLC. Last year Halder's son had entered the forest without the permission letter to gather honey. "Someone must have tipped off the officers,

who then seized his boat and all the produce he had collected, including several hundred litres of honey."

The concept of BLC rentals is a double-edged sword, says 67-year-old Jogojit Mandal, who goes to collect honey and fish with his wife. Even if they get the funds

to rent a BLC from a dealer, using such BLC would still be illegal and could attract fines. "It depends on the forestry officer. If we are caught and our identities verified, it would not match the pass holder's name." Apart from the monitoring purposes, the BLC and honey-gathering passes are issued to prevent overfishing and also to give compensation to the families of tiger attack victims.

However, Halder and Mandal asserted that in their village the families which lost someone to tiger attacks only receive a small portion of the issued relief funds. They allege that the forestry department keeps a significant chunk of the compensation amount which ranges from Rs 1-3 lakh.

Mandal asserted that officials knew about these rentals but preferred not to charge the dealers. They impose fines on those using rented Boat Licensing Certificates (BLCs) to enter the forest. Similar problems exist with the honey gathering pass from the Joint Forest Management, as some in the community claim that they are

not allotted passes even after applying multiple times over the years. He added that the officers could seize their boats and the produce they collected, leaving them with nothing. "In such incidents, we cannot even afford our 'pantabhaat' (fermented rice) and pickles," said Mandal.

According to the Sundarban Tiger Reserve's official "Offence and Seizure" document, only 29 dingis (non-motorised boats) were seized between 2017 and 2021. However, Moulis rejected the claim and asserted that the number must have been in hundreds.

"The local government does not let us unionise and support our claims of corruption between the Forest Department and the Tiger Reserve," said 45-year-old Ashim Barui, who has been gathering honey since he was a 15-year-old, after he lost his father in a tiger attack. Barui claimed that they usually gather around 40-50 litres of honey per beehive, some times even up to 200-300.

"We are supposed to bring it to the Forest Department after we are done collecting the honey, and

they coerce us into selling it to them directly for a lower profit margin as it is illegal to sell it without a valid collection pass," he said. Mandal and Halder alleged that the forestry officers coerced them into giving them more money for free.

In contrast, the Joint Forest Management Committee claimed to have helped the Mouli community of Sundarbans with the help of Sundarban Banaraksha Bahumukhi Samabay Samity (SBBSS).

According to Sundarban Tiger Reserve's former Deputy Field Director, Ajoy Das, this initiative has provided a safe honey collection camp to hundreds of Moulis, where they can learn apiculture techniques to produce the government-backed 'Bonophool' honey.

However, Moulis such as Barui, Mandal and Halder claim that the honey produced in those camps is insufficient to meet their demands.

Das refused to comment on the allegations regarding Bonophool and the alleged corruption among forestry officials.

Iron-ic: clean and dirty water are Egra's woes



Tribal people of Khamari village collecting water at the electric water pump | PHOTO: ARCHAN KUNDU

ARCHAN KUNDU

Egra (East Medinipur): The residents of Egra in East Medinipur District of West Bengal are drinking water with high iron content everyday, leading to frequent health problems. The problem is extended to the surrounding villages of the town as well.

According to Dr Chandan Kumar Manna, a local doctor in Egra, he gets at least two patients who are suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome every day. "This is mostly caused due to the high iron content in the water here," says Dr Manna.

Many residents complained that the drinking water supplied to the houses by the Egra Municipal Corporation is often reddish, with a rusty smell.

Sangeeta Nayak, a 36-year-old homemaker in Egra, says she uses the municipal supplied water only to wash her clothes and dishes. "There is always a red sediment when water is stored."

Another resident, Champa Maity, a 38-year-old home maker, said they discontinued corporation water supply as their daughter Sampa, a 16-year-old school student, suffered from stomach ache and skin allergies after drinking that water. "The allergies went away after we changed the water," she said.

The villages surrounding Egra depend on ground water, which they pump up with electric or solar pumps in each of the villages. These pumps are generally shared by 15 or 16 families at a time from the village.

Villagers in Khamari said they had to pay for the power

consumed by the electric motors that pump up the ground water. Kamal Mandi, a 27-year-old labourer, said "It becomes tough for us to pay the bill even after dividing it among 15 families."

Mandi said that after dividing the bill for the water pump among 15 families, it stands at Rs 270 to Rs 300 per household. But these households mostly consist of members from the Scheduled Tribes who work as manual labourers on farms, earning Rs 300 to Rs 350 a day on the days they get to work.

Most people in Egra take packaged water. Hence, multiple local suppliers have emerged in the recent years who have installed filtration machineries in their homes and deliver packaged water on a basis. The initial cost is Rs 350 for the water dispenser with prices of 20 litre water cans in the Rs 20-30 range.

Kar said the Total Dissolved Salts (TDS) for the local packaged water range from 25 to 30 milligrams per litre. He said, "The way they (local suppliers) filter

the water, no mineral is left at all." The Bureau of Indian Standards states that the minimum TDS for drinking water should not be below 50 milligrams per litre as it lacks essential minerals.

Dr Manna said, "80 out of 100 women here (Egra) suffer from Anaemia." This is caused by the lack of any minerals in the local mineral water canisters.

80 out of 100 women here (Egra) suffer from anaemia - Dr Chandan Kumar

SHRABANA CHATTERJEE

Salboni, Boria (Jhargram): Jhargram is one of the densest forest areas in West Bengal and has some of the oldest and most sought after sal trees. These trees are highly priced in the market due to their diverse uses in furniture making, medicinal properties, organic leaf plates, and more.

According to West Bengal Forest Department data, these trees can fetch between Rs 11,000 and Rs 45,000 depending on their size and age. But who reaps the benefits?

"Currently, the forest department is shooting off the shoulders of the tribal people. The Bon-Suraksha Committees (Forest Protection Committees) founded in 1995 are made of villagers who work to keep the trees safe," said Shyamsundar Mahato, a 52-year-old local activist in Salboni village of Jhargram.

The villagers are braving extreme cold weather conditions in the region to protect their forests from the illegal tree fellers, who Mahato refers to as "asadhu byabshai" or unethical businessmen.

When the illegal tree fellers cut these trees and sell them in the black market, they have to pay no tax to the authorities or share the profits with the tribals. They can pocket the entire loot, which is why it is a thumping business, he says. Assistant Divisional Forest Officer (ADFO) Balaram Panja said, "The thieves will always be there, we can only try our best to



Illegally cut sal trees inside the forest roads of Jhargram | PHOTO: SHRABANA CHATTERJEE

work around the problem."

Pramod Mahato, a 55-year-old Forest Protection Committee member from Boria village, said, "Each year the government gives parts of our land to the corporation for felling. The government and the local tribals get a 60-40 share of the profits earned from the tree sale."

But the tribals have never been shown any official documents of what the actual profits look like and if they are getting their prescribed share, he alleged.

The 40 per cent profit that the tribals get from the tree felling is then divided among the 60

households that are part of the Forest Protection Committee. They also get minimal labour charges to conduct the government-initiated tree-felling drives. The local people said they do all the work for the forest, be it timber collection or fending off

When the illegal tree fellers cut trees and sell in the black market, they have to pay no tax or share profits with the tribals

the thieves, but they have no say over the share of profits.

Mahato claimed that when they raised the theft issue with the forest department, the officials said they did not have enough

staff to catch them and put the onus on the tribals because they are getting 40 per cent of the profits.

ADFO Panja said, "The tribals benefit a lot from the forests. We have given them the whole forest. We also give them 40 per cent of the profits that we make from the legal deforestation of the sal trees in the Jhargram region."

The Forests Rights Act (FRA), 2006, recognises the rights of the forest-dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for a variety of needs,

including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs. It is debatable if the forest department has the authority to "give away" the forest to the tribals or if they are the rightful owners to begin with.

Both officials and locals in the Jhargram forest areas say that they have not been able to catch any of the illegal tree fellers. The thieves are very discrete in their work. They come in the dead of the night in small tempo carriers, cut the trees, load them in the tempoes, cover them with sheets of plastic and drive off. Some days the locals confiscate the loot and save the timber from black marketers, but the thieves often manage to get away in the darkness of the night with their faces masked up.

The forests are vast, it becomes logistically impossible for the tribals to comb through the whole area to prevent illegal activities.

There is also the problem of elephant attacks in the dense forest. Large elephant herds come out at night, making it nearly impossible for the local tribals to function without fear for their lives. The local people have requested the forest officials to inspect the timber processing units to see who is sourcing the raw trees through illegal means. But, so far not much has been done by the authorities in this regard.

Parents in Kokapur say daily work is sustenance, keep children out of school

PRIYANKAN GHOSH

Kokapur, Narayanpur (North 24 Parganas): The Kokapur F.P. School in Narayanpur, once vibrant, now faces high dropout rates. When the Charuhat Narayanpur AP School was inaugurated in 2016, parents of Narayanpur withdrew their children to get them enrolled to the new closer option.

In 2023, both the primary education centres showed scanty daily attendance and high dropout rates. The Narayanpur FP School, inaugurated with 115 students, now has only 13, some whom enrolled fresh while others were transferred from the Kokapur FP School.

After 2020, the school cited an 80 per cent dropout rate, partly due to the pandemic. Among the most common reasons, COVID topped. Many families had lost



Charuhat Narayanpur FP School | PHOTO: PRIYANKAN GHOSH

their earning members to the pandemic and the children were taken away from the school and put on the fields.

The entire area depends on livestock and bamboo cultivation, with women playing a crucial role. Children contribute to the income in many families, with some citing

the pandemic's impact. Debomoyee, a widow, teaches her 11-year-old son farming after her husband's death, emphasising survival through harvest sales.

"Now he helps me with field work. And my daughter (14) manages all the household work. It is better than going to school. At

least we are guaranteed that we will stay alive with the harvest we sell," she says. A similar situation prevails in the FP School in neighbouring Kokapur, with only around 30 students. Though it had 15 teachers initially, it has now only four, including Headmaster Chandrima Ghoshal.

Ghoshal, a former NGO worker from rural Bihar, was disheartened by parental disinterest. Efforts to engage families prove challenging, as many prefer involving children in household and field work. "The ones who come are normally from a very poor background and the midday meal is the only reason they send their children. Some only drop their children off during the lunch time," said Ghoshal.

"I sent both my daughters to the school, despite my husband's disapproval. Sadly, they weren't learning much," said Iqbal, a 30-

year-old fruit seller in the village. "The mixed-grade classes lacked focused teaching. Eventually, I opted for a different school 10 km away, but the daily commute is a financial strain since we can't afford a toto [electric vehicle] or autorickshaw."

Even schemes like Kanyashree Prakalpa, launched in 2013, and Sikshashree in 2014, aimed at increasing the rate of education in rural Bengal, do not seem to have impacted all places or not reached some places at all. "Nothing has been implemented in our village so far. If there was assistance or fee compensation, I could afford to send my daughter to school," expressed Kishore, a labourer.

Despite government initiatives and schemes, the ground reality in these villages reflects a stark disconnect between policy implementation and the lived experiences of residents.

Egra adivasis yearn for better housing

Some tribal folk have no access to pucca housing for decades

ARUN MAITY

Egra (East Medinipur): Adivasi settlements in villages near the district town of Egra comprise houses made of mud and asbestos sheets, despite schemes implemented by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) for proper houses.

For many generations, the adivasis have occupied the land on the outskirts of Egra, Khamari and Bartana villages. However, the people are not illegal settlers on this land.

Sudhangshu, a 45-year-old mason and farmer, said the owners of the land at that time had brought their forefathers from Orissa to reside and work. They had shifted to the outskirts of Egra nine years ago. However, he and his family are yet to receive any details of the proposed 'pucca' housing they are supposed to get.

Launched by the Ministry of Rural Development in April 2016, PMAY-G aims to replace temporary shelters with permanent, well-equipped houses for eligible families, including primitive tribal groups. Despite applying for the scheme, families like the Mondals face roadblocks.

The PMAY-G scheme includes the compulsory inclusion of primitive tribal groups in its eligibility criteria. Sudhangshu said he was aware of the active scheme and made attempts to avail himself of the benefits many times. After the application process, their names were on the list. However, there was no further notification from the Municipal Corporation.

To further investigate the matter, Sanjay Mondal, a 25-year-old mason, went to the corporation. As per Mondal, during his visit, an anonymous



MAKESHIFT HOMES: Mukundu Mandi and his house on the outskirts of Egra | PHOTO: ARUN MAITY

government official informed him that they have excess land without any recorded documentation and, therefore, they need to hand over the surplus land to come under the scheme. They refused to hand over the excess land, saying that they do not possess a surplus of it, just what has always been theirs.

The Mondal family's name appeared on the list three times before the meeting with the official. They have faced the land scheme issue for seven years.

Mukundu Mandi, a 55-year-old farmer from Khamari village, said the adivasi settlements in the village were also unable to get better housing despite obtaining the 'patta' (legal document with details of land ownership) and other land records.

In Khamari, there are 30 adivasi households, all of whom stay in 'kutcha' houses. Mandi said that most of the households applied for the scheme and the panchayat

said, "it will happen" many times but they were not notified further.

According to multiple adivasi residents' claims, they were also promised funds for house repairs after cyclone Amphan, which they have not received to date. The original owner of the land, Haripada Maity, gave the land to the settlers for the same reasons as the Egra settlements.

"When the cameras were on, they said they would provide the money for Amphan damage, but after they put the cameras down, all we got was air," said Kuna Mandi, a 36-year-old farmer, who has a family of eight.

Mandi said he possesses no surplus land on paper and all the relevant documents are with him. However, they are unable to avail themselves of the scheme as there was no communication or valid reasons from the panchayat. Mandi said, "You will not see any adivasi household in this whole

village with a pucca house."

Bartana's adivasi settlement area has 40 households. Kamal Mandi, a 27-year-old labourer's family and other scheduled tribe families had to face a similar problem as they were sometimes told to, "come later" and that documents were missing. Mandi and his family have resided in Bartana village for 14 years in the same house made of mud and asbestos sheets.

The municipal corporation of Egra that oversees Khamari and Bartana panchayats refused to comment on the land issue.

As per most local people's claim, people there spend their irregular income of around Rs. 400 a day on food and resources such as new asbestos sheets. Mandi said that during the monsoon they face flooding. Due to asbestos roofing, the houses become very hot during summer and extremely cold during winter.

Callousness reigns in Alipore Sadar hosps

POULOMI DEB

Satgachhia (South 24 Paraganas): What do you do to take care when you are ill? For many villagers in the Alipore Sadar subdivision of South 24 Paraganas, if they have fever or diarrhoea, they have to give up weeks of wages to rent a car.

The alternative is walking for an hour and a half to the Lakshmibala Dutta Rural Hospital.

This public hospital charges amounts which many of them can ill-afford. And they say they are allowed just one day to rest in hospital beds, no matter how serious their illness is.

Soiba Mandal (36) of Satgachhia village, Tapashi Hajra (42) of Kalinagar village and Sugla Hajra (30) of Keutipara all work as maids and cooks for a farmhouse in Bawali. They lower their voices as they speak about themselves.

Sometimes, doctors hired by NGOs come to check them. But, according to Sugla Hajra, these doctors are not enough to treat barabari (malnutrition), injuries received from politically motivated violence, and diseases from drinking contaminated water.

While the woes of healthcare in rural West Bengal clearly begin with lack of available medical facilities, the fact that there is no immediate first aid available leaves a good number of people vulnerable.

This points to a glaring lack of preventive healthcare. While vaccines for COVID-19 were promptly distributed, many villagers are not aware of vaccines for other diseases like chicken pox and tetanus.

The government Lakshmibala Dutta Rural Hospital declined entry to the reporter.

During the 2021 legislative



A shortage of doctors in government hospitals has impacted healthcare in rural areas | GRAPHIC: POULOMI DEB

elections in West Bengal, party workers visited people in the villages to campaign. Many of them spoke of improving healthcare, but nothing was done after the TMC government was voted into power. "Every single villager knows that nothing ever happens. When the Left was here, they did nothing. They have gone, the new ones have done nothing," said Sugla Hajra.

Only Satgachhia village used to

work before she took up her current job.

According to a letter from the Directorate of Health Services, West Bengal, dated August 17, 2012 and made publicly available, modernised labour tables were made available to several hospitals, including LakshmibalaDutta. As she is shown a picture of a labour table, Tapashi Hajra says that her son, who had suffered severe blows

In the Lakshmibala Dutta Rural Hospital, patients can get a bed only for one day, no matter how severe the illness is

have an operating local hospital within walking distance. "There, we had to list our symptoms, and then they would give us medicines or operate on us," says Mandal. "They rarely checked us. They would not touch us."

Her son used to work in that hospital, and he was barely paid. She herself told him to leave the

during a bout of violence, was made to rest on one of those instead of a bed. Labour tables are made for facilitating childbirth.

There is also a dearth in awareness about health. Sindhubala Mandal, 55, from Keutipara is chronically ill and could not name her ailment. None of the villagers seem to have hope.

Water bodies aplenty, but not a drop to drink



Hailakandi has several water bodies, but potable water is hard to come by | PHOTO: ROSHAN ZAHIN

ROSHAN ZAHIN

Lalapur (Hailakandi district): Hailakandi has been staggering under a massive water shortage and also poor quality of water for the past few years.

Titon Das, who resides in the village and runs a small mobile cover shop in the semi-urban area near the district says that water supply is erratic and the quality unfit for drinking.

"Though the government executes schemes and missions such as Jal Jeevan Mission from time to time, the water has iron in it due to which it's not fit for usage. We can't even store sufficient water since the water is provided only once a week and that too is mostly muddy water which is certainly not good for one's state of health. There is no individual connection and that's why we have to reach the common well on time to get wateravail the facility," he says. He hopes that the government will solve the problem.

Titon Das says that apart from this major issue, he's finding it difficult to make ends meet since he runs a small mobile cover shop, which fetches him little. "I have two children and my daily income is Rs 150-200, which is definitely not enough to run the house. There

are an enormous number of expenses for both the children which I am not able to fulfill. The government has given loans for the agricultural sector but that is not sufficient."

Titon Das said he obtained a house from the government in his wife's name. "I have had more expectations from the government but the government is failing to meet those expectations. There is a problem of frequent and long power cuts and disrupts the children's studies."

Tahir Ahmed, who is an SDO (sub division officer), said the state of affairs will change. "A new PHE Plant is under construction at Dakhin Uttar Lalapur. After its completion, it will provide tap connections to residents in that area," he said.

While a Rs 83 crore World Bank-assisted Rural Water Supply & Sanitation Project was announced in 2015.

The proposed project of Greater Algapur-Hailakandi Water Supply Scheme was rescheduled twice to 2020. However, the pandemic-induced lockdown pushed the project further.

In 2023, a District Development Committee meeting revealed that the project's physical site is '98 per cent completed.' However, the activation date is yet unknown.

No country for neglected Sundarbans fisherfolk

DHRITI SENGUPTA

Jharkhali (South 24 Parganas): "Thanda pore geche na, ekhon mach dhora bondho hoye geche. Phalgun mashi theke abar shuru hobe" (It's winter, right, so fishing has stopped right now. We'll start late February), said Rashmi Mondal, on January 4.

Rashmi, 35, has been fishing since she was 10. In the months she does not fish, she sells puchka — a trade she has been doing for four years — in a stall provided by a local NGO near a tourist spot in Jharkhali.

Right now, the only source of income for her four-member family is the phuchka stall, and the Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000 her husband brings from outside.

Most of the people here do not have land and are mostly into fishing for a livelihood.

When tourists visit the area, the fishermen earn around Rs 500-600. Sometimes, if they are lucky, they earn Rs 2000.

"We go to a 'foreign land' to do roya kaaj (or contractual farming) when we do not fish," said Mondal. Foreign land, in their terms, is places like Tamil Nadu, Orissa, and the Andaman islands.



Madhushudhan Kar (right) and a fellow fisherman at Kar's house | PHOTO: DHRITI SENGUPTA

But fishing too can be a dangerous occupation as they are often attacked by crocodiles.

Crocodile attacks are more prevalent in winter, so the fear is more in winter. This winter, there has been around 7-8 crocodile attacks. "A crocodile took a man away just 10 days ago, around 9 pm," said Mondal. "The attacks have increased over time."

Victims and the families of crocodile attack are supposed to get a compensation of Rs 1-2 lakh from the Forestry Department of the state government. "Foresters take 50 per cent of that."

The foresters say that since they are the ones who have made calls and got them the money, they deserve that percentage, she alleged.

Sixty-year-old Madhushudhan Kar and others fish in waist-level water near the banks, where the crocodiles mainly roam. They do not risk taking youngsters in these areas. "Fishermen need to be hyper aware about the crocodiles, so we need people who are experienced," said Kar.

Earlier, in the Sundarbans, the core zone was 19,000 square feet. Right now, the government has increased the core zone — which



A local fisherman checking for damage to his boat | PHOTO: DHRITI SENGUPTA

includes Halti, Shaimari, Gulti, Narayantala, Bagmara, Chadkhali areas, right up to the Bangladesh border.

So, the fishermen only have a small area to fish.

"Thousands of people are fishing where only 50 people are supposed to fish," said Shombhu Mondal. "That's why the number of crocodile attacks have increased."

Shombhu, 39, who once tried to take his life by drinking acid, does what the local people here call 'bidesh', that is in a trowler, and catches fish near Kerela, Orissa, and Andaman.

"Oi macher neshaye, apnar oi jhor batash kichu malum hobe na." (There is this addiction to fishing. So, at that time, you don't think about anything else, even if it's a cyclone), he added.

Of course, the forest department does issue Boat License Certificate (BLC), which costs Rs 70,000 to Rs 80,000. "Most people here don't have that kind of money. So

for every 100 boats that go with passes, 200 to 300 go without passes," said Shombhu. There have been 759 BLC requests this year, of these, only 639 have been issued.

For this reason, the fishermen go to the deep forest, where there are more animals, to save themselves from the foresters. "So many lives are getting lost because of the foresters," said Shombhu.

When they protested about the irregularity in payment of compensation, people from the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) party and the foresters came and damaged their houses, Shombhu alleged.

Reacting to this, a lot of local people are getting affiliated to the BJP, for which again they were targeted. A few months ago, when the foresters came, a lot of the local people fled and hid in the jungles for two days in waist-deep water, braving snakes, crocodiles, and mosquitos.

"Amra bhablam, morbo toh morbo, akshathai morbo. Borshar shomoe etota jol, oi jole dariye dariye kaadchi amra." (We thought if we die, we'll die together. It was the rainy season, water was waist deep, all of us were crying when we were standing there) Those who could not flee were severely beaten up by the foresters and their houses and shops were damaged.

Kar's daughter Mondal also fled that day, stayed in the forest for three days and then went to live in her sister's place in Basanti for a month. Her house got destroyed. The domesticated animals that she reared, like chickens, and ducks got killed.

"Eta ar kichu nei, oi barir ply diye nich ta shariyechi", she said, pointing to her stall. (There is nothing really left, I fixed it with plywood from home)

"Jibon jaye jaak, kintu matha nichu hobe na." ('If I die, I'll die, but I won't bow my head'), Kar exclaimed.

All work, low pay in Jhapa

Long hours and minimal pay for tea estate workers flout Nepal's labour laws

SRIJANA KHADKA

Jhapa (Birtamode): Despite long hours of tiring work, tea farmers of Jhapa district in Nepal are struggling to make ends meet and this adversely affects their standards of living.

In August, the Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security had fixed the minimum wage for tea estate workers at Rs 13,893, which includes Rs 8,934 basic salary and a dearness allowance of Rs 4,959. But workers rarely get Rs 400 per day.

"I have been working here for 40 years," said 70-year-old Bishnumaya Basnet of Giri Bandhu tea estate, Buttabari, "Back then, I earned 10 rupees a day. Now, my daily income is 400 rupees. It took 40 years for my salary to rise from 10 rupees to 400 rupees."

Most of the tea estate workers are women. "Men used to work here, but because they didn't get good pay, many of them chose to go abroad for better job opportunities," she said. "I have a great-grandson and granddaughter, but I don't want them to enter this kind of work. What is the point of getting into such work?"

Another 50-year-old worker, Sabitra Shrestha, said that they don't receive a regular salary. Sometimes, it comes after two-three months. "The excuse is always that they are facing losses," She said, "Our income from tea is not sufficient, so we also engage in goat and poultry farming."

Despite putting in so much hard work, workers are barely making enough to meet their basic needs. "We could manage to survive even with just Rs 100 a day before. Now, with Rs. 1,000, we can hardly afford to buy anything due to the constant rise in prices," Shrestha said.

Nepal's labour laws cap



NO TIME FOR TEA BREAKS: Tea estate workers busy at work; (below) workers Bishnumaya Basnet and Sabitra Shrestha | PHOTO: SRIJANA KHADKA

It took 40 years for my salary to rise from Rs 10 to 400

- Bishnumaya Basnet

working hours at eight hours a day and 48 hours a week. But tea farmers work 10 hours a day and 60-70 hours a week.

"We start working at 7 am and conclude our working hour at 5 pm," said 63-year-old Tilak Bishwokarma, who works at the Tokla tea estate in Mechinagar. "We work really hard, even in the sun and rain. Many young people died because of the continuous

work. The sad part is their families don't even get compensation."

Despite the occupational health risks in the tea industry, workers lack insurance coverage. The tea gardens use a lot of pesticides every year, and workers are not provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Laxmi Khatri from Barne tea garden in Shantinagar said, "We need gloves, footwear, face shields, and many other things for our safety. As a result, we suffer from various

health issues like headaches, vomiting, and chest pain." Even though the majority of workers in the tea garden are women, there is a lack of access to toilets and drinking water.

"We bring our own drinking water, and there are no toilets here," said Tulasa Kafle, a 53-year-old worker. She added, "Many of us don't have our own land. The company provides us with quarters to stay, but the living conditions in those quarters are



also very poor."

The government has implemented the Labor Act 2017, Labor Rules 2018 and the Social Security Fund Act 2018, but tea workers have not been able to benefit from them.

Bishnumaya lost her son due to kidney failure. "I couldn't gather enough money for his treatment," she said, "I don't get a loan from the company. When I seek help from outside, they often doubt us, questioning how we could repay them for working in tea farming."

Tea estate owners remain silent on these issues. They refuse to talk about all these problems. Deepak Tamang, president of the Tea Garden Workers Union, said that owners avoid discussing problems and often ignore regulations.

"A new salary agreement was made six months ago with a daily wage of Rs 500," he said. "However, the workers are not receiving the promised amount."

They are being denied treatment expenses that they are entitled to, and workers being are unjustly laid off without valid reasons.

In the city area of Jhapa, such as Birtamode Bazar, workers in non-tea industries earn between Rs 800 and Rs 1,000 per day. "Plumbers and house painters get Rs 1,000 per day," Tamang said, "But tea estate workers don't get basic facilities like aprons and umbrellas. They are forced to work in wet conditions during the rainy season and without access to drinking water on sunny days."

Jhapa, recognised as the primary tea-producing district in Nepal, boasts 10,500 hectares dedicated to tea cultivation, according to the National Tea and Coffee Development Board's data for the fiscal year 2021-22. The country as a whole features over 160 tea gardens, with approximately 17,000 farmers actively involved in the cultivation of tea.

For Koragas, it's weaving for a living

RUPESH NAIR

Badiadka (Kasaragod): The traditional occupation of the Koragas — a tribal community in Badiadka panchayat, 20 km north of Kasaragod — is *bhatti madam* (basket weaving). This can no longer sustain their livelihood due to several factors. The baskets are sold at markets in Badiadka or Kasaragod, with each unit fetching about Rs 150. Most families can make only two or three of them a day.

The raw material required for these baskets — pullangi wood — is hard to come by. As the wood is becoming scarce in the forests of Kasaragod, officials are preventing the Koragas from gathering them.

They now make long journeys to Sullia, a border town in Dakshina Kannada, to gather pullangi every day.

Rama, 57, who lives with his family of six, said his declining health forced him to look for other jobs. "It's too far to travel every day. I can't do it like I used to." He recently started working again through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). However, he's only able to find employment for about 70 to 80 days a year. Though unviable, a return to basket weaving seems inevitable.

Chandravati is another basket weaver living on the outskirts of the colony with her family. The husband works through the MGNREGA, while Chandravati weaves baskets. "The prices for the baskets have decreased a lot," she said. "I used to get Rs. 250 for one last year, now I

barely get Rs 150." She said the pullangi is quite flexible, making it an excellent material for baskets. "Most of my customers are traders and produce sellers in Badiadka and Kasaragod," said the 41-year-old. "They know it's a good product, but they refuse to pay a good amount for it or go for cheaper options."

Geeta, 55, Rama's sister, along with many other community members, also make a rice steamer using paalvalli, which takes about an hour to make. Unlike pullangi, paalvalli is much more easily available.

However, the return on this item is much less, as it's sold for about Rs 30 in Badiadka. In Kasaragod, it fetches about Rs 70. The cost of shipping these items negates any extra profit they might earn from selling these steamers in Kasaragod.

The community resides in the Perdala colony outside the Badiadka town centre.

The issues of poor livelihood are amplified by alcohol addiction among the youth. "Whatever they earn that day is spent on booze," said Pushpalata, a teacher at the local anganwadi. She has been teaching there for nearly 25 years, and many of her past students are now facing this issue. There is a high dropout rate amongst children at the school level, according to Pushpalata. She also pointed out that none in the community has got a government job.

The Koragas remain clueless about other sources of revenue, such as government pension schemes as efforts by the government have failed.

Cheaper substitutes trouble Kosgama's basket weavers

PRANAVESH SIVAKUMAR

Kosgama (Akuressa): While Christmas festivities were underway in full swing in capital Colombo, about 150 km away is Kosgama, a deep interior hamlet in Akuressa to which even a mythical Santa was not able to bring any hope and joy.

In a distant nook in southern Sri Lanka, 600 families are stuck in the morass of poverty. At a time when cheap and environmentally hazardous plastic products flood the market, Sellaya Selvarani, who runs a family business of basket-weaving, points out, "People have lost interest in these. No one is buying."

The main occupation of the families in the Kosgama community is basket weaving, and now they suffer as there aren't many takers.

This is especially because they don't have basic shelter and most live in rented houses surrounded by towering palmyra trees.

"Without our own home, we're deprived of the Samurdhi scheme too," the 49-year-old Selvarani added.

The scheme is a government welfare programme launched in 1994, which aims to reduce poverty among low-income households by providing resource support for economic upliftment.

Politicians visit them during election campaigns to seek votes, but disappear once the polls are over. Fed up, the people here decided to speak up, only for that to backfire.

"You visit us only for vote-seeking. Such selfish people you all are, you don't visit us afterwards. We're here landless, homeless, deteriorating into abject poverty, and striving and struggling to feed our children," a local woman had yelled at an election candidate.

Having had enough of this, they had stopped casting their vote, revealed Velumani, 57, who has a broken left leg.



Selvarani (centre) and husband Velumani with their granddaughter | PHOTO: PRANAVESH SIVAKUMAR

Now, they have been stripped of their voting rights and are deemed as unregistered voters.

Velumani, Selvarani's husband, said that this is discrimination and marginalisation of the downtrodden and deprived.

"My youngest child is 23 now. Since she was three years old, we have been scraping through in this shanty built of stones. We, in our living history, have never owned a house," he added, stammering a little. "Earlier at least we used to do some business. Now, it's completely nil. This was our sole source of income, through which we could pay our rent," Selvarani continued.

"Not only that, this pittance of an income serves to meet various other expenses — extending to clothing and food for infants," she said.

All their children are in their

twenties. Their eldest, who is 28 years old, had a modest wedding ceremony and has his own family now.

Their second child, 25 years old, works at a garment factory, where she too found her partner and got married.

The parents didn't want to be against it.

Now, their second child, Kavithaais, is living with the parents since her husband's house is another shanty.

"We even tried selling our goods in Galle and Matara, on the island's southern coast," she said. Apart from these, they're clueless about their next move.

"While I've a broken limb, improperly healed, my husband has an impaired right ankle," Selvarani mourned.

They often suffer from starvation as they barely eat one

meal a day.

"No meat, lacking in nutrition... We're scrambling even for rice, dal, and an affordable non-vegetarian sustenance," Selvarani said.

"We're longing and desperate for a land, where we can build a small house of any material," she added.

While job opportunities are available, they're only for the educated. Since all of their children have at least primary education, India's Plus-1 exam, they all have access to employment.

Their parents hope the children can chip in with their parents' care after taking care of their own families.

The silver line in the grey cloud is their family of five comprises all grownups who are capable of working.

Without their own homes, the people of Kosgama cannot avail of the government's Samurdhi scheme — a welfare programme aimed at reducing poverty

Chengara resorts to solar energy for power

REVU SURESH

Chengara (Pathanamthitta): Solar panels dot the roofs of ramshackle structures housing over 600 families on the Chengara land agitation site in Malayalapurza panchayat in Kerala. Denied power connections as the land is not in their names, solar energy is the saving grace for the protesting families to get on with their lives. More than 17 years have passed since hundreds of landless families led a struggle to claim land in the illegally occupied Harrison's plantation, also known as the Chengara Bhoosamaram (land protest).

The struggle was spearheaded by dalit activist Laha Gopalan, a former government employee and Communist Party of India worker.

When 34-year-old Maya Balan joined the struggle launched by Sadhu Jana Vimochana Vedi (SJVSV) in 2007, she was pregnant with her eldest child. After the protest, Maya and her family set up a makeshift house on the land allotted to them by the Vedi.

The Vedi is an independent collective comprising protesting families in Chengara, and the idea of solar panels developed out of the government's continued denial of electricity.

They set up solar panels two years ago using the battery of an old vehicle. "The bulbs lit by solar panels help my children study," says Balan.

The Kerala government's Land Reform Act of 1963 had failed several dalit and adivasi families, following which the Vedi was formed in 2002. The Chengara protest was born out of Vedi's struggle to fight for the landless in Kerala.

TR Sasi, president of the Chengara Development Society, said that it is a denial of human rights that the government claims total electrification in the state. "Some of us use solar panels and the remaining adjust with kerosene oil," he says.

We had nothing. We slowly built up these solar panels and roads

- Kunjimol

In 2007, the then Electricity Minister MM Mani said Pathanamthitta district was electrified, but people in Chengara Samarabhoomi were left out.

Remembering the initial days of protest, 70-year-old Kunjimol said, "We had nothing. We slowly built up these solar panels and roads." She said their houses are not recognised by the government. Hence, they are not able to get power connections.



A solar panel above a house in Chengara | PHOTO: REVU SURESH

Kunjimol, whose husband and son passed away, works as a domestic help. She said children prefer to stay out and study because of the lack of power. In Kunjimol's house, the solar panels were set up around 10 years ago, when memories from the land struggle were still fresh.

"My husband was alive then. We resisted. We fought everywhere. But the land allotted by the government was uninhabitable, so we decided to stay here," said Kunjimol.

In 2009, the Kerala government announced a Chengara package, promising land and financial aid to construct houses. But many were allotted houses in uninhabitable places.

SJVSV secretary Rajendran said, "We don't have electricity and the government needs to take a decision soon." When Kerala State Electricity Board initiated discussions to bring electricity, Harrison's kept filing cases against SJVSV. "So we made our own electricity using our own meagre savings," added Rajendran.

Malayalapurza panchayat vice-president K Shaji said, "It is difficult to bring electricity to these houses since the government has not recognised their land." He says it is not possible to bring electricity unless the government gives them land officially.

Raebareli village awaits pucca roads

76 years after Independence, a village in Indira Gandhi's constituency remains disconnected from the outside world

VARUN BHANDARI

Dighiya (Raebareli): Raebareli boasts of a rich historical legacy. The district was the first in Uttar Pradesh to heed Mahatma Gandhi's call for the salt satyagraha. Even after Independence, it has been a hotbed of political activity.

Former Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was elected to the Parliament from here, while Congress stalwart Sonia Gandhi has served as the MP since 2004.

Most notably, the district is ranked sixth in the Sustainable Development Goal district ranking published by the State government.

Today Raebareli faces a major impediment to its progress – the lack of pucca roads. This has caused a number of issues, from accidents to time-consuming and unnecessary travel.

Rampur Baghail is a village located in Amawan block, 10 km from Raebareli town. It has a population of roughly 700 people and no connectivity to the main road, the NH-128.

Within the village too, there are no pucca roads. The residents commute on muddy roads, which get dangerous during the rainy season. According to long-term residents, this has been the case for over 75 years, since Independence.

Most residents of Rampur Baghail are involved in agriculture and are unable to visit the nearest mandi in nearby Dighiya to seek better rates for their crops.

"We are vegetable farmers and don't have enough landholdings



BALANCING ACT: Village children crossing the makeshift bridge to reach the nearby market | PHOTO: VARUN BHANDARI

here. Travelling another 16 km to sell our vegetables alone eats up our remaining profit margin," said Ramashray, 58. He now works mainly as a daily labourer since farming alone cannot support his livelihood.

Rampur residents heading to the local market must travel via a makeshift bridge made of three wooden logs to access the main road. "This is the only way we can get our necessities as the other road is so far away and we don't own any vehicle," said Madhu Kumari, 45, who is a BPL cardholder and a mother of two teenage girls.

The lack of a proper road has hit

education the most. The children here access school and markets via the makeshift bridge. "Our school is in Dighiya and there is no other route to reach the school. What other option do we have but to risk our lives and use the makeshift bridge? Otherwise we can't go to school," said Ajay, 12, who lives nearby.

Moreover, the nearest multispecialty hospital is in Lucknow. Reaching the hospital during a medical emergency is a luxury for most village residents.

"Either we have to take the long route, or we cross the bridge and risk falling into the running stream. A few weeks ago, our

child caught a fever in the middle of the night and it took us almost three hours to reach the hospital. Thankfully, nothing bad happened," said Suresh, 33, who works in a nearby construction site and is a long-time resident of the village.

The lack of roads in the village not only affects the daily lives of village residents, but also keeps them in perpetual poverty. Their inability to access any basic amenities adds to their woes.

Over the years, the central government has announced multiple schemes for Raebareli district, but none have been successfully implemented.

"We have talked to the local MLA and tried to take our problems to higher authorities. They have repeatedly assured us that there will soon be pucca road connectivity," said Ashish Yadav, the Pradhan of the village. He added that even he must sometimes take the route of the makeshift bridge to access the main road.

Women, who form the majority of the workforce in farms, are reluctant to go to work. Safety is a major concern as there are no visible street lamps or roads.

The lack of connectivity also means that government initiatives, from health immunisations to government subsidies, take longer than usual — if at all — to reach them.

(At the time of writing this report, it was reported that due to the increased water level of the stream, the makeshift bridge was completely washed away. There is no connectivity to the main road as of now.)

Mines threaten adivasi livelihood



The adivasi community is at risk due to rampant mining | PHOTO: MADHU KUMAR P

MADHU KUMAR P

Haripur (Surguja): "We have lost our cultivable lands in the first phase of mining, and now we don't want to give our homes for mining. Adani and the government have ruined our beautiful forest," said Thakur Ram Orkera, resident of Hariharpur village.

Orkera had five acres of arable land, for which he got Rs. 50 lakh as compensation. He has four sons, the youngest of whom is studying in a school run by the Adani group.

The PEKB (Parsa East and Kete Basan) coal block is run by the Adani enterprises. "They had promised that they would give us jobs and free education if we gave them our land. None of my sons are working in the coal fields anymore, as they made us do odd jobs. The school is also not good enough," he says.

In 2012-13, 762 hectares of Hasdeo forest were allotted to companies, causing livelihood loss and loss of cultivable land in about 10 villages near the PEKB coal block, with 338 hectares left for the second phase.

Mohar Say, 52, gave up six acres of land for the first phase of mining. He says he got Rs 54 lakh as compensation for his land. "We used to earn Rs 10,000 to 12,000 a month selling micro forest products such as mahua and tendu patta (tobacco leaves). Now they are buried under these coal mines."

Say bought three acres of land in Korba with the compensation. He says, "I won't be able to buy a piece of land in a city with that money now. Even if I did, how would I survive? I don't know a thing apart from farming."

Bipasha Paul, a member of the Chhattisgarh Bachao Andolan, says, "Why should they give up their land to get basic facilities like schools, hospitals, and jobs? The government is wiping out their tribal identity."

Paul also added that the

government is not considering the loss of the Adivasi people in terms of the intergenerational wealth that they used to pass on for generations. On average, a tribal family used to earn at least Rs 2 lakh a year just by trading forest produce. "Now it's all gone," she said.

Hasdeo Forest is considered to be the "lungs of Chhattisgarh."

A protest has been going on since 2021 to protect the remaining lands that have been allocated for mining.

Following the BJP's victory in Chhattisgarh, more than 40,000 trees are estimated to have been felled in Hasdeo forest, despite prolonged tribal protests.

Adivasi people in nearby villages have been compensated for land lost for mining under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement Act, 2013. However, they fear forced displacement due to the Coal Bearing Areas Act, 1957.

Maniki's residents call for education reform

NEETIKA KUMARI

Abidpur Maniki (Ghaziabad): "Muslims have always been backwards in education. We are daily wagers without permanent jobs. Young girls often elope with lower-caste boys for education, bringing shame for generations. In our community, respect matters more than education," Zafar Khan, 57, a ration shop worker in Maniki, expresses concern about education in his community.

When the last Census was conducted in 2011, the literacy rate for Maniki was 48.44 per cent. The female literacy was 20 per cent for the female population of 1428. More than a decade down the line, not much has changed. Generational and social stigma continue to haunt women even today.

Abidpur Maniki, a village in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad district, has 1,309 residents. Located 25 km from the district centre, it has a government school up to class VIII. The village relies on paddy and sugarcane farming, many small farmers sold their fields to neighbouring villages, impacting the community's livelihood.

Kamil Mirza, 32, who works as a recycler said that there is no awareness about education, especially among women. "Most of the families are daily labourers working in sugarcane fields and brick kilns. Young girls prefer working to studying and earn Rs. 1,000 a week," he said.

Akmal Mirza, 45, one of the last zamindars in the village, explains economic categories in Maniki as being the self-employed, daily wagers, and labourers. He said, "In the battle between hunger and education, hunger often triumphs." Mirza notes limited progress, with a madarsa opened three years ago, reaching only class 5 with few girls attending.

Furkan Khan, 56, and his daughter Insha have taught at the madarsa for the last three years. "The gates are always open," he said. Expressing concern about



Children in the only government-run school during their lunch break in Maniki | PHOTO: NEETIKA KUMARI

"I'm in class 5. I want to be a doctor. But next year my parents will get me married"
- Sophie, 14

Muslims lagging in education, he said, "Parents find it hard to invest in girls' education, anticipating early marriages."

Sophie, 14, who studies in the same madrasa said, "I'm in class 5. I want to become a doctor. Next year my parents will get me married. They have already looked for a boy for me from the nearby village."

Maniki also has an anganwadi, where children from three to six years old are enrolled. The parents of most of these children work in the sugarcane fields. Jagbiri, 45, takes care of these children as she is in charge of the anganwadi.

She said that there are four

female staff members; three are on leave today. "Around when girls turn six they start doing household chores. And a few work in the brick kilns. There is a demand for younger girls in the kilns because it is easier to shape mud with small hands. Girls prefer working there than studying," she said.

One of the rooms at this anganwadi had alphabet charts, number charts and the one on the human anatomy. "I teach them all these basic things while I take care of them," she said.

Suman Devi, 35, gram pradhan of Maniki, has been the pradhan for three years and was busy making cow dung cakes with three other women. She did not refute the claims of low literacy at Maniki but said that the situation is somewhat changing.

"Girls after class 8 go to Modinagar, which is around 4 km from Maniki. I have requested the SDM that the school be upgraded till class 10. But there have only been assurances," she said.

She also said that there are no male teachers in the school. Villagers have often complained of female teachers not teaching properly. "When I went to address the issue they misbehaved with me. I'm uneducated. I could not understand their arguments. They were so rude to me," she said.

ZAID NAZIR WANI

Rajouri (J&K): For the past year Kashmir's marginalised but numerically strong Gujar-Bakarwal community has been mobilising against a proposed law that they fear will dilute the concept of a Scheduled Tribe.

After the abrogation of Article 370, the Union government promised Gujar-Bakarwals political representation. But when the law — The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Bill, 2023 — was eventually drafted, it sought to give Pahari Speaking People, a group of about 50 communities, ST status.

The Gujjars-Bakarwals have been mobilising for the past year against this. Shahid Ayoub, a tribal student activist and a research scholar pursuing his PhD from Kashmir University, has been at the forefront of protests. He is additional spokesperson of the Gujar Bakarwal Joint Action Committee, which led the Tribal Bachao March in July 2023. Currently, he is the president and founding member of Gujar Bakarwal Students Alliance (GBSA) Jammu and Kashmir. Edited excerpts from an interview:

On what basis are you opposing the tribal reservation of the Pahari community?

The Pahari identity is very ambiguous. There are multiple ethnic groups within the 'Pahari Speaking Community'. They are not ethnically similar. How can a Muslim, Brahmin, Rajput, and a Sikh form the same ethnicity? The ethnicity of a Syed and a Brahmin cannot be similar.

How did this question of granting ST status to the Pahari communities come about after the abrogation of Article 370?

When Article 370 was abrogated in Jammu and Kashmir, the Union government promised

Kashmir in throes of battle over 'tribal' status

Gujjar-Bakarwals have been opposing the inclusion of the Pahari Speaking People in the ST list



Members of the Gujar-Bakarwal community march from Kupwara towards Handwara on Nov 6, 2022 | PHOTO: ZAID NAZIR WANI

the Gujar Bakarwal communities that they will give political reservations for the first time through Schedule Tribe status.

When political reservations were extended to J&K, we (STs) got nine reserved seats in total and five of them were reserved in the Pir Panjal region. Before that, all the parties and Gujjars used to fight elections on those five seats.

They [Pahari community] felt that they would not be able to fight elections and they needed the same ST certificate that the Gujjars have, to fight elections. It is for this that they met the BJP in New Delhi.

Was there a movement for tribal status for the Pahari community before abrogation?

Yes, but the movement had already ended, because they had got the reservation of 4 percent in J&K [under the J&K Reservation Act 2004]. They were enjoying those benefits.

What was the response of the Gujar-Bakarwals to this announcement?

The community felt left out. **How did the Gujar-Bakarwals mobilise against the Union government's decision? And what was the role of the Gujar-Bakarwal Student Alliance?**

At the time, the Gujar-Bakarwal Student Alliance was not even formed. Many people from across different organisations came together. So,

we as activists, students, citizens and youth of the Gujar-Bakarwal community, decided that we must go to the streets to protect our rights. We had a meeting in Srinagar and we announced the creation of a committee called the Gujar Bakarwal Joint Action Committee.

Any member of the Gujar-Bakarwal community can come and become a part of this movement. Senior leader Haji Muhammad Yusuf Majnu was made the president of the committee and social activist Talib Hussain — who also led the movement during the 2018 Kathua rape case — was made the official spokesperson.

What did the committee decide to do to register its protest?

We came up with the idea of the "Tribal Bachao March". It was a student-led initiative. We started on November 4, 2022 from Kupwara. From that moment, we started the mobilisation. We marched from Kupwara to Handwara then to Baramulla, Bandipora via Sopore, then Manasbal, Ganderbal. We started from Kangan in Ganderbal, we came to Srinagar (40 km). About 50 volunteers used to walk daily. I was one of them.

Do you see any connection between ST reservation for Paharis and the State elections, which the Supreme Court has asked the centre to conduct this year?

Yes. The BJP wants the Pahari community to back them in elections in return of the favour of reservations. This is seats versus reservations. However, those who have traditionally been anti-BJP are today claiming to love them. This is not long-lasting and the Gujar community can also use its mandate to answer this polarisation of the two Pir Panjal communities.

Nuh teenagers face marriage pressure

Many girls are married before they turn 18 amid pressure for dowry. These demands often continue after the wedding

RAGINI DE

Firozpur Namak (Nuh): Subran, a 20-year-old woman, is relieved despite a lot going on in her life. Her parents agreed to marry her later when she grows a little older. Unfortunately, the situation is not similar for other girls in her village.

"It's common in my community for girls to be married off by the time they are 16 or 17. Many of the girls I grew up with in the village are already married. Some have even become mothers," said Gulshana (18).

"Our izzat (family honor) is tarnished if we don't marry our daughters in time. People start badmouthing our daughters and question their character," said a parent while cradling a baby in her arms.

These are a few examples of the beliefs of parents of young girls in Nuh district of Haryana. Earlier, Nuh was known as the Mewat region. Located barely 100 km from Delhi in the Aravallis, Nuh is one of the most backward regions in the country, with a predominantly Muslim population.

According to Heena Sonkar, an activist working in Nuh with NGO Nirantar, "Marriage is seen as protection for a girl against sexual advances and it also prevents her from exercising her sexual agency, both of which could bring shame and dishonor to the family."

According to the 2011 Census, 79.2 per cent of Nuh's total population—around 11 lakh people—were Muslims, while 20.4% were Hindus. At 28.7 per cent, Nuh topped the state in early marriages of girls in 2021. Several social, cultural, and economic disadvantages are associated with early marriage. The key reasons include poverty and limited access to education, economic opportunities, and livelihoods.

In India, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (PCMA) replaced the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 in November 2007. Early marriage



BOUND BY HONOUR: Women and young girls are gathered around a water well in the village | PHOTO: RAGINI DE

usually involves a person aged below 18 and it affects both boys and girls. It has adverse effects on girls since early marriage brings about fundamental changes in the lives of adolescent girls. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), "Early marriage, particularly in girls, exposes them to a greater risk of reproductive morbidity and mortality."

"I know many of my friends who were given into marriage by the time they were 16 or 17, and once they are married, you can never meet them," said Azuri (17).

In the 2011 Census, almost 2.5 lakh children in the state were married off before they turned 18. The 2021 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data shows that child marriages in Haryana rose from 20 in 2019 to 33 in 2021.

Women are seen as the

custodians of family honor and are perceived as complete only when they become housewives and mothers. These notions put immense pressure on the girls and their families.

Further, a daughter's marriage is regarded as a social obligation - that a father must fulfill. For this reason, families ensure the period between puberty and marriage is as short as possible.

In most cases, dowry perpetrates early marriages with money, property, and gifts given by the bride's family to the groom and his family. The demand for

dowry demands," said Sabrun, almost choking while speaking about her aunt. Keeping a stern face, she added, "This kind of violence is always hushed up by families. Even the police turn a blind eye."

Despite the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the practice still contributes to violence against women and girls. Dowry is used as a means to keep extracting money from the bride's family, irrespective of their financial condition.

"The demands keep getting higher and impossible. They demand SUVs like the Fortuner or other expensive cars. How will my parents be able to provide all that?" asked Shaista (18), who faces marriage pressure from her family.

Early marriage causes negative consequences for girls, with education declining due to forced school dropouts and compromised health in cases of early pregnancy. With the women's legal age of marriage in India increasing to 21 years, and with supportive parents like Subran's, the situation in Nuh might change gradually.

The 2021 NCRB data shows that child marriages in Haryana rose from 20 in 2019 to 33 in 2021

Traditions spur child marriages in Haryana village

ISHIKA WADHWA

Fazilpur (Haryana): "Poverty makes you do many things and marrying off your children early is one of them. I was myself married off at the age of 14 by my parents to a 35-year-old man and had two children by the age of 16. My husband was an alcoholic so I didn't have any money to feed my children, therefore I lost one of my kids by the age of 20," said Omala, 36, a Bengali domestic help and resident of Fazilpur village.

According to Surekha, 32, many families migrated years ago from Kushmandi village in Bengal to Haryana for jobs and settled in Fazilpur village. She works as a domestic worker. "Our families got us daughters married when we were 12-16 years old to older men in this village so that we could be a part of this village," she added.

Lalu, 42, a sanitation worker here, married a 14-year-old girl when he was 17. He lost his pregnant wife and the baby when she was 16. Due to malnutrition, she wasn't healthy enough to carry the child.

Maruba, 30, a single mom and a domestic worker married at 16, has two daughters. She is not against child marriage and sees it as a social norm in her community.

"Even I'll marry off my 16-year-old daughter as I don't have much money to raise two

Our families got us daughters married when we were 12-16 years old

- Sulekha, 32

daughters at once and pay for their school fees," she added.

Bithika, 16, is a mother of a baby boy. She was sent from Kushmandi to her uncle's house in Fazilpur. She was married to a 28-year-old man instead of being sent to an urban school. She said "I wanted to study more, get a degree, and become a teacher in my village's school, but my parents duped me into marriage. I will never let this happen to my children and make sure they study as much as they want," she said.

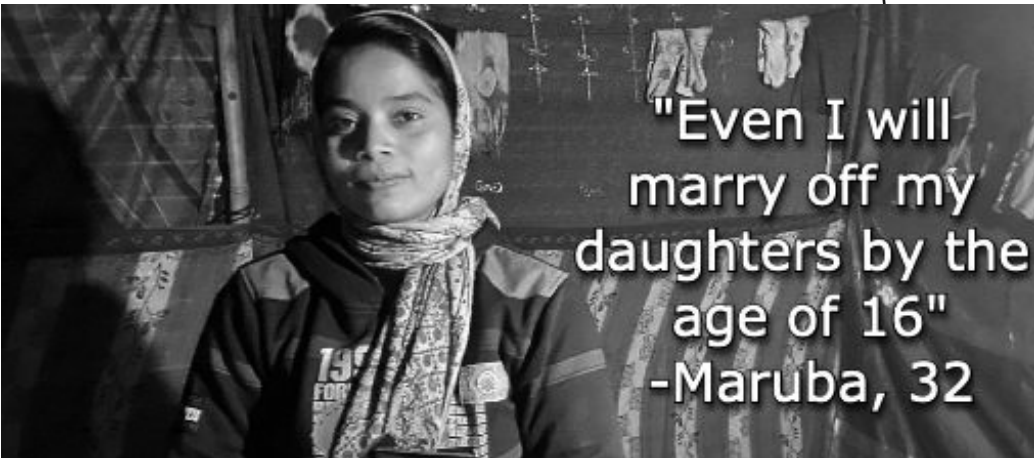
Rutvik, an 18-year-old boy, got married at the age of 15 and had to drop out to earn for his family. "I struggle every day to earn money. If I had completed my studies and got married later I could have done better for myself and my

family." According to Lata Thakur, Surkarya Foundation's project manager, working in Haryana's villages against child marriages, is a complex interplay of sociocultural and economic challenges with limited awareness.

"We employ a multi-faceted approach. First, we conduct extensive awareness campaigns to educate communities about the harmful consequences of child marriages. Second, we provide support systems for at-risk girls, including educational opportunities and mentorship programs. Additionally, we collaborate with local authorities to ensure the enforcement of existing laws against child marriages," she said.

Neha Dahiya, DPO at the Women and Child Development Department, said their department works with law enforcement to ensure the application of existing laws. "However, challenges persist due to a lack of awareness and sometimes, resistance from communities. Strengthening the implementation of these laws and increasing awareness about their implications are ongoing priorities," she said.

She added, "Our future strategies involve intensifying awareness campaigns, enhancing collaboration with NGOs, and strengthening the implementation of existing laws."



Maruba, 32, got married at the age of 16 and is a single mom. She works as a domestic help | PHOTO: ISHIKA WADHWA

In Bihar village, it's a 20-km trek to the nearest hospital

ARUNIMA JHA

Madhopur (Samastipur): "My brother Jogeshwar passed away in 2019 due to lack of medical facilities in the village. He had a heart attack and died on the way to the nearest hospital of Samastipur," said Pradeep, a 47-year-old farmer in Madhopur. The Mangla Devi health sub-centre was constructed in 2014 the remote village in the Samastipur district of Bihar.

However, locals say that the doctor has never visited the centre. Even though the Indian Health Ministry says that a sub-health centre should be open all the time, this particular centre has only been open a few times in nearly a decade of its existence.

The nearest hospital is in Samastipur, around 20 km from the village.

According to a report by the National Library of Medicine, 75 per cent of the health infrastructure in India is concentrated in urban areas, where only 27 per cent of India's population lives, and the rest live in rural areas.

The state of Bihar in India faces a significant shortage of medical facilities, particularly in its villages. "I lost my husband because there was no functional hospital in our village, and he couldn't travel to Samastipur for treatment. Unfortunately, my brother-in-law faced a similar fate," said Ramchandrar's 27-year-old wife, who is a domestic worker in the village. In many



- 72% of India's population, or 716 million people, lack nearby medical facilities, compelling them to travel to urban areas for care.
- Rural Health Statistics 2019-20 reveal a decline in functioning sub-centres from 10,337 to 9,112 in Bihar and a decrease in community health centres from 101 to 57 between 2005 and 2020.
- A study found that, on average, only 3.6 out of 10.5 appointed staff members were present during surprise visits to 100 public health facilities in four northern states.

PHOTO AND INFOGRAPHIC: ARUNIMA JHA

rural parts of Bihar, various medical centres such as sub-health, primary and community health centres have become rundown buildings.

According to another report by the National Library of Medicine, sub-centres are very important in providing healthcare in rural areas.

They are the first level of primary healthcare and the first place where people can connect with health services. Each sub-centre is set up to serve a population of 5,000 in rural plains and 3,000 in hilly, desert, or tribal areas.

These centres are staffed with at least one female health worker or an auxiliary nurse midwife and one male health worker. Both

have assigned quarters inside the village health sub-centres.

"When we reached out to the doctor assigned to our hospital, he mentioned that he has to visit six different centres weekly, making it difficult for him to come to our village."

He also complained about the lack of staff. He has opened a private clinic in Samastipur as well," said 73-year-old Ravi Kumar, a retired engineer and resident of the village.

The Rural Health Statistics for

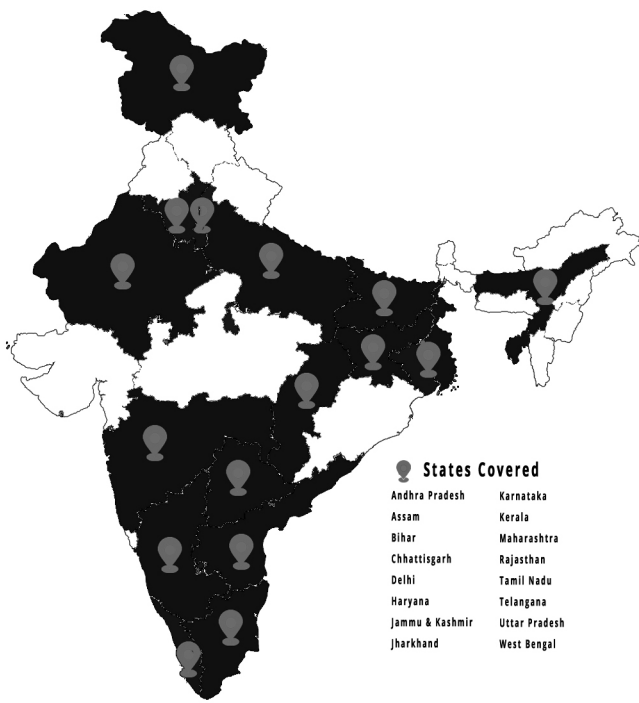
2015-16, released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, reveal that among the 1,55,069 sub-centres in India, a staggering 86 per cent fall short of meeting the government's set Indian Public Health Standards.

By March 2016, around 28 per cent of the sub-centres lacked a consistent water supply and one-fourth of them did not have access to electricity. Another problem is absenteeism; a study in 2011 found that almost four out of 10 health workers were absent.

Each sub-centre is set up to serve a population of 5,000 in rural plains and 3,000 in hilly, desert, or tribal areas

THE WORD COVERING DEPRIVATION 2024

What went into this year's edition?



Disclaimer: The map is for general illustration only and not intended to be otherwise

ZOOMING IN

From the last practitioners of their craft to the last remaining patch of green, from victories gained to those sought, verdant tea estates to red brick kilns, the images captured by photojournalists of the Asian College of Journalism span the incredulous and the ingenious



FROM BROKEN BOATS: Sixty-five-year-old Nathun Sahani earns his livelihood from the remains of the broken boats (naav ka naal) sitting along the banks of the Triveni Sangam in Fatuha, Bihar. Sahani, who belongs to the Mallah community, has been doing this for the last 35 years. In Bihar, this community is known as Nishad. Their traditional occupation is centred on rivers. Sahani earns Rs 100 by selling the tiny iron equipment made from the broken parts of the boats | PHOTO: PRERNA SHARMA

ROOTS UPROOTED: The Poush Mela, Santiniketan's renowned crafts fair, has been bolstered by the Trinamool Congress government to a large-scale affair. But adivasi artists are often left out of stall allocations, and have to sit on the ground where trash is thrown | PHOTO: POULOMI DEB



PEOPLE'S POWER: Farmers take to the streets in Noida to demand additional compensation for the lands acquired by the National Thermal Power Corporation to set up a power plant in Dadri | PHOTO: NEETIKA KUMARI



LIFELINE: Kadath is a locally made ferry used to transport vehicles and people in remote villages where there are no bridges. These types of locally made ferries are the only way of connecting the forest to the outer world, especially during the monsoons. Here, villagers of Kallelmedu cross the Kuttampuzha river along with 4x4 jeeps, which are used to ride to the inner forest of Kallelmedu, a tribal colony in Kuttampuzha panchayat in Kothamangalam, Ernakulam district, Kerala | PHOTO: MUHAMMAD MUKHTAR

THE LAST OF US: Clay-pot maker Babu shows off the last remaining stone furnace used by the Kusavan community in Vaikkilassery, Kozhikode, as industrialisation pushes their work to the brink of irrelevance | PHOTO: RUPESH NAIR



TIME'S WITNESS: In Sugnu, Jharkhand, Sushma Devi takes a break from sifting grain | PHOTO: TANISHQ PRIYA



MINING MISHAP: The agricultural land of Basdiha, a village in the Boarjor block in Jharkhand, has been consumed by the Rajmahal mines under ECL, a subsidiary of Coal India Limited. The village is now only a strip of land with mines on three sides | PHOTO: SHRIYA MURMU



BUILDING BEFORE GROWING: Children growing up in brick kilns are picking up tools to break coal and bake bricks before going to school. They are also living amidst dust and charcoal from a sensitive age | PHOTO: ARCHAN KUNDU

WOVEN OUT OF HISTORY: Kamala Bike Jadhav, who lives in Waghmare Vasti, makes her living selling baskets on the highway, stationed right across the Vjaystambh that celebrates the Dalit community's victory against the Peshwas in Maharashtra. While her community is shunned by the gram panchayat and the rest of the village, on January 1 every year her baskets are celebrated in the Bhima Koregaon celebrations | PHOTO: RIA WADIKAR



SPILLING THE TEA: The Tocklai Experimental Station in Jorhat district of Assam – the largest continuous tea-growing area in the world – is the world's oldest and largest research station of its kind. It carries out clonal propagation and constant research so that the strength of the full-bodied liquor is retained and the tea bushes yield quality tea | PHOTO: ROSHAN ZAHIN



LAND OF BROKEN DREAMS: A house made of aluminium and tarpaulin sheets in the Olakara adivasi hamlet, which is a settlement of the Malayan tribal community in Vaniyampara village, Thrissur district, Kerala. All 44 families living there have been fighting for ownership of their lands for the last 21 years. They have not been able to build a permanent house or a bathroom as they don't legally own the land | PHOTO: KAVYA PRADEEP M



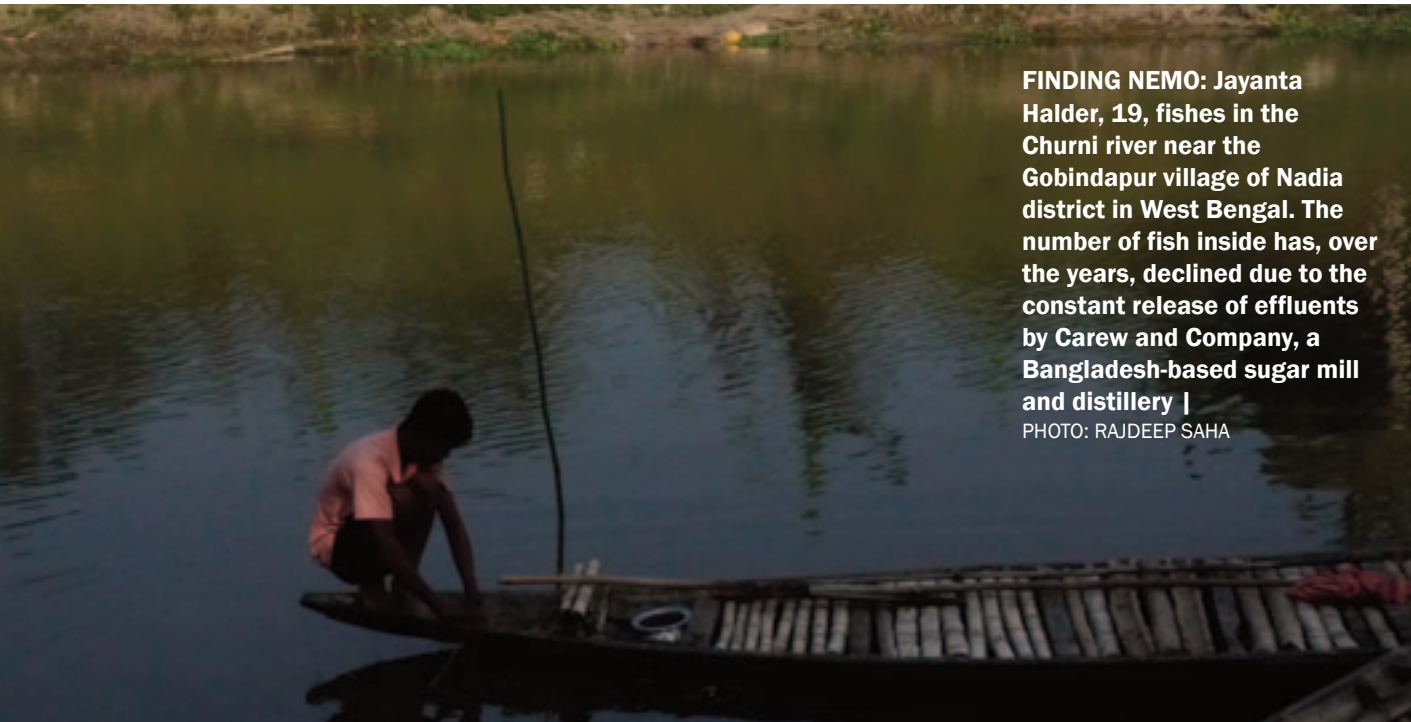
LUNCH IS SERVED: Students of the Mandal Parishad Upper Primary School in Sathanigudem village, Khammam district, Telangana, stand in queue for afternoon lunch provided by the government under the Mid-Day Meal Scheme | PHOTO: MAHATHI KATTA



STANDING TALL: Situated against the backdrop of the Nallamala forest, the Srisaillam temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The temple is said to have been built in the Vijayanagara period in the 2nd Century. The gopuram, visible on the extreme right, is dedicated to Lord Mallikarjuna, or Shiva. The gopuram on the extreme left is dedicated to Goddess Sri Bhramaramba (Parvati). The entrance leads to the abode of Lord Shiva and subsequently to Goddess Parvati's | PHOTO: AISHWARYA PARMESWARAN



CLASS IS NOT IN SESSION: Children belonging to 13 families who moved from the Arayakappu tribal colony in July 2021 due to adverse conditions in the wild, visit their families for the holidays at the Edamalayar tribal hostel. Previously, this hostel accommodated female students from the Ponginchuvadu and Thalukandam tribal colonies | PHOTO: NAINU OOMMEN



FINDING NEMO: Jayanta Halder, 19, fishes in the Churni river near the Gobindapur village of Nadia district in West Bengal. The number of fish inside has, over the years, declined due to the constant release of effluents by Carew and Company, a Bangladesh-based sugar mill and distillery | PHOTO: RAJDEEP SAHA

T'corin reels under flood aftermath

After unexpected rainfall for two days, the death toll is 10



WADING THROUGH: A privately hired bulldozer clears flood aftermath on a road, with no government assistance in sight | PHOTO: NEHA ARAVIND

NEHA ARAVIND

Sankaraperi (Thoothukudi): Thoothukudi district experienced flooding due to unprecedented rainfall on December 19, bringing life to a standstill. Heavy rains on the night of December 17 and early morning of December 18 submerged various parts of the district. Rivers and canals in the region overflowed. The death toll stands at 10.

Floods severely impacted areas like Kayalpattinam, Sankaraperi, Thoothukudi, and villages along the Thamarabharani river bank. For a week following the rain, electricity was cut off. People from neighbouring Tirunelveli and Kovilpatti supplied food to the stranded people. Three people died allegedly due to a wall collapse, another four died due to drowning, and two others due to electrocution. One of them is suspected to be a natural death.

G Balakrishnan, 60, in Kayalpattinam, said that if the government had acted promptly on the rain alert, damages might have been reduced by half. "There was hip-level water outside our house, and it started flowing inside as well. The fridge, doors, sofa and bed are damaged."

He also mentions that charities and local councillors took it upon themselves to distribute food. "More than the government, these people provided us with a lot of help that we will never forget," he said. Appas, 46, a fish vendor

from Kayalpattinam, recounts being stranded in hip-level water. His neighbours provided him a place to stay until the water receded. He sells fish in the nearby areas of Thoothukudi, and due to the rains, he lost his freezer, which he depends on to store his goods. Thoothukudi district went a week without network coverage, and cars and bikes were rendered useless. Residents resorted to tractors and bulldozers for evacuation to nearby cities. Fishermen in Thoothukudi were unable to bring their boats to help people as the floods left them stranded across the district. People with medical conditions suffered because of inaccessibility to hospitals, pharmacies and safe spaces. Selvi from KTC Nagar in Sankaraperi says her 68-year-old father had heart surgery two days before the flood. They moved him upstairs when the water started entering the house, but they were stuck there for two days. "We did not have his essential medicines for those two days. The government did not help us, but someone from the next street sent a tractor to help people in our colony evacuate," she said. Tamarasari, 30, from Kandasamyapuram, is a sanitation worker at a hospital. Her husband has been suffering from seizures for many years now. Water started entering their house when the family was sleeping. "Due to the rain, the gutter started overflowing and entering our house. We placed

both the children on the bed, but my husband suffered a seizure because of the water," she said. "I had made him sit on a chair while I tried to salvage our

“ Every half an hour my husband had a seizure but we could not take him to the hospital. No one came to help us

- Tamarasari

belongings. Every half an hour, he had a seizure but we could not take him to a hospital because no

one came to our compound to help us," said Tamarasari. The children in the compound started vomiting and had diarrhoea because of the smell from the gutter. Since the toilets were unusable at that point, parents had to resort to giving them plastic covers to defecate in. Several salt manufacturers in the district suffered losses as their stocks were wiped out. Sri Kabilan, owner of MVM Subramania Nadar & Sons in Arasaradi, says 2500 tonnes of salt were washed away from his salt pans. "The price of salt has increased now because a lot of salt pans were destroyed in these floods. Only if our production for this year goes well, we can meet our losses," he says.

Kabilan also says that he does not believe any compensation will be given to them though the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had paid a visit to take stock of damages. A small shop owner, Periyasamy, 38 in the Muthammal colony says the water was nearly shoulder level and he lost goods worth nearly Rs 1 lakh. He had never insured his shop and the government is yet to provide any help. M Mariappan, 41, owner of Haritha Book Centre, near the new bus stand in Thoothukudi said that none of the previous floods had affected the bus stand area before. But this year, there was two feet of water inside his shop. "The water started draining out the next day (Dec 20) but the damage was already done. We closed the shop for one week. I lost nearly rupees one lakh worth of goods and on top of that lost Rs. 10,000-20,000 in sales," he said. D Chandra Mohan, Assistant Commissioner of Thoothukudi Municipal Corporation, said there was almost five feet of water inside the corporation office. The documents stored on the lower shelves were lost and they are currently drying in the sun. Computers were also damaged. The affected residents find themselves grappling not only with immediate losses but also with uncertainties about future recovery. Despite the government provision of Rs 6000 in relief through ration shops, individuals like G Balakrishnan, Appas, Periyasamy, and M Mariappan all said the amount is insufficient to make up for their losses.

Karalar tribe fears losing their home



A Karalar family has built a house with the hope of getting land deeds | PHOTO: SANJHU THOMAS K

SANJHU THOMAS K

Kalvarayan Hills (Kallakurichi): Even after years of struggle and despite being one of the earliest inhabitants, indigenous people belonging to the Karalar tribe in the Kalvarayan Hills still lack their land record documentation. This puts their livelihood at risk and fails to protect their rights, their sustainable livelihood and cultural heritage.

The community's livelihood revolves around the cultivation of maize and yam (elephant foot), alongside goat and cattle rearing, which is integral to their survival and financial stability. However, their way of life is adversely affected due to the lack of land documents.

Without proper documents, they constantly fear losing homes and land, besides posing problems in accessing essential resources, government welfare schemes, and credit facilities, significantly hampering their socio-economic progress and questioning their future.

Vijayalakshmi, a maize farmer, said, "We've been living in this land for generations, but it feels like our hard work is wasted without official documentation. We fear that one day we won't have a land to call our home." Though there has been continuous pleading with the authorities for decades, there has been no improvement, she added.

Lack of documentation holds them back at every turn. As she

highlighted, "We don't know what will be our condition tomorrow, as anyone can ask us to leave this place. With all these, even the toilet facilities initiated by the government have not been built because of the lack of documentation."

Despite continuous pleading and making appeals to the government authorities for years, the government has not even responded favorably leave alone take steps to solve the problems.

Manikandan, a farmer, claimed, "I've been struggling to get a tractor for years, and the land document is the basic eligibility for applying for loans, and without it, I can't do anything." He also said, "There were days where I stood the whole day outside every office. But I haven't got any positive things."

He also highlighted that there were more than six district collectors transferred to this region, and "we gave the petitions to them each and every time, including the politicians, but there was no progress." Adding to this, Shivaraj, a farmer, said, "All the politicians come here during the election and promise us, but they won't even respond to us after the election."

Without legal documentation, their agricultural pursuits are facing hurdles. Legal recognition

Despite appeals to the authorities for years, the government has not even responded favourably, let alone take action

of their land ownership would enable them to cultivate without evictions or land disputes.

Additionally, it would grant them access to crucial government subsidies, bank loans for investments in farming equipment like tractors, and securing educational loans for the younger generation to pursue higher education, as well as life insurance policies to maintain agricultural productivity and economic stability. Malathi, a housewife, said, "I got my knee injury, and I have stopped farming. It's only my husband who is working and my daughter who is completing her schooling this year." This inability to access educational loans due to the absence of land documents bothers our children's future, she added.

Additionally, government benefits have not been given to the people here. They are not crossing the legal deeds for the property in the eligibility criteria. She said, "Luckily, we are getting the Rs 1000 for the Magalir Urimai Thittam initiated by the Chief Minister, as we managed to do many things in that."

Malarvannan, the village leader, claimed, "Getting loans is the only major problem here; educational, personal, medical, getting this is so tough. No one from this village was ever granted a loan." Still, people are fighting for it. "Government can neglect if one or two families lack the problem. But this is a whole village of more than 60 families, but still we aren't getting the documentation," he emphasized.

Forest officer Rajendran said these regions fall under the jurisdiction of the Forest Reserved Area, which delays action. "We're the ones who stay between these people as well as the government, so we want to look into both sides," he added.

The chances of these people getting proper documents are very low. "As it is a forest-reserved area, we're required to follow the 1:3 rule, where three parts must be for the forest and one part for the public," Rajendran explained.

The region is classified as a forest-reserved region, which delays the settlement process.

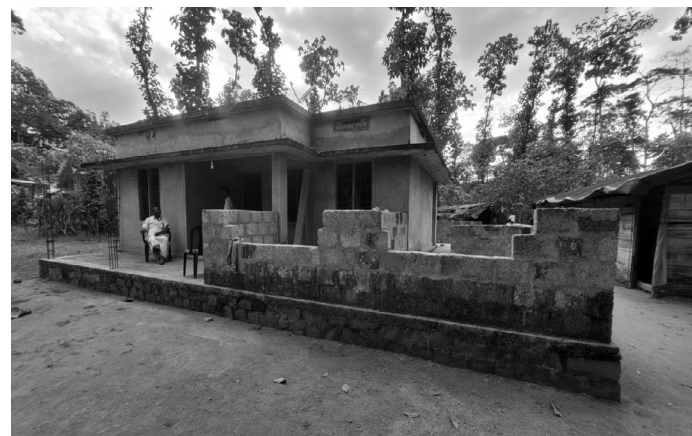
Shelter eludes Mannan and Muthuvan tribes in Panthapra

NAINU OOMEN

Panthapra (Kochi): Ever since they migrated from Uriampetti and Variam in 2009 in search of a means of livelihood, 57 tribal families in the Panthapra teak plantations of Kuttampuzha panchayat have been constantly fighting for a shelter that would protect them from the harsh conditions of the wild.

The 67 families belonging to the Mannan and Muthuvan tribes had left hundreds of acres of uncultivable land in their native places. They migrated to Panthapra, nearly 25 km from Kothamangalam, Kochi. The government had promised them shelter after more than a decade of protests and legal battles. Each family was granted Rs 6 lakh to build a 600 sqft house and given two acres of land. Several of these houses lack toilets, and the toilets there had to be built using the tribal families' own funds. Some of them even lack doors, putting the residents at risk from wild animals which often appear in the area.

Mahesh, 19, said, "Elephants come near the house almost everyday. Electric fences built by the forest department do not work or sometimes the elephants manage to knock the electric posts down and destroy whatever we plant. Eighty new families have come down recently," said Kannan, the kannakaran for the Panthapra colony. These families



Oorumoopan Kuttan Gopalan's house, the construction of which was halted two years ago | PHOTO: NAINU OOMEN

are staying in sheds with tarpaulin sheets in place of roofs. "They too will have to now go through all the procedures to get shelters of their own," he said.

The 67 families were given land in Panthapra in 2015 by the then Oommen Chandy-led United Democratic Front (UDF) government. In January 2020, the Chief Minister launched a housing project under the Gotra Jeevika scheme and selected six self-help groups to construct the houses. Later, 10 families won a case to build the houses on their own with government funds.

Kanthi Vellakayyan, Kuttampuzha panchayat president, said the funds were given to six ST organisations in Idukki and Wayanad to construct the houses. However, they did not

fulfil their duties and despite repeated calls for meetings, they refused to cooperate, he said.

On the other hand, Vellakayyan added that the construction of the houses has been taking place for 10-15 families. She hopes to ensure shelter for all the people in Panthapra. Rajeev, tribal extension officer in Kuttampuzha, says the delay in releasing the funds as well as the completion of the construction was due to systemic flaws. According to him, the delays were part of the procedure and would require time to be sorted out.

"Our families initially stayed at Pooyamkutti, where our sheds would be washed away by the river," said Kuttan Gopalan, oorumoopan of the Panthapra tribal colony. They stayed there

for two years, with some building sheds amid bamboo plantations. Later they were taken to an area near Mamalakandam. "In 2014, a court verdict favoured the Mannan and Muthuvan communities," said Gopalan.

However, not all the families from both tribes agreed to move away from the forest, due to which the land that was granted to them was cancelled. This led to a legal battle of two more years, which proved fruitful as the verdict came in favour of the 67 families ready to move from the forest. The construction of houses still took four more years by the next government. The houses in Panthapra are surrounded by teak trees, and these could fall causing damage and endangering the lives of the occupants.

Thankappan, 69, pointed to the Panthapra anganwadi, which has a teak tree growing through the asbestos sheets. "What will happen if it falls on our children?" he asked. "Most people in Panthapra get work for one or two days a week under the MGNREGA," said Thangappan. Another source of income for them is through the sale of forest produce such as incha and kurunthotti. People in Panthapra have been knocking on the doors of the officials for more than a decade now. As they reach out to those in power, their pursuit is for something as basic as doors and windows for their houses, which they hope to receive soon.

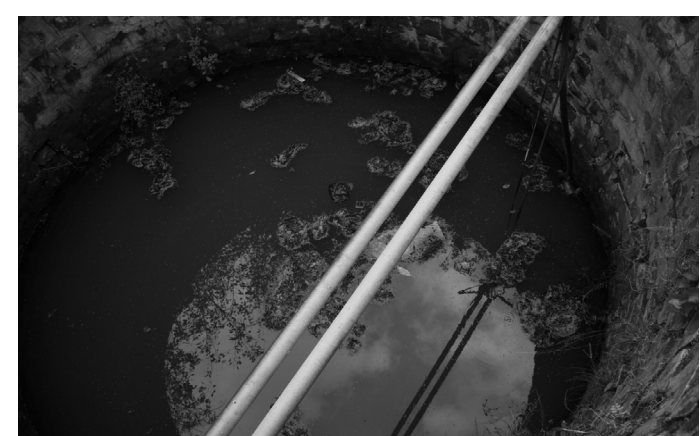
PRITHIVISHAA

Kalvarayan (Kallakurichi): In the heart of the Kalvarayan hill ranges, the Karalar tribes grapple with a pressing issue – the acute lack of menstrual hygiene and sanitation facilities.

Scattered across small hamlets, which dot the Kalvarayan hills that straddle Salem and Kallakurichi. These resilient people, particularly women, face daunting challenges as poor sanitation conditions swamp their lives stuck in a morass of poverty.

In the picturesque hamlet of Porashampattu, nestled within the Kalvarayan hill ranges, the struggle for basic menstrual hygiene and sanitation is explained by Raji, a 38-year-old farmer. "As we don't have sanitary napkins, we end up using tattered rags and rely on neem leaves as an antibacterial shield." It denies these women the dignity and makes them prone to health risks. Adding to their monthly woes is the daily drudgery of having to trudge 8-10 km daily to fetch clean and potable water. Although they can harvest rainwater in wells, it does not last the whole year, exacerbating their daily struggles.

When it is so difficult to get water, villagers can't think of having proper toilets which require running water and proper drainage system. Though some of the houses have dingy toilets built with government support, they are



Contaminated water in the Porashampattu hamlet | PHOTO: PRITHIVISHAA

not being used. The absence of proper sanitation facilities forces the villagers into open defecation, exposing them to various risks. Constant fears of venomous snake bites and insect attacks haunt their daily lives. The struggle for a basic human need becomes a perilous adventure, further highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address the sanitation crisis.

Parvathy, a resident of Penjur village, reflects on the absence of washrooms, saying, "We live deep inside the forest, and there is not a single washroom in our village. We're scared to let kids go alone into the forest just because we don't have proper washroom facilities." The Kalvarayan hill ranges has several tribal settlements. Many of the dwellings are uncemented and

muddy walls and with slanted tin roofs. Between the houses are the wooden structures used for climber/creper plants that provide vegetables. Moreover, the lack of sanitation infrastructure not only jeopardizes the villagers' health but also contributes to the contamination of local water sources, leading to water-borne diseases. Children, in particular, face difficulties attending schools due to the unhygienic conditions, perpetuating a cycle of limited education and compromised well-being. The implementation of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan aimed to bring about a positive change in these tribal areas. However, the unique challenges faced by the Karalar communities like infrastructure have hampered lasting improvements in the lives of the Karalar tribes.

The bitter-sweet stories of sugarcane farmers

Growers struggle with unprofitable crops, say govt has offered no incentives

SOUNDARYA M

Thiruvallur (Tiruchirappalli): Behind the vast and sprawling green fields of Thiruvallur Solai village lies stories of financial uncertainty and distress. The village located near two rivers Kollidam and Kaveri boasts of fertile agricultural land suitable for cultivation of paddy, sugarcane, banana, black gram and sesame. But the farmers complain of periodic financial loss due to adverse weather conditions and vagaries of agricultural markets.

M Ranganathan, 65, a farmer who lives in Thiruvallur Solai village of Tiruchirappalli district in Tamil Nadu, incurred a loss of Rs 40,000 due to unseasonal rainfall in 2022. He has been working as a tenant farmer for 15 years. Ranganathan, who has leased sugarcane land for Rs 25,000 said that he maintains the field with borewell irrigation which costs Rs 10,000. Like in 2022, every other year he incurs loss due to unseasonal rains or drought. The relief and support of government doesn't reach them. "Benefits and schemes are for those who own land, but for us, there is no way but to face the loss, the owner of the land claims the insurance," he said.

"Sometimes we don't even get an extra amount of Rs 10 (incentives) if we put more effort during the crisis," he said. Ranganathan works from 7 am to 1 pm every day but hardly earns Rs 500 a day and work is irregular and some months he doesn't get any work at all. His wage has been stagnant for the last two years. "There has been no incentive this year," he said. PR Pandian,



An agricultural labourer during sugarcane harvest | PHOTO: SOUNDARYA M

president of the Coordination Committee of All Farmers Association of Tamil Nadu said that "Sometimes farmers did not get incentives because they may not have been regular to work." "If only the owner has faith in his labor, they can think of giving it," he said and added that there was no information regarding the special incentives for sugarcane farmers. "If one acre of land has 24,000 sugarcane, not all of it goes to the market. Some have deficiencies such as weight, loss of color because of potassium or phosphorus deficiency, etc."

A Sathish, a fertilizer retailer at Thiruvallur Solai, said that the

sugarcane fields are prone to attack of pests and worms such as lepto. Sometimes organic manure is used for pest control but if it does not work then chemical insecticides such as chlorpyrifos have to be used to control the soil-borne pests. "Few farmers don't know how to identify the deficiency in the crops, so we (workers at his retail shop) visit the field and provide pesticide or fertilizer according to the deficiency in the crop," he said.

The village has about 1800 households. Most of the members in the household engage in farming except a few families who live in farms and brick kilns. The

entire stretch between Ponnurampuram and Kondayampettai in Thiruvanaikoil, located about 5 km from Thiruvallur Solai, still boasts fertile agricultural land.

Parmeshwari, 64, another sugarcane farmer who has been working for three decades, too said that "Many times, we face losses during the period of unseasonal rainfall and crop failure. Panchakamiyan is an (organic manure used for agricultural fields mixture of cow dung, komiyam, cow ghee, cow milk, curd, jaggery, tender coconut water and ripe banana) and monocrotophos (insecticide)

300-400 ml is used for one acre of land," she said. "I'm the sole breadwinner in my family and I barely get paid Rs 300 for a day," Parmeshwari said. Ahead of the Pongal festival where the procurement of the sugarcane begins in early December, she said "There is a shortage of laborers, even if I worked for more than regular timings (incentives) are not given."

According to Parmeshwari said that during the time of Panguni (March-April), they start cultivating the crops and by the end of Margazhi (November-December) the crops are grown. "If five laborers are working on 1000 sugarcane, we get Rs 2000 and we divide it among ourselves," she said. She said that this time the procurement of the sugarcane has been delayed and they have not received any information from the officials. "Generally, the inspection for the procurement starts from the third week in December, but they have not visited here yet," R Rajendran, 58, a farmer in Uthamaseeli, owns one acre of sugarcane field and said that the Primary Agriculture Cooperative Bank provides them interest-free loans for all farmers. He said there is no interest for one year. The loan is given for Rs 1.7 lakhs to manage all the agricultural expenses.

Thiruvallur Solai's Agriculture Bank manages to distribute the sugarcane within the Tiruchirappalli district to the ration shops at Thiruvanaikoil, Srirangam etc. Saktivel, joint director of the agriculture, said that the inspection for procurement will start in two days and will be distributed to the ration shops in Tiruchirappalli.



Farmers harvesting crops | PHOTO: MAHATHI KATTA

Khammam cultivators caught in debt trap

MAHATHI KATTA

Laxmidevipally (Khammam): Until last year tribal farmers in Telangana fought hard to get the pattas, or legal documents, for the podu lands that they are cultivating from generations. Even now, many are yet to receive them.

Under the Forest Rights Act passed in December 2006, tribal farmers who had been using forest lands for podu cultivation before 2005 were to be given title deeds for up to four acres of land. These resources and lands have been denied to them over the years because of the continuation of forest laws from the colonial era in the country.

Access to legal documents, however, is not the only factor that needs to be addressed to improve their livelihoods. One of the main problems faced in by the tribal farmers of Laxmidevipally in Khammam district is unavailability of water due to lack of electricity in agricultural lands. Until 2022 there was no three-phase power supply in Laxmidevipally and its surrounding villages. The three-phase power supply helps people pull electric lines from it and connect to the borewells from which farmers can pump water from the ground to irrigate their lands.

Though now there is a three-phase power supply for the farmers to pull electric lines, digging the ground and setting up bores will cost them lakhs of rupees. Under the Giri Vikasam scheme introduced in 2017 the State government had promised to extend electric lines and set up for borewells for the farmers for each panchayat so that every farmer in each village gets water to irrigate the lands.

However, only two borewells have been set up in 2022 in Laxmidevipally. The situation is the same in the neighbouring village, which only provides water supply to four families of farmers and not for the rest.

Payam Nageswara Rao, 42, has been farming since 2005. He says, "We filed several petitions at the

ITDA to sanction the extension of the electric lines but it hasn't borne fruit."

The farmers heavily rely on rainwater, motors connected to faraway brooks that run on petrol, and inkdu pits, which dry out in summers. Vajja Shantha, 53, says "We are able to cultivate only one crop a year because of the water scarcity. The people and government are bothered about us, the people who bring food to their plates."

Farmers can purchase seeds and fertilisers at subsidised rates in their respective states from the dealers. However, the tribal farmers haven't benefited from this. Kaalam Anil, who has been working in the farmlands since he was 25 years old, says, "I know that we can get subsidy on seeds and fertilisers, but we are not well aware of its process. We never had big meetings regarding it, and sometimes the officials gather a few people and write in their

records that a lot of people attended and got the information."

Due to lack of funds, farmers in Laxmidevipally and in many more tribal-dominated villages rely on the landlords and fall into poverty. Payam Satyavati, 40, says, "We stand in queue with folded hands in front of the landlords' houses waiting from morning to evening. Even after waiting that long there is no certainty that we would get the money."

The Rythu Bandhu scheme was a programme launched by the BRS government in 2018 to support farmers' investment in kharif and rabi seasons in Telangana. It provides Rs 50,000 per acre per season and the cash is directly received by the farmers. This has gone a long way in bringing down the reliance of farmers on the landlords.

"A landlord invested money for the three acres of the land I cultivated last year and at the end he showed me that I had to pay him Rs. 85,000. This year I cultivated seven acres of land with Rs 1 lakh with the help of Rythu Bandhu and my savings," says Anil. Farmers in Laxmidevipally continue to fall into the debt.

School teachers help tribal children to pursue education in Andhra village

AISHWARYA PARMESWARAN

Chinthala (Prakasam): "I don't want to go to school," said seven-year-old Nagalaksmi in Chinthala, a village in Dornala mandal of Prakasam district in Andhra Pradesh. This disinterest in education is a common sentiment noticed amongst the children of the tribes residing near the Nallamala forest. The children in the village belong to an indigenous tribe called the Chenchus, who prefer a life away from the usual town's hustle and bustle.

The village comprises 186 families. It is home to a tribe whose livelihood depends on forest hunting and fruits and vegetables freshly plucked from the forest, which they sell in the nearby towns and villages. They sell seasonal fruits and vegetables like red chilies for winter and regipandlu (jujube) during monsoon.

The children are accustomed to following their parents into the forest as they pluck fruits and vegetables for selling them in nearby markets. Parents who have not been exposed to the benefits of education do not admit their



Students outside Government Tribal Welfare Ashram HS | PHOTO: AISHWARYA PARMESWARAN

children to schools. In such a scenario, the village administration and school teachers have been trying to persuade the villagers to send their children to school.

"Initially the parents of the children were hesitant to send

their children to school as going to the forest looking for fruits and vegetables and selling them is all they had known." The village sarpanch continued, We had to first spread awareness amongst the parents to send their children to school."

The teachers appointed in the Tribal Welfare Schools play an important role as they are responsible for motivating the children to attend school regularly. "We talk to parents and enroll their children in school. We sometimes have to go door-to-door to motivate the children to be regular with their classes," said Chandra Reddy, a teacher at the Government Tribal Welfare Ashram High School.

The Government Tribal Welfare Ashram High School currently provides education to 140 students. The school earlier had classes up to class 5, which in 2016 was extended up to class 10. "The students who wish to study further move to either Dornala or Nandyala," said Chandra Reddy. The school has no plans to extend its education curriculum to the intermediate level, owing to few students wanting to continue their education beyond class 10.

The children at school are given three meals a day. "Children usually come to the school stay until lunch and then leave. There are times when students only come to school during lunchtime," said V Kanakaiah, the village sarpanch.

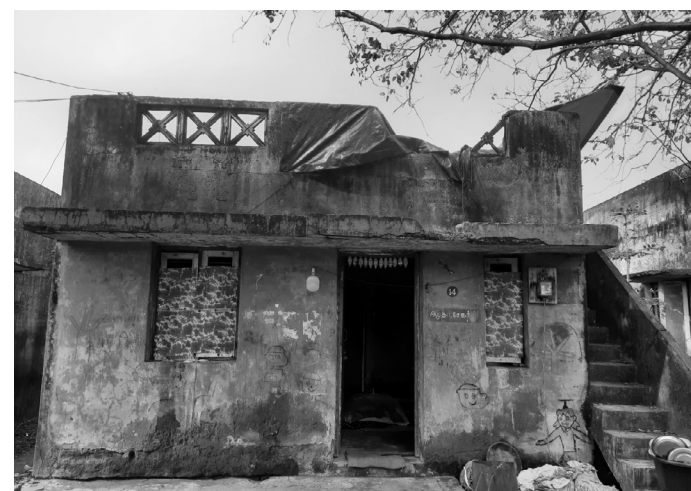
The school has been painted

colourfully with cartoons in an attempt to draw the attention of the students. The school also consists of a hostel to accommodate students coming from nearby villages, namely Thummala Bayalu and China Arutla.

"The schools in the neighbouring village consist of classes up to 8. We also look at children who finish their class 7 and encourage them to continue their schooling at Chinthala. We have to take extra efforts for the children to continue their education here," said the sarpanch. The children joining from the neighbouring villages live in the hostel in the school, added the school teacher.

The teachers also said that the students who attend the school do not usually turn up after festivals and summer vacations. "The children living in the school hostels usually go back home for vacations or festivals. They often do not come back. The teachers go to their homes and motivate them to continue," said the teacher.

The school management said, "The children have shown interest in the subjects and we make sure they learn to read and write Telugu, their mother tongue."



The walls and terrace of the house are damaged in Amirtha Nagar, Nagore | PHOTO: LAKSHMI PRABHA S

Tsunami relief for Narikuravars crumbles

LAKSHMI PRABHA S

Nagore (Nagapattinam): Their houses and lives are in shambles. The 21-odd families of Narikuravars in Amirtha Nagar have been struggling to rebuild their homes. After the tsunami in 2004, the Tamil Nadu government built houses for 21 families in Amirtha Nagar, Nagore, for the Narikuravar community.

Among the 21 families, only nine are now living in the colony. "Our financial condition doesn't allow us to build our own houses.

Our only option is to leave this place as we neither need this house nor this town," said Rupa, a 20-year-old housewife, clad in a petticoat and a shirt, worn by many women in the community.

"We tried to repair the damaged areas but we couldn't afford the amount," she said and added that they would have to pay up to Rs 35,000 to repair the houses and it is difficult to save money. "We can't live here during monsoon as the rainwater leaks through the roof, and soon a thick carpet of algae forms and the place begins

to stink," said Bharathi, a 24-year-old mother of a two-month-old baby. The people came together and built one small house to shelter their children during the monsoon.

"We have filed about 20 petitions to the Nagapattinam collector, but no actions have been taken so far," said Amudha, a 45-year-old resident. "During rainy days, it is not possible to go around and sell our trinkets and ornaments. We survive by fishing at Nagapattinam," says Amudha. The Narikuravar community

women sell needles and small ornaments at the Nagapattinam bus stop. They face harassment, especially after dusk. One of the major problems faced by the villagers is the lack of sanitation facilities. Open defecation is carried out at Karuvathoppu, a shrubby grove near Amirtha Nagar, which is infested with snakes and insects. "Foul smell comes from the tap water as the wastewater mixes with the groundwater," said Karthi, a 23-year-old fisherman.

Another problem that they face

is the categorisation of their community. "Our community is noted under the MBC, Most Backward Caste category," said Eashwari, a 22-year-old pregnant woman. The members of the community have requested the government to change their categorisation, and include them among the Scheduled Castes or the Scheduled Tribes. However, there is no response from officials.

"We hardly get power neither in summer nor in the rainy season as the junction boxes are damaged", Eeshwari, a resident added.

‘Cleaning septic tanks is all that we can do’

Chakkiliyars in Kollam are forced to carry out manual scavenging. They still face social exclusion in finding spouses

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR

Kollam: The Union government’s NAMASTE scheme to eliminate manual scavenging means little to Anandan of Kappalandimukku in Kollam; thottipani, or manual scavenging, is the only life he has known.

The National Action Plan for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) was introduced to mechanise waste collection and treatment of sewers and septic tanks. It aims to rehabilitate manual scavengers.

“There are no other jobs for us,” says Anandan. “We have not learned any other profession; cleaning septic tanks is all we have seen and learned. We don’t have any other means to earn an income, a livelihood. We will accept any job that pays – whether it is a thousand rupees or three-hundred rupees.”

At 5 pm, he had just returned from a gruelling shift that began at two in the night. The 35-year-old has worked as a manual scavenger for at least two decades and expects to continue doing so, despite the practice being banned by the Supreme Court in 2013.

“Even if this job is done away with, they need to find us an alternate profession. The government has not done that for us. When they do, we will be able to stop working like this. Without a job, we will not be able to support our household – there are needs to be met, children to educate. I have a 10-year-old child. As she gets older, I will need money to meet her expenses. For that I need to work, and I have to take up any work that comes my way,” he adds.

Anandan is a member of the Chakkiliyar community. Along with the Arunthathiyars and the Paraiyars, the Chakkiliyars are among the most marginalised castes in Kerala.

According to C Gopalan,



LIVING ON THE MARGINS: Valliamma and her sister-in-law Krishnamma work as domestic help, but they find it challenging at their age | PHOTO: ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR

district secretary of the Scheduled Castes Welfare Committee and a member of the community himself, Chakkiliyars are present in all 14 districts in Kerala and live in colonies doing some variation of sanitation work.

The Kollam Chakkiliyars trace their origins to their Tamil forefathers hailing from the Pathanapuram-Tenkasi region, and still have extended families in parts of the Tenkasi district. The community, while low-ranked in the caste hierarchy, was employed as leather workers for royal families – cleaning leather hide to make shoes, sword handles and knife holsters, among other items.

“In 1921, when Kollam Municipality was formed, our ancestors were brought here. They didn’t take up the job of scavenging willingly. They were coerced into it, and this became a kulathozhil, a dynastic profession. In my case, my father was a corporation sanitation worker. When he retired, I got his post as sweeper,” says Gopalan.

As the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu witnessed multiple rounds of state reorganisation upto the 1950s, the Chakkiliyars and Arunthathiyars who had migrated to Kollam town grappled with a loss of identity and a sense of dignity.

It was only in 2022 that the Kappalandimukku colony was awarded ownership of the land it occupies. The colony houses 41 families, of which at least 14 persons continue to be employed as manual scavengers. Even those who get a government job are hired in the post of corporation sweepers or sanitation workers.

All these challenges come hand-in-hand with the social stigma attached to the practice. “We have been isolated,” Gopalan says. “We did not get a good education at the government school. Our children cannot marry from Kerala – we have to find them spouses from outside the state because nobody in Kerala would want to marry them. We cannot disclose to people that we live in this colony, even if someone is well educated.”

“At least our children are doing better. With education they manage to get a posting as a peon, sweeper, or clerk. They relocate away from the colony. Who wouldn’t?” says Gopalan.

“At least our children are doing better... They move away from the colony

- C Gopalan

Poovanchira tribals left high and dry by govt

KAVYA PRADEEP M

Poovanchira (Thrissur): The residents of Poovanchira colony in Pananchery grama panchayat dread summer. That’s the time they have to go without water to do their day-to-day chores.

Poovanchira, a Malayan (a tribal community) colony is home to 57 families. It is near the Vellani forest, and the nearest town is Pattikkad, 3 km away.

The groundwater level plunges, and the lone borewell yields little to no water. Families even send their children to hostels to study at a young age and villagers are relying on forests for water.

“There is no water, especially in summer. The borewell is not working anymore,” said 65-year-old Sathyan, the Moopan (chieftain) of Poovanchira. “The gram and block Panchayat members promise action, but nothing has happened. This is one major reason why school children move out to hostels.”

Generations ago, non-tribal settlers from Travancore used to employ the tribals as agricultural labourers. After which the Malayans began gathering medicinal herbs from the forest for their livelihood.

Omana, 60, a resident of the Poovanchira colony who works as a domestic helper, said people who are better off make a well for themselves. “When there is extreme scarcity, we depend on the water distributed in panchayat lorries, which come very irregularly,” she said.

Lisha MK, 32, said they rarely get enough water for every family from the panchayat lorry. “They sometimes come late at night when people are asleep or in the morning when everyone is going



The borewell pump in Poovanchira colony | PHOTO: KAVYA PRADEEP M

to work, which makes it difficult for us to collect water,” said Lisha, who works as a teacher at padanashaala (a common classroom for the colony run by the government).

A Rs 30 lakh water supply scheme, initiated by the block panchayat for 45 families in Poovanchira colony, was inaugurated six months ago. Remya Rajesh, who is the SC/ST promoter and block panchayat member, said all houses would get piped water supply through the Jal Jeevan Mission, a central government scheme to make drinking water available in rural households across the country by 2024. “We are looking forward to the scheme as we are living near the Peechi dam from where the entire district gets water,” said Remya.

When the water problem was raised in the panchayat meeting held in the first week of December, they were promised a new borewell soon, and Rs 2 lakh was sanctioned. “If the borewell pump is not installed soon, we will have to continue to go deep inside the forest to get water as the panchayat delays the distribution of water most of the time,” complained Manju Thangachan, a 43-year-old housewife.

Panchayat president PP Raveendran, 63, said, “The scheme is expected to be completed by March 31. The total expenditure is not yet confirmed as the expenses will be shared among the central government (45 per cent), state government (30 per cent), panchayat (15 per cent) and consumers (10 per cent).” He said there were some technical issues, as in some areas the pipes have to be laid through forest regions, and the forest department is not giving permission for this.

Thrissur collector VR Krishna Teja has sanctioned Rs 15 lakh for Pananchery panchayat, one of the biggest panchayats in Kerala with 23 wards. “Free water supply is not possible. In fact, water distribution was temporarily stopped as 45 families were not paying the maintenance money. It is unfair to take Rs 10,000 every two months from just four to five families when everyone uses the same water,” said ward member Deepu PA.

According to Paul Mathew, Thrissur bureau chief of Deepika newspaper, every government is letting them down. “The government has allotted crores of rupees for tribal colonies. There should be a team to monitor the middlemen who execute these projects,” he said.

MUHAMMED MUKHTAR

Vallam (Ernakulam): Back in 1946, the Dewan of Travancore Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer proposed establishing Travancore Rayons at Vallam, on the banks of the Periyar. This decision would destroy the lives of people in the region for generations.

Since the company began operations in 1948 it has released toxic fumes with sulfuric acid and carbon bisulphate (CS₂) into the soil. While the company shut down 23 years ago, the residents of Vallam and Rayonpuram continue to breathe polluted air.

At Vallam, 5 km from Perumbavoor in Ernakulam district, there is now not a single water body with potable water. All ground water sources have been contaminated due to the seepage of sulphuric acid into the soil.

PB Ali, 83, was among the earliest employees of Travancore Rayons and worked as an instrument mechanic at the factory. “The main products are rayons and cellulose film.”

“Many people were employed, and it was a notable factory during its peak; but all was lost once it destroyed the environment,” said Ali.

Production of rayons and cellulose film involves the use of caustic soda and sulphuric acid, which contaminated the groundwater over a radius of 3 km due to leaks in the pipelines.

Toxic fumes also caused health issues for villagers and employees of the company, most of whom became chronic patients after retirement. “They cannot work, they lived with disease till their last breath,” Ali added.

Beevi Fathima, 63, a resident of

No roads lead to Kerala’s Peechi tribal colony

ROHITH SONY

Olakara (Thrissur): Tucked away in the mountainous forests of Peechi, at Olakara, is the Malaya Adivasi tribal hamlet. The hamlet is home to 47 families and can only be accessed through a narrow, ramshackle road.

Olakara’s Moopathi (woman tribal chief) Madhavi, said that buses do not ply to the tribal colony and the nearest bus stop is almost 2.5 km away. An hour’s walk, followed by a boat ride is the only way to access Peechi, the town closest to Olakara.

“A few days ago, a private bus driver agreed to come to the colony and start service, but he needs a permit from forest officials, which we could provide soon,” said MA Aneesh, assistant wildlife warden for the Peechi-Vazhani Wildlife Sanctuary.

The panchayat office at Pattikad in Thrissur is almost 25 km away and takes a two-hour journey by public bus with an interchange at Vadakkanchery.

Students in the Olakara colony are forced to stay in hostels and pursue their education in the nearby towns of both Thrissur and Palakkad in Vettillappara, Chuvannamannu, and Chalakudy, which are almost 60 km away by road. The colony does not have a primary school, and the closest primary health centre is at Vaniyampara, about 14 km away.

“I have filed an application to the authorities to establish at least a lower primary school in the colony for the children, as well as a primary healthcare centre,” said Madhavi. “It is sad to see children stay away from their homes as early as the age of five. They are not equipped to look after themselves, but parents are left with no choice.”

The Pananchery panchayat located in Thrissur has recently provided transport for 10 students to go to the lower primary school at Valkulambu, Palakkad. This did little to solve the larger problem.



The narrow road leading to the Olakara tribal hamlet | PHOTO: ROHITH SONY

The nearest government institution to the colony is the Olakara Forest Station, under the Kerala forest department, which doubles as a polling booth during elections.

A few members of the tribal community own bikes and even auto rickshaws. The recently formed eco development committee, has provided a jeep to the residents.

“In case of emergencies and other important events, the residents of the colony are forced to hire taxis,” remarked Madhavi. “While getting any taxi driver to come through the poor-quality road in itself is a task, they charge hefty prices for even short distances.”

A proper road has become a necessity for the forest dwellers in the wake of elephants and tigers destroying crops and farmland. “I used to visit my relatives at

Echipara, near the Chimmini Dam, by foot. The journey through the forest only took an hour. Now, we are forced to use vehicles to go there,” said Madhavi. The residents here fear traversing the forest path on foot, even during the day.

A few residents of the colony say being a part of Kizhakkanchery panchayat in Palakkad district would reduce the travel burden for the residents and make it ideal for administration. But Madhavi says Olakara should remain in Thrissur district as a part of the Pananchery panchayat, regardless of the distance.

“The benefits and support that the government officials at Thrissur give us is a lot more than what Palakkad could ever offer,” said Madhavi. “I do not believe that shifting to Palakkad would be a wise decision for the Olakara tribal community.”

Soil, water and air spew venom in Vallam region



(Left) ‘Save Vallam’ posters on the walls of Travancore Rayons factory; (right) Fathima Beevi holding a cup of water taken from the toxic well | PHOTOS: MUHAMMED MUKHTAR

Vallam, said their well was contaminated with acid, and they can’t use the water for cattle rearing and household purposes. “I cannot even use it to wash clothes,” she said.

Saniitha, 47, another local resident, said that her well has foam coupled with an oil slick and a pungent smell. Sometimes there is a change in colour which clothes absorb.

Now the village depends on paid municipality water for drinking and all other purposes.

PK Kochunni, a historian and RTI activist based in Perumbavoor, had filed many petitions against the management of this property by the government

and its inaction on the drinking water scarcity. “The company closed on July 17, 2001, through a lay-off,” he said.

After the closure, the Kerala High Court intervened and the state government entrusted the property to Kerala Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (KINFRA).

“The actual property is 75 acres, seven acres were allotted to the Kerala Electricity Board and 30 acres was entrusted to KINFRA,” said Kochunni.

Shanavas Pareekutty, a social activist and convener of Save Vallam Janakeeya Kootayma, a collective body of people of Vallam that is opposing setting up

harmful industries by KINFRA, said: “We, the people of the Vallam, are against the decision of the government to set up industries in the locality. We will oppose any move by the government to bring another toxic company.”

“If you look at the categories of factories and industries under KINFRA, we find that most of them are harmful to the environment,” said Shanavas.

He said that instead of such factories they would be open to initiatives in areas of education, health and sports. He said they have lodged complaints with the Chief Minister, the collector, the ministries of health and industries.

Kochunni says Travancore Rayons had brought the good, bad and the ugly to the region. “Thanks to the company, Perumbavoor became a municipality. New roads were made and the region saw significant development during the 1960s.”

Production of rayon and cellulose film involves the use of caustic soda and sulphuric acid, which contaminated the groundwater over a radius of 3 km due to pipeline leaks

Sea incursions, an endless risk to life

Seas along Kerala’s coast have become more unpredictable each year, and threaten to swallow homes along the coast

ANN JACOB

Kannamaly (Kochi): Kannamaly is a coastal town in Ernakulam district, located 18 km away from the main city. The local community of the area is fisherfolk, having suffered sea incursions for generations.

The risk of a sea incursion at any point is a never-ending issue, with the repeated loss of their houses and belongings. People fear that they will have to helplessly watch as everything they own gets lost in the sea.

“We fear it can happen at any time, and we may lose everything again,” says Sheeba Jacob, district panchayat ward member of Kannamaly.

“All our furniture, equipments, and appliances floated away onto the lake, and we don’t even know who the washed-up appliances belong to,” says Thangamma, a resident. “The mud that comes from the sea takes money and hours of effort to clean. We elderly people cannot even do that on our own.”

The sea incursions that took place during the Ockhi cyclone in 2017 and the flooding in July 2023 have caused immense damage.

Since the community here is made up of fishermen, they cannot move away from this area. They have no choice but to stay back, start from scratch, and hope the next incursion does not happen soon.

“This unpredictability of the sea has caused our people to lose many things that they have invested in,” says Immanuel, a resident from Kannamaly. “Fridges, motors, and more have been washed away by the sea into the lake, and we have to replace them all.” He adds that the sand from the depths of the sea comes and settles inside houses, damaging electronic appliances.

Houses that people have invested all their savings to build have been broken and evacuated because of incursions. People who have small businesses that store goods in their houses have also incurred huge losses.

“Some parts of our houses, like our broken tiles, cannot even be repaired,” Thangamma adds. “It took almost a month to come back and start living again in the houses after cleaning up.”



HIGH TIDE: House damaged by sea incursion abandoned in Kannamaly | PHOTO: ANN JACOB

Ockhi had been a high-impact disaster for the community, as people had to be evacuated in boats because the seawater had strong undercurrents.

“The last incursion that happened after Ockhi damaged more than nine houses in my ward,” Sheeba recalls. “The damage will continue to happen till a permanent solution like tetrapods is installed.”

The government had promised a 10-km tetrapod stretch, but the work has started only for 7 km, and is still in progress. Tetrapods have an interlocking pattern that will decrease the strength of the waves coming onto the land. They can hold the sea back for good measure.

The installation was supposed to be completed in November 2023. “Another huge issue that came

in 2017 was COVID-19,” Sheeba says. “God knows how we made it. So, we did not evacuate isolated patients, but we ensured that food and medicine reached them.”

There has been one sea incursion after Ockhi, and the geobags have been placed after the disaster. Residents say that incursions used to happen in the June–July, but the sea has now become unpredictable due to climate change.

The Anganwadi in the locality, close to the sea had to be rebuilt. “The anganwadi also goes into a hopeless state,” says Preeti KG, the anganwadi teacher. “Books, boards, and

things we use to teach children have been lost and need to be replaced every time. It was only one wall of the anganwadi that stood the force of water.” Geobags were installed by the irrigation department according to

the residents, but the arrangement failed to withstand the strength of the waves.

“They needed to allow us to arrange the geo-bags in an interlocked pattern,” Sheeba says. The geobags that people of the land placelast longer, and the residents attribute it to their familiarity with the sea.

“Years ago, the incursion would only happen once or twice a year, and then canals would carry seawater to the lake nearby,” Sheeba adds.

She explains that the houses were not affected as much in the past. But as the population increased, these canals were converted to land and used to build houses. After this, the frequency of incursions increased.

“Only people who have lived here know the strength of the sea,” says Immanuel. “We cannot predict the sea anymore, and we need tetrapods. We cannot live in fear every single day.”

The people from the affected areas protested and demanded tetrapods, and the authorities had promised immediate solutions. Despite promises, construction started after a lot of delays, and the installation has not yet been completed. The risk of the community losing their houses and belongings still stands.

Women in ODF village have no toilet to go to

DHEEPATHI O J

Jagirmangalam (Thiruvallur): Although the Tamil Nadu government has constructed several toilets in Jagirmangalam village, the local people are unable to use them.

The main reason is toilets are of sub-standard quality. Several of them have collapsed following spells of heavy rains.

Ironically, rest of the year there is no water available in these toilets.

“Though constructed in 2018 it was devoid of water and sewage connection,” said a resident Rani M, a homemaker in her mid-thirties.

Even a decade after the launch of the centre’s flagship Swachh Bharat Mission, Jagirmangalam village in Tamil Nadu’s Thiruvallur district is not yet open defecation free, despite claims to the contrary.

Besides, the residents do not have the awareness of using toilets. Habituated to defecate in the open, they don’t see the lack of toilet facilities as a problem. They walk close to 2 km to relieve themselves. Women go early in the morning or late in the evening to defecate.

“It is very difficult to relieve ourselves if we miss going by 5 am,” said S Sathya, a resident of the village. The 28-year-old homemaker and mother of three young girls said that every morning she also takes her kids.

“Children cannot get up at 4.30 am,” she said. If they miss the early morning hour, then the women can go to relieve themselves only after 6 pm – once it becomes dark. “That is even more challenging with snakes and other insects roaming around after the sunset,” said Selvi M, another resident of the area.

The situation, they said, would be worse during the rainy season as there would be water stagnation. “Feces will be floating around,” said Sathya.

She said that the villagers have regularly been affected by diarrhea and urinary tract infections.

Some of the villagers have constructed their own houses. However, they too are devoid of toilets. K Manikandan is a 34-year-old daily wage laborer who has constructed a small house. But there is no toilet. He said, “There



A damaged toilet in Jagirmangalam | PHOTO: DHEEPATHI O J

is no space for constructing toilets. We may construct it later when I earn enough money.”

Most of the houses however have a bathroom. But there is no way to dispose the dirty water. There are small sewage tanks and a drainage canal with no provision for the collected water to be treated. These structures are yet to be combined with a full-fledged drainage system. So, the waste water from the bathrooms is manually disposed.

Rani said, “We manually carry the waste water from the tanks using buckets and dispose it. I make at least 20 trips a day to clear the tank.” There are other problems which arise out of this. When the villagers dispose waste water in the agricultural fields, owners of the fields pick up fights with them saying their crops will get damaged because of the sewage water.

The situation seen in the village is in stark contrast with what the district administration has projected.

In February 2018, Tiruvallur district declared all the 526 villages in it as open defecation free (ODF). As per its official

website, the district administration has also identified motivators for all villages. Their job is to spread awareness regarding the construction and usage of toilets in the village. Villagers, however, said that motivators only came soon after the toilets were constructed in the village in 2018. After that hardly anyone has come, they say.

Government has constructed toilets in the village – both common as well as separate ones for houses which have space around them. But presently all of them are unused and are dilapidated. A common toilet has been constructed in the village which has two bathrooms and four toilets. However, it has not been maintained for several years.

The block development officer (BDO) in charge of the Jagirmangalam village said, “The problem is that we do not have sufficient funds for maintenance. The toilets were constructed when some funds were allotted. We will look into repairing them as soon as possible,” he said, adding that motivators will be sent to the villages more often to motivate us time and again.

K’taka coffee estates deny women equal pay

GHAZAL CHENGAPPA

Virajpet (Kodagu): The aroma of coffee drying in yards fills the air against the backdrop of picturesque hills in Kadamallur, a village 9 km from Virajpet town. It’s January, and amidst the coffee shrubs, men and women engage in the labour-intensive process of coffee picking. However, this seemingly idyllic scene masks an unsettling reality—a gender-based wage gap that has existed for years. In the entire district of Kodagu, wages average between Rs 400-500 per day for men and Rs 200-350 for women.

Picking coffee entails running one’s palms along the shrub’s branches to pluck all the berries in one swift motion. In this estate, the ratio of men and women is nearly equal; often with children in tow. However, despite this a stark contrast in wages persists.

“Sometimes we get paid as little as Rs 150 a day when work is slow,” says Meena, 42, a tribal Yerava woman. Her community has been the backbone of the district’s coffee estates, along with more recently arrived migrant workers.

Every day Sumitra, 27, accompanied by her eight-year-old son Diganth, walks to work on an estate in Kottachi, a remote village near Kadamallur’s centre.



Woman at a coffee plantation | PHOTO: GHAZAL CHENGAPPA

She firmly says, “I don’t want to work as a domestic helper in someone’s house when I have the option of working at an estate.” Coffee cultivation provides a relatively accessible entry point, demanding minimal training and skill. Sumitra learned the ropes by observing her relatives.

Jaya, 58, has worked at the same estate for 15 years, she’s dressed in a grey lungi paired with a checked button down shirt and hair wrapped in a thin cloth called a vastra. “There’s always been a wage gap, but I continue to work

here because of the promise of regular work.”

In a promising shift, a wave of new-age estate owners is challenging the status quo by championing equal wages, signalling a transformative trend in the traditionally male-dominated agricultural sector. “I pay all my workers the same wages of Rs 300 per day for their work,” says KM Subbaiah, an estate owner from Madikeri, the district capital. He emphasises equal value in the tasks performed by both men and women.

Attapadi aims for the stars

AMARNATH K

Attappadi (Palakkad): Nestled amid forests on the side of a hill, the APJ Abdul Kalam International Tribal Residential School in Attapadi has brought about a paradigm change in the quality of education imparted to tribal students.

Says Uma Preman, a social worker who started the school in 2017: “I don’t run this school for a 100 per cent pass benchmark. I focus on the tribal children here to give them what they deserve but hardly get from other schools here. The students do not know any language other than their native tongue. Even Malayalam is a foreign language to them.”

APJ school has teachers from Attappadi’s tribal villages who teach primary class students in their native tongue. Gradually they learn to grasp things in English and Malayalam. They learn Tamil and Sanskrit also.

Uma had founded Santhi Information Center, a non-profit organisation that gives a helping hand to people who suffer from life-threatening ailments. She had sold all the properties that were written in her name by her deceased abusive husband to begin Santhi.

She reached Attappadi in 2014 as part of her social work. From there she attempted to send some youths for UPSC exams to ensure civil representation from Attappadi. But the result was



The APJ Abdul Kalam Tribal School in Attapadi | PHOTO: AMARNATH K

depressing. The coaching centre told her that even those students who had master’s degrees didn’t have the aptitude to attend the exam. “I am not saying that the education system in Attappadi is bad. Tribal students come from households where there are no educated adults who can help them with their studies,” said Uma. According to her, the schools in Attappadi, despite their recent milestone of cent per cent pass, don’t give the special attention that tribal students require.

She raised Rs 23 lakh overnight from three of her friends on the day she decided to start the school. The school now gets contributions

from people who are willing.

Uma plans to begin a digital university soon. “In the next 6 years, we will make this dream real. Students will be equipped to go outside and study for MBBS and engineering. Others will have the opportunity to study the subjects of their interests in Attappadi.”

APJ school does not admit any student to classes other than the first standard. Uma is adamant that every child should be galvanised right from the beginning.

Athul Krishna, a class 3 student of the school, says he likes to live in the school. Abhinav, a class 2 student was enthusiastically trying

to figure out something sitting on the painting of a map of India in the courtyard.

“My teacher will buy me an Al-Fahum (a chicken dish) if I can find out the cities she is asking me to,” he said jovially.

The school encourages students to learn through play.

“Earlier, it was difficult to bring children to the school. Even though education is free here, parents were not sure of their children’s future. Now parents want to admit their children here. “(The school doesn’t) force our children to follow their path. Instead, they help them to be better,” said Nithin, parent of a child studying in the school.

Foam in Indrayani muddies water

Alandi residents grapple with contaminated river water amidst government disputes and protests

NITIKA FRANCIS

Alandi (Pune): A huge layer of toxic white foam has been forming on the Indrayani river, the primary source of water for the folks of Alandi, Maharashtra, since November 2023. The river has been subject to pollution from various sources, which has resulted in the people of Alandi having to reach into their own pockets for something as necessary as clean water consumption.

In recent months, the inaction over the foam has led to a back and forth between the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) and the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB), who have made a habit of blaming each other when confronted about the state of the river.

Employees of the PCMC are alleging that industries within the Maharashtra Industrial Development (MIDC) area in Bhosari, Pune, are the primary pollutants of the river. "The Indrayani river originates at the Andra Valley Dam near Maval, Pune, and flows towards Alandi. It remains clean until it reaches the MIDC area," said Santosh

Dulajihile, the PCMC canal inspector, who oversees the Indrayani canal in Alandi.

"MIDC companies have been instructed to treat and clean their water before dumping it into the river. We have even sent them warning letters insisting on this. After the water undergoes that amount of pollution, it remains that way, even when put through a filter," he said. "Due to continued pollution, the river has been producing an off-putting odour since about March. I hardly ever eat my lunch because of this smell," he added.

"The water that comes from our pipes is Indrayani water, and it is green in colour. There are certain hours in the day where the pipe water is not as dirty, which we keep track of and then collect the water accordingly," said Mukesh Chauhan, 47, who works odd jobs in Alandi.

"We don't neglect the water completely, as we have scarce choices. We use it for cleaning our clothes, although it stains sometimes," he added.

"We spend Rs 5 to buy 2 litres of water; we'd rather spend money we don't have and starve than drink water from the river and die," he said. "But not



THE HOLY FOAM: A man drinking the polluted water of the Indrayani river. This water is considered *teerth* (holy) | PHOTO: NITIKA FRANCIS

everyone is afraid of drinking it. Pilgrims drink the water, believing it is from God," he added.

Alandi is considered a sacred destination for those who wish to

commemorate Sant Dnyaneshwar. He was a 13th-century Marathi saint whose tomb lies in Alandi. His commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, titled Dnyaneshwari, is

beloved by many Maharashtrians, as evidenced by the thousands who make a beeline for Alandi every year.

"Sant Dnyaneshwar blesses the

water of the river, making it *teerth* (holy water). Outside of the annual pilgrimage, I come here every evening to bathe in the water and cleanse myself," said Shantanu Andhale, 33, a shop owner from the region. "I don't think this pollutes the river. How can a blessed river be polluted?" he said.

According to Krishna Iyer, a retired environmental engineer with years of experience at the Kerala Water Authority, the foam is formed due to companies not following the cleaning standards set by the Pollution Control Act 1986. "When toxic elements come into contact with the oxygen in the atmosphere and the water, they react. They break up and form objectionable compounds, which are harmful to the consumption by human beings, animals, and plants," he said.

Farmers in Alandi have no access to means of livelihood beyond their fields. Many of them are unaware of the effects that contaminated water may have. Upon receiving green, dirty water in their supply meant to be used for irrigation, many of them have resorted to using wells.

"We do not want to ruin our soil with dirty water, and it has

happened before. We use a well to water the farm, but even that water is limited. But this is much better than ruining the soil in the long term," said Shubham Gundre, 43, a farmer from Alandi.

His wife, Suvarna, 37, who also works on the farm, alleged that Indrayani Hospital is supplied water from the Indrayani river. When reached out to, the hospital did not comment.

"The water is used in so many places that it shouldn't be, but nothing is done about it. The only reason there was any response is because it is *teerth*. Our concerns are never raised to them," she said.

The Human Rights Protection Organisation of Maharashtra orchestrated a silent protest to highlight the pollution crisis to the PCMC in November 2023. Members of the organisation even corresponded with Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, the union environment minister Bhupendra Yadav, and Ajit Pawar.

The white toxic foam, which has caused so much commotion in the area, acts as a visual reminder to the villagers of the inaction on the part of the responsible governing bodies, which can help bring about a change, in the current situation.

Struggles of the 'nowhere people'



Hemji Koli and his family migrated from Pakistan in 2015 | PHOTO: ARCHITA LAKHOTIA

ARCHITA LAKHOTIA

Kali Beri (Jodhpur): India witnessed two years of large-scale migration from Pakistan — 1965 and 1971. Around 10,000 refugees came to India. In 1971, more 90,000 households migrated. Some of these refugees migrated to states like Punjab, Haryana, and cities in Rajasthan like Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, and Ganganagar. The majority of these families are from backgrounds like Brahmin, Rajput, and Marwari castes or are tribals like the Bheels and Mewars.

These refugees fled from terrible circumstances, leaving behind their homes to seek a better life. Nonetheless, there has been little improvement in their situation. For years — some even 20 to 25 years — many of these refugees have been struggling to get Indian citizenship.

Hindu Singh Sodha was one of the refugees who, unlike the government, decided to take a step and help the refugees. In 1971, when Hindu Singh was hardly 15 years old, his family migrated from Pakistan to India. "In the time that I migrated, I saw several people facing several issues and the government was not helping in any way. My family was the only one who took the lead, and that's when I decided that's what I wanted to do," he says.

In 1977, Singh's fight for the refugees started. In 1978, he founded three organisations — the Pak Visthapit Singh and Seemant Lok Sangathan, and one non-governmental organization, the Universal Just Action Society. He however, says, that none of these organisations have received aid from the government and have been functioning on minimal funds.

In 2005, Singh succeeded on his mission when 13,000 families were granted citizenship by the

government. "I have been working since the last 30 years to improve the livelihood of these refugees but in these years it's hardly been once or twice that the government provided any aid. There is simply no word from them."

"[Lack of citizenship] is the main root of the problems but there are so many other problems. I have seen these refugees starving for basic shelter, education and health facilities," says Singh. "These refugees, because of the absence of the valid identification documents often do not get employment at any place, and are discriminated against. There was no land provided to them for a very long time. After fighting for 20 years, we were granted a small

makeshift classrooms for Hindu Singh have come to their rescue.

"I have seen several cases over the years when the doctors deny treatment to the women of the refugee families. In one case that I saw a young lady who was pregnant being discharged by the gynaecologist because she had a Pakistani passport. In another horrendous incident, 11 members of a family died by suicide because of the discrimination they faced in India. Sometimes seeing these cases, we often question our work," recalls Singh.

Hemji Koli migrated here in 2015 with his five daughters, wife and parents. "We came to India by foot because there was no transportation. For several years, we lived on illegal lands. Only after 2020, we were provided kucha settlements (thatched-roof houses). We are not provided with any form of land and Aadhaar cards even after eight years. The only help we have received in all these years is from Hindu ji, who has been working tirelessly without any government aid."

Another refugee, Goodvinji, migrated here in 1997, when he was 17 years old, with eight members of his family. "We migrated when Pakistan has just 22 per cent of Hindus left. They would often torture us because of our religion. Even after shifting to India, things did not change. We stayed in camps for five-seven years, and now live in a slum with 400 other families. We were only granted citizenship in 2005, after eight years of struggle," he says.

"My organisations and I have done all we can," says Singh. "The government needs to bring a legal framework and an easy procedure to grant citizenship to assist these refugees and help them come back to India, their native land. We will wait but won't stop until justice is granted to me and my people."

Even after shifting to India, things did not change

- Goodvinji

Grey areas of the pilgrim city

RUTUJA PARDESHI

Bhadrakali (Nashik): In the heart of Nashik city, amidst the vibrant colours of culture and religious fervour, lies a stark contrast — the lanes of Bhadrakali, where a community of sex workers lies in the grey areas, seemingly forgotten in the shadows of Nashik's pilgrimage sites.

Bhadrakali is a vibrant thoroughfare adorned with bustling shops, the constant sounds of cycle bells and car engines running around. The air is filled with the hum of people working and walking around. Above the shops, homes with small windows remain shut and quiet, creating a sense of seclusion, separating them from the life outside.

Kajal*, a sex worker who lives here, said, "It's like an unsaid, unwritten rule. (While staring towards the window), we are not allowed to open the windows or peep outside during the business hours of the shops downstairs and they let us live upstairs."

During 300 CE, it was an established custom to dedicate girls to temples. They were offered as objects of sexual pleasure for the temple and priests. The custom later developed and the girls were known as nagarvadhū. They did not marry and considered God their husband. These women were considered pure.

Satya Patil, head of history department at the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open



Sex workers live on the upper floors of buildings on Chowk no 3 of Bhadrakali, Panchavati, while the ground floors are occupied by shops | PHOTO: RUTUJA PARDESHI

University, said, "Sex work was once upon a time a theme of Indian literature and arts for centuries. In Indian mythology there are many references of high-class prostitution in the form of celestial demigods acting as prostitutes. Even during the mediaeval period and rule of the Mughals they were treated very royally."

However, their status changed with the advent of British rule in India, and the status of devadasis changed completely into the role of sex workers, consequently leading to the growth of sex work in India. Today, the profession is largely driven by economic and psychological distress.

Rajul*, 38, who is a sex worker, said, "My parents passed away, so

I had to support my siblings but we had no job in our village and when I shifted to Nashik I still didn't get a job. Sex work was my last resort."

Sex workers also face a myriad of health issues, from sexually transmitted diseases or infections and unwanted pregnancies, to violence from clients, and being denied healthcare. Studies have found that more than two-thirds of sex workers have had appalling experiences in hospitals. These include being refused healthcare because of their profession, facing embarrassing questions, and being neglected.

Healthcare professionals therefore underscore the need to have specialised clinics and awareness programmes tailored to

the unique challenges faced by the community.

Dr Himesh Patel, a general physician from the civil hospital, emphasises, "Sex workers' health cannot be reduced to only sexually transmitted diseases. Sex workers have bodies that need healthcare treatment services that go beyond their sexual behaviour patterns."

The stigma of the sex work ensures that they are often denied access to health, which the WHO defines as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.

Dr Vikas Dharmadhikari, medical director at civil hospital, highlighted, "Frequently, when individuals engaged in sex work are admitted for treatment, the presence of these patients within the same ward tends to elicit discomfort among other patients. Consequently, we encounter numerous challenges from the broader community's response to this situation."

Sex workers also reported facing a judgemental or disapproving attitude from not just from fellow patients but also from healthcare professionals upon determining their profession. Rashmi* shared her experience from one of her hospital visits, "When the doctor realised about my work, she was not ready to touch me for the further procedure." Rashmi added, "Sometimes we are treated as if we are untouchables."

*Some names have been changed upon request

Govt schools without students

TANISHQ PRIYA

Ballalwadi (Pune): In Ballalwadi, impoverished children are deprived of the basic right to education due to a combination of the panchayat and government's apathy and their families' ignorance.

Hindwa Rakesh Khare, 8, a class 3 student at Bhave School here, said her dream is to become an IPS officer, but she cannot go to school everyday as she has to take care of her younger siblings and also help in the household chores. Her mother works as a domestic help to pay her school fees, while her father is a truck driver.

"Most of the time teachers come late to class and don't teach us properly. I love science and math but sometimes I feel scared to ask questions repeatedly as they scold us," she said. "Once I become an IPS officer, I will fulfill my parents' dream and provide a good education to children in slum areas."

Shailinder Patel, a 70-year-old retired officer from the Defence

Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), said that after his work hours he used to teach these children. "The parents don't want to send their children to school because they need to send them for work. For them, feeding the stomach is more important than education."

Patel said that the government is planning to privatise the slum school for a better foundation, but instead, they must establish a

proper meal scheme and basic facilities so their parents send their children to the school. "If you want to remove poverty in slum areas, establish education," he added.

Jyoti Kadam, 65, principal of Sane Guruji Pre-primary School, said that in slum areas the enrollment rate is 90 per cent but the attendance of children is around 50 to 60 per cent. "After class 7 or 8, most girls drop out

because they need to take care of their younger siblings or get married at an early stage."

Kadam said that on weekends they organise an awareness programme for parents so the parents understand the importance of education and send their children to school.

"English, maths, and science are the most difficult subjects. If the government asks the support from an NGO to give them free guidance, it will be more beneficial for these children," she added.

Prateek More, a government-school teacher, said that the government is planning to shut down around 10,000 schools as there is poor attendance. "Students don't want to come to class because they don't find class interactive. The government only focuses on basic education; there are no practical skills for them," he said.

The school, one of five in the slum of 2,000 households, was only able to teach around 30 pupils because it had only two teachers.



Students from different classes have to study in the same area due to a shortage of teachers | PHOTO: TANISHQ PRIYA

Bihar brick kilns breed child labour

Unable to study due to the lack of schools for them, children are forced to work along with their parents

PRERNA SHARMA

Garhohachak (Patna): “I want to study but I cannot as I am poor. We do not enjoy doing this but we have to do this out of compulsion,” said 12-year-old, Puja as she moulded bricks. Each day she works for eight-10 hours and moulds and arranges around 3,000 bricks. She does this for six months from October to May in Kripal Tola of Garhohachak village in Fatuha, 25 km away from the capital Patna.

“We are a family of 11 and we come by train from Parawanpur village (100 km away) because there is no work for us there,” Puja said. She also always wished to study but there are no government schools in her village and her parents cannot afford to send her to a private one. “If I get to study I want to become a doctor but I know that this is not going to happen. We have no source of income. Whatever ‘khoraki’ (wages) we get is not enough for a decent survival of our family,” she said. Her family gets Rs 3,000 per week.

Puja is not the only child in India who wants to be educated but has to resort to hard work that is far beyond her capacity. As per the 2011 census, there are 43.53



SHATTERED DREAMS: Puja and Malti working tirelessly with their parents so that they can get rid of the heavy debts | PHOTOS: PRERNA SHARMA

lakh child labourers in India. Bihar stands third in the country with 4.51 lakh children engaged in employment. Three ‘Eeta Bhattis’— brick kilns of the village within a 2 km radius employ approximately 40-50 minors who work even after they hurt themselves while carrying bricks after they are dried.

“Padhe la milbe na kartai kuch to hum ka banbai...kuch na (If we don’t get to study anything we’ll be able to become absolutely

nothing,” said six-year-old, Rekha Kumari who comes from Barh (a village in Bihar) and has been working with her parents for the last two years.

Rekha wants to become a police officer when she becomes older but an education seems impossible. She also has a dream of making TikTok videos, getting famous and earning a lot of money. She said, “I love to dance. If I get the knowledge of how to make videos, I’ll start doing that

and earn a lot of money after which our family will not need to work here.”

Eight-year-old Shakuntala from Hilsa, who wants to become a collector when she gets older, said, “The place from where I come has no schools. Whenever I go to anganwadis of this village I am thrown out by the locals. So, what can I do? Also, whenever I ask my parents if I can study they say that they cannot afford to send me to school and waste money

because they have to get me married and we need money for that.”

Most of the parents of the children said don’t see a way out. “The brick kiln owners don’t pay us on time, so how are we going to educate them? We wish to educate them and make them collectors but destiny does not favour us,” said Ram Uday Chauraha, father of one of the children working in the brick kiln. He said, “We borrowed Rs 1



lakh from our village moneylender (Panhara) due to unemployment. Unable to repay, we migrated. Because of heavy debt, we engaged our children in brick kiln labour instead of educating them. Anganwadis of our villages were inadequate, prompting children to run away.” All other parents recounted similar stories about repaying loans.

The government needs to do more to ensure that the children’s

fundamental right to education is upheld, says Divya Gautam, assistant professor, Patna Women’s College, Patna University. “Villages need more quality anganwadis and government schools with free education, ensuring migrant children seamless transitions between locations. As education is on the concurrent list, both state and central government should work together to tackle this problem and provide accessible, quality and compulsory education, fostering awareness for these young learners. They can also take help from NGOs to support these children. Also, I feel that they are being denied their fundamental right to education because of the lack of awareness among the parents,” said Gautam.

Officials say they have just started a pilot project to tackle the issue. “We have done surveys and located brick kilns in Fatuha and Maner in Bihar which are prone to child labour and are building two schools for their education on a pilot basis. We’ll try to create awareness among the migrant parents and children and try to bring psychological changes, said Chandan Kumar, labour superintendent of the labour resources department.

Palghar’s Katkari tribe hit by anganwadi strike

YOHAAN VARGHESE

Aghai (Palghar): Since December 5, 2023, anganwadi workers in Maharashtra have been on strike. Two lakh workers have been demanding an increased monthly salary, gratuity, a pension scheme, and government employee status.

In March last year, their honorarium was increased to Rs 10,000 from Rs 8,500. However, this wage is minimal, and the anganwadi workers union now demands Rs 18,000 per month, which, according to labour laws, is the minimum wage of a contract worker, and on par with that of an ASHA worker’s pay grade. Children and women of tribes living in Palghar district, especially the Katkari tribe, have been facing the brunt of this strike.

Palghar, a district in Maharashtra’s northern Konkan division, is about 87 km from Mumbai. The Katkaris were forest dwellers. Although their lifestyles have changed, much progress is needed. “We would earn around Rs 300 during harvest. There were no schools in the neighbourhood at that time, so we couldn’t go,” says Parathi Mahathe Diva, 78. There are only a few schools for pre-primary and primary classes every 15-20 km. One or two teachers and a few helpers take care of all the classes.

Initiatives put forth by the state government such as the Early



Women from Nevre, Palghar, who work in the fields | PHOTO: YOHAAN VARGHESE

Childhood Care and Education Plan provide preschool education for children aged between three to six. The state’s literacy rate is higher than the national average. However, many children in rural areas drop out of schools, which lack facilities and quality.

In a small Katkari community in Nevre, a local school – the Government Public Prathnik Chendvali School — teaches children from classes 1 to 5. “The adivasis faces several problems with education,” says Bharat Wadvisar, the head teacher. “Many get their daughters married at the age of 16 and 17, not just here but in many other places as well. Women rarely study for longer.”

“Many families send their

daughters to school up to class 9 or 10, but if they fail in that grade, they are immediately married off,” said Bharat. “Even boys rarely study after class 12. Even after graduating, they work in the godowns or factories because they can’t secure a job.”

Bhopal Mukhni, said, “We would earn around Rs 200 selling betel leaves and use it to buy rations. The only schools that existed were far away and too expensive.” Most people work in brick kilns or garages, and once they start working, they distance themselves from education.

Thus, anganwadis, under the Integrated Child Development Services programme, are important places for children and their families. They provide basic

needs to help children learn and get a foundation before they start school. It also helps he families understand the importance of an education. There are 2,579 anganwadis in Palghar district.

The workers have been working in anganwadis for five hours everyday. They take care of children, teach them basic math and language skills, and provide them with a nutritious midday meal, consisting of rice, pulses, vegetables, fruit, and sometimes even protein. They spend an additional five hours at home on data entry and record maintenance. They have been helping young pregnant women with counselling, care, meals and rations.

The strike is a cause for upheaval in a system that was becoming normalised among families. Young mothers will struggle to meet their children’s needs. With anganwadis closed children’s health has begun to decline.

Last week, the anganwadi workers met in Azad Nagar Mumbai to put forward their demands to the authorities and until these are met, all centres in the state have been closed. The state government met with them but said that the ICDS is a central government initiative. Meanwhile, the Women and Child Development of Maharashtra is trying to take steps to coordinate with anganwadi centres.

A tribe under threat from animal attacks

ELSA SUNNY

Peringamala (T’puram): “My husband was accompanying my daughter who was studying in a college in Nedumangadu. They were climbing a hill just 100 metres from our home when they were attacked by two Indian gaurs,” said Manju, an MGNREGA worker.

Manju lives in the Idinjar settlement of the Kani tribe in Peringamala village, Nedumangadu taluk. The Kani speak their own language and live on forest produce. “They collect honey, frankincense and tuber from the forest and earn their income by selling it. But now many are moving outside the forest to work,” said ward member MG Jayasingh.

The tribe is facing threat from wild animals, and is scared to continue farming, fearing attacks by elephants, tigers, Indian gaurs, and monkeys. “We have plantains, tapioca, ginger, tamarind. But we are not able to collect anything,” said Chandrika, a 63-year-old MGNREGA worker. We have requested protection from the panchayat but nothing has been done,” she added.

“Our ancestors were trained to hunt and kill, but nowadays no one is brave enough to kill these animals,” said Chandrika.

Sharadha Amma, 73, said the forest department brings monkeys and snakes from the town and



Manju, Sharadha amma and Chandrika, victims of animal attack, share their stories | PHOTO: ELSA SUNNY

leaves them near the settlement. “These monkeys won’t go back to the deep forest and we are having a tough time shooing them away from our crops,” she said.

She recalled how in olden times she used to eat different kinds of tubers from the forest. “We used to eat only once a day, but we never got sick. Nowadays we consume rice from ration shops and children have low immunity.”

Agriculture doesn’t generate income anymore. “Jackfruits are eaten by elephants. Indian gaurs chase men who go to prune rubber trees as early as 4 am,” said tribal head Narayana Kani. He said men go deep inside the forest only for one month a year as they fear wild animals. “We sleep in a shed, collect honey and return.”

“The divisional forest officer has promised to make trenches to keep off elephants. But they haven’t done anything so far,”

said Narayana Kani. Electric fencing has been installed to block elephants from crossing into the settlement areas. But it doesn’t work due to a lack of batteries. “Branches from trees fall on these fencing and destroy the battery,” said Narayana Kani.

“Once we didn’t send our children to school for three months,” said Aswathy. They study in a Kani school at Madathara, which is an hour away from the settlement. “How will I send my daughter to school when there are wild animals around?” she asked.

The panchayat arranged buses but would not pay for the fuel. “The school authorities wanted us to pay Rs. 1,000 per student, but we are daily wage workers and we can’t afford it,” said Aswathy.

“If long-term plans are not undertaken to protect tribals, our land will be lost to wild animals soon,” he said.

Struggle and resilience among residents of Attipathu

JUDAH PRINCE

Arunodayanagar, (Attipathu): “Sometimes I think I am unlucky”, said 33-year-old Prakasham P, “I have only two more years left and after that I can’t apply for any government jobs.”

Anxiety grips the double degree holder with an MBA in human resources, who is racing against time and adversity to land a secure job. In fact, he is rejected for being over-qualified.

“When I first applied to the heavy vehicles factory in Avadi, they asked me to bring my transfer certificate to complete the procedure. I gave my MBA certificate and they immediately said that I was overqualified for the job.”

He is one of the many unemployed young people who are facing dejection in life. With no options left, he returned to fishing, which is the occupation of

his community, the Irula.

The lake in his area is polluted and only experienced fishermen know where to cast their nets. The college-educated Prakasham finds himself out of his depth.

Moreover, customers are reluctant to buy fish that comes from polluted waters. Therefore, Prakasham and other fishermen will have to make a trip to Pazhaverkadu to get a fresh catch. This trip costs them upwards of Rs 500 in terms of travel arrangements.

Prakasham worries that even if he wants to go and try his hand at an exam, he might have to neglect the duties of being his family’s provider. “I can still try to write exams, but I can’t do that for now, as I have to take care of my family. I also need to travel to tuition centers where they coach students if I am to get good marks and get a job. I can’t get that peace at home nor can I neglect them.”

Tucked away in a remote corner



Prakasham P, an Irula man and one of the residents of Arunodayanagar, is struggling to find work despite holding two degrees | PHOTO: JUDAH PRINCE

of Attipattu is Arunodayanagar which houses about 20 families, mostly Irula. The colony has two facing rows of tiny houses with closed windows and broken doors. Most residents prefer to stay out of the congested and unventilated

cramped rooms.

Kathirvel, a panchayat leader, said that he’s willing to fund the education of the Irulars but that there seems to be a problem with getting the kids to go to school.

He had funded the education of

a female nurse from the community. But the residents are still unable to get a job.

Prakasham’s wife, Bhavani P, says, “When we ask them to go to school, they immediately point at my husband and say that if a

double degree graduate like my husband can’t get a job, then what good will it do for my family if I go to school and get a job?”

Kathirvel says that he is trying his best to get them placed in the power plants that surround Attipathu and Ennore. The factories have a commitment to provide the communities in which they are placed with jobs, which stems from the fact that the Irula in Attipathu were originally from Ennore.

They were displaced when the floods hit Chennai in 2004 and were granted refuge on land registered with Arunodaya, an Andhra Pradesh-based trust. This is where the community have had their houses built. They have since gone decrepit due to the recent flooding.

Fishing also poses problem for the Irular as they are not part of any fisherfolk organization and are thus exempt from benefits. The benefits are compensation in

case the people have to travel to Pazhaverkadu or buy it from other sellers. Catch could be got at a discounted price if they were to be part of any such fisherfolk organizations.

Despite interventions, problems persist. Kathirvel says that if they are to be uplifted then they have to receive education, and the first step is to encourage them to go to school. This is at odds with their ground reality.

Prakasham suspects that his community background deters his chances of getting a job that befits his qualification, as potential employers think him not suited to an office culture.

Prakasham concludes, “If we are not educated, they easily deny us employment in the government sector calling us under-qualified. But if we get the necessary education and try to apply for a job, they call us overqualified. So, either way, we are stuck in unemployment.”

Death seeps from under the ground

More than 30 years on, arsenic poisoning continues to affect rural West Bengal, and change is elusive

RAJDEEP SAHA

Bishnupur Mathpara (North 24 Parganas): "What is the point of showing you my disease? Will I get something from it?" said 55-year-old Ananta Das, a labourer from Bishnupur Mathpara village in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, almost 70 km from Kolkata. In anger, he pulled up the sleeves of his grey pullover to reveal his hands, which have turned green due to years of skin lesions and pigmentation. He then walked off, refusing to speak about his disease.

Ananta is among the several hundreds of people in the area suffering from arsenic poisoning. North 24 Parganas is one of the worst affected districts in the state.

Arsenic poisoning was first detected back in 1987 in West Bengal, with only two blocks - Barasat block in North 24 Parganas district and Baruipur block in South 24 Parganas

district - showing signs. At present, 148 blocks in 14 districts have arsenic in their groundwater, according to Dr. Tarit Roychowdhury, Professor, School of Environmental Studies, Jadavpur University.

In the past five to six years, at least five people, including Ananta Das's brother Mahanto Das, have succumbed to arsenic poisoning in Bishnupur Mathpara. The youngest casualty was in his early forties.

"The first symptoms of long-term exposure to high levels of inorganic arsenic (for example, through drinking-water and food) are usually observed in the skin, and include pigmentation changes, skin lesions and hard patches on the palms and soles of the feet (hyperkeratosis). These occur after a minimum exposure of approximately five years and may be a precursor to skin cancer," reads the World Health Organisation's website.

Regions with severe Arsenic poisoning in West Bengal (2023)

10 ppb (parts per billion) of Arsenic in water is the limit set by WHO. These nine districts have amounts going up to 3700, found in South 24 Parganas, according to Dr. Tarit Roychowdhury.



ILLUSTRATION BY RAJDEEP SAHA

POISONED HANDS: High levels of arsenic poisoning is seen across the eastern border districts of West Bengal

According to Mahanto's son Subrata Das, the former had developed lung cancer due to prolonged exposure to arsenic in the water from their tube well.. Ram Prasad Das, a 36-year-old

tutor, who was clad in a shawl, braving the winter cold, said, "Around the year 2000, some people came here, telling us about the arsenic present in the water. Before that, no one here knew what arsenic was. They installed a tubewell with filters, which stopped working after some days."

The solar-powered water pump, fitted with three blue-coloured cylindrical filters, installed about 10 years back, is not maintained properly.

"The panchayat told us that since we drink water from the pump, we should use our own money to get it fixed," said Ram Prasad.

Seventy-year-old Biswanath Das, who earns his living making bamboo sticks and occasionally working in the fields, had started getting symptoms of skin lesions on his heels and body, greenish-sealy spots on the skin in the last six years. Many villagers have

now started buying drinking water at Rs. 15 per barrel. "Not all can afford it. Those who can't, continue drinking the solar-powered pump's water," Subrata said.

A 10-minute auto ride from Bishnupur Mathpara is another non-descript village, Tegharia, which has also been affected by arsenic poisoning, with at least five people succumbing to it.

Jaya Das, who looked to be around 45 years old, said, "I've been married for 30 years and since the beginning, I've seen these lesions on my husband's body. Back then, we used to drink from the tubewells inside our homes, no one knew about arsenic."

Her husband Swapan Das, a former businessman who was left with brain damage after a road accident, has dark spots from pigmentation all over his chest. A tumor from near his ear was surgically removed, which had

cost them Rs. 16,000. His son-in-law is the source of income for the household. "We buy two Rs. 25 barrels of water that last us for two days," said Jaya.

Another household that has been affected by arsenic is that of Shefali Das. Says her husband, 54-year-old Biswajit Das, a labourer: "This has been happening for more than two decades, and he continues to get affected by arsenic," said 52-year-old Shefali.

Her father-in-law had died of cancer, due to arsenic poisoning, almost 24 years back.

"If the water can be changed, then there can be hope," Roychowdhury says there are many solutions to the problem, the use of surface water being the best of them all.

"As a state that receives an annual average rainfall of 2000mm, West Bengal needs to use surface water found in huge water bodies."

NREGA work stoppage halts livelihood of Pandua villagers

INDRANI PAL

Pandua (Hooghly): Till two years ago Lulu Khetrapal, a 61-year-old man from Boincheegram village, about 72 km from Kolkata, used to get regular work under the MGNREGA. Now that source of income has dried up and he drives a rickshaw.

His son Ashok migrated out of the village to Mumbai where he works in a gold jewellery workshop.

He laments, "I sent my son as he would be able to earn well in Mumbai but even there he does not get paid." In the neighbouring Simlagarh village too, women mostly from Adivasi communities also shared their ordeal to find steady work.

Budhni Soren, a 75-year-old woman, who was fixing her mud stoves after finishing cooking, said that in her village a lot of people have to migrate to different states in search of work. "Two years ago when we used to get work under MGNREGA, I also worked, we made roads, planted trees but now there is no work for us," she said.

Similar stories abound in Boincheegram and surrounding villages of Pandua block of Hooghly district in West Bengal. People in these villages mostly work as labourers in potato and paddy fields.

Most of these people have been severely affected due to the stoppage of works under the



Rani Hansda, a landless labourer, prepare seeds for the next harvest season in Pandua | PHOTO: INDRANI PAL

MGNREGA, as the Central government has not released funds to West Bengal. Most of them do not get regular work and in every village, outbound migration is a reality waiting at the doorstep of each home.

According to LibTech India, a research organisation, due to stoppage of MGNREGA work in the state, women lost wages amounting to Rs 1,780 crore to Rs 2,758 crore for the year 2022.

This is compounded by the fact that due to untimely rain and rising cost in agriculture, farmer land owners are cutting down on

cost and as a result many agricultural labourers do not get work regularly. Budhni Soren said, "I also worked as an agricultural labourer but now people have machines to cut the paddy so they do not employ many manual labourers."

Rani Hansda, a 58-year-old woman, was preparing and preserving the paddy seeds from paddy for the next harvest season under the sun in the afternoon. "We do not have land of our own. We take land on lease and harvest crops, if they do not give land these paddy seeds won't be of any

use", says Rani Hansda. She said her son often doubled up as mason apart from working as a farm worker. He travelled to different villages for work.

"When you are poor you have to face this, you may think that if you go to a different village, you may get work, but there also people will exploit your labour and won't give you wages after hard labour," said Rani who has brought up her children on her own after her husband left her.

Apart from this, the villagers have not been able to access several other government schemes

such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) or Ujjwala scheme. Both Khetrapal and Podma Hembram, another resident of Boincheegram, highlighted the difficulty they have been facing in getting benefits under PMAY. Podma, who lives in a kutch house made of mud said that the roof of her house collapsed during the Amphan cyclone that hit West Bengal in 2020.

"People from the government came to take pictures of our house after we submitted the required form, but we still did not get it," she said. Podma and her father-in-law have now rebuilt the roof themselves.

"We need to go to the station when it rains heavily as our house gets flooded," says Podma. Budhni Soren's family also did not get a house under the PMAY even after applying several times, but she is also proud of her existing house as her granddaughter Saraswati, a college student, decorated their house with traditional art.

Another major problem in these villages is the high incidence of tuberculosis. A health officer from the primary health centre of Batika-Boinchee panchayat said they have identified 3,056 TB patients this year in the five panchayat areas. But most of them did not receive additional nutrition support under 'Nikshay Poshan Yojna' and Rs 3,000 for drug resistant TB.

Kusumpur Pahari's battle for clean water



Kusumpur Pahari residents place drums in a line while waiting for water tankers | PHOTO: PRAGYNESH

PRAGYNESH

Kusumpur Pahari (New Delhi): The renovated Priya complex (now PVR cinemas), CBI officers' colony and a couple of embassies in the posh neighbourhood of Vasant Vihar surround the largest slum in New Delhi, Kusumpur Pahari. With the shine and sizzle of a plush South Delhi locality around it, Kusumpur Pahari is deprived of one the most basic needs of all: water.

"Our lives revolve around waiting for tankers," says Kavitha, 36, a domestic help working in the nearby CBI colony. "I have lived

Frequent fights break out in the area during rush hours as everyone attempts to store as much water as they can for the week.

A local Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) worker residing in Kusumpur Pahari claimed that the situation has improved since the AAP government came to power. "There used to be a tanker mafia here. Tankers used to come to certain areas more frequently than others and took money. Now they come regularly around the Pahari and water is free for everyone," she said.

Residents though disputed the claim that the water is free. "We have to pay them (tanker driver) Rs 100 for getting water. There is no free drinking water here," says Satish, a 45-year-old watchman. He said that for bathing, and household daily chores such as washing clothes and utensils, there are borewells in all the blocks around Pahari but they also get water once or twice a day.

People whose homes are closer to the borewell usually reach it earlier with multiple containers, not leaving sufficient time for others to fill the water. Residents say that this water is stagnant, containing anything from plastics to excreta but is still used to carry on with daily chores. Due to that, many residents have dug pits in their own homes and are using them as toilets so that they can access their stored water for usage.

Panchayat fails to quench Perne's thirst

RIA WADIKAR

Perne (Pune): In Waghmare Vasti, a rural slum in Perne village, residents from marginalised communities are being denied water by the gram panchayat. The residents are forced to use polluted water from the Bhima river or rely on privately supplied water.

The water has also been a cause of skin diseases for the people..

Water has always been a marker that separates those with caste privilege and those without. According to a 2023 study by Dalit-studies scholar Dr. Vinod Kumar Mishra, Scheduled Caste and Muslim households have reduced access to safe drinking water.

This is evident in Perne village in Haveli Taluka of the Pune district in Maharashtra, where a rural slum comprising Muslim, dalit and adivasi people is being deprived of the right to clean water for drinking and cleaning. The denial of water for this community is juxtaposed by the Vijay Stambh, which overlooks the slum — a symbol of pride for Maharashtra's dalit community.

Water in the village comes from

the Bhima river, and a filtration system operated by the Gram Panchayat supplies the water to households. Yet the water from these filtration tanks only reaches pakka (brick and mortar) households in the village, while Waghmare Vasti is left to fend for itself. The slum has to rely on a pipe that supplies a stream of unfiltered water from the river. Poornabai Bhosle, a 62-year-old resident of the slum, said, "For more than eight years now, the water has had a peculiar smell and often comes out with black or yellow sediment. We can't use it to drink but we have no option but to use it for bathing, cleaning clothes and utensils."

Waghmare Vasti consists of approximately 450 residents living in houses made of metal sheets. According to Shahu Batsute, 43, a shopkeeper in the slum, "Most people here do whatever work they can get. They work as daily-wage labourers or domestic workers in other villages." With the average family consisting of six to 10 people, a daily wage of Rs 400 is barely enough to sustain the household. Kamala Bike Jadhav, who sells woven baskets on the highway,



Women wash clothes at the water tap behind Waghmare Vasti in Perne, Pune | PHOTO: RIA WADIKAR

said, "We buy water at Rs. 10 a pot or Rs. 350 a litre. Water is a gamble for us — we can't afford it but we are helpless."

Privately owned water is supplied by Aslam Pathan — the only owner of a pakka house near the Waghmare Vasti. His family has a borewell in their house and a filtration unit that they use to supply water. While their business flourishes in the absence of intervention by the gram panchayat, the residents of the

Waghmare Vasti struggle.

From December 16 to 21, the gram panchayat was on a strike for higher wages, which led to many pakka households in the village also facing an erratic supply of water.

According to Jaya Waghmare, who works as a domestic worker in Pune, "This problem of water is only there for us. People in the main village have wells apart from the water they get from the panchayat." However, panchayat

attendant Nikam stated, "The panchayat has schemes in place to provide water but it's a big project, so it will take time."

This does not take into account that the slum dwellers are being denied the means to maintain basic hygiene and sanitation.

"No one cares about our health or what we need. They make no effort to even talk to us," says Kamala Bike Jadhav, as she rinses her hands with yellow water before she sits down to eat.

Our lives revolve around waiting for tankers

- Kavita, Resident