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Farmers still on the warpath

Delhi continues to be surrounded by protesters from other states

NITIKA GANDHI
RIMJHIM SINGH &
S N THYAGARAJAN

NEW DELHI/CHANDIGARH/COIMBATORE: Despite the cold and a raging pandemic, thousands of farmers have been gathering everyday for about a month now at Singhu on Delhi's border, to protest against the three new farm laws. The bills, passed in the monsoon parliament session, stoked resentment among farmers who said the new law would favour companies looking to edge out farmers. Men, women and children mainly from Punjab and Haryana gathered with their tractors and trucks at the Singhu Border.

According to Lakhveer Singh (62), a big, heavily bearded man dressed in khaki kurta and a brightly orange coloured turban, "the laws are way more favorable towards the corporates and not legally or economically empowering the farmers".

Singh, who is from Punjab state's Jalandhar district, says the government has failed to understand that about 85 per cent of the farmers are small landholders with less than three hectares. "This makes these farmers weak sellers in front of the corporate players who have huge demands to make".

Mahinder Bhagwa, (60), of Ludhiana, Punjab says "The Central Government is favouring the private companies as they will pay huge taxes to the government."

Vikas Duggal (38), from Sonapat, Haryana, who is growing wheat and rice on 11 acres of land,

says he is protesting for his brothers who he said could be "manipulated with the entry of private players."

Lakhveer says the farmers want the government to protect the mandated minimum support price and reform the agricultural produce marketing committees (APMC) which are meant to safeguard farmers from exploitation.

The three laws are the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, which permits the farmers to sell their produce outside of the physical premises of the APMC market yards; The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, which creates a legal framework for contract farming through an agreement between a farmer and a buyer before cultivation; and the amendment to the Essential Commodities Act, which removes items such as cereals, pulses, potato, onions and edible oilseeds from the list of essential commodities and also the stock limits on them.

Some of the farmers who oppose the law are not familiar with the provisions.

"Had I known the details of the law, I would have joined the protests," says Kripal Singh (69), a farmer from Sukhgarh village, Mohali, Chandigarh. "My son has gone to Delhi. I am not sure he knows what the new law says but he was asked to accompany the farmers and he readily agreed."

The village has around 120



Farmers protesting at the Tikri border in Northern Delhi

PHOTO CREDIT: NIKITA GANDHI

families and 75 are involved in agriculture. "Most of the families have huge lands. As many as 90 farmers from our village have joined the protest", he adds.

Diljit Pal Singh, 58, a small farmer, says: "People of our village agreed in the panchayat to head to Delhi. My brother has gone while I stayed back to take care of our crops."

Does he know why the farmers are protesting?

"My brother has some knowledge. All I know is Prime Minister Modi has passed some laws which will not benefit us in any way."

About 3,000 km away down south in west Tamil Nadu, there is a mixed reaction. Paramasivam, 67, and his son Shandip Sabapathy, 34, are Chartered Accountants engaged in coconut farming at the

Somandurai Chittur village near Pollachi. They feel the laws are wrong in undermining the role of middlemen and "homogenising agriculture across the country."

Paramasivam wonders how, when different crops are "cultivated every 10 km" in India, a set of common laws can be made for the whole sector. "We have eight coconut harvests a year... we cannot employ a fleet of workers and pay them throughout. The middleman brings his team which harvests the coconuts," he explains.

On contract farming, Shandip says: "Our experience has been bad. An MNC asked some farmers to cultivate cocoa a few years ago, promising a good price. Many earned good money in the short run but eventually made losses." The farmers could not switch to other crops immediately because the

nature of the soil had changed, he adds.

Another contentious point, according to Shandip, is the dispute resolution mechanism under the price assurance clause. "It can work only under utopian circumstances. The disputes will be resolved by a bureaucrat who will understand the corporate representative, not the farmer."

Seventy-year-old Sivanesan from Erode, a bank employee-turned turmeric and paddy farmer, however, believes that the laws will benefit the farmers in the long run.

Arguing that corporatisation of agriculture is necessary, he says small and medium farmers, who constitute a huge chunk, cannot afford storage facilities, which are "key" to the future of farming. "They should let the corporates do it for them," he says.

Silmaba Gounder, 66, a farmer from Sankagiri, Salem, favours the law in parts.

"The middlemen form a big cartel, they should be shown their place."

The APMC system has never been effective in Tamil Nadu. "Its weakening will not impact the farmers here. The middlemen, who own the private mandis, do not respect the farmers... there is always discontent over the price [of produce]."

In the same breath, he points to the dangers of corporatisation. "The corporates neither speak our language nor understand our troubles. Many farmers may lose money if they don't understand the fine print in the contracts."

J'Khand tribes say Sarna is their religion

AMRIN NAAZ

NOAMUNDI, JHARKHAND: The tribal communities of Jharkhand have been demanding recognition of the Sarna Code, a distinct religion that aligns with their culture and traditions.

Budhram Chatomba (52), who belongs to the Ho tribe, said that Sarna followers worship nature. Their culture, tradition and ways of worship are different from those of other religions. As of now the census has recognised six religions: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist.

Chatomba said, "We are identified as Hindus. Our beliefs are entirely different from that of other religions. There is no question of accepting them." He said asking Sarna followers to identify themselves with others was lowering their dignity by not recognising them as who they are.

As per the 2011 census, more than 40 lakh people of Jharkhand mentioned their religion as Sarna under the 'others' option. They have been demanding their own religion code for a long time.

Another member of the tribal community, Shambhu Banra (27) said there was an apprehension that the upcoming 2021 census form would no longer include the 'Others' option. This implies that they would be indirectly forced either to leave their religion as

unidentified or be identified as followers of the six prescribed religions.

Banra said, "Every religion is represented by their own codes based on their beliefs and practices. Similarly, we should be recognised as Sarna Dharma followers."

In a special session on November 11, the Jharkhand State Assembly, sent a resolution to the Centre demanding the recognition of the Sarna Code as a separate religion for tribal communities.

Salil Birua (35), a teacher who is Sarna follower, said, "In 1871 we fell under the broad umbrella of 'Others'. Later, various terms like Aboriginal, Forest Tribal, Animist, Primitives and Tribes were introduced. Then again in 1951 we were counted under 'Others'. Now we are at a point where the census of 2021 will scrap this option too."

Birua said members of the tribal community who migrated for work to other States were not counted as tribals.

Ajay Tiriya (37), Secretary of the Adivasi Association, Noamundi, said, "We need our identity that we've been denied for a long time. We need Sarna Code to reclaim dignity and assert our identity."

According to a report published in The Telegraph, in August, 32 tribal groups of Jharkhand have decided to boycott the upcoming Census, if it does not recognise Sarna as an option.



Migrant workers leaving Delhi after the lockdown was imposed across the country by the Centre.

PHOTO CREDIT: THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

No work, migrants head for the cities

MAYANK KUMAR

SITAMARHI: Ajay Mohan Thakur, 37, is waiting at Sitamarhi railway station to board a train to a city he swore he would never go back to.

Thakur was forced to leave Mumbai in June this year because he lost his job as a superintendent in a handloom factory due to the pandemic.

"I had vacated my room, paid all dues, and set out on the 1000 km journey on a migrant special train. I was annoyed and demoralized," he said. But months after being jobless, he had to give in to the inevitable. He had to go back.

"When you do not have enough money to feed your family, one has to surrender," he said. "I promised myself, I would never return. I was very angry but it all melts away as savings end," he added.

Sitamarhi, a district in Bihar on the India-Nepal border, houses some 3.4 million people. According to the Patna based A N Sinha Institute of Social Studies, 80 percent of the population in the district is dependent on agriculture. There are not many industries in this district, apart from a sugarcane factory and a few small industries.

But the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting job loss, affected that. Thousands of people had to return back, walking along highways because buses and trains services were often shut.

Bihar accounted for 1.5 million of the 10.5 million migrant workers

who returned to their home states, the Central Government told the Lok Sabha on September 14.

Among those who have returned is Shamsuddin (23), a resident of Mehsaul village in Sitamarhi district. "I used to work as a plumber in Faridabad," he said. He survived five months on savings and then had to make the trek back. He now works as a bus conductor, a job from which he earns Rs 8,000 a month as opposed to the Rs 25,000 he earned in Faridabad.

After returning from Bengaluru, Satish Kumar, 31, was relieved to get a job under MGNREGA. However, he has not yet received his wages under the scheme. "It has been four months, I was hoping MGNREGA would sustain my family during the lockdown, but we are struggling now and planning to return," said Kumar.

Ramsharan Aggarwal, a professor of Political Science at a local college said "The state government has completely ignored industrial development in the last 15 years, there are no industries, therefore no work."

Primal Kumar, District Information Officer, said "We have provided jobs to more than 10,000 people under the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan in 25 work areas or projects related to meet the needs of the villages like plantations, rural roads, Jal Jeevan mission and other infrastructure projects."

However, despite these schemes migrants are going back to the cities in search of a livelihood.

Darker times for Kolhapur's red-light area
Sex workers lose income, yet to receive 'promised' govt assistance

ESHAN KALYANIKAR

KOLHAPUR: Governments in the country have come to the rescue of people who have lost work and earnings as a result of the pandemic. Not so lucky are the sex workers of Kolhapur.

A 27-year-old woman, who gave her name as Rani, with two children aged 7 and 3, says she is not making enough money in her profession. To make matters worse, she is left out of monthly direct benefits scheme for sex workers, and additional benefits for mothers in the trade, announced by the Maharashtra Government in November last.

The benefits are only for those registered with the District AIDS Prevention and Control Unit (DAPCU). Like Rani, several women remain unregistered.

Pinki (name changed), 55, is one of the few sex workers with a ration card. She says she and others like her have been helping

out their friends who have no government ID, by offering their monthly rations.

Some women haven't been able to pay even house rent and some of them are single mothers, says Pinki.

The State government announced additional monthly support of Rs 2,500 for sex workers with children, Rs 5,000 for all sex workers along with monthly rations of three kg of wheat and two kg of rice.

Responding to complaints, District Women and Child Development Officer Sujata Shinde, said, "The funds are not yet disbursed to anyone, we are cross-checking the list [of sex workers] with us. Many don't even have bank accounts. We are not asking for any ID proof but just bank details."

Shinde said additional benefits would be given to mothers until their children completed 14.

The DAPCU programme

officer, Deepa Shipurkar, said, "We have prepared and given the list to the District Women and Child Development Office. But not all sex workers are registered with us."

An organisation of sex workers, Sakhi Sanghatan, has 1,200 members including Rani and Pinki. Its president, Sharada Yadav, says many sex workers in the city are unwilling to register with the DAPCU. For, doing so, they believe, will mean admission of their involvement in the trade.

Yadav, once a sex worker herself, says she is trying to convince the women to register with the DAPCU, and get other documentation done for them to obtain an Aadhar and a ration card, with the help of the DWCD. But the problem, she says, is that many women have no supporting documentation. Even women with documents can't open a bank account as

"they require you to deposit Rs 500 to Rs 1,000 and we can't afford it."

According to Yadav, of the 1,200 sex workers, 800 of them live in the city, and the others come from nearby villages.

The women stand at street corners in Laxmipuri Pan line late in the night. As soon as they get clients, they go to the nearest lodge they have a tie-up with. It's not a legal arrangement but an open secret.

Narrating her ordeal, Rani says that when she was 17, living in Pune, her friend spiked her soft drink and sent her, inebriated, with a client. She then decided to continue in the trade and ran off to Kolhapur. Since then, she has had no contact with her family.

"I had a husband. He was a former client and we got married. But he wasn't good to me or our children, so I left him," says Rani.

Earlier, Rani, like many other

sex workers in the city, used to pay neighbours Rs 100 a day to take care of her two children. Now she leaves them with her landlord, who takes care of them for free, or with Sharada Yadav, whom she fondly calls aai(mother).

Yadav, as head of the Sanghatan, has a strict policy not to allow minor girls to work in the city. "We even discourage first-time sex workers; we know what we face on an everyday basis and we wouldn't want this life for anyone."

Pinki says all sex workers have an understanding - older women like her get to work throughout the day and the younger ones in the evening.

"All women have been wearing masks these days. Their masks are down before the customer approaches them so he can see their face; it is pulled up again when the customer is physically close," she said.

Non-political is the new normal in Chellanam

Entrusted with hopes of people, Chellanam 2020 has some big shoes to fill

AISWARYA RAJ

KOCHI: People in Chellanam, a fishing village on the outskirts of Kochi, showed their dissatisfaction with the two major political alliances in Kerala by voting them out in favour of a non-political group, Chellanam 2020 in the recently concluded local body elections. Years of neglect and lack of government intervention in resolving their problems including sea erosion led the villagers to choose the group.

The villagers hoped the representatives fielded by the politically neutral group, Chellanam 2020 would solve their problems, said A.G. Xavier, a 57-year-old fisherman.

Chellanam 2020 was formed after a group of youth came together on Facebook to discuss the issues faced by the locals. Charles Biju, president of Chellanam 2020, said that the indifference of the top leaders of the mainstream parties made it difficult for the local politicians to ease the plight of the fisherfolk. The outfit was conceived after the

worst sea incursion and floods in years hit Chellanam five months ago.

"We found that protests were futile unless we could mobilize on a large scale people devoid of political leanings. We knew that any change was impossible if we were a part of the government apparatus," he said.

About the basic amenities they had been missing out on for several years, Biju said "We have insufficient facilities currently in the hospital and will set up a hospital with a casualty ward."

The group secured eight out of 21 seats in the Panchayat and second position in four wards in their maiden attempt. The ruling Left alliance won nine seats and the Congress alliance secured four.

"Our victory shows how the locals were dissatisfied with the existing politics," said Sebastian V. J, the Chellanam 2020 representative who won the Panchayat election from 20th ward.

However, the group is uncertain whether it would contest in the coming assembly



Posters of Chellanam 2020

PHOTO CREDIT: AISWARYA RAJ

elections as it wishes to focus on the region and its people.

The locals have been demanding walls to curb sea incursion for more than three years. Dejected, many locals started a protest called Janakeeya Vedi in October 2019. The protest is still continuing.

"We were supporters of the Congress

party, but in this election, we voted for Chellanam 2020," said Mariamma George, president of Janakeeya Vedi.

After cyclone Ockhi hit the coast in 2017, the walls that prevented the waves from flooding the houses, have been collapsing.

"The sea floods our houses frequently. No one from the Panchayat has come to ascertain the intensity of these frequent incursions. We are hopeful of Chellanam 2020 doing something," said Annie George, a 72-year-old woman.

A few geo-tubes, which trap sand inside it and curb sea erosion, were found on the coast. But they were ineffective, said Xavier.

"Waves crash over the tubes and inundate the houses. These tubes are to be laid in a contiguous manner. A few of them placed like this will not have any impact," he said.

"The contractor for constructing geo-tube was unaware of the technicalities, but the government is not to be blamed," said K.D.Prasad, the outgoing Panchayat Vice-President and an LDF politician.

Homeless in their home

SAYANI DAS

SILIGURI: Indrajeet Chhetri (48) stood among a brood of chicken and puppies on his front yard. He said that his late father had been lured into taking up work in the Matigara Tea Estate sixty years ago. “‘They give you a house there’; that’s what they told my father. Little did he know then,” Chhetri said.

Chhetri is among the 3-4 lakh tea garden workers in North Bengal who do not own the land they have been working and living on for almost 200 years.

Their houses could be taken from them if they stopped working in the gardens for better jobs elsewhere, or even if the management changed hands and cut down on labour.

Ownership of land and housing security are at the centre of tea garden protests in the Terai and Dooars tea belt for many decades now.

According to Sudip Dutta, assistant secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Darjeeling district committee, just 30 to 40 percent workers receive quarters from their management in most of the gardens in the North Bengal tea belt. Only permanent workers are entitled to them;



The dilapidated house of a tea worker. Photo: Sayani Das

temporary and casual workers build shacks.

In 2012-13, under the erstwhile State Labour Minister, a survey was conducted according to which 95,835 workmen out of 2,62,426 in the entire Bengal tea belt were not provided houses by the management.

According to the same survey, 62 estates did not spend anything on workers’ housing in 2012.

Workers at Chhetri’s village had built shacks, wooden houses or brick-mortar rooms. But building a house with a wage of Rs 176 per day, the lowest rate for tea plantation workers across India, isn’t feasible.

The money mostly came from their individual Provident Fund

accounts with the company or through mortgage. Without land papers, they could not receive loans either for housing or health or education.

Permanent workers with quarters also suffered due to a lack of maintenance and repair in their homes, which is the management’s responsibility.

Also, these workers do not benefit from government housing schemes because they are recognised as industrial labour under tea companies.

Their above-poverty-line identity disables them from accessing the Indira Awas Yojana and the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana -- which are meant for economically weaker sections --

when they most need the schemes to secure a home.

For workers to get the land rights, the State needs to alter the Estates Acquisition Act, 1953, to take back non-plantation leased land from the companies and hand it over to the workers.

According to Dutta, in 2005, the then Left government had tried to take back non-plantation land from the tea estates, but the companies sought a stay order from the Supreme Court.

Dutta said, “Had it been wasteland, one would have owned it after living on it for ten years. But these workers won’t own it even after staying there for 100 years.” According to him, the primary demand of the joint forum, representing a group of 28 trade unions here, is that residential land should be separated from industrial land on tea estates. An email to the plantation owners went unanswered.

Dutta warned that land right over a plot would not solve all problems. Land would not be expandable, while the worker family grows and fragments over generations. However, Chhetri said, “Let us have the land first. Then, like any other citizen, let us decide how we manage it among the upcoming generations.”

Electrification only in name at Motisar

JUHI SEERNANI

AJMER: Farmers at Motisar village in Rajasthan’s Ajmer district have turned nocturnal.

Sitaram Bans, (52), who grows peas on his fields, treks 2 km in the dark to take advantage of electricity, which comes only at night.

For the past three months, electricity comes only at night and that has been a major problem for Bans and other farmers. They work at night in the biting cold.

Despite not getting power supply when he needs it most, Bans can consider himself lucky he has any electricity at all.

India still has 14000 villages, which are nearly a fifth of the total number of villages, yet to be electrified, according to an article in Mint.

Harsh winters

“Winters make it difficult for me as I have arthritis and it is very cold,” Bans said.

Once, after one such night time visit on a bitterly cold night, Bans was terrified to find that his legs suddenly stopped working and he couldn’t walk back home and other villagers had to help him..

He was afraid he may have done his feet permanent damage, but it got better in a few days.

According to the Mint article, a village is considered electrified if it possesses basic electrical infrastructure and 10% of its homes have access to power.

Sitaram went all the way to Ajmer, which is 20 km away from Motisar, where officials heard his complaint and assured him of improvement but there has been no change. Since his son is paralysed, he can’t send him to do farming and he is scared of sending his 14-year-old daughter at night.

All this is happening even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in April 2018 that India had achieved its goal, ahead of schedule, of providing electricity to every village in the country.

According to an employee at the Ajmer Electricity Department, it has to distribute power to a huge number of villages. “When we make one village happy, we have to make the other sad. It is how it is,” he said on condition of anonymity.

Kaaliram Singh, Panchayat chief of the Peesangan Tehsil, under which Motisar functions, said that since its population was



Sitaram Bans, a nocturnal pea farmer. Photo: Juhi Seernani

much less than the other villages in the Peesangan area, Motisar is not given much attention and the problems of the villagers are often ignored.

Singh claims that he is doing everything he can to help the people of Motisar and make the village more developed by constantly asking the government and the electricity boards to do something .

By March 2021, there will be lampposts that would prevent accidents in the village, besides providing light he says.

Parched throats in Siliguri

SAYANI DAS

SILIGURI: Women streamed down the narrow path, with aluminium vessels balanced on their heads or buckets hanging on their two sides. A few carried children in a sling over their shoulders. Others scolded the children who were running alongside. “Stop running. If water spills, you won’t have a drop until tomorrow.”

Tea gardens in the Terai and Dooars tea belt of North Bengal face acute scarcity of drinking water, so much so that villagers no more wish to comment on it.

While the tea estates of north Bengal house five to ten villages each, most fail to provide adequate drinking water to their residents. So, at dawn, the workers, who are in their hundreds in each village, file in near the few municipal taps to fetch the day’s water share for their families.

Ramesh Orai, 50, a plantation worker at the Matigara Tea Estate here, said in a complacent tone, “The problem has always been there. What use talking about it?” He doesn’t hope for a solution any more, either from the management or the government.

Under the West Bengal Plantations Labour Rules, 1956, owners of tea gardens are responsible for supplying drinking water to permanent workers. However, most of the gardens later shed this responsibility on the State’s 2010 project, Sajal Dhara Prakalpa, which was launched to meet the crisis.

Under the scheme, the State would undertake a one-time instalment of water pumps, purification and storage facilities in the tea gardens to provide potable water to the rural community. Later, maintenance of the projects



A broken pipeline, and hence disruption in water supply in the Terai and Dooars tea belt. Photo: Sayani Das

became the responsibility of the Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department. After 2014, most of these installations became relics.

According to Sudip Dutta, assistant secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Darjeeling district committee, “By law [Plantations Labour Act, 1951], even today, drinking water facility should be provided by the employer.”

An email sent to the management in this regard did not receive a reply.

Dutta said that most of the Sajal Dhara installations suffered for lack of maintenance and repairs. He said, “In most cases if the motor stopped working, the PHE department and the panchayats would be at loggerheads to decide who should finance the repair.” This ‘confusion’ rarely got resolved.

Uday Tiwari, a field worker in

the Matigara garden, said many workers spent their savings to repair or sink tubewells in their villages. All of them had to mortgage an asset.

“With an income of Rs 176 per day, how else can we spend Rs 10,000 to 15,000 on water?” he asked.

Tiwari said, “We could manage for ourselves, but what about our wives and children?”

Water scarcity has eased little in these gardens over a decade of elections.

Orai said, “During the panchayat election, we said that we urgently needed two wells. They [people’s representatives] joined hands and took the votes. Who remembered us after they won the elections?”

Tiwari added, “If the government does not pay heed, what use complaining about the company?”

RIMJHIM SINGH

CHANDIGARH: The big, fat Punjabi wedding culture took a hit in 2020 due to the pandemic. The otherwise grand and extravagant ceremonies were reduced to small gatherings. The wedding industry went into recession.

The Fine Dine Caterers, Chandigarh, is trying hard to recover from the losses. Shivam Sahini (26), an employee, says:

“Before the pandemic, a wedding would have 600-700 guests but the number came down to 50-100 post-lockdown. Our sales dipped. We started catering for small gatherings such as birthday parties and wedding anniversaries to stay

a float.”

A decoration contractor, Mani Bishnoi (47), who has been in the business for 15 years, says, “This has been the worst time in the business. I have 23 small companies under me and all of them ran out of business. We used to make a lot of money during the wedding season, which helped us survive throughout the year.”

Customising gift boxes

But all is not lost. The city is now slowly returning to the grand wedding culture as the number of guests allowed has increased. “Since 200 guests can now attend a wedding, our earnings have improved”, says Hemant Yadav, owner of a sweet shop. “We

customise gift boxes and sweet boxes for weddings and other events. Although the demand has decreased, we are hopeful of earning well as people now prefer larger and more expensive gift boxes as they cannot spend much on other things.”

Endorsing him, Sunil Chauhan, a customer, says, “I plan to buy huge boxes of sweets for my daughter’s wedding. Since the gathering will be small, I plan to spend more on gifts for my relatives and guests.”

The lockdown and the ongoing farmers’ protest have, ironically, helped some businesses. Ashutosh Malik (51), who owns a tent company, has seen profits. “There

are around 400 decoration companies in the city. But due to the farmers’ protest, many company owners have gone back to their villages because their fathers are in Delhi. This has increased the demand for the few of us here and we are earning more than ever. In the past four weeks, we have earned enough to compensate for our losses incurred during the pandemic.”

Surinder (44), chief of the All Rise DJ Company, is another happy man “The farmers are protesting for the right cause and the protest has benefited us. The decrease in the number of companies in the city has earned us more contracts,” he says.

Exploitation adds to slum plight

No end to sufferings in jhuggles in unauthorized colony owned by 3 private players

NITIKA GANDHI

NEW DELHI: “I was brought here in the 1990s, just after my marriage and since then I along with my three kids and four adult members have been living in this 3*2.5-metre room house; we don’t have much space to stretch our legs and sleep but we somehow managed to build a kitchen to keep utensils,” said Sarita Devi(42).

This the plight of about 15% of the 15,000 population in the unauthorized deep slum, stretching for about 500 metres, at Pithampur in the national capital.

According to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the slum has about 2000 houses. There are 7-8 members living in one jhuggi.

Sarita, who hails from Chitrakoot in Madhya Pradesh, is in a cluster of the JP Block, where

there is no space for people to wash themselves or their clothes. Getting out of your house without stepping on a filthy drain is a challenge.

About 40% of the population in jhuggis shares two mobile toilets, 300 metres away, one each for men and women. The facility is cleaned every second day but, due lack of proper water supply, the toilets are left unflushed. In fact, people have to carry buckets of water.

“Starvation, exploitation and deaths have become common in our lives; governments came and went but there is hardly any relief for us, and the pandemic has worsened the situation. Earlier, we had at least two proper meals but now having food every day is a big ask,” says Sarita.

Amidst the stringent lockdown, the supply of free dry rations by the

Central and Delhi governments is hardly enough for them, she complained.

Moreover, youngsters, mostly illiterate, in the slum are addicted to drugs. Bandana Kumari, MLA (Aam Aadmi Party), told this student-reporter that 30 per cent of them, in the age group 12-16, had taken to marijuana, hash, etc.

But not everyone in the slum is destined to suffer in this slum, which doesn’t come under any municipal corporation. It is in a posh area and is owned by three private players, said Radhe Kumar (38), president of the Slum Residents Welfare Association and BJP leader. The huts of the 1980s have now transformed into permanent houses, and people have got their ration cards

About 55% of the total slum population is there, attracted by

freebies, free water supply, negligible electricity bill, and admission of children to private schools via the EWS (economically weaker sections) route.. These people occupy about 80% of the total area, extract money from the poor households and would not think of moving out of the slums.

Raja Ram (42), from Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, who works for about 16 hours a day as labourer, is the sole breadwinner of a family of eight. On the one hand, he is unable to feed his family with two meals, and, on the other, he is burdened with a monthly rent of Rs 3500 by a powerful man, says Raja Ram, adding that even during the lockdown, no lenience was shown.

The MLA said the government was planning to rehabilitate the poor population in a better place by 2023.

A target of evictions in the capital of the nation

ABHIJEET KUMAR

NEW DELHI: Living in roadside slums, the Gadia Lohars community has faced repeated evictions from their settlements by Delhi Municipal Corporation authorities, leaving them deprived of housing and sanitation.

According to a Housing and Land Right Survey Network (HLRN) report, released in September 2019, a settlement of 62 Gadia Lohars families in Mansarovar Park was demolished in 2017 without the inhabitants being provided with alternative accommodation.

Ravi, 29, said that they have been living here for over 30 years. He said, “The MCD came without

any notice on an afternoon in February. We asked them to give us at least half an hour to move our belongings. But the policemen said that it’s government property and ran a bulldozer over our homes.”

After the eviction, the families moved to Mohan Nagar, 9 km away, for a few months before returning to Mansarovar Park.

“My 11-year-old son had to drop out from school for a year because the month of February-March is the time of exams and we had moved far from the school,” rued Ravi.

Sanjay, 24, said Mohan Nagar is on a highway. “There was no work there. Our debt was rising as we had to set up a new temporary house. In two months, we spent almost Rs. 35,000. Add to it the

loss due to the demolition, our total loss during that time was easily around Rs. 80,000.”

The reason for their coming back to Mansarovar Park, Sanjay said, was that they had been living there for decades, so people knew about them and they used to get some work at least. “There are many factories and households nearby this area. A lot of our hammers and other iron products go to the factories, so here we are still able to get some earning,” he added.

The Gadia-Lohars are a former nomad community from Rajasthan who have settled in the Delhi-NCR area for more than 50 years. According to the HLRN report, Delhi has over 58 Gadia Lohar settlements, with a population of at

least 25,000. Their primary means of livelihood is manufacturing and selling iron tools and utensils. The families of the Mansarovar Park settlement use a public toilet, more than 100 metres away from their shanties.

Aishwarya Ayushmaan, 28, who works as a legal researcher at HLRN, said that the reason for the repeated evictions of the Gadia-Lohars in Delhi was they were not included in the Delhi Urban Slum Improvement Board surveys.

One major issue for the Gadia Lohars is that they have not been provided with a caste-certificate which is needed to get the benefits of caste-specific government schemes.

“There’s a lot of confusion

regarding their caste. In States like Rajasthan, they are more visible and hence they have been included in the Most Backward Classes (MBC). But here there has been no proper delineation in Delhi,” Ayushmaan said.

However, there were evictions as recent as last year of the Gadia Lohars in the city, he added. According to the HLRN’s report on forced evictions published in August this year, 35 houses of the Gadia Lohars were demolished in Gurugram in July, during the peak of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Doing her work with a smile even in times of adversity. Photo: Abhijeet Kumar



A cycle of water woes

Villagers use a two-wheeler, even with a flat tyre, to fetch water in large quantities

ESHAN KALYANIKAR

PATTANKODOLI (Maharashtra): Almost every villager of Boudh Nagar here has a cycle, doesn't matter if a tyre has sprung a puncture. The residents laugh it off and say they just walk the cycles to bring water in big quantities from a nearby well, and from the village drinking water tank.

People of this village, in Kolhapur district, complain that water is supplied to them once in five days, that too irregular and delayed frequently.

Sarita Kamble, 33, for whom her ninth-grade daughter brings a cycleload from the well, says, "The water cannot be used for drinking. We use it for other household work."

The family is compelled to go for packaged drinking water.

Veena Kamble (32) says, "There

is no water at the government toilets either, we carry water there."

Veena's husband, Anil, walks his cycle to the watertank every time the house is short of drinking water.

For several women, it's a different routine: one pot of water on the head and another in the hand.

Babaso Nalband (33), an employee of the State Bank of India at Sangli, who lives in this area with 13 family members, says, "I have to take leave from work frequently, to fill up containers with water when it arrives. We need to collect it in huge quantities before the water tanker goes."

The wealthier villagers have borewater supply in their homes.

Most villagers get gram panchayat supply, for which they pay Rs 1,200 a year, with great difficulty.

Abhijeet Patil, water distribution supervisor with the gram panchayat, says the supply from the tank, with a capacity of 3.15 lakh litres, was enough till a few years ago but now the village population has increased. According to the 2011 census, it was 18,573.

Shortage of labour at the watertank facility is also a problem, says Patil. "The salaries of the existing workforce are pending because of poor revenue collection and the lockdown."

Construction of another watertank under the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) has been pending for about six years. It is only after a sustained protest earlier this month that the district administration assured the villagers that the project would be completed by March 2021. The project aims to provide at least 40 litres of piped

water per capita per day.

However, Deputy Sarpanch Krishna Masurkar says this project is a curse for the villagers as roads have been dug frequently to fix pipelines.

"The gram panchayat has spent Rs 3,25,270 to fix leakages caused by faulty laying of the pipelines by the sub-contractor. He doesn't even pick up our calls," says Masurkar.

Denying the charge, the sub-contractor, Tinku Mane, says, "The pipelines are fit and the villagers have been getting water through it for the last 4 years. I took care of maintenance for distribution of water for about three years. The gram panchayat might have paid for maintenance after that." He adds, "The work will be completed in the next two months."

Both Patil and Masurkar say the water problem will be solved once the pending work is completed.

Husband, not sarpanch, does the talking

There are plans to take the payment on a monthly basis (at Rs 100) for water supply, says Arun Jadhav, husband of Sarpanch Vijaya Jadhav. This will ensure contribution by all villagers, he adds.

Arun Jadhav, who is candid that he is the decision maker in matters of the village and answers questions on behalf of his Sarpanch-wife, says salaries of many labourers working at the watertank have been pending, because the villagers aren't paying their dues.

Asked about lack of water supply at government toilets, he says taps aren't fit inside the facility as a way out of "misuse". Some people would drink alcohol there and steal the taps, he says.



The daily routine: Anil Kamble removing a container of water which he brought from afar. Photo: Eshan Kalyanikar

Art hangs by a thread

COVID-19 adds to problems of zardozi artists in U.P. village

GARIMA SADHWANI

BAKHTIYAR NAGAR (U.P.): Sheebu Ansari (35) has sown coriander, potato and papaya in a corner of his home in this village in Lucknow district. A zari-zardozi artist, he cannot afford to buy food, nor does he have any land to do farming, so now he eats what little he is able to grow.

(Zardozi is a type of heavy and elaborate metal embroidery on a silk, satin, or velvet fabric base. Designs are often created using gold and silver threads. With time silk and other shining threads are also used)

Sheebu's mother, Shabnam Ansari, said 20-25 years ago, people would want to get their daughters married only to zardozi artists, because they were prosperous. Today, no one wants to be associated with them. She said, "People who do menial jobs are better off than us."

While the condition of these artists has been declining for the past 10-15 years, the Covid-19-induced lockdown brought their trade to a halt. It takes four days



Pinning his hopes on a fallen art: Sheebu Ansari at work. Photo: Garima Sadhwani

and the whole family's effort to complete one piece, for which they earn Rs. 300. "Over the years, many people left zardozi and started driving battery-run rickshaws or became daily wage labourers," Sheebu said.

Waheel Ahmed (55), who has been in the business for more than 30 years, said that while he could earlier earn up to Rs. 9000 a month, now he struggles to make even Rs. 2000. He said, "I take orders from the shops in Lucknow's markets. After the lockdown was lifted, the shopkeepers told us to keep the

pieces with ourselves. They'll pick them up whenever they manage to make the payments."

The farmers' protest on the Delhi border has also hampered their work because the cloth -- raw material -- comes from Punjab. Waheel added, "The few shops in Malihabad [Bakhtiyar comes under this block] that do have the material, have increased the prices."

Sarpanch Yusuf Khan said the villagers have been given free rations, but not any particular help to mitigate their professional woes.

ARPIT PARASHAR

SIWAN (Bihar): "We pay more, yet we don't get our due ration entitlements, and the supply also comes late." This sums up the complaints of villagers of Rasulpur in Bihar's Siwan district. The people are "exploited" because of their caste, alleges Tiljhiri Kuanwar (55), a resident. Most of the cardholders in the village belong to the Chamars community, a Scheduled Caste.

"According to government guidelines, we should get 5 kg of wheat and rice per head in a family, but our distributor at the Public Distribution Booth (PDB) gives us only 4 kg per head," says the villager.

Ranglal Manjhi (62), another resident, complained that the distributor, Ramesh Singh (44), at being asked about the short supply, said he kept as his share one kg of the entitlements due to every member of a family.

Under the National Food Security Act, every person in a household should get 5 kg of grain -- wheat at Rs. 2 a kg and rice at Rs.

3 a kg. But at Rasulpur, people pay, on average, Rs. 3 for wheat and Rs. 3.50 for rice. Despite paying more, they do not get the foodgrains due to them, the villagers complain.

Gogli Devi (60) said, "Last month I got weevil-damaged wheat and pulse. When I asked my distributor about it, he said 'that is what he is getting from the government'." However, she added, people in neighbouring villages were getting fine quality of wheat and pulse.

Mukhev Ram (61) said, "During Lalu's [Lalu Prasad Yadav's] government we had a red card (BPL card), under the Nitish Kumar government we got coupons, and when the Jitanram Manjhi government came to power, we got a new ration card." This is how a Dalit resident sees recent changes in Bihar's Public Distribution System (PDS). It just conveys the message of rivalry among political parties, he says.

"Every year we have to renew our ration card as it is valid only for a year, but we haven't got the card for this year. Our distributor said because of the pandemic we

Venturing out for wages, though risky

Livelihood crisis felt acutely by workers who returned home

GARIMA SADHWANI

BAKHTIYAR NAGAR (Uttar Pradesh): Shaqeel Ahmed (27) and Abdullah (40) walked many miles and each paid a truck driver Rs. 3,000 to bring them here from Warangal in July last year. With no food and water, they kept standing with 33 acquaintances for two days and three nights.

During the Covid-19-caused lockdown, 118 people who had been working outside returned to this village in Lucknow district. More than 100 of them have already ventured out again. Shaqeel and Abdullah, who are zardozi artists, are planning to go back to Warangal soon.

Shaqeel, who had been working in Warangal since January 2020, said, "I earned Rs. 25,000 a month when I worked in Riyadh, Saudia Arabia, for two years. But I lost my job. In Warangal, I earned Rs. 12,000 a month. Here, I hardly earn Rs. 6,000 even if I work overtime."

Abdullah, who had been in Warangal for the past 12 years, has a similar story. "Here, we work more but we earn less. I made Rs. 12,000 a month, but ever since I came back, I've received orders for only 15-20 days and made Rs. 2,000." He believes that zardozi artists earn well only in Chennai, Hyderabad, Warangal and Mumbai, because their work flourishes there.

Sudhir Yadav (20), who drives a battery-run rickshaw, said, "I had been working as a waiter in Pune for five years. I came home in February [last], and have been stuck here because of the



Moving on: For Sudhir Yadav, a battery rickshaw is the source of employment now. Photo: Garima Sadhwani

pandemic."

Sudhir is planning to return to Pune in a month. He is scared, having heard about the ordeals of those who had returned home during the lockdown, but he has to work. "I earned Rs. 2,000 a month in Pune, and here I make nearly Rs. 300 a day. But what I get in Pune is guaranteed income. There's no surety of that here. Also, since I lived in the hotel, I was able to save my whole salary."

Sanjeet Kumar (27), another zardozi artist, who had been working in Hyderabad for the last 11 years, came home just before lockdown in March 2020. "When work started resuming in June, my boss called me. There were six of us who went together. But a friend and I came back in August, because there was very little to do."

Sanjeet made Rs. 800 a day for 12 hours of work in Hyderabad, but just Rs. 200 in this village for the same duration every day. "I'll go back once work resumes normally. There's no growth here," he says.

Satish Kumar Nigam, a BA graduate, says, "I drive a battery-run rickshaw here, because I can't afford to go to Lucknow every day for a job or move there with my family. The government should set up some factories here, and prioritize educated unemployed people for recruitment."

Farid Ahmed (21), who owns a cybercafe in the village, said, "I have a B.Com degree from Lucknow University. Since the lockdown, I hardly earn Rs. 1,000 a month." He added, "Educated villagers like us should be provided jobs in cities."

Caste counts for fair PDS supply

Chamars of Rasulpur village in Bihar complain of malpractices



Gogli Devi (60) showing her ration card for 2019. Photo: Arpit Parashar

haven't got it yet," complains Ramjeevan Ram (32).

During the initial stage of the pandemic in March 2020, the Central government issued guidelines on distribution of free rations to provide relief to the people through the PDS. And the

Bihar Government announced mandatory supply of 5 kg of rice and 1 kg of pulses for April to each of the 1.47 crore ration cardholders. But the supply chain was ineffective, say people.

According to Kalanti Devi (61), distributor Ramesh Singh said that the supply chain from the government's side was slow because of the pandemic and economic pressure, and that's why he was unable to provide free rations to them.

Ramesh Singh (42) spoke of a "common practice in most of the villages here" of the persons concerned denying people free rations and illegally selling the grains.

Nonchalant, Pradeep Thakur (35), leader of the Rasulpur Gram Panchayat, said: "These things are common here as we all have to survive. This is nothing new. Before me other council leaders were doing it and now I am doing because I am a part of the system. The circle officer, ward councilor, dealer and distributor at the Public Distribution Booth all take their share."

Now, boats beckon you in city of lakes

However, with night curfew still on, tourism is not out of the woods

BHARAT SHARMA

UDAIPUR: The tourism sector, badly hit by the lockdown since March 2020 in the wake of the pandemic, is now slowly recovering in this city of lakes and historical capital of the kingdom of Mewar in the former Rajputana Agency.

Permission has been given for resuming boat rides, of course with COVID-19 precautions, in the Fateh Sagar (artificial lake) and the Pichola fresh water lake.

The Manasputra Karni Mata cable car ride, near the Pichola lake, which attracted around 2,500 monthly visitors during the winter vacation previously, recorded a drastic fall in ticket sales. But in November nearly 800 visitors turned up, said a person at the ticket counter.

Bharav Lal from Mavli, who

offers camel ride down the road to the Karni Mata temple, said his monthly income target was Rs 10,000-15,000. But it is difficult to meet the target these days because of fewer numbers of tourists. Most of what we earn daily goes to the camel itself -- for food, decoration, clothes, vaccination, etc." He pays the Nagar Nigam here Rs 2,000 yearly to get permission for camel rides.

Vendors suffer

Rajesh Kheda, who runs a stall at the tourist hotspot, *Dudh Talai*, said his business was affected due to curfew in force after 7 p.m.

"If you [the city administration] close the market and all shops in the evening itself, then where will the tourists go? They will just go back to their hotel rooms. And how will we earn?"

Kheda, who has been selling lemon juice and soda for six years

now, said, "I used to earn upto Rs 2,500 daily during the peak season of winter holidays but I earn hardly Rs 250 these days."

Prithvi Singh (23), who opened a tea stall at *Dudh Talai* in September last, also says his business is not doing well, but hopes it would pick up in the near future.

Tourists come more at weekends than on weekdays, especially from nearby Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh to spend time here or Mount Abu, which is about 160 km away, says Kheda.

Shakti Singh Rathore, whose father has been running Hotel Shanti Palace on City Palace Road for 30 years, says, "There are 12 rooms in our hotel which used to be full during this season [winter holidays]. There are no foreign tourists this time. Even after our offer of 20-30 percent discount,

only five or six rooms have been occupied by domestic tourists."

Naman Arora, an MBBS student, who came from Haryana with three friends, says Udaipur is a beautiful city but they have difficulty in finding cabs and restaurants after 7 p.m., thanks to the curfew.

Damaged roads, a deterrent Moreover, "the roads are dug up everywhere due to which it gets uncomfortable to travel around the places."

Adding to tourism business woes was the decision of the local administration not to conduct the Dussehra-Deepawali mela, the Shilpgram (arts and crafts) mela and Rawan dahan this year, to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These events normally attracted crowds from all over the country.

As per Regional Tourist Office of Udaipur data, the number of

visitors in November was 54,830, down from 1,57,560 during the same period in 2019.

What is the government doing to boost tourism? Shikha Saxena, Deputy Director of the Regional Tourist Office of Udaipur, says online marketing campaigns are being done.

"We expect this industry to bounce back as soon as the pandemic gets over."

Talking about damage to roads during the construction of the Smart City project, which is affecting tourism here, she says sewage work, for which roads have been dug up, has slowed down due to the pandemic.

Pointing out that the issue was raised at a meeting, in the presence of the Udaipur Collector, Saxena said, "We suggested that if sewage work was done in different phases, then it would affect [tourism] less."



Low-key resumption: While tourism is yet to return to its heyday in Udaipur, boat rides have just resumed in lakes. Sunil Agawal, partner at Mewar Boating, operating in the Fateh Sagar, says his business dropped 80 per cent compared to the arrivals in 2019. Photo: Bharat Sharma

Battered, after marriage

She was 5 when she was promised to a man; he threw her & children into a well

SANSKRITI FALOR

JAIPUR (Rajasthan): The date is etched into her mind: February 23, 2015. Sohan (she prefers to go by only one name) was three months pregnant when she went to the forest to collect wood, accompanied by her two children. There, her husband, her in-laws, and her brother-in-law's wife were waiting for her. They beat her, pulled her by the hair -- so hard that a patch of skin peeled off -- and threw her children and her into a well.

She lost her first child, eight-year-old Rahul, that day. Not only did the incident take her son's life, but it also paralysed her daughter and gave Sohan a lifetime of illness. "I still take medicines because there are some wounds that haven't healed. I will have to continue taking these forever," says Sohan, now 30.

Sohan, who comes from a small village, Dabach in this district, was five when her father promised her to Kamlesh from Thali village in the State. At 15, she was married and sent to his home, she says. Things were fine in the first three years; until she gave birth to Rahul. "They then started beating me, and my husband used to blackmail me saying that if I don't get money from my father, he would get married to another woman," says Sohan.

According to a UNICEF report, 15 million child marriages took



Down but determined: Sohan with her daughter
Photo: Sanskriti Falor

place in Rajasthan in 2015-2016, making it the sixth top State with the highest number of child marriages in the country.

Parents' perception

"Parents want to marry their daughters off since women are seen as a burden," says Yogesh Vaishnav, a social worker with Vikalp Sansthan, formed in 2004 to fight for children's future by ending child marriage.

"A patriarchal society thinks of daughters as their honour and they want to marry them off before they start speaking for themselves," he points out, adding, this leads to

sexual, emotional and mental violence.

"Young women lose their right to see their own dreams."

After her second child's birth, Sohan felt that things were getting worse. "They hit me and sent me back home for 18 months. And when I returned to his [Kamlesh's] house, the beating got worse since I didn't bring anything. My father is no Ambani, he did all he could, and I couldn't ask for more," she says.

Sohan's 60-year-old father, Radhakrishnan says he did what he could for her wedding, but her in-

laws continued to make demands. "They started asking for car, money, motorcycle and gold, among other things, saying that if Kamlesh had married another woman, he would've gotten these in dowry, he complained.

Four months after Kamlesh threw his family into a well, he got married again. Sohan was never served a divorce notice.

"He always used to say that he would get married again, but I never thought he could take such a drastic step and kill his own son for money," said Sohan.

"They cremated my grandson without calling the police or conducting post-mortem. I don't even know if he actually died or was alive," adds Radhakrishnan..

Sohan is fighting a case against her husband, who she says is influential, for the murder of her son and domestic violence.

She claims that her husband's side has threatened or paid off witnesses and has control over the police. "They have filed a false case against me, claiming that I fell into the well."

Building life anew

Sohan is trying hard to rebuild her life. She has found work in a factory near her village, earning around Rs 6000 a month, enough to support her and her daughters.

She wants them to study and do something with her lives, she says, adding, "I know my luck is bad, but I want to live and fight for my children."

Whither home and dream?

Child marriage Impacts literacy, security and health

ANUSHKA JAIN

NEW DELHI: Nandini Kewat works as a labourer at a public park in New Delhi's Vasant Kunj, but misses her home and parents back in rural Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh from where she hails. "Getting married early is a lot of trouble, so long as you live with your parents you don't even realise what you have and don't," she says.

The 18 or 20 year-old (She herself is unsure of her age) is among the 36 million child brides who hail from Uttar Pradesh, notorious for child marriage. According to a survey conducted by Centre for Social Research (CSR), in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in 2015, child marriage severely impacts women's literacy, security, and health.

Belonging to an agricultural family, Nandini dropped out of school after class 5 to help her parents by working on their farm with her 3 sisters. She was married off to a local a few years later, after which she moved to South Delhi's Vasant Vatika, a Delhi Development Authority park.

Not in our hands

"Over there, only our parents decide when we get married," she says.

After her marriage she discovered that no one in her in-laws' place had ever studied after marriage. Of all her 5 siblings only



No warmth in her life: Nandini Kewat with her child in front of her jhuggi in New Delhi. Photo: Anushka Jain

her youngest sister, all of 10 years, continues to study. "She's a quick learner," says Nandini, who asks her for the alphabets in her name everytime they meet in New Delhi to include in her Mehendi.

Talking while making rotis in front of her 4x6 feet jhuggi, the mother of two struggles to keep her year-old toddler Suraj away from the fire of the chulha. As Suraj stumbles and falls close to the fire, Nandini picks him and says, "His mother neither gets to eat nor sleep," she says.

Living in the small jhuggi cluster with 20 other migrants from Jhansi, she left her older son back in her village where he is studying. She isn't alone. Almost every other woman there has had children at a very young age.

Uma (22), who is also from Jhansi, has had two children – one is a toddler while the other is 4 years old.

According to the National Family Health Survey 2015-16, rural Jhansi has a child marriage rate of 32 per cent.

Raghuraman Singh, district coordinator of the Women's Safety Cell in Jhansi, says child marriage happens mostly due to mentalities, and financial constraints. "People have a mentality that girls are ultimately someone else's property. As soon as she gets a little mature they think she is ready to get married, without caring if she really is," he says.

With a longing look in her eye, Nandini says "It's a lot of trouble getting married early. You bear children at a very tender age, household responsibilities are thrust on you. A young girl suddenly has to take up such grown-up responsibilities."

Balancing Suraj and the Chulha, she tells me, "I won't get him married, I'll let him study."

Virus puts the brakes on teasing in buses

PALLAVI KESWANI

NEW DELHI: For Amresh, 47, the 13-km DTC bus commute to her office in Safdarjung Enclave every day has improved over the past year. A clerk, Amresh has been taking the DTC bus for 20 years, but "only in the past few months have I felt I don't need to be on guard all the time."

Like Amresh, women across the city have benefited from the many improvements made in the 6000+ DTC buses plying on the roads of Delhi. Travel is free for women and, in October 2019, the AAP government deployed 13,000 Marshals in buses to enhance safety. Ironically, however, it was the COVID-19 protocol, not the presence of Marshals, that seems to

have improved the quality of DTC commute for women.

"The buses are emptier, and everyone has to be seated. So the overall atmosphere in the bus has improved," says Amresh. Once the seats are full, the bus does not stop to pick up passengers.

Rekha Rai, 33, agrees that COVID-19 has protected her better. "The coronavirus is doing the job the Marshals are supposed to do," she says, adding "they keep chatting with the bus driver and conductor, many a time I don't even realize that a Marshal is present."

A study by Jagori, a women's documentation, training and communication centre, and UN women revealed that 51% women in Delhi face harassment in public

transport. "Women often face sexual harassment, aggression/violence, teasing and many other forms of unwelcome behavior in public transport," according to a study by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability and Jagori.

Interestingly, the Marshals also cite the COVID-19 protocol as the reason behind a decrease in the instances of harassment. "Since the buses are no longer crowded, the incidents have gone down", says Sunil Sharma, who has been working as a Marshal since 2019.

But is the presence of Marshals enough to make women feel safe? Dharmendra Kumar, Manager, Srinivaspuri Bus Depot, explains that DTC Marshals come from three backgrounds – from among

ex-servicemen, the Home Guard and Civil Defence volunteers. All three groups are provided gender sensitisation training by organisations like the Manas Foundation.

However, on the ground, their experiences differ. While someone like Sunil, who previously worked at a police station, has the experience to tackle offenders, Marshals who are inducted from among civil defence volunteers lack the skills. Even for Sharma, handling an intense situation becomes difficult. "I can only try to intervene, but if the situation gets out of control, I dial 100."

Since he joined as a Marshal, Sharma has had to deal with pickpockets and eve-teasers. Now, his duties include ensuring that the

passengers wear face masks and follow the Covid protocol.

Diya, 22, a student of Delhi University, stopped taking the DTC bus after her parents learnt of the many incidents of harassment her friends experienced. She claims that an overwhelming male staff on the buses is a deterrent. "I think the presence of more female staff would make me feel safer."

As of 2018, there was one female driver working for DTC and 241 female conductors - 20% of the total number of conductors (Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability and Jagori). This wide gap is also because women do not feel safe working in DTC buses. While female conductors are hired, many shift to administrative work after some time..



No longer a nightmare: A woman signalling a bus to stop.
Photo: Pallavi Keswani

Their cup of woes in tea gardens

SAYANI DAS

SILIGURI (West Bengal): Gangamaya Biswakarma, 63, wrinkled and retired, looks back at her life as a tea garden worker and sighs. The woman, who worked in the Mohorgon and Gulma Tea Estate since age 12, has witnessed many shades of women workers' struggle here and around.

Women constitute 60 to 80 percent of the workforce on various Terai tea estates. According to Tea Statistics Report, 2000-01, the tea garden population consisted of 19,572 women as against 17,099 men. Despite their forming the bulk of the community, their problems scarcely get resolved.

Biswakarma, squatting in the sun beside her oldest son's wife, who has a baby in her lap, is glad that the mother got six months leave on pay during her pregnancy. "But not everyone gets it," she said. Maternity leave is only for permanent workers. Casual and temporary workers, during pregnancy, have to work to receive their day's meagre pay.

Working mothers are now struggling to nurse their babies. Crèches, where they could leave their under-two-year children, have been closed since March 2020, though work resumed in June-July. Also, as a safety protocol, women weren't allowed to carry their babies to the gardens.

Sharmila Thapa, a field worker and mother of a one-year-old, said she left her baby with older children in the neighbourhood or old women

like Biswakarma when she went out to work these days.

Post-pandemic, the women were also worried about their older children, who were pushed to attend online classes when the family barely had a Smartphone or good internet connection. The mothers, mostly with primary school education, were struggling to guide their children. Fathers barely looked after the matter."

Then for household chores, they woke up before sunrise, cooked meals, fetched water from distant municipal taps since most gardens didn't provide tankers, looked after the children and managed fast-dwindling rations. While a few still worked with firewood, most households shifted to LPG. "Firewood is scarce, but from where do we pay for gas?" Biswakarma asked. Mostly, they paid from savings or sold off livestock.

The women said they had to go to fields to answer nature's call as there were no community toilets. Some houses in the villages also lacked toilets.

Pratap Kujur, health assistant at the Matigara TE dispensary and member of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) said, "In the best estates 10 to 20 percent don't have a toilet. Under indifferent management teams, the numbers go higher." An email sent to plantation owners received no reply.

However, there is something to cheer about. Unlike the situation half a decade ago, women now receive the same wages as men – Rs 176 per day.

Braving odds, domestic helps stitch up their lives

RAGHAVI GARG

GREATER NOIDA: Three women here have turned around their fortunes, scripting a story of empowerment, though they never received any formal education. They started off as domestic helps but found a way to upgrade their lives.

Neha Kumari (18) and her sister Rupa Kumari (20) did not go to school due to lack of resources. Through hard work and determination, they acquired the skills to break their cycle of poverty. They learnt eyebrow trimming, waxing, hair colouring, etc., from their friend, while working as domestic help. Today, they are employed at a big salon in the metro. "As maids, together we earned Rs. 5,000 a month. We saw that our friend who worked as a beautician earned Rs. 8,000. We resolved to learn the skills," says Neha.

"The job of a beautician is more dignified," says Rupa. "Nobody likes washing dishes, mopping and cleaning toilets. Add to that the shoddy treatment meted out by employers."

The sisters recall their appalling living conditions. "It was difficult to manage the expenses in a family of eight, including four other siblings," says Neha. Today, the two earn Rs. 12,000 each and make sure that their siblings, including a six-year-old sister, get proper education.

What is their best takeaway from the new job? "Getting to learn



Neha Kumari (left) and Renu Baisla (right).
Photo: Raghavi Garg



some words and phrases in English ... it makes me feel more confident and empowered," giggles Rupa.

Renu Baisla (35), a former household help, learnt stitching, knitting and embroidering about seven years ago. When she went to the market to get her clothes stitched for a marriage one day, Renu was surprised on seeing the bill. She decided to learn the skill. "My friend's sister was a tailor and I started working under her," she says. Today, Renu owns three sewing machines, including one electric machine. She has hired two girls to work with her.

After the Covid struck, she started ordering supplies online

"which I never did earlier." She now communicates with her clients and manages all monetary transactions online.

According to a 2010 National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), more than two-thirds of domestic workers in India are employed in urban areas. Between 2000 and 2010, women accounted for 75 percent of the increase in the number of domestic workers.

A National Domestic Workers' Movement report says a majority of domestic workers in India are illiterate/minimally educated and low-skilled.

They are among the poorest and most exploited groups .

Buried six feet under patriarchy

RIYA YADAV

DEVARGAON (Maharashtra): In a family of 15, Jyoti Munde is the only one to go out in search of work every day. On the other hand, her husband sits with other village men to play cards, says Dhawlabai Munde, her mother-in-law.

Jyoti works on farms and as a labourer, earning hardly Rs.300 a week. Her burden has only increased after her sister-in-law was recently delivered of a baby and she couldn't work. There are four men in the family, but women run the house, in the entire village.

Dilip Ambhore, an Arogya Kendra worker at Devargaon, says the village's older men don't work. "Younger men still do, but the older generation will play cards for the entire day while the women work and come back in the evening."

However, this doesn't translate to their economic independence. Violence against women continues. According to *The Times of India*, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported that of the total 4.05 lakh crimes against women registered in 2019, 1.26 lakh, were that of domestic violence. Devargaon is no exception to this.

DL Kulkarni, an Accredited Social Health Activist worker, says men take control of women's income despite all this. "They often spend money on alcohol and tobacco. Some get home drunk and beat them up," she adds.

Shanta Krushna Mahaware, a resident of Devargaon, was seven

months pregnant when her drunk husband hit her in the stomach. She and her unborn child died in April this year, the ASHA worker says.

Aarti Somnath, who works on farms, says she has to wake up at 4 in the morning, do household chores, cook, and fetch water from a pump located half a kilometre away. All this before she leaves for work at 7:30 a.m.

Pregnancy is not an excuse for not working; it just makes it harder. Men often don't take good care of pregnant women.

"Women here have to do some heavy work like fetching water from pumps even when they are eight-nine months pregnant. We had a case of a woman who was delivered of her baby, legs first, while she was working on the field. She was rushed in immediately," says Gotarne, a nurse, at the Arogya Kendra at Devargaon.

Ambhore states women do not even have a year-long gap between babies. Gotarne says, "We had a 48-year-old pregnant woman as our patient who was trying for a son. It was a high-risk pregnancy not only because of her age but also it was her eighth pregnancy. Miscarriages and abortions are common."

The Kendra has made several attempts to spread awareness of pregnancies, contraceptives, and health. But, "people from the older generation aren't educated enough to understand the importance of following these directions. Moreover, women follow what the men demand from them," says Kulkarni .

Motisar: No toilets at govt day care shelter

Lack of toilets at an Anganwadi forces people to go home every time they need to use the toilet.

JUHI SEERNANI

AJMER: Sushila Gawaria, a 45-year-old selling bangles door-to-door in Motisar is unable to concentrate on her job because she is worried about her 25-year-old ailing son.

Shakti suffers from Cerebral Palsy, an affliction of the nervous system that leaves sufferers unable to walk and have involuntary motions. And that is the reason Gawaria is unable to concentrate.

The Motisar anganwadi, a government institution where working parents can leave their children while they work, does not have toilets. This means, the children at the Anganwadi have to hurry home if they need to go. Sometimes, the children use the fields instead of rushing home and coming back again.

"I manage to earn around 500 in three days by selling bangles but sometimes I can't go out as no one is there to look after my son," she says. Gawaria's older son and wife live in Gujarat. Her husband leaves her to look after Shakti and earn the family's only stable income as whatever he earns by selling fruit is spent on alcohol, Gawaria says.



Sanjeeta Kawal at the decrepit anganwadi building in Motisar, Rajasthan.

Shakti is wheeled in his wheelchair to the Anganwadi by his mother every morning. But, he has to be wheeled home when he needs to use the toilet because there are no toilets in the anganwadi's school.

He is one of ten physically handicapped children in this nondescript village of 1200 people. Most of the people here are farmers or pastoralists. The anganwadi school is just a small room situated in the center of the Motisar village, which can accommodate only twenty children at a time.

Anganwadi centres, or AWCs,

are part of the central government's Integrated Child Development Scheme. They provide a package of six services including pre-school non-formal education to children. According to a parliamentary standing committee report, there were still around 4.5 lakh anganwadi centres that lacked both drinking water and toilet facilities.

The Block President refused to respond on the matter.

Sanjeeta Kawal, a caretaker at the Anganwadi, who takes care of the children when they arrive and is responsible for the upkeep of the place has to rush to other people's

houses for using the toilet.

"I went to the Sarpanch but she hardly ever pays attention to the problem of toilets. They don't want to listen. But they pretend to listen," she says.

According to government data, nearly a fourth of the operational AWCs lack drinking water facilities and 36 per cent do not have toilets.

While India celebrates being open defecation free, the Anganwadis meant for healthcare and nutrition of women and children continue to suffer without a proper system of sanitation.

Selling Yaks is only option

SHERUB WANGMO

THIMPHU: People are selling their yaks to the slaughterhouse in Paro, Bhutan. Soe, one of the remotest villages in Thimphu district, is a two-day-long walk from Shanna in Paro. Usually, this village's inhabitants earn their living through tourism and by selling medicinal mushrooms and dairy products. However, this year, because of the pandemic, there were no tourists this year and they could not sell any local produce.

Tshering Dorji, the village spokesperson, said that people had sold close to 20 yaks, more than double the number (8) sold last year. "This is worrying," he says.

Yaks are the primary income source for many families in Bhutan; most own at least 50 animals. Yak milk is sold fresh or fermented and made into cheese. They are also used to carry tourists trekking in the mountains. Yak hair is also used to make a variety of handicrafts, prized by visiting tourists.

Palden (name changed) sold three yaks last month. "In such a situation, we don't have other options," he says.

Another highlander Nim Dorji (name changed) agrees that their choices are limited. Except water and firewood, the community needs to purchase almost everything. And the price of the commodities has increased over the years, he says. Therefore they sell yaks for meat in the nearest town.

The killing of an animal is considered a sin in a Buddhist country. The authorities are concerned over the killing.

Aged woman saddled with disabled children

SHERUB WANGMO

Thimphu: Buku is 63, but she still has to look after her two adult children: they are both differently-abled.

Her 29-year-old son, Karma Gyeltshen, is physically disadvantaged and who also has speech and communication disorder. Also, Yongmin, her 23-year-old daughter cannot walk but drags herself around on her knees.

The family is living in a makeshift dwelling with no attached toilet or running water.

The daughter moves around the house using her knees and does as much household work as she can. The son uses a walking stick to move around. He fetches water from the tap; he spills half of it on the way home due to his disability.

The mother has stayed strong and hasn't given up on her children. But she wishes she could do more for them. "I am proud of my daughter because, despite her disabilities, she helps me with all the household work," says Buku.

The Ability Bhutan Society is now collaborating with a physiotherapist to provide a wheelchair for the daughter.

However, there are still many challenges. Their home isn't wheelchair-accessible, and there is barely any place to move around.



PHOTO BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Class in progress at a state school in Udaipur's Badgaon

No mid-day meal in nine months

Rations last provided in March

BHARAT SHARMA

UDAIPUR: Government schools here are still waiting for the second lot of grain distributed to students instead of mid-day meal. Mid-day meal is not served as students have not been coming to school since the start of the lockdown in March 2020 in the wake of corona spread.

The government found an alternative by which wheat and rice were distributed and school authorities called each student to collect the rations.

The plan was to give students in primary classes (1 to 5) 6.2 kg of wheat and 3.2 kg of rice, and pupils in secondary classes (6 to 8) 9.3 kg of wheat and 4.8 kg of rice once in 94 days. But this arrangement came to a grinding halt in March.

Chandrashekhar Joshi, Additional District Education Officer of Udaipur, said wheat and rice were normally dispatched from the Food Corporation of India, Jaipur. But there was delay in transportation from the main godown at Pratapnagar.

Previously, the Akshay Patra Foundation, a non-profit group, collected the grain from the godown, prepared the meal and delivered it to the schools. But this arrangement was withdrawn.

The rations would be distributed by the school administration by the end of winter holidays, Mr. Joshi said.

Akshay Patra's menu for the schools included roti, mixed-dhal, plain rice, sweet daliya, khichadi, thepla (flatbread) and fruits.

Previously, schools used to supply students milk also in the morning, after prayer.

Under the Anna Poorna Doodh Yojna, started by the BJP government in Rajasthan in 2018, milk came from the Saras dairy. However, the present Congress government has stopped the scheme, saying it would introduce a different arrangement where fruits and sweets would be served.

"All these government schemes

keep changing. Previously we used to provide fruits once in a week but now we will make the supply every day if it [the scheme] is announced officially," said Manju Khamesra, Mid-Day Meals in-charge at the Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Bhopalpura.

As per school data, out of 71 students in the primary classes, 67 collected their ration in the first instance of supply. In Secondary classes, 92 out of 124 students received it, Mrs. Khamesra said. The remaining 32 secondary class students, most of them hostellers, could not collect the rations as they must have left the town, she added.

Suman Jain, principal of the State Higher Secondary School, Badgaon, which is on the outskirts of the city, said except a few, all 222 students in class 1 to 8 collected the rations.

Now that the Government has relaxed restrictions on opening of schools, students, mostly from secondary classes, come to the campus. As many primary students do not have a mobile phone and hence are not able to attend classes regularly, the teachers are going door to door to assign and check homework, says Mrs Jain.

Government teachers were actively working even during the lockdown. Assigned duty in nearby areas, they visited every house to collect information.

"Sometimes the people think that we are sent by the government to note down their concerns. Once a family told me to 'Ask the government to clean the drain'. As we had to collect information from them, we used to say 'yes, we will convey your concern to higher authorities.' Only then would they give us the required information," said Aumudani Mittal, lecturer at the Bhopalpura school.

"If we knocked on the door when they were watching the Ramayana serial, they got annoyed and asked why we came at that time," said Mrs. Khamesra.



PHOTO BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

A Balaknama reporter talking to street children

The story of Delhi's child journalists

The group, led by a 17-year-old, tries to voice out its concerns

PALLAVI KESWANI

NEW DELHI: At 17, Kishan faced a unique challenge in March last year when the national lockdown was announced.

As editor of Balaknama, a newspaper run by Delhi's street children, focussing on their issues, Kishan did not know how to contact the children left without any support.

"My team tracked some of them down through mobile phones.

However, since many did not have access to a phone, we tried to find out their last known location", says Kishan.

Once his team established contact, it was quick to make note of the street children's problems. But the new normal meant they were dealing with situations previously unheard of.

"When we first talked to them over phone, the children mostly complained about lack of food. But when we started visiting them, we realised that they were also facing issues of sanitation, forced labour and lack of access to face masks and sanitisers", recalls Kishan.

Kishan learnt of Balaknama through CHETNA (Childhood Enhancement Through Training and Action), a Delhi-based NGO. He was a street child and CHETNA encouraged him to resume his education. In 2018, when he expressed an interest to join the newspaper, he was brought in as a reporter.

"This newspaper is an outlet for all problems that we face. The mainstream media, unfortunately, does not highlight them clearly",

he says. In December last year, he became the Editor of Balaknama.

For weeks now, Kishan has been meeting his team everyday over conference calls. "I talk to reporters based in Haryana, Agra, and Lucknow."

All reporters are aged between 14 and 18 and source both the news and possible solutions to their problems from the street children, some younger than them.

"We don't decide what to cover before leaving for reporting. We go to the field, gather the children and note down their problems", says Kishan. This style of reporting has ensured that the problems are addressed immediately.

"As soon as the lockdown was lifted, we reported on the lack of sanitisers, masks, and sanitary napkins. People who read our newspaper started donating."

Kishan also ensured that his team adapted to the digital platform.

Since the newspaper could not be printed after the COVID breakout, news is now available on the Balaknama Facebook page. Kishan does not work full time. As per the NGO's policy, every child is required to continue his/her education.

A student of Class 10, Kishan gives four hours of his day to reporting and spends the rest of the day studying. "I want to become a dancer," he says.

Sanno Khan, who mentors the team at Balaknama, has plans. "We hope to become as big as any mainstream newspaper. I hope children become aware of their rights," says Khan.

Covid: only 20 out of 400 return to school

NIHIT SACHDEVA

SAHARANPUR: Nikhil still meets some of his former classmates on his way home from school.

a class III student is one of only 20 kids who are still going to Nehru Bal Vidyalaya at Chak Hareti village.

Chak Hareti is a small village in Uttar Pradesh's Saharanpur district. Nikhil is amongst those few students who have been coming to Nehru Bal Vidyalaya for a month.

Nehru Bal Vidyalaya is one of five schools in the village.

"The rest have dropped out," says Shashikant Sharma, 54, Principal of the school, for classes I to VIII, he has been running along with his wife Anita for the past 25 years under the NGO Prayas Samajik Shaikshanik Vikas Samiti.

He says that ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the first lockdown from March 24 to April 15 this year to curb the spread of coronavirus, the school has not officially opened despite certain restrictions being relaxed.

However, parents of those 20 students insisted that they did not want the year to go completely wasted.

One of the parents, Sonu Kumar, 35, who lives nearby, says, "Since there are very less number of

students which makes it easier to follow social distancing, I decided to save the year and send my children too." Kumar, who has a private job, has two children studying at Nehru Bal Vidyalaya, a son named Dikshit in Class V and a daughter named Mansi in Class VII.

Students dropped out during the lockdown due to the risk posed by the Coronavirus, inability to travel and other financial constraints, says Anita.

Usha Kumar, 30, says that she decided to keep her daughter, Sanjana, a Class II student, at home and drop out from the school as she prioritises her child's health over education. She says that her husband, Sanjeev, who worked as a labourer in a cloth factory, lost his job during the lockdown making finances another factor.

Sharma says that he allows students to continue for months even if they are unable to pay the monthly fee of Rs 200.

A single-storey building and without any signboard, it is almost impossible for anyone to tell Nehru Bal Vidyalaya is a school.

Empty desks and benches stacked on top of each other are the first thing visible in the school. A small blackboard on one of the walls has various instructions written in Hindi. But there are no students.

Gitillor: lack of phones, internet mars education

AMRIN NAAZ

GITILLOR, WEST SINGHBHUM:

School has been out for students of Gitillor village here because the primary school here have had no access to education for the past nine months as their households have no smartphones or internet connections.

Run by two teachers, Mangal Singh Hembram and Phoolmati Pingua, the government primary school was attended by 52 students from three villages.

When the lockdown started, teachers were asked by the Jharkhand government to shift to e-learning methods.

They were supposed to send study material over WhatsApp.

Hembram said, "After we tried contacting the parents and doing a survey, we found that only 3 households had smartphones." The students were completely out of touch with their studies for nine months now, he added.

According to a national survey, Jharkhand state had the fewest rural households with computer devices, including smartphones with only 1.3 per cent households owning them. Also, only 11.9 per cent households of rural Jharkhand had internet.

Urnu Hembram, father of a student, said, "My child takes interest in studies but I hardly earn enough from farming to sustain ourselves.

How will we buy smartphones and recharge them?"

In many households, students help their families by working to make money

Dhukni, nine, did not want to work in the fields, but she did not want to sit at home either. "I want school to open soon so I have something to do," she said while taking a bucket of water to the field where her family cultivated vegetables.

Earlier, Dhukni's school gave them a football to play with. Now they have a makeshift ball made of



PHOTO CREDIT: AMRIN NAAZ

Children of Gitillor working with their family

old clothes.

Rahbari (10), a student, was helping her mother Junga (35) in sorting wheat crop in front of their home.

Junga said, "I don't want her to keep playing all day so I ask her to help me. Rahbari would go to school even when she felt sick, such was her dedication. Now she

does not want to either study or -- me."

The village is surrounded by a dense forest with a short passage connecting it to the Kalebira-Hatgamharia Main Road.

As the children do not have to go to school, they roam around these areas. This has been a constant worry for their families.

A parent, Sukhran Hembram (47) said, "Our children are being spoilt because there's no school. They do not have any routine anymore so they loiter all day. Sometimes they run far away. Then we go looking for them.

It has disrupted their growth and our lives." He said the education they received was of decent quality.

"For us, something is better than nothing. Now they have torn the pages of the books that were given to them and used them for eating fried food," he added.

Another parent, Minjar (37), said tuition classes stopping because of the pandemic put them at a loss. "I am an illiterate person; how will I guide my children. Now there is no way they could study," she said.

Venkat Ramana, Block Coordinator of ASPIRE, an education not-for-profit said his organisation would be teaching children of Gitillor from classes three to eight for 100 days.

Govt hospitals the only ‘ray of hope’

Residents of Bihar look up to them as private hospitals turn Covid patients away

MAYANK KUMAR

SITAMARHI: When 46-year-old Rakesh Kumar Suman was diagnosed with Covid in August, he went to a nursing home in his hometown Sitamarhi.

At the nursing home in Sitamarhi, a border district in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, Suman was told that it was not admitting Covid infected patients. So he went to another.

When he was turned out of there, he went to another. And another till he realised that he may have to go to the government Covid care center.

“All the private nursing homes refused my admission, saying Covid patients are strictly not allowed. I had to move from one private health facility to another in a private ambulance, with oxygen support, for two hours before my wife said let’s go to the government facility, by the time I reached the Covid dedicated government facility, my condition had deteriorated and needed ventilator support, but I survived,” he added.



COVID-19 centre in Sitamarhi District Hospital

As per the National Institute of Transforming India (NITI) Aayog’s estimates in 2019-20, Bihar was

ranked 25 out of 28 states in health. The problem is not only of infrastructure or human resource,

the primary problem is of governance and trust. “Any middle-class family never

wants to utilize the government health infrastructure as they believe it is not worth visiting,” said a senior district health official on the condition of anonymity.

“The district hospital was used to its full potential in many decades amid the Covid pandemic. I have been working in the hospital since last 28 years but for the first time, I am seeing people trusting our facility, not because it has improved but as they have no other option,” added the official.

Public health experts blame the centralized bureaucracy and political class for limiting the public health system’s size and organization.

The situation of Primary Healthcare Centres (PHCs), Sub-divisional Healthcare Centres (SHCs) are worse as it lacks qualified doctors.

Even in the district hospital of 120 beds, only 18 doctors are present while the sanctioned strength is 32. But things could be better.

“More than 55 per cent sanctioned posts of doctors are

unfilled in the district’s 19 PHCs and other medical facilities,” said Mahaveer Thakur, a noted local physician.

“What is achieved during the crisis is not because of government health infrastructure but due to the hand of God,” he added sarcastically.

“In the state, where none of the director level positions is occupied by public health experts, how can we expect improvement in the public health system,” said Rajesh Kumar Singh, another local surgeon who runs a nursing home.

Arun Prasad, 51, another Covid patient, was admitted at the Sitamarhi District Government Hospital on September 18.

He survived after fighting with the disease for 23 days.

“No doctor attended to my father. The hospital paramedic staff came and asked me to learn how to administer the drip, saying she would not come again, as she feared contracting the virus,” said Sumit, 19, Arun’s son.

“My father survived due to the grace of God,” he added.

No sanitary napkins in tribal village

AMRIN NAAZ

GUNDIJORA : Bonmasi Mai, 54, uses one cloth for an entire year during her menstruation. She makes a makeshift undergarment with a drawstring and a cloth. She is told pants are a man’s garment.

Women of Gundijora use old rags during menstruation. They have no access to sanitary napkins.

Ruibaari Kui, 30, an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker from Gundijora, said, in all these years sanitary napkins have been provided just once. “How will I get them for others when I myself use a cotton cloth?” she said.

In the National Health Family Survey 2015-2016, it was found that in rural India, 71.4 per cent of the women used a cloth, which does not fall under the hygienic methods of protection.

Most women in Gundijora used a cloth. They wash and reuse it. Due to the taboo associated with menstruation, they have to dry the cloth in hidden places.

In a report by Wateraid, an NGO operating around water, sanitation and hygiene, it was stated if old clothes are not cleaned well, they can become unhygienic. If not washed or dried properly, they can lead to infections.

Some people use sanitary pads and then go back to using cotton rags because they can’t afford menstrual hygiene products.

Basanti Hembram, 21, a resident, said, “I began using sanitary pads after I started attending school. When I have extra pocket money left, I buy it. They are better and comfortable.”

Nandi Hembram, 22, said she was not able to spend money on sanitary pads. She said, “Spending even Rs. 30 on them seems like an extra expenditure when I see I have to do it every month.”

A report under UNICEF showed women who used reusable pads were more than one and a half times more likely to experience vaginosis and twice more likely to experience urinary tract infection, as compared to those using disposable pads.

The Indian Express cites yeast infection, fungal infection and cervical cancer as potential health hazards related to poor menstrual hygiene. There is a lack of awareness about the consequences.

Belmati Hembram, 33, said she has suffered from some irritation and symptoms of infection around the time of her periods. “I’ve never received any help for the same. I thought this was natural,” she said.

She explained taking medication for menstrual cramps was also uncommon there. The women are supposed to endure the pain and continue doing the chores. “Who else will work if we don’t,” she added. Anjana Devi, 43, a social worker who works for women and children of villages around the Noamundi block, said there was no primary clinic nearby. Everyone had to travel around 7 kms to the TATA Steel Noamundi Hospital.

She added that a lot of women do not eat nonvegetarian food when they’re menstruating. “Some are not allowed to enter the kitchen, enter crop fields and plant trees,” she added. Jayanti Barjo, 35, an anganwadi worker, said they had never been provided with sanitary napkins. She said, “For 11 to 19-year-old girls, we only get iron tablets and a fixed amount of rice.”

Waterlogged roads make life difficult

NIHIT SACHDEVA

SAHARANPUR: It wasn’t until the villagers started dying of dengue that the officials started to pay some attention.

Lack of proper cleanliness and sanitation is still a major cause of concern throughout the year, said the villagers at Behada Sandal Singh.

Behada Sandal Singh is the combined name for two villages, Behada Khurd and Behada Kalan, with a total population of 5,887 people in the Muzaffarabad Block of the Saharanpur district, 717 km away from Uttar Pradesh’s capital city of Lucknow.



A road in Muzaffarabad

Last year, in October and November, the village was severely affected by dengue, said Dr Kushal Pal, 74, a physician who works at Kamala Hospital, a local nursing home. Dr Pal said that the epidemic took at least 65 lives.

The health department only started setting up relief camps after the situation started to get out of control. After that, multiple medical teams visited the village for a week and sprayed disinfectants.

The nearest community health center for the villagers is 10 km away in the main Muzaffarabad area. Going through the village,

which locals said was named after a local philanthropist, it was easy to see what the villagers meant. Pools of rainwater on the village roads were potential breeding grounds for mosquitoes. Heaps of garbage on the roadsides just made it worse. Ram Kishor, 60, a villager, said that despite the appeal in July from Ravi Prakash Singh, the Block Development Officer, various households in the village were guilty of water wastage.

Alok Kumar, 32, another resident, said that every monsoon, shoddy roads and improper drainage system result in rainwater filling the village alleys upto knee level.

According to information available on rd.up.nic.in, the website of the Government of Uttar Pradesh’s Department of Rural Development, Rs. 6,80,815 was allocated in September for maintenance of various blocks in the city. Kumar said that there were only three sanitary workers for an area spread over five kilometers.

One of those three workers, on the condition of anonymity, said that he visits every area in the village every eighth day and collects the garbage. Subodh Kumar Sharma, 50, who runs a small tent house and a store of essential food items, said that in earlier times, the villagers themselves made sure that the area in front of their houses was clean. But after the Covid-19 pandemic, they got scared and became totally dependent on the sanitary workers.

Suman and Nathiram, the Panchayat Presidents of Behada Khurd and Behada Kalan respectively, could not be reached out for a comment.

Rajnish Kumar, Gram Panchayat Development officer for the villages, said he has not received any official complaints recently regarding the issue of sanitation from either of the two. He also said people who died during the dengue epidemic last year were mostly those with comorbidities.

Miscarriage on the rise in C’garh slum

Sector 25 women suffer due to construction work, alcoholism

RIMJHIM SINGH

CHANDIGARH: At least one out of three women in the slum area of Sector 25 suffers miscarriage, according to Asha Kiran, a non-governmental organisation. The women are forced to work during pregnancy as their menfolk are alcoholics and do not work. Most of the women work at construction sites throughout the nine months of their pregnancy and often end up miscarrying.

Sheetal Kumari, 37, a resident, is six months pregnant with her fourth child and has miscarried twice earlier. “My husband used to work as a labourer at construction sites till 2016. While working, he got addicted to alcohol and has never stopped drinking. He left work and I am now forced to earn for my family of five.”

Sheetal, who earlier used to work as a domestic help, joined as a contract labourer. “I have to lift heavy objects like boulders, iron pillars, metallic rods, wooden doors, cement-mixers, sacks full of sand and, sometimes, heavy machinery. I have slipped thrice at my work site. This resulted in a miscarriage.” She added that in 2019, when she was three months pregnant, she slipped on a wet floor with a heavy sack on her head.

She hit her head on a wooden plank and fell on her stomach. “The excessive bleeding led to miscarriage.”

Another resident, Komal, 31, mother of three, suffered a miscarriage last month.

Her husband, Ramesh Kumar, has been bedridden since 2018. A speeding car hit him when he was walking home drunk one night.

He was paralysed and, with time, got addicted to alcohol. “I used to work as a garbage cleaner but after my husband’s accident, I started working at a construction site as a daily wage as it fetches more money.”

Recalling her on-site accident last month, she says: “I slipped as I



Women in a discussion about their problems

was carrying heavy iron slabs. The bleeding did not stop for a few hours and I lost my child.”

After just 12 days of the accident, Komal returned to her work site. “I have three children, aged five, seven and 10. For the 12 days that I did not go to work, it was difficult to get food even twice a day.”

Alcohol addiction in men is a huge issue here. Many organisations have visited the slum with a promise to

run de-addiction programmes and rehabilitation therapies. But nothing has materialised so far.

“I have to lift heavy objects like boulders... and heavy machinery. I have slipped thrice at my work site. This resulted in a miscarriage.”

With a population of nearly 1,100 people, this slum records one of the highest number of miscarriages among the other slums in the city.

Dr. Vatsal Saraswat, a senior consultant at the Government Dispensary and Community Centre, Sector 25,

says: “Most of the women who suffer a miscarriage in this slum come here for treatment. They come with heavy bleeding, caused by falls while lifting heavy objects.”

Dr. Saraswat says the women, mostly married at a young age, are malnourished. They give birth to four or five children on average and are anaemic.

“These women have acute iron deficiency, which often leads to multiple deformities in the unborn child. We give free medicines to pregnant women but they do not complete the course. These conditions, with their strenuous work load, lead to miscarriages.”

Cost of occupational hazards in Noida marble unit

RAGHAVI GARG

GREATER NOIDA(U.P) : Workers at a marble processing factory here continue to fall victim to health hazards due to lack of awareness and poor safety kits.

According to the Factories Act 1948, a factory that manufactures products which cause dust and fumes must have exhaust appliances installed.

No such appliance has been installed in the factory, which shall remain unnamed in deference to the request of workers.

Rahul Maheshwari, 33, a supervisor, says there is no proper dust extraction system in the factory and most of the work is done under open shelters that have no vents.

Says Govind Yadav, 28, a worker: “The

washroom is full of dust. There are layers of dust on the tables on which we eat. Our nose, ears, hair, entire body and clothes are full of the white dust that flies when we work.”

He and his friends have chest pain almost all day, he claims.

“A friend, just 20, collapsed at work after a very bad chest pain. He quit the job,” adds Yadav.

The workers cut, grind and polish marble at the factory for use in kitchens, dining rooms and bathrooms. Respiratory problems and lung issues are common.

Explains Dr. Puneet Chaudhary, a pulmonologist: “Silica dust is emitted when marble is cut. This leads to silicosis.”

Silicosis is a lung disease that can be progressive and has no treatment except a

lung transplant.

On why they do not use face masks, gloves and helmets, Ram Manohar, a worker, says: “It is uncomfortable to work in the apparatus they provide us. Most of it is loose and damaged.”

They work faster without the “shabby safety gear.”

Supervisor Maheshwari has a different story to tell though.

“When the workers are being supervised, they keep their face shields on but as soon as we move away, they take the shields off.

The lack of awareness on health hazards makes them a victim of respiratory diseases like asthma and even lung cancer,” he says. “They get cuts, bruises and eye injuries.”

Does the management provide health

insurance for workers?

“No, the company has taken nothing of that sort,” says Maheshwari. “But it disburses money if the workers injure themselves while working.”

Many workers know at least two persons who died young of silicosis that they developed while working in marble processing factories.

Bacchan Prasad, 52, who has worked in many factories including packet printing factory and marble-cutting factory, says the fumes often make workers giddy.

“Many workers turn to drugs to resist the effect of the fumes,” he says.

However, Bacchan, who goes by his first name, is quick to add that he did not take drugs but quit the job.



Workers processing marble without any safety gear

Textile hub effluents affecting crops, people

No waste-water treatment plant and negligence of farmers putting human lives at risk

SANSKRITI FALOR

SANGANER: Irrigation sources at Sanganer village in Jaipur district of Rajasthan continue to be polluted by factory effluents. This has severely affected farming at the village which is also a textile hub. Arsenic in the water has led to a rise in cancer cases in the area. Recently, the village has started to receive drinking water from the nearby Bisalpur village. However, this has not stopped farmers from using the same water for their crops.

“We have been using this water since I started farming,” says Sandeep Yadav, a 27-year-old farmer in the area, who doesn’t believe this is a harmful practice. Although the Rajasthan High Court has banned installing pumps to draw water, many farmers continue to do so without realising the effects the crop has on consumers. “The police have come to take the water pumps a few times, but that can be settled,” continues Yadav. “This is a cheaper way, and the yield is good too. It also helps in speeding up the growth of our vegetables,” he says, adding that he sells his produce all around Jaipur.

Many farmers are aware of the harmful effects of this water. Gopal Singh, 51, another farmer in the

area, says “The police are strict in checking but pumping-in this water is cheaper and keeps our crops green. Every farmer here knows our crops are harmful; which is why, we don’t consume our own yield. We sell it to traders but we don’t eat these vegetables.”

According to a study by the International Journal of Applied Environmental Sciences, water scarcity in many parts of India has compelled farmers to use wastewater generated from industries for irrigating agricultural fields. This, in turn, makes farming an unsustainable way of life. Dataram (38) has seen his forefathers engaged in agriculture. But he chose not to follow their footsteps. “I quit farming because the water has made our land barren and it would take a huge investment for me to cultivate again,” he says. His nephew was born with a chronic skin condition, he says. “It can never heal. That is when I decided to become a driver instead of a farmer.”

The other side of the story

Factories in the area were ordered to have a filtration plant and a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP), according to a 2015 judgement of Rajasthan High Court. “Most factories don’t build



One of the several polluted water bodies in Sanganer.

these plants because the expense of building them is just as much as setting up the factory, so they bribe the police, and keep functioning,” points out Ashok Koolwal, who owns a factory here. The Daryavati river, now known as Amanishah Nullah, suffers a great loss due to these industries. Even though the Rajasthan Government has laid out many plans to rejuvenate the river, the cloth industries around continue to pollute it without any accountability. “Even though the

government has promised to set up plants to prevent water pollution, nothing has been done. All the industries, till date, continue to dump their waste in water and farmers use it,” says Rajendra Kumbhaj, an environmentalist working in the Sanganer area. Not only do these industries pollute the water in the area but they also increase the levels of air pollution, he adds. “These industries are polluting air, water and soil and these are the flaws of our system that we need to fight,” he says.

PHOTO CREDIT: SANSKRITI FALOR

Slum dwellers told to leave

The Chandigarh administration promised them they could stay but land owner is forcing the people of Rajiv Colony to leave

RIMJHIM SINGH

CHANDIGARH: About 250 people of Rajiv Colony, a slum in Sector 49, are struggling to keep a roof over their heads as they have been asked to vacate the land on which they built their makeshift homes a year ago. The Chandigarh administration had allotted them the piece of land after the low-lying areas near river Ghaggar were flooded in July 2019, with the promise of providing the families proper houses in a year. Mukhtar Khan, 50, a resident, says, “The officials told us that we would get our new houses by June or July, 2020.

The Chandigarh administration, they assured us, would pay a rent to the Neev Builders and Construction Company, which owns this land.”

However, in the last week of November this year, the Neev Builders gave the residents 25 days to vacate the land. “We were asked to make our own arrangements for accommodation,” says Bhaskar Kumar, 33, another resident. A senior official of the Chandigarh Housing Board (CHB), on the condition of anonymity, explains the situation. “We had made arrangements to hand over the houses to the Rajiv Colony residents in the Maloya district under the Slum and Displaced Rehabilitation Scheme but could not do so because the Sewage Treatment Plant could not be installed in time. The construction of the houses was



PHOTO CREDIT: RIMJHIM SINGH

A makeshift house of the Rajiv Colony slum in Chandigarh.

started setting up the STP plant last month. It will take another 20 days to finish the work.”

Prakash Bhatia, a sub-division engineer at the CHB, says: “The administration has stopped paying the rent to the Neev Company and so the company wants the land

vacated. We informed the administration about the delay from our side well in advance and submitted even our work plan in August 2020. The officials said they would continue to pay the rent

till we finished our work. They have suddenly stopped, saying they are facing a severe fund crunch.”

An official of the UT Administration, simply says that they are trying to help as much as they can and will soon help the residents to relocate.

A mountain of health hazards

Tallest landfill in Ghazipur

PALLAVI KESWANI

NEW DELHI: Everyday, Zarina, 72, sits at her small tea stall with her nose and mouth covered tightly with her dupatta. She adopted this practice long before COVID-19 struck and people were asked to wear face masks. Come winter and the residents of Mullah Colony prepare themselves to brave India’s tallest landfill in Ghazipur, as the season brings additions to the host of problems that exist throughout the year.

“My children have fallen sick almost every year for the 25 years that I have lived here,” says Zarina. Only two narrow canals and a road separate Zarina’s tea shop from the Ghazipur landfill.

Standing tall at 213 feet, when it was last measured, the landfill occupies 70 acres of land.

Like Zarina’s children, Chaman Singh, 23, a student pursuing a bachelor’s degree in science, has to deal with respiratory problems every winter. “It gets difficult for me to breathe due to the stench and pollution,” he said.

Breathing becomes difficult

when the landfill catches fire, which happens often. On November 25, 2020, a fire broke out at the site and was brought under control only after 24 hours. “Our whole house was filled with smoke that day,” recalls Naazri, whose flat is situated in the lane directly facing the landfill. “Many politicians have come and promised that the landfill will be removed. Even the media has reported the issue many times but the mountain has only grown over the years”, she adds.

Naazri and her parents make a customary trip to the nearby Lal Bahadur Shastri Hospital every winter with complaints of cough and breathing troubles. However, in 2020, they have had to keep away because of COVID-19.

It is not as if the Mullah Colony residents have no trouble during the rest of the year. Leachate from the landfill has continuously seeped into the ground, destroying groundwater. Burfi Devi, 73, for instance, spends money on packaged water every other day due to this.

“We can’t drink the water; we can’t wash vegetables in it or cook. The water in our overhead

tank is useless”, she says. Like Devi, Zarine and others spend a fortune on buying bottles of water daily.

“Unless we spend, we cannot survive here”, says Devi whose son is recovering from typhoid. Besides stomach ailments, the residents also suffer from skin-related diseases because of the polluted water.

Citing the non-availability of an alternative site, the authorities continue to dump garbage at the Ghazipur Landfill.

In a meeting of the Delhi Assembly’s Environment Committee, held in early December, East Delhi MP Gautam Gambhir promised that by December 2024, the entire garbage at the site would be processed. But the authorities have not made a plan for the shifting of the landfill.

Satish Sinha, Associate Director of Toxics Link, an environmental NGO, suggests that while processing the waste is the right thing to do, it cannot, by itself, solve the problem.

He argues that the action to tackle Delhi’s waste issue should start at a much earlier stage.

Growing pile in Bhalswa

ABHIJEET KUMAR

NEW DELHI: Poor waste management of the Bhalswa dairy landfill, whose size is increasing day by day, has created a health crisis for nearby residents.

The 65-metre high Bhalswa, situated on northern border, is the city’s second largest dump yard.

Sunita Gupta, 50, who runs a small shop nearby, said that when it rained, it is impossible to breathe and in the non-monsoon seasons, there is always a burning sensation in the eyes and lungs.

The landfill has proven dangerous for rag-pickers living in nearby slums. In August last year, a part of it had collapsed, injuring three people.

Saiful Mir, 46, said that he came to Delhi in 2004 along with his family and had been working as a rag-picker since then. Even after the entire family’s labour, Mir said their daily income was Rs. 200-300.

Sharifa Bibi, 42, Mir’s wife, said, “There is no water supply in our area for the past one month. We are taking water from our neighbour’s hand-pump,” she said.

Pointing at the water in one of the bottles, she said that the water

is extremely saline but her family has to use it for cooking and bathing.

“The skin has become very itchy in the past few weeks. But there is no other option. We can’t buy bottled water for our everyday use,” she added.

Brij Mohan, 43, who works as a paramedical staff in the Government dispensary at Bhalswa dairy, said that most of the people complained of respiratory illness and skin infections.

Due to small slum houses and unhygienic practices, people contracted skin infections from each other.

Living in such cramped up spaces worsened the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a report in The Times of India, in 2018, the standing committee of the North Delhi Corporation had undertaken plans to tackle the gas and leachate problems but the authorities have been silent on the relocation of the slums and providing the waste-pickers an alternate livelihood.

“The government should do something for their rehabilitation and seriously deal with the waste in the landfill, but no one ever does anything,” said Mohan.

Toilets constructed but people continue to use fields

Two years ago, the facility was built under Swachh Bharat Mission but there is still no proper drainage

GARIMA SADHWANI

BAKHTIYAR NAGAR (LUCKNOW): Janaki, a blind chikankari artist in this village, struggles to go to the farms to relieve herself, but she has no choice. The toilet at her home, made under the Swachh Bharat Mission, is broken. She doesn’t know whom to ask for help.

Under the Swachh Bharat Mission, 365 people here received Rs. 12,000 each to construct toilets in their homes. Sarpanch Yusuf Khan said, “Instead of hiring a contractor and getting the toilets made, we thought it would be better to directly transfer the money to each person’s account. We transferred the money in two instalments- the first half was given in 2018, and the second half in 2019 after the toilets were constructed.”

He added, “Initially we received

money only for 300 toilets. But after the process started, we had to seek an additional budget for 65 more toilets.”

However, the problems of the villagers did not end with the construction.

Fahad Khan (17), a school student, said, “There are many people who don’t use the toilets. Some have used it to store bhusa (straw).”

Sri Ram, a daily-wage labourer in his sixties, said, “In my locality [Chamar-tula, inhabited largely by lower castes], most people still relieve themselves in the open. It is impossible even to step out of home sometimes, because of the smell.” Sri Ram added, “Earlier they (the neighbours) would say that Thakurs don’t allow them to use water from the handpump in the locality, but now the Thakurs have no such objection. Yet, people are habituated to open defecation here.”



PHOTO CREDIT: GARIMA SADHWANI

“We have another problem of no running water in the house,” says Geeta, a chikankari artist.

Before the Covid-19 induced lockdown in March 2020, supervisors from the block level would come on inspection at 4 a.m. every day and those found defecating openly had to pay a penalty of Rs. 500.

But there are some people who have not even received the money to build a toilet, in the first place. Nandini Ramkumar, a housewife, said, “Everyone in my locality received the money, except me. I was told that there

is no place in my house to construct a toilet. Who are they to decide? I could’ve built it on my roof had they given me the money.”

Geeta, a chikankari artist and masseuse, said, “My daughter, Khushboo, has to use the neighbour’s toilet. My two sons and I still have to use the fields.”

Shiv Prasad (42), an NREGA worker, said, “There were a few families in every locality that were left out, because they did not have the documents.”

Yusuf Khan said, “Many problems arose after the toilets were made. We are still trying to construct drainage systems for the village. As of now, only two localities (Arkho-tula and Chamar-tula) have proper drainage systems.”

However, no one in the village admitted to defecating openly.

Open drains and swamp in Motisar

JUHI SEERNANI

MOTISAR: The village of Motisar has no proper drainage system and there are open drains everywhere. Overflowing drains and sewers built right in front of the houses in the village make the stench unbearable and the whole village becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other bacteria and viruses causing multiple diseases. The sewage drains here open up directly into the road which causes the water to pool along the road.

“When water overflows, the roads become muddy. But the government is looking into the matter,” said Gyanchand Das, a member of the Bhagwanpur Panchayat Samiti. While walking through the village, it is hard to say where the road stops and the roadside begins. It is a popular widespread feeling among the villagers that this rift between the villagers and the Panchayat stems from the fact that the Sarpanch, Keli Devi Rawat has abandoned the people of Motisar after elections and did not make any attempt to visit the village.

This issue is an old one and the residents have been battling it for a decade now.

Reservoir draws mixed reactions

Some farmers welcome Thervoy Kandigai project; others left unhappy

MEENATCHI PRABHU

TIRUVALLUR: J Elumalai refers to the gleaming, new reservoir in his town as his village's Taj Mahal.

"Did you see our town's Taj Mahal?" he asks, gesturing at the bright green and white intake tower, surrounded by the earthen bund and sloping manicured lawns of the reservoir in his village of Thervoy Kandigai.

The comparison to the Taj Mahal, a building renowned for its ethereal beauty seems particularly apt. The mausoleum built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jehan for his favourite wife was praised for its beauty but it was vilified for hastening the demise of the mughal empire, which did not recover from the cost of building it.

Just as the building of the white marble structure had its pitfalls, the pursuit of solving Chennai's water crisis had its own. The Thervoy Kandigai reservoir's construction was dogged by farmer protests, while others are full of praise, despite parting with their patta land.

Finally, seven years after it was commissioned in 2013 under the chief ministership of the late J Jayalithaa, the reservoir was inaugurated by Minister of Home Affairs Amit Shah in the last week of November.

While the farmers from one village lauded the creation of the new reservoir, those on the other



PHOTO CREDIT: MEENATCHI PRABHU

The reservoir can supply up to 60 million litres of water

side were not convinced. The first sign of trouble began a year after the proposal was submitted by the water resource department, when the farmers of Kannankottai village refused to part with their land. In March 2014, the farmers staged a road roko.

After several roadblocks due to farmer protests and monsoon rains obstructing construction, work resumed again in 2018.

Junior Engineer Padmanabhan, who has been working on the project since 2013 said that almost 600 of the 800 acres of land required for the reservoir belonged to Kannankottai village.

"We protested for many years, but it was all in vain. I had to part with 3 acres of my land," says

Kaatan, a farmer from Kannankottai.

The land owners claim that they were promised a financial compensation of four times the land value on the patta (deed), but they have only received two-and-a-half times the patta value till date.

"We're normally never home at this time. We are out there working on our fields. Now, we sit in our homes, jobless," laments Ramamoorthy, another farmer from Kannankottai.

Chitra, Deputy Tehsildar for Land Acquisitions at Kavaraipeitai says that compensation has been provided to farmers based on the Land Acquisition Act, 2013. She says compensation has been given based on the Guideline Value

(GLV), which is determined based on how much of the surrounding land has been sold.

However, just a kilometre away, the farmers of Thervoy rejoice at the coming of the reservoir. A farmer from Thervoy, says that the reservoir has ensured water supply throughout the year. "Now we can have two harvest cycles instead of one," she says.

"This reservoir is a boon to our village," says Thervoy Panchayat Head M Munivel.

"I have given nearly 4 acres of land to the government. I'm happy that this reservoir is built. Now, our fields will be drought-free," says Elumalai. He is happy that with his

help, the city of Chennai will have water all-year-round.

According to Padmanabhan, along with the four other reservoirs in the city, the Thervoy Kandigai reservoir should be able to meet Chennai's water needs. The reservoir can hold a thousand million cubic feet (1 cubic foot = 28 litres approx.) of water, if filled twice a year. The monsoons will be able to meet one-fourth the reservoir's capacity and the rest will be supplied from the Krishna river through an 8.6 km-long tunnel from the Kandaleru Poondi dam. The reservoir can supply up to 60 million litres of water every day to Chennai.

Old fears kill new dreams

Fearing elopement, parents stop girls' higher education

RIA YADAV

NASHIK: Savita Ramesh Gabale (14), a student studying in 9th grade, said she wanted to study further but knew her parents would get her married off soon. "I want to study after my 10th and get a job somewhere. I haven't figured it out yet, but I don't want to get married now," she said.

Parents in Nashik district deny young girls higher secondary education due to their fear that the girls would get into love affairs. They also worry about the safety of their children. Devargaon and two other villages: Shedpada and Vaishnavwadi have two common schools for both primary and secondary education for children. However, for higher secondary education, the children need to travel to cities.

The parents do not want to send their girls to cities. Usha Pintu, who makes fishing nets for a living, said she feared that once her 12-year-old daughter stepped out of the village, she might lose focus and run away with someone. "It is difficult to get them married if this happens. We need to maintain our image here, only then will someone accept her."

"Even if we think of sending them off, travelling is not easy.

There are no buses here, and it can be expensive for us. It can also be unsafe for our daughters," Usha continued.

Sangeeta Pintu, Usha's daughter who is now studying in the 6th grade, said she wanted to become a nurse and help people.

Shrikant Zadhavar, a government school teacher, said everyone followed the usual path: education, career, love and marriage. "With girls, it becomes a bigger deal because families don't accept such affairs. This is why they are often prevented from pursuing high school education outside the village and are married off so soon," he said.

Besides this, economic conditions play a major role in not letting girls study further.

"Most villagers do not know about student loans that the government provides for poor children," he added.

According to a UNICEF report, 7 per cent girls under the age of 15 and 27 per cent girls under the age of 18 were married in India from 2010 to 2017. Girls in Devargaon are married off at 16 or 17 years.

D L Kulkarni, an ASHA worker, said the Gram Panchayat had made attempts to spread awareness about the law that sets the legal age for marriage of girls at 18.

Unwanted and bullied at school

Students of Musahar community face caste violence

ARPIT PARASHAR

PATNA: It's yet another tale of discrimination in this country.

"Our children are thrown out of government schools because we are rat-catchers. We are untouchables and many upper caste people don't want us to be educated. They beat our children at school and many upper caste children throw away the books and bags of our children," says Hariya Mehto (53), a resident of Ambedkar Colony here.

Jhunu Ram (15), a resident of the colony, has dropped out of school and become a rag-picker.

"Once I went to the headmaster of a high school in Adalatganj, Patna, to tell him that my classmates are bullying me and they are calling me Muss-marwa[rat-killer]. But he slapped me and said, 'if they are saying so, then why are you telling me all these things; you are a mouse eater and they are saying the truth, you should accept it'," he said.

It is alleged that teachers are biased, calling children from the Musahar (rat-catcher) community dirty. Some upper caste families don't want the Musahar children to attend the same school.

When asked about the Jhunu episode, the headmaster said "We teachers shouldn't do such things. I too feel sometimes that I am overreacting." He said upper caste dominance in this area was a big problem, adding that a non-governmental organization, OXFAM, was trying to build trust between teachers and children.

Asked about discrimination against ST children, Arun Kumar Chaudhary (52), speaking on behalf of his ward councillor-wife Shobha Devi (42), said, "There are



Jhunu Ram (15), with his friend, playing a game on the mobile phone he bought after working at a restaurant.

PHOTO CREDIT: ARPIT PARASHAR

problem with the local MLA, Nand Kishore Yadav, and request him to allot one building for a government school near Ambedkar Colony.

The government school, where the slum children have been attending classes, is 12 km away. In June 2019, with OXFAM support, some families started sending their children there. But, they said their children were segregated in separate classrooms and the teachers hardly took classes for them.

Right now, schools are closed due to the pandemic. Even otherwise, most of the slum children don't want to go to school. They prefer to work at some place with their parents or as rag-pickers because their parents don't have any regular job.

Not welcome in school, these children are exploited at their work place and they end up smoking and consuming drugs, says resident Hardev Mehto.

However, some families, despite financial problems, send their children to a private school. Papu Manjhi, 40, says he is sending his two children to the nearest AVN English School. "We don't need to fear discrimination because teachers in that school are open-minded and they understand our situation," he added.

There's still a ray of hope for the slum children. Sailesh Jha (52), a nodal officer in the Rural Works Department, visits the slum after his office work at 5 p.m. and teaches them till 9 p.m.

Asked about his motivation, Mr. Jha said, "One day I came here, with a local NGO, to distribute some woolen clothes, and saw these kids collecting glass bottles and playing on a heap of garbage."

"I spoke to their parents and after listening to their problems, I decided to take tuition. Most of them now know how to write and spell their names."

It is some progress but there is a long way to go, he added.

People of the colony say they are happy with Mr. Jha's initiative because they don't have to pay tuition fees, adding he is a good man.

According to the State Mahadalit Commission's interim report, Bihar has nearly 22 lakh Musahars and out of them 96.3 % are landless and 92.5% work as farm labourers.

Upper caste Hindus still consider them untouchables and only 9.8% of Musahars are literate — the lowest among Dalits in this country.

Bihar spends about 3.7 percent of the GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product) on elementary education.

According to a news report, in a performance audit report tabled in Parliament in 2017 by the Comptroller and Auditor-General (CAG), it was indicated that Bihar had lagged in education for years and the State Government was not able to utilise over Rs. 26,500 crore from the Right to Education corpus between 2010-11 and 2015-16.



PHOTO CREDIT: R. SAI VENKATESH

Living hell: Drainage water, dumped garbage, broken pipes surround Kanagi Nagar slum

Slum-dwellers edged out

Decades-old issues persist in Chennai slums

R. SAI VENKATESH

CHENNAI: Bulldozed houses, pungent smell from the Cooum and hordes of mosquitoes: amid all this, residents of the Sathiyavani Muthu Nagar (SM Nagar) slum have been protesting for months, awaiting packed food from the Corporation and clinging to a few valuables they saved moments before their homes turned to debris.

About 500 houses were razed in the SM Nagar slum over the last month. The plan is to move them to Perumbakkam, about 28 km away, under the Rivers Restoration Project of the Chennai Rivers Restoration Trust (CRRT) and the Public Works Department (PWD).

Most men in SM Nagar are construction workers and daily wage earners. Some of them are porters, employed in the Central Railway Station, five minutes distance from the slum. To make ends meet, the women folk work as domestic helps. The residents are scared of losing their livelihoods.

"It's not as if we want to live next to the Cooum. We will move out in hours if the government relocates us to a nearby site," says one of the resident.

Over the last 20 years, slum dwellers across Chennai have been evicted to peripheral areas like Perumbakkam, Pallikarai and Thoraipakkam, where they have been given houses ranging from 100-400 square feet in multi-storey buildings or land to build new homes. Over 1,000 families from SM Nagar alone have been relocated since 2019.

What is happening to SM Nagar residents now is what happened to those who lived in a barren land near Perumbakkam in 2010. Annadurai (name changed), a member of the Residential Welfare Association, Perumbakkam, recalls the time he stood on the fallen debris of his demolished house begging for support with hundreds of others. He claims the then DMK government demolished their homes as part of a slum clearance project.

His wife adds: "When the men were away, the women were asked to get into buses by people who claimed to be government officials. They locked us up in a wedding hall for a day, demolished our homes and dropped us back."

Many residents protested, moved court and sought political support but succumbed to pressure in the end. They relocated to Bharathi Nagar, until they were allotted a house in the eight-storey building in Perumbakkam, five years later, along with slum dwellers relocated

"Some men remain unemployed and depend on their wives," he says.

Hygiene is a huge issue in the resettled sites. The Perumbakkam resettlement area houses over 17,000 families. The allotted homes are hardly 400 sq ft in size. The pipes in some old blocks have weakened over the years, causing the sewage to stagnate on the roads.

Munnusamy (name changed), who was allotted a 200 sq ft house in Kannagi Nagar after the 2004 Tsunami, says the smell from stagnant drainage water on pavements is unbearable.

In Mylai Balaji Nagar (MB Nagar) near Pallikarai, where thousands were resettled to build the Mass Rapid Transit System, there was an influx of slum dwellers between 2000 and 2010. The area lies opposite to a barren land where garbage is dumped. Residents are peeved at the poor quality of roads. Pavithra, a corporation worker at MB Nagar, digs out a piece of the road with her hands and says furiously: "This is the thickness of the road. How can heavy vehicles move?"

Poor maintenance is a perennial problem. Devakumar, a resident, points to the dirty waterlogged dump yard. "This is supposed to be a playground. This has been like this since 2002."

Besides hygiene and livelihood, the resettlements face problems which are decades old. The residents of the two-storey Tsunami quarters in Kannagi Nagar have been fetching water from a pump since 2005. None of the homes has tap water.

"Every day, there is a fight at the pump," says Munnusamy.

Parthibhan, a Chennai Metrowater official, however, points out that no resident has filed a petition for tap water. "The scheme under which they were given houses provided for only pump water."

A CRRT official says: "Government relocation is much better. Livelihood is not just about working in the area you used to work in. It is also about the quality of life you live" he said.



A pump for the entire block at the Kannagi Nagar slum

PHOTO CREDIT: R. SAI VENKATESH



PHOTO CREDIT: ARPIT PARASHAR

Children of Ambedkar Colony sit on a heap of garbage

JANUARY 15, 2021

MISCELLANY

9

Dry but still high in Bihar

ARPIT PARASHAR

PATNA: The Nitish Kumar Government imposed total prohibition on the consumption and sale of liquor in Bihar in 2016.

But, according to the latest report by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2019-20, the State consumes more alcohol than Maharashtra, where dry law is not in place.

About 15.5 per cent of the male population, aged 15 and above, drinks alcohol in Bihar, whose total population, male and female, is estimated to be about 12.4 crore.

Thanks to cross-border smuggling and other methods adopted within the State, liquor sale has defied prohibition.

An area notorious for bootlegging in the capital city is Yarpur Colony. Country liquor is made by mixing urea powder with jaggery and water; after that the mixture is fermented. In the last three years, many people died consuming the liquor.

Phulwa Devi (48), whose son Nandu Kumar (21) died last year after drinking spurious liquor, said, "Women of this colony protested outside Jakkanpur Police Station but the police officials paid no heed to our complaints and said that we are 'untouchables' so they will not file any police complaint."

She has been living for the past 70-80 years in the colony where the residents eke out a living through manual scavenging.

A 60 year-old woman, a

resident of the colony, said: "One packet of alcohol here costs Rs. 25. After the liquor ban in Bihar, many people started visiting my place because I serve pork, mutton, chicken and fish with alcohol at a reasonable price."

There are several allegations that the police turn a blind eye to the sale of liquor in return for "monetary compensation."

There are around 20 dealers in the area.

"Police constables never ask us to stop selling liquor as they know we are poor people and we don't have any other way to earn money," said Jagdish Mehto (42), a school bus driver.

A constable refused to go on record on the money collected from the colony.

When asked about reports of deaths, a sub-inspector there declined to comment on this issue.

However, Suresh Sharma (52), a resident, said, "Many women were protesting and asking for an investigation in front of the police station after a young boy died in December 2019, but they were ignored."

Asked why they drank and sold liquor unlawfully, Mehto said, "Manual scavenging is the only way of income for people like us and liquor helps us put up with the stink of cleaning human waste."

"There are around 200 families in this area and most of us are involved in this work."

"After the liquor ban we had no choice, so we started making liquor in our own house."

Lake divides poverty, affluence

Islanders face the repercussions of development on the other side of the backwaters

AISWARYA RAJ & ADARSH B. PRADEEP

KOCHI: Surrounded by water and filth sits a dilapidated moss-stained house in Thanthonni Thuruthu, an island in the backwaters of Kochi.

"The flooding has become a routine...I no longer mop up the house. I will have to do it again the very next day," said Padma



Padma Rajappan outside her home

Rajappan (80), the inhabitant of the house.

Across the lake surrounding the thuruthu (island), is a contrasting sight, where development is apace with the construction of humongous apartments by private players, a four-lane road and a leisurely walkway. These have largely been done on reclaimed lands that displaced a huge volume of water which now floods the island.

The Thanthonni Thuruthu (translated as an island with self-owned boats), is inhabited by 63 families and has no healthcare facilities or educational institutions except for an Anganwadi that was closed recently citing low turnout of children. The thuruthu can only be accessed by vanjis (small boats) owned by the islanders or through the sole ferry service operated by the government.

For procuring essentials like free rations and cooking fuel, the families have to go to the mainland in their vanjis or the government ferry and stock them up for a month.

During health emergencies like pregnancies, the islanders have to wade into the water even in the dead of the night. Thankamma Subramanyam, a 70-year-old resident of the island, whose sister suffered a stroke recently, talked about the difficulties of ferrying the latter to a hospital.

"We had to ferry her in our boat at night to a hospital 5 km away. Carrying her to the boat, then rowing across to the mainland and waiting for a ride to the hospital was a strenuous task," she said. Now, the islanders phone auto



PHOTO: AISWARYA RAJ

Padma Rajappan's home becomes an island within the Thanthonni Thuruthu

rickshaw drivers before hand and make sure that they wait for them across the lake.

"All these hardships can only be eliminated by fulfilling our long-standing demands for a bridge and a bund," she added.

Jinu Varghese, Project Director, Goshree Island Development Authority (GIDA), one of the two government agencies for the development of Kochi, said that the project for an outer bund to prevent the water ingress during a high tide was ready but the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) clearance was awaited. She said that there had been no proposal for the bridge so far.

She added that it was not

feasible to build a 372-metre-long bridge connecting the 200-metre-wide island to the mainland and that many families would be displaced in the process.

Another GIDA official said, "I tried explaining to a few dwellers the issues of constructing a bridge in the thuruthu. But they are persistent with their unfeasible demand."

Talking on the environmental clearance for the bund, Ms. Varghese said, "Countless species are a part of the fragile ecosystem of the thuruthu. Infrastructure development could disturb them."

However, a prominent environmentalist, who does not wish to be named, said that, "If

private individuals could get CRZ and environmental clearance, then there should be equal chances for the thuruthu to get a clearance for the bund to prevent the high tide ingress."

The islands adjacent to the thuruthu, are well-connected with the mainland and have all the basic amenities.

One of the islands even hosts the State's largest convention centre and a tourist destination under the jurisdiction of Kerala Tourism Department.

Despite such unequal developments, where poverty prevails on one side and affluence on the other, the demands of the islanders still fall on deaf ears.

Raised road brings down house in UP

NIHIT SACHDEVA

SAHARANPUR: The flooding started when the road in front of his house was raised by 3 ft, said Mohammed Rizwan.

Rizwan, 48, is a tailor at the Behada Khurd village in the Muzaffarabad Block here. He lives with his wife, Rizwana, and daughter, Tabassum, in a house that might turn into dust any moment. The reason: the 2014 relaying of the road outside Rizwan's house, which leads to Chhutmalpur, a major town in the district.

Rizwan said that when the level of the road was raised, his house became lower and every time it rained, water began to enter his house.

He has complained about this multiple times to local officials. Then, in 2018, a government official made a visit and took measurements of the house and its surroundings for building drains sufficiently wide to divert the rainwater away from his house.

That official retired in 2019. Rizwan feels his lawyer is also keeping him in the dark about whether a case has been filed or not.

The retired official and the lawyer could not be reached for comment.

"Chaar daafa gir chuki hai



Mohd Rizwan at his shop

deewar," (The wall has fallen down four times), he said.

Rizwan's daughter Tabassum alleged that their plight was because they were Muslim in a Rajput dominated village.

To be sure, there is no evidence that Rizwan's religion played any role. But state-watchers say any development activity in Uttar Pradesh always has a social and political angle.

Sidharth Mishra, a senior journalist and former editor of The Pioneer in Delhi said, "The dominant caste always draws the contours of development in a particular area."

"By dominant caste, one does



Cracks in the wall of Rizwan's house are getting bigger.

not necessarily mean the upper caste. It is the vote bank of the party which is in power. In Mayawati and Mulayam Singh's time, former Uttar Pradesh Chief Ministers, it was the Dalits and the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) respectively while at present, for the Bharatiya Janata Party, it is the

Rajputs."

According to Census 2011, Behada Khurd has a total population of 3,443 people which includes Dalits and Muslims but dominantly, the Rajputs.

Behada Khurd panchayat president Suman Rana could not be reached for comment.

Sealed Nepal border prevents access to Indian healthcare

MAYANK KUMAR

SITAMARHI: In September, Madhusudan Kumar, from Nepal's border district of Dhanusa, wanted to come to India for his appendix surgery. But, he found that he couldn't because a global pandemic and the escalating tensions between India and Nepal kept the border sealed.

The 51 transit points along the way were sealed and the once friendly security men were now grim and serious.

To make matters worse, Nepal Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli blamed unrestricted border crossings by Indians for the escalating COVID-19 crisis in his country.

"For any medical emergency we used to visit Indian hospitals which are hardly 30 km away. Now with the restrictions, we have to travel 240 km to Kathmandu for the treatment," said Mr. Kumar.

Nepal and the Indian state of Bihar share a 640-km-long border, with 14,000 villages close to it spread across seven districts of Bihar and three provinces of Nepal.

The long history of India and Nepal date back to the times of the origin of Buddhism.

Today, the citizens of either

country do not need a passport or a visa to visit the other, resulting in an unusually close bond between the people who lived close to the border.

The restriction-less travel led to a situation where Nepali people on the border area was fully dependent on the Indian side for medical treatment and groceries because it was nearer and cheaper.

All that changed due to the lockdowns and with Mr. Oli blaming Nepal's COVID misery on India.

"We used to buy our clothes and vegetables from Indian markets as they were cheap, but now we have to buy them at higher prices in Nepal," said Nawal Mehto, a school teacher.

For people in Sitamarhi, the crisis is disastrous.

"In my village, almost all families have relatives in Nepal. Family members are not able to meet each other since the lockdowns," said Devesh Kumar Thakur, a villager from Riga at the Indian side.

Ajay Kumar, an Indian businessman running a small factory in Rautahat district of Nepal, said "We have land and business set-up in Nepal, it is unimaginable to live with these

restrictions. We are one family, separated by COVID regulations."

Many feel that things have turned from bad to worse since June 12, when the Nepal paramilitary forces opened fire along the Indo-Nepal border under Sonbarsa police station, in which an Indian national was killed and two others were injured.

"Never has a bullet been fired at the Indo-Nepal crossing in the past, I cannot call it a border as it is practically not one," said Rana Tej Pratap, former principal of a local college under Bihar University.

Anil Kumar Jha, a senior leader of Nepali Sadbhavna Party, said "Everything will again get back to normal after the pandemic."

"The unprecedented situation generated due to the pandemic has forced both the governments to seal all crossings connecting the border villages. It is a matter of few weeks," he added.

The Indian officials also agreed that things would get back to normal after the pandemic.

"We understand the problems of the people residing at the border. The people of Nepal are suffering more due to the lack of infrastructure," said a Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) official requesting anonymity.

Rohingyas brave poor camp conditions, Islamophobia

PALLAVI KESWANI

NEW DELHI: "That's not ours. That belongs to the Indians", said Abdul* (32), pointing to a farmland, less than a kilometer from the Yamuna river. Abdul's family is among the 55 Rohingya families living in a refugee camp at Madanpur Khadar, South Delhi.

Kachha huts built of tattered tent cloth draped on wooden frames line the small settlement on the roadside. A large metal board announces that the site belongs to the Uttar Pradesh Irrigation Department. A small, makeshift mosque stands next to the board.

Social distancing is a cruel joke for the families that live in shared huts. "My parents live with three other elders," said Abdul.

Over 250 people share four handpumps for their water needs,

including drinking. Many suffer from water-borne diseases. They rush to the nearest private clinics as getting treated at government hospitals is an ordeal. "We have tried going to government hospitals but the people there make a huge fuss over our identity cards. We have only the ID card provided by the UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees]," said Abdul. Many women give birth to children at the camp itself because of the problem.

"I was the first from my family to come to India," said Abdul. He then brought his parents, wife, and three children. They were housed in a camp at a different location, on land owned by the Zakat Foundation, an NGO. A fire in April 2018 destroyed much of his belongings, including the identity proofs given by the UNHCR. The

camp residents then moved to the present site.

While most men work at construction sites, a few, including Abdul, have bought e-rickshaws. Some like Zubair* make use of the skills they learned back home. Working in a shop, Zubair undertakes translation projects for Google in his spare time. He knows eight languages, and translates from the Burmese and Rohingya languages to English. Zubair's family is among a handful of the camp residents who own smartphones. His two sisters study online at the Jamia Milia Islamia Senior Secondary School. Most of the children attended the school adjoining the site before the lockdown.

Besides the UNHCR and some NGOs, residents of the nearby JJ Colony also help the refugees.

Pradeep Sinha,*42, a fish vendor, said "I bring about 15 to 16 kg of fish. I know everyone by name and I trust them to pay honestly. I take what they give me after everyone finishes buying."

Rehman* (57), a local tailor, said "I don't have much to offer monetarily, but I feel the need to check upon them."

The Rohingya refugees, who fled to India after religious persecution in Myanmar, have also had to deal with targeted Islamophobia. Since the camp is located very close to Shaheen Bagh, the epicenter of the anti-CAA protests last year, the refugees were aware of what was happening. "We didn't dare to step out of the camp during that time," said Abdul.

In April last year, after some visitors at a Tablighi Jamaat event

tested positive for COVID-19, the Ministry for Home Affairs asked the States to trace the Rohingya refugees who had attended the same and test them. "They tested the entire camp twice. Not one tested positive", said Zubair.

According to the UNHCR, 18,000 registered Rohingya refugees stay in different States of India. The Centre, however, has maintained that the total number of refugees in India is 40,000, including those who entered "illegally." In September 2017, the Centre told the Supreme Court that it considered the refugees as a "serious security threat."

At the South Delhi camp, the refugees express their wish to return. "Who doesn't want to go back home," asked Abdul.

(*Names have been changed on request, to protect identities.)

Alone, over the hills and far away



"I'm afraid of using gas cylinders. I have seen on TV how women get burnt using gas stoves. We collect fallen wood for our stoves," said A.S. Putty, who lives alone. Putty was a worker in an estate at Kodagu, Karnataka, where she faced sexual and physical exploitations. Widowed, she forages in the deep forests, goes alone to the ration store 2 km away and spends her time raising livestock. "Pythons swallow eggs from the chicken coop," she said.

Minimum wages out of their reach

Poor pay, private borrowings keep Karnataka's domestic helpers perennially in debt

MEDHA NIDHI S

BENGALURU: Kavitha Lokesh, 30, moves around barefoot, adding colour to the room in her bright pink saree. She goes through her routine of sweeping, collecting the dust into a pan and disposing it. She surveys the room to make sure everything is in order. Then, she gets ready to talk. As she speaks of her life in Kukkur village near Talakadu in the Tirumakudalu Narasipura Taluk, Mysuru, Kavitha paints a picture of what life is like for domestic workers.

Every morning, she wakes up and finishes her daily chores - sweeping the house, cooking, bathing her children, feeding the cattle - before walking 5.1 km to work, where she does more of the same. Kavitha works as a domestic helper at an eight-acre farm estate-cum-homestay close to her village.

The first thing she does is change into her saree and wait for instructions. Her duties include

sweeping and mopping the three homestay rooms and the main farmhouse. She then clears the mango leaves on the yard. After a 15-minute break, when she is served breakfast and tea, she washes the utensils and checks if there is anything else to be done. After finishing the day's work, she waits for a relative to pick her up in the evening. For her work, she is paid a little more than Rs. 3000 a month.

Informal borrowings

Kavitha's husband died by suicide three years ago, leaving her alone with two boys, aged seven and four. She was burdened with many responsibilities, the most pressing of which was paying off loans. "We took loans because we needed money to feed the cows and treat my husband's leg. We took a loan of Rs 3.5 lakhs for his treatment. I'm still paying that off," says Kavitha who took an additional loan of Rs 1 lakh to keep the household running after her husband's death. "They are



Making ends meet: Kavita Lokesh (inset) at her workplace, a farm estate-cum-homestay, in Kukkur village, Talakad, Karnataka

informal 'hand-loans' from people in the village. There is still Rs. 2.5 lakhs to be repaid," she says. In Karnataka, the percentage of credit accessed formally through banks

and co-operative societies is 68%. Kavitha is among the 32 % who borrow informally.

Lakshamma, a tailor, works as a domestic help in three houses in

Jayanagar, Bengaluru. Like Kavitha, she too depends on informal loans from her employers. Her son needed a phone for his online classes, for which she took a loan of Rs. 20,000. Lakshamma makes close to Rs. 5,000 a month and even less from her tailoring job. The family depends mainly on her husband, who works as a mechanic for Rs 10,000 a month.

Most vulnerable

Dhahna Moktan is a migrant worker from Basantapur in Nepal. She moved to Delhi with her husband seven years ago. In 2016, she came to Bengaluru for better job prospects.

Dhahna works as a domestic help and her husband is a security guard. "I get Rs 2000 from every house and I work in six houses," says Dhahna, who has a three-year-old daughter and is pregnant with her second child.

Domestic workers are among the most vulnerable sections. According to a 2013 report of the International Labour Organisation,

there are over 4.75 million domestic workers in India. The report states that changing cultural norms in urban spaces saw both men and women entering the workforce, resulting in an increased demand for domestic workers.

On the other hand, the agrarian crisis in rural India forced more

villagers to migrate to the city, with women taking up jobs as domestic help.

Karnataka is one of the few States that has set a minimum wage for domestic workers.

The Labour Commissioner revised the minimum wages in 2020-2021. But the law is hardly implemented.

What the law says

According to the 2017 notification issued by the Karnataka Department of Labour and Skill Development, the minimum wages for domestic workers for washing clothes, dishes, cleaning and cooking was Rs.37.50 for the first hour, followed by Rs.22.50 for successive hours. For eight hours of work, it is Rs.195 a day, at the monthly wage at Rs.5,070.

Rs.13,000 a month. Besides poor wages, the other grievances of domestic workers which remain unaddressed are overwork without weekly offs and lack of insurance and pension.

A study by Rohan Gudibande and Arun Jacob concluded: "Notifying minimum wages alone cannot make much difference to the lives of domestic workers. A strong, transparent monitoring mechanism accompanying such legislation, is critical."

In 2019, this was revised to

Rural work scheme to their rescue

A SRILEKHA

THIRUVANNAMALAI:

Kannappilai (70), as an adult member of a rural household, is eligible for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). However, the money is not enough. "Corona has hit our lives badly," he says. Farming, right now, is so economically unviable that he cannot repay his loans, he adds.

Nearly 30% of the 800-odd households in Pulavanpadi, a village near Arni in the Thiruvannamalai District, are covered by the scheme.

Right now, many are working on repairing the damage caused by the Nivar cyclone. They will work every day for four months (around 100 days), earning Rs 110 each day. The scheme has been particularly beneficial for people who lost their jobs during the pandemic.

While timely payment seems to be a problem — Rama, a 45-year-old resident of Pulavanpadi, says that workers haven't been paid for a month — the scheme is beneficial for adults who cannot do heavier work. Uma, a supervisor, believes that the scheme has benefited women. "Many women are working here," she says.

Anbalagan, a deputy block development officer, says while the project ensures some work, it does have other complexities.

Some people sign up for this but go and work somewhere else, he claims, adding that "a larger number of people have joined the MGNREGS this year because of the pandemic."

Tamil Nadu street theatre artists struggle to keep dying art alive

R SAI VENKATESH

CHENNAI: Cheenu, who irons clothes for a living, hundred metres away from a white building with a security guard and an old ambassador car, never knew it was a government office all along.

"This is the recognition we get after working for so many years," Kumaragurudasan, a Research Fellow at the State Resource Centre (SRC), Adyar, says. For years now, recruitments for the SRC have been put on hold by the Ministry of Human Resource and

Development (MHRD). He points to a series of dusty wooden chairs and cubicles in his office and remarks: "There were 30 people in this office. Now there are just seven. This number will also reduce soon."

Kumaragurudasan is a street theatre artist with a doctorate in theatre. A major part of his work involves hiring and training private street artists across Tamil Nadu to perform shows and create awareness among people. Street theatres, especially *Therukoothu*, puppet shows, *Veedhi Naatakam*

(open street plays), etc., are some of the prominent forms that attract people's attention. Song and dance are the popular modes of communication.

Kumaragurudasan says street plays and their audience were in a state of decline even before the pandemic struck. However, he feels, those who have been watching street plays will remain loyal to them, irrespective of technological strides. "We establish a live, physical relationship with the crowd, something which cinemas and mobile phones cannot

do", he says. "For instance," he points out, awareness on issues like paliyal vankodumai (sexual abuse) and sex education are better conveyed in villages through street theatre."

COVID-19 effect

Since the major objective of street plays is to spread awareness on important issues, the artists perform in crowded areas. But the pandemic and lockdowns prohibited large gatherings, rendering them jobless.

"Gathering crowds after the unlock was also a problem even though the artists adhered to social distancing and other COVID norms", Chandran, a performing artist of 22 years, says. Chandran hails from Erode and comes from a family of street theatre artists. But the profession does not give him financial stability. He and his team earn about Rs 600 per show excluding food and other expenses.

"As the number of shows has come down, the income has dwindled. "The artists take up odd jobs when they are not performing, while some just drift away", he says.

After the unlock phase, Chandran signed up for three shows to create safety awareness among the public. He relies on his income from teaching at a local school in Erode.

According to Kumaragurudasan, the lack of funds from the Central government is one major reason for the decline in street theatre.

"The government is scared that we will conduct shows, criticising its policies and influence the audience," he alleges.



Therukoothu artists, performing to create awareness on water pollution

Pattambi potters in a fix over rule

MANEESH T

PALAKKAD: Government rules against mining for clay has made life hard for Kumbharans, a community of potters in Palakkad district's Pattambi.

The Kumbharans are a caste based community of some 36 families who - legend has it - migrated from Andhra Pradesh. They practise their caste-based occupation, but find it hard because the Kerala government forbids the mining of clay.

Earlier, they used to collect clay from the fields lining the banks of the Nila river, locally known as the Bharathapuzha, says Ponnu, 44,

According to the Department of Mining and Geology survey report in 2016, the 'Kerala Conservation of Paddy Land and Wetland Act, 2008' imposed restrictions on mining of tile/brick clays, citing

the chances of water shortage. The government also set up District Expert Committees to monitor and control the mining of ordinary clay. Ponnu, who set up his own kiln and an adjacent pottery wholesale store in Palakkad seven years ago, says he is now forced to import clay from tile companies to meet the needs. He also brings in what he calls 'Bangalore clay', which costs him Rs.65,000 for a truckload.

Ponnu, who makes pots, well rings, and other home decorative items, says his business has fallen drastically since the pandemic. A large slump in the sales also meant that there were layoffs of some of the workers, he said.

Talking about the unavailability of clay, he says big tile companies have government passes and agents but he does not have access to them.

RISHIKUMAR MOHANLAL

MAHABALIPURAM: "You are the first to ask how we survived the pandemic" says F. Irudhayam, 75, a tourist guide at Mahabalipuram, registered with the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department Corporation (TTDC). On December 14, 2020, the monuments of the UNESCO world heritage site opened for tourists - after months of Covid-enforced lockdown.

The town, which used to be teeming with people from across the globe, wears a desolate look. The livelihood of all those depending on the tourism industry, including tourist guides, people running budget hotels and sculptors, has taken a hit.

The guides narrate their tale of woes, standing near the famous Arjuna's Penance. K. Rajendran, 68, head of the local guides' association, says, "The Kerala

government announced a financial assistance of Rs 10,000 to tourist guides and maintenance assistance to house boat owners to tide over the pandemic. The Tamil Nadu government gave us Rs.1000 and some ration, that's all."

Says R. Stalin (39): "During the tourist season, our monthly income used to be anywhere between Rs.15,000 and Rs.25,000. Look at our plight now" A few guides took up odd jobs like masonry and welding to sustain themselves.

Much of the tourism industry in Mahabalipuram is dependent on international tourists. "With no tourist visa being issued, I have lost all hopes of seeing an international tourist anytime soon," says Kanniyappan.

Another attraction at Mamallapuram is the famous stone sculpture. How did the sculptors survive the lockdown? "My workers were with me all these years, how could I let go off them,"



Tourist guides outside Arjuna's Penance, Mahabalipuram

asks Thangavel Bhaskar (58), an art master and founder of Creative Sculptors Workshop. Bhaskar says he used to pay his workers anywhere between Rs.15,000 and Rs.18,000 a month before the lockdown. "There is no fixed sum now. All my workers agreed to

work despite the pay cut."

A smaller sculptor, R. Mohanakrishnan, is disappointed that the sector did not get any subsidy or GST relief during the difficult period.

The narrow lane of Othavada Street leads to a scenic coast.

Double whammy for these farmers

UJWALA POTHARAZU

WARANGAL: Farmers of Kamarapet village, Warangal, struggle as they do not have adequate water supply. While the pandemic impacted their export, rains in October destroyed their crops and homes.

There are 10 families in the village, all into farming. They cultivate cotton, paddy, maize, red gram and groundnut.

However, this year, "instead of the usual 30-bag/acre yield, we got only 15 bags," says Sambasiva Rao (32), a farmer.

"Initially the government asked us to grow fat rice; later it demanded more of thin rice," says farmer G. Rajitha (37).

The Telangana government promised to pay double the price

for thin rice, she says. But it did not happen. "We were already dealing with losses; additionally, there was the pandemic. We have fallen into very bad times."

For women, especially, the pandemic was hard. "I had to work in the fields, come home and do household work and manage my children," says Rajitha.

The pandemic has also gravely impacted the future of many farmers' children. They are well-educated and once held city jobs. But due to the pandemic, they lost their jobs and had to return to agriculture.

Sambasiva Rao is one of them. "I am an MBA, and due to unemployment, I had to return to my village. Even here, there is no profit. I have a family, and I need to look after them," says Rao.

Mahabalipuram, a shadow of its past

Known as a backpacker's paradise, it is filled with budget hotels and restaurants.

On a regular day during the tourist season, the street is full of foreigners and local tourists. Now, the street is empty.

"It's been nine months since we got any room bookings. The restaurant gets a few customers and we have started door delivery" says Vivek, 55, who owns the Blue Elephant lodge which has a hundred rooms.

"There was a time when there was no parking space on this street" he recalls. V. Vedantham, 52, who owns the Pallava Dynasty, says that he used to get bookings only from foreigners who stayed on for months.

Most of his bookings are from travel portals. The post-lockdown cancellation and refunds have put the entire industry in doldrums. "Nobody wants to take the liability," says Vedantham.

Stigma, maladies and sufferings

AISWARYA RAJ

POONTHURA: On a beach in Poonthura, Thiruvananthapuram, about 20 fishermen sang an elegy to the ground beneath their feet, slowly being stolen by the sea as they hurled their fishing nets. As they stood on the now 20 metre-wide beach, which was one km wide 15 years back, they sang praising the sea mother and the fish they caught in the nets.

Poonthura, situated 10 km away from Thiruvananthapuram Central, bears little resemblance to the “misbehaving lot” picture, portrayed by the media. When the pandemic struck, the first case of community outbreak was reported here. Lockdown followed, military personnel were deployed and the movement of the locals was closely monitored.

“The mayhem in this town was extensively covered by the media. The locals were seen coughing at the healthcare workers who came to collect samples and assembled with no regard to physical distancing,” said Herman Eldaphonse, a 25-year-old man. “However, our hardships due to sea incursion, sea erosion seldom make news,” he said.

There were no quarantine centres or hospitals for Covid patients in Poonthura. “Patients from Poonthura said that they were ill-treated in quarantine centres. The family members of these people were enraged. This caused the misdemeanour when the health workers came here for testing. I am not justifying their conduct, but the context was removed when this issue came in the news,” said Simpson Xavier, secretary at the St. Thomas Church.

Herman said “Life is hard for us especially after the pandemic. Earlier we had to bear classist remarks, now we are seen as the carriers of the disease even though we fare better than other places in the district.” The daily number of covid cases has been less than three for several weeks, according to data issued by the Primary Health Centres.

The people’s plight increased manifold after the Covid-induced lockdown as the entire area was shut down for six months. They could not go into the sea for more than five months.

“The beach was wide for 100 fishermen to sell together their catch 15 years ago, now the width has dwindled,” said Peraprais, a 55-year-old fisherman.

The houses nearest to the sea are under the 50-metre distance and they are flooded during high tide. “The Rs 10 lakh provided by the government for rehabilitation is too less an amount. The sea is the life and livelihood for everyone here, who would leave it?” he said.

Adequate measures like geo-tubes and groynes for curbing the frequency and intensity of sea incursion and erosion have not been built in Poonthura. The demands were made since the coast was hit by cyclone Ockhi.

There are almost 40 fishermen from Poonthura still missing after the Ockhi disaster.

“At the year end, people make offerings in church for dead people. Some women do not offer prayers for their missing family members with the hope that they might be stranded in some islands and will return someday,” said Herman.

Panchayat has managed to keep the peace between T.N., A.P. fishermen at Pulicat

R. SAI VENKATESH

PAZHAVERKADU: Crows flutter against a brisk breeze to grab prawns laid out near boats moored to the shore while fishermen sit separating their catch from the nets. A few tourists admire the scenic view of the lagoon in front of them, wondering whether they should spend Rs 1000 on a boat ride across. Another day at the Pazhaverkadu or the Pulicat Lake, Thiruvallur, Tamil Nadu!

The fishermen of Pulicat readily narrate their tales of livelihood, poverty, tourism, types of fish in the lake, fishing nets and auctions. But the most interesting story is one of the decades-old rivalry with the fishermen of Andhra Pradesh across the border. From stealing nets to assaulting and even killing one another, they have seen it all. Thankfully for them, the tensions have reduced a great deal now.

Rajasekar, a fisherman, says the three-decade animosity is “almost extinct.” Rajasekar is one of the 500 fishermen families living near the Pazhaverkadu lagoon. He learnt fishing at a very young age and has seen many incidents of violence between the fishermen of the two States.

Ilayaraja agrees with Rajasekar. “Fishermen from A.P. even come to these waters, stay here for a week or two, fish and go back” he says. But he is quick to point out that some of their fishing habits do cause “trouble.”

The A.P. fishermen, he claims, use the surrunku valai (large nets used to catch thousands of fish) or rakshasa valai (monstrous nets), which harms fishing.

The net traps the food that fish feed on, leaving the fishing ground devoid of fish, says Ilayaraja. “When we see such activities from



Fishermen of Korai Kupparam, Pulicat. Some have seen violence between A.P. & T.N. groups in the past

their end, we take their nets away and wait for the panchayat to resolve the issue.”

Boundary demarcation is another festering issue. R. Selvaraj, an overseer at the Tamil Nadu Fisheries Department, says a series of three to four palm trees, decided upon in the past, still acts as the “boundary line.”

Muruga, a 26-year-old fisherman, affirms that the palm tree demarcation is followed in villages across the lagoon. Disputes are resolved by an unofficial panchayat, where a truce is enforced by the concerned villages.

“You are treated as an outsider if you don’t adhere to the panchayat ruling”, he says.

The tension between the

fishermen of the two States bordering the lake was effectively captured by novelist Radhakrishnan in his book Pazhaverkadu Varalaaru (The history of Pazhaverkadu).

According to him, the fishing habits of those residing in the villages along the Sriharikota island (Andhra Pradesh) to the Pazhaverkadu lagoon (Tamil Nadu) triggered a series of attacks for three decades, from the 1980s.

He talks of a particular incident in which fishermen from A.P. set fire to villages near Thirumalai Nagaram and Arambakkam in Tamil Nadu. A panchayat meeting was convened and the villages entered a truce, agreeing on allotted timings to fish.

The panchayat has managed to

keep the truce. “When a hundred people fight, it is hard to pick out the instigator and even harder to jail all of them,” says Radhakrishnan. Most issues, thus, are resolved by the panchayat or the village elders.

The local police Naik, R. Prabhu Deva, 26, agrees he has very little to do to control crime in the villages.

But the shadows of the past refuse to go away. Muruga says Andhra fishermen sometimes tie the Tamil Nadu fishermen to their boats when they go to their territory to catch fish, the truce notwithstanding.

“They still see us as outsiders. You have to ask them five or six times for a glass of water. But the tensions do not go out of hand.”

Photo Credit: R Sai Venkatesh

TIRUCHENDUR: “I am getting myself trained for the TNPSC exam without spending a single penny and that is because of ‘Thoondil’.” said Tina Vaz (23), from Chettivilai, near Tuticorin. This girl was referring to a non-governmental organisation, Thoondil’ Foundation, which was started in 2018 to enhance skills and talent, apart from promotion of academics, among students.

This is one of the NGOs launched by passionate youngsters to promote extracurricular activities among schoolchildren in coastal villages of Tuticorin.

“We extend our training and services to develop innovative ideas among students and try to bring them out,” said Mr. Trison Fernando (25) of Thoondil .

At first the people from the villages of Periyathalai, Thisayanvilai, Padukkappathu, Chettivilai, all in Tuticorin district, and many other places did not believe in these organisations but now they trust them more than they do schools. Most of the children from these places dropped out after class 10 due to poverty and in the absence of a higher secondary school. Thoondil focuses on extra-curricular activities among these children which they otherwise would not pursue. “In the beginning we randomly chose 5 students from each village and lately we have succeeded in our approach,” said Maria Joseph(43), one of the tutors. Thoondil handles more than 1000 students. More than 60 % of the students have discovered their talent and started to work on it.

Eera Kaattru, started a year ago, is another NGO that encourages schoolchildren to showcase their talent in dance, singing, art work and sports in various villages.

It trains the children in *silambattam* (a weapons based martial art). The villagers are happy about it.

Literally, on the road

GAUTHAM S

CHENNAI: On the streets of St. Thomas Mount here, a group of families has been living in a kind of settlement for more than 10 years now, without a proper house. Selling bottled phenyl and cleaning acid is their only livelihood.

M.Raja (32), head of one of the families, who has been living in Chennai even since he was born, says that during day, all of them spend their time on the road.

At night, and when it rains, they find shelter under the elevated tracks of the St.Thomas Mount Metro Station.

“My father, when he came to Chennai, did not get a ration card. That was the problem; since then, nobody in my family has had any chance to get any official document for ourselves,” he says.

Raja, father of two, says that of the more than 25 families living there, near the St. Thomas Mount Railway Station, only 10 remain now.

For the others, the Tamil Nadu government allotted houses at Padappai, 13 km from Tambaram.

The 10 families, including his, did not get the benefit because they were in their native place, Salem, when houses were allotted. “I hope they give me a house at least before Pongal next year [2021],” he says.

Referring to the new location, Vishwa (40), another head of a family, says, “It was like being on the Andaman Islands, very far away from the people and places you know.”

“I once visited the houses that were given to the other families. It will be difficult to do business there.”

He says, “The other people who live near the [allotted] houses at Padappai, choose to pick fights with us because we are poor.”

Both Raja and Vishwa say that it is the women and children who struggle every day on the streets.

There are no proper bathrooms and toilets and they are forced to do everything in the open.

Alandur Corporation officials were not available for comment

WAY TO GO



A fisherman out on Kadalundi river, Kozhikode. Originating from the Western Ghats, Kadalundi is a major river in the area, in addition to the Chiyar, Bharatapuzha and the Tirur river. The rainfed river runs for 130 km before draining into the sea

PHOTO CREDIT: R KAMALA MENON

R KAMALA MENON

PERINTALMANNA: “What sarkar? It has done nothing for us,” says Janaki, a tribal from the Panambi SC Colony. The colony is situated at a height of 1200 ft on top of a hill.

The eight tribals living here belong to the Kattunaikan community. Their houses are built on loosely placed bricks and wooden planks, and tattered clothes hang from the hill. Cattle, hens and dogs roam freely around the houses.

“We don’t have water or electricity. We walk down this hill to buy medicines and groceries. If we fall sick, we don’t visit hospitals. Yes, we have an excellent view with no use at all,” says Rajan, Janaki’s husband.

“An ordeal!”

“We have to climb down the hill to fetch water. It’s not easy as we are all getting old. We carry pots and several bottles on our head,” says Neeli, feeding her chickens in her hut. In 2017, the Kerala government set up four bathrooms, blue vertical boxes, near their homes. “With no water or proper ventilation, the bathroom is of no

use. When we use it, the waste, instead of flushing down, comes up and the odour is unimaginable,” says Rajan. The people of the colony still defecate in the open

‘Poor menstrual hygiene’

With no proper toilets and water facilities, menstrual hygiene is another big issue. “I use neither sanitary pad nor cloth. I bathe regularly,” says Shandha, mother of two girls.

Janaki is, quite understandably, bitter. “The government has been making false promises for years. Politicians climb this hill only when they come to ask for votes,” she says.

Her three children stay in a hostel run by an NGO so that they can pursue their education without any hindrance. Rajan is the only person who goes to work from the colony.

“I cut weeds, climb coconut trees and build wooden fences. I earn between Rs 600 and Rs 900 a day.” For the government, the small settlement hardly seems to matter. An amount of Rs 1 crore has been sanctioned to meet the tribal communities’ basic necessities. But none of the money seems to have been used in the Panambi SC colony.

Desperate fishermen double up as boatmen to keep afloat

GAUTHAM S

PAZHAVERKADU: In the busy market lane here, you hear typical cacophony, of people selling fish, eateries serving breakfast and the commotion of morning traffic.

Amid this, A. Rajasekar, 35, comes close to you and asks, “Do you want to go boating?” He is a fisherman who doubles up as a boatman.

Like him, almost all natives of Pazhaverkadu, also known as Pulicat, a small fishing town 60 km north of Chennai, are fisherfolk. Rajasekar says that for the past two generations his family

has been in the fishing trade. but he doesn’t want his children to follow in his footsteps. Why? There is lot of competition but very little income, he says.

“Fishing as a profession is dying. The income from this alone is not enough to run the family and so I’m forced to work at harbours as a dock worker.” He says the meagre profit that he earns from fishing cannot be taken home and he reinvests it in the trade.

R. Anandhan (32), says that when his father entered the trade 30-40 years ago, there was business for at least 11 months a year because of abundance of fish, but now they are very hard to find. The business slowly dwindled to



Moored boats of Pazhaverkadu fishermen

six months, and now you are lucky if you get business twice a month, he says.

“Nowadays, since we are out of work most of the time, women of

our families go to work to make ends meet. There is no other option.”

Many fishermen, like Rajasekar, are offering boat rides, to tourists

PHOTO CREDIT: GAUTHAM S

visiting Pazhaverkadu, to earn an income during the days they do not go fishing. He says that out of about 20,000 fishermen in the four panchayats around Pazhaverkadu, 100-200 offer boat rides.

R. Selvaraj (33), Fish Overseer at the Fisheries Department office here, says the government has come up with welfare schemes to help the fishermen.

Under one of them, ‘National Savings-cum-Relief’ Scheme, a fisherman should generate Rs. 1500 over nine months, and the State Government and the Centre will each contribute a matching sum. The amount, Rs. 4,500, will be given to the fisherman in three instalments during the lean/ban

period. Selvaraj says each fisherman family that has a family card will get Rs. 5000 once, as an allowance during the lean period.

A. Linges, a 24-year-old diploma holder from SP Kupparam, near here, however, says Rs. 5000 is not enough to run the family.

M.K. Sharif (54), Tamil Nadu president of the Chennai Fish Vendors’ Association, says, “The amount that the Government gives fishermen is similar to the amount that will be given for the Pongal festival next month; it is not of great help but there is no option.”

During the ban, fishing is prohibited to aid in conservation of the species, as this period considered the breeding season.

Even art scarred by caste

A Kerala Dalit panchavadyam artist speaks on the discrimination in his profession

MANEESH T

PALAKKAD (KERALA): When Kalamandalam Chandran (57), one of the pioneers in panchavadyam (an orchestra of five instruments), an indigenous art form of Kerala, reached the Nemmara Temple to perform, he was happy. The year was 1987.

Soon, the organisers, much to his dismay, told him that he should not perform during the day. They did not directly tell him the reason, but he knew it. He was a Dalit, a member of a formerly untouchable caste, and they did not want the crowd to know it.

Decades after Travancore King Balarama Varma's 'Temple Entry Proclamation,' which allowed people like Chandran into temples, caste hierarchies and blatant discrimination still exist in Kerala.

Continuing prejudices

Chandran is a living example of how caste segregations have continued to undermine talent in the name of caste in Kerala.

"My name doesn't have a 'tail' like other names do. That is where the problem lies," says Chandran, with 47 years of experience in drumming Thimila (one of the panchavadyam instruments) in over 7,000 shows across the world. His name also features in the Limca Book of Records for leading the largest panchavadyam performance.

Despite the laurels that he has



Kalamandalam Chandran

received over the years, the Dalit identity has always pulled him back.

Rejection and disrespect have been a constant throughout his career, he says.

Born in a Scheduled Caste family in Peringode, a place that is known across the State for its panchavadyam performers, Chandran took his first steps into the arena at the age of nine.

After learning Chenda (another percussion instrument) in the initial years, he went to the Kerala Kalamandalam in Thrissur in 1980, to change to the Thimila.

"My father used to cut and shape stones, and earned Rs.14 for every 100 stones. From that, he would pay Rs.5 as my fee," he remembers.

In Kalamandalam, he was a disciple of Annamanada Parameswaran Maraar, the first person to theorise panchavadyam and write a book on it.

"Performing Thimila, Chenda and Idakka (an hourglass-shaped drum) was restricted to the upper castes. The norm continues even now," says Chandran, adding that he was the first member of the Scheduled Caste to pass out from Kalamandalam in Thimila playing.

After getting out of the Kalamandalam, and performing in festivals across the State, Chandran got a taste of the reality.

In one instance, his co-performers, all of them belonging to the higher castes, backed off from performing alongside him.

"If I am the *pramathi* (the leader) in a performance, how can the higher caste people perform under me," asks Chandran, rhetorically.

Now a visiting professor at Kalamandalam, Chandran recalls one of his experiences in another school. One by one, the students started dropping out of his classes. "They came to know who I was.

Caste is like a sticker on my forehead," he says.

Bias in temples

Talking about temple performances, Chandran says there are temples that do not allow Dalits to perform inside its walls, even now. "In the Guruvayur temple, it has always been like that."

Even decades after movements like the Guruvayur Satyagraha, which gave the Dalits the right to enter its premises, this discrimination in the name of "norm" continues. "During the Ilanjithara melam [a concert] at the Thrissur pooram, you can see only the 'Maraars' and the 'Pothuvals' [two higher castes] performing; not the Dalits," he adds.

Chandran, who has filed two cases in the Kerala High Court, has also demanded information under the RTI on the Guruvayur Dewaswom. He has written a book "Thimilayile Jathikkalam" (The caste-period in Thimila), and wants more people to come out and be vocal about the discrimination.

"The problem here is not someone's lesser talented in the art; It is the artist himself," he says.

"My name doesn't have a 'tail' like other names do. That is where the problem lies."

In need of help & sympathy

Transpersons like Sony are denied jobs, forced to beg

UJWALA POTHARAZU

SECUNDERABAD: Sony, a transwoman in Secunderabad, has been struggling since the pandemic struck last year. Like most trans people, she has no choice but to beg for a living. There are no other jobs for her.

However, during the lockdown, she could no longer beg because the railway stations were closed. The transpersons received no support from the government, says Sony. "A Christian missionary group provided us with 5 kg rice and 2 kg of pulses, sugar, oil and other groceries."

Devastating impact

For transpeople, already struggling from a lack of job opportunities, sexual harassment and constant mockery, the pandemic has been devastating. There are around one lakh transgenders in the Secunderabad area, according to an NGO.

Sony (36) is one of them. She was born male but began developing female hormones at the age of seven. In 2015, she went for a gender reassignment surgery. Her family did not support her decision, at first, she says.

"Later, my mother accepted me realising that hormonal changes were not my mistake," she says.

She married her cousin, but he soon abandoned her, she says. Wanting to be financially independent, she decided to get a job at a textile shop. But that didn't last long, either.



PHOTO CREDIT: UJWALA POTHARAZU

Sony got no government support during the pandemic.

"My co-workers were jealous because our boss used to praise me for my work. Because of their designs and disputes I had to resign", she says.

Begging, therefore, became the only way for her to eke out a living. "We transgenders beg because we are not accepted at work. Not all transgenders are sex workers but

people misunderstand us. They harass us while we beg at traffic signals and railway stations," says Sony.

Sony has only one request. "Recognise us and allow us access to basic facilities," she says. "One of my friends died on the road side as she did not have sufficient food and money during the pandemic."

Pandemic robs silk industry of sheen in Kancheepuram

RISHIKUMAR MOHANLAL

KANCHEEPURAM: "What can I say," sighs L.Pushparaj (48), a weaver in Chinna Kancheepuram, an area in the south Indian 'town of silk' that houses 500 weavers. He feels he has lost his battle with destiny.

Kancheepuram is one of India's biggest production centres of pure silk. Since the outbreak of Covid-19 in March 2020, many weavers like Pushparaj have been dependent on private moneylenders and relatives for money to survive.

Although it has been more than six months since the looms commenced their operations, the sales have been poor. "I used to get Rs.10,000 for a saree before the lockdown. Now, I get only Rs.4,000," says 55-year-old S.Ekambaram, another weaver. "But, then, something is better than nothing."

"As a registered member of the co-operative, I received Rs.1000 a month during the lockdown but I get nothing now," says M.Gopi (58) who, along with his father K.Mariappan (70), weaves in a



Weavers Gopi and Mariappan at their loom in a rented house in Kancheepuram.

small, rented house.

Navaratri and Deepavali are normally boom time. "But in 2020, the festival sale was so dull that Kancheepuram, for the first time, saw a sharp decline in the sale of silk sarees."

G.Selvakumar (50), another weaver, agrees. "I have never seen showrooms this empty, with owners sitting on the porch looking for customers," he says. He adds: "I am not sure we can recover by Pongal."

MEDHA NIDHI S

MYSURU: Gauramma, 37, sits on a step outside her home in a nightie, sorting dried legumes into two piles. She lives on a private farm near Talakadu owned by city-dwellers who visit every month. Her husband Krishnappa works as a caretaker, looking after crops, cows and goats.

Both of them are from a nearby village called Kurubalana Hundi in the Tirumakudalu Narasipura Taluk, Mysuru. Gauramma and her family belong to the Kuruba caste whose primary occupation is goat-rearing.

Before they settled on the farm, the family lived in Kurubalana Hundi village. "Krishnappa would work in farms and earn Rs 120-200 per day and I would take the goats to graze," says Gauramma, adding that they used to own 22 goats.

'Throw away cups'

About the caste hierarchy in her village, Gauramma speaks very openly.

She practises untouchability towards the "lower caste" farm labourers who visit the farm for manual labour.

"We give them coffee or tea in plastic cups so they can throw it away. Even if they touch a gunny sack, I throw it away," she says as

she continues to separate the good beans from the rotten ones.

On the farm, Gauramma spends her time doing household chores. She and her family do not enter the farmhouse in spite of working in the farm around it.

Sunitha, who goes only by her first name, is a 32-year-old woman from Kukkuru, a bigger village close to Kurubalana Hundi. She cleans and cooks for the farm owners every time they visit. She declares proudly, without being asked, that she is from the Arasu caste, which is said to descend from the Mysore royal dynasty. While Sunitha falls at the top tier of the caste hierarchy, Gauramma falls somewhere in the middle.

Gauramma says, "My caste is also a high caste but it is one level lower than Sunitha's. Anyone can eat what she makes." She adds that while Sunitha drinks coffee or tea at her house, she does not eat the food that Gauramma makes. "She doesn't enter my house if I cook meat." Even in her home, Gauramma refrains from cooking meat when the farm owners - Brahmins - are present.

Sunitha's family, on the other hand, is vegetarian. "We do not even bring eggs into the house," says Sunitha as she washes dishes.

Dr. Srivalli GS, a professor of

Sociology at Nagarathnamma Meda Kasturiranga Setty Rashtreeya Vidyalaya College for Women, says that the caste structure in rural and urban areas is very different. "In villages, everyone knows everyone. There is no way to escape caste unless you leave the village. In urban areas, it's different. There is a possibility for being invisible in cities." However, Dr. Srivalli disagrees that caste does not exist in cities. "Caste is in

"There is no way you can escape caste in villages because everyone knows everyone."

everything - who cleans your house, who cooks for you, what caste is the person who collects your garbage everyday..."

Explaining the geography of her village, Sunitha says, "We Arasus live a bit away from everyone else. Next to us are the Lingayats and then the Muslims, followed by the Scheduled Castes. The Scheduled

Tribes live away from the village." The Scheduled Tribes, locally known as Nayakas, formed 54.62 per cent while the Scheduled Castes 33.17 per cent of total population, according to the Census of 2011 by the Directorate of Census Operations.

Sunitha has been working at the farm-house for four years. The women of her community do not go out to work in the fields, she says. That sort of work is done by "lower caste" farm labourers.

Madevamma is a Dalit woman in her late 30s who works as a farm labourer in and around B Shettahalli, close to Talakadu, which falls in the Tirumakudalu Narasipura Taluk

Asked if she has seen caste-based discrimination in the village, Madevamma says: "They do discriminate based on caste ... even those who call us to do farm work. They don't let us touch anything and they keep their distance from us."

She pauses for a while before asking, "Do you not watch Ambedkar?" She is referring to a Kannada TV serial, based on the life of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. When I tell her that I have studied about Ambedkar in school, her face lights up. "He is our caste it seems," she whispers proudly.

'Jobs alone do not guarantee respect'

ABIRAMI RAMESH

CHENNAI: When you enter the Amma Canteen at the Muthu Kumaraswamy Naicker Street, Chennai, you find three women working in a kitchen under a fan running at an extremely low speed. One of them holds an M.A. in History.

Amma Unavagam or canteen is a food subsidisation programme that was launched by the Tamil Nadu government under former Chief Minister Jayalalithaa. Under the programme, the State runs canteens at various places and serves food at subsidised prices for the poor.

Anandi, 40, has completed Class 10 and Jyothi, 45, dropped out after Class 5. But Samasundeewari has a post-graduate degree. They all say in unison that they work to meet their financial needs. Their main expenses include house rent and children's education.

They feel education is the only ticket to dignity and respect in society. "People get to lead a better life because of the better opportunities that come with education."



Samasundeewari, Anandi and Jyothi at an Amma Canteen in Chennai. (Right) The rate card displaying the subsidised prices of food items.



Jyothi's younger son has finished school and works in a simple, mechanic shop. "But my elder son, a graduate, works in an air-conditioned showroom. That's how important education is. That's what I am proud of," she says.

Asked whether the women have been looked down upon for not knowing English, Anandi says: "Tamil is our first love, our mother tongue and the best language. But deep down, we regret that we do not know English. Had we been

familiar with the language, we would have got better exposure and become more literate."

The women find their workplace both "flexible" and "mechanical." They relax whenever they want and in the way they wish. They prefer to come to work and relax because if they take a day's leave, even during menstruation, their salary is cut since they are daily-wage labourers, who are here thanks to the government's undertaking.

All three of them say they started

earning because of financial struggles and the alcoholism of their husbands. They felt like "slaves" as they had to ask their husbands money for their personal expenses. Their gesture, however, is thankless because their menfolk constantly taunt them saying, "you feel and act bigger now just because you have started earning." They add that they still have to ask their husbands' permission to continue working.

Samasundeewari wanted to get a degree in law but her dream did not get fulfilled. She wishes for a world where youngsters are given jobs based not on what their previous generations did but their educational qualifications

"Our children are our pride," the women say. "We pray all our difficulties end with us because we have struggled a lot. Our children shouldn't suffer." They would like their children to become more confident and assertive. "We are often taken for granted by people around us. This wouldn't have happened had we been educated," says Jyothi, who would like to be remembered as an Amma Canteen employee.

Coimbatore, new destination for workers from other States

Many with secure jobs back home come here for lesser work

S.N. THYAGARAJAN

COIMBATORE: That the COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown that followed left a lot of migrant workers homeless is well known. But it also made migrant labourers out of people who had steady jobs and never meant to leave their States. Many who worked as teachers and skilled workers, and pursued the education of their choice before the pandemic struck, arrived from States such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal to this city. They now do menial jobs to survive.

Pawan Kumar (27) belongs to Siwan district, Bihar. He came to Coimbatore in September 2020 to join a manufacturing company as maintenance worker. With a B.A., B.Ed degree, he worked as a school teacher and tutor, making Rs. 10,000 a month. He earns Rs.750 a day, out of which he sends Rs.500 home

Narayan (21) was pursuing a



PHOTO CREDIT: S N THYAGARAJAN

Krishna Mahat, a migrant from West Bengal

Bachelor's degree in English literature at Dhanbad when Covid struck. His father was a daily wage who lost his job. Narayan discontinued his studies to become a maintenance worker here.

Krishna Mahant (24), an electrician from Haldia, West Bengal, comes from a joint family of 14 members. He stopped getting work in March last and, by July, his

house was taken over by creditors. "In August, a friend told me about a company from Coimbatore hiring people. I joined as maintenance worker," says Krishna.

He wants to continue working here because he has a medical insurance for the first time in his life. He intends to become an electrician and bring his family here.

Rising up despite the odds

Promoters, teachers help Kattu Naicker children access education

AIŚWARYA RAJ

WAYANAD: The children of the Kattu Naicker tribals of Madhyappadi and Gajagadi at Aranappara in Wayanad are making tremendous progress in education

“I want to become a doctor,” said Soumya Raju, daughter of an illiterate estate worker. Soumya studies in 9th standard at Model Residential School, Kaniyapetta. Years in hostel and exposure to a different environment has set her apart in terms of health from her counterparts in the forest village. The promoters, employed by government, have worked hard to alleviate illiteracy in the tribe, prevalent till a decade ago by engaging closely with the tribals.

The Kattu Naicker (translated as leaders/lords of forests), categorised as “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group”, were hunter-gatherers, soothsayers and had less interactivity with the mainstream society. In a population living in Kerala-Karnataka border, which has a Dravidian language combined by Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam (called as nama-bhasha) with no script as their native tongue, Soumya speaks decent Malayalam which most of the elders in the village are not familiar with. She is among three girls studying in the same school and there are 34 students in these villages, including those in different residential schools with tribal reservations.

The colonies have two Anganwadis, where the students watch the government-sponsored-online classes in Vickers channel.

There are special classes for Secondary Level School Certificate (SSLC) students conducted in Anganwadis for the want of a better place. Teachers from various schools in Wayanad visit the anganwadis to provide lessons for these students.

Children are admitted to the Aranapara LP school at the age of

government, like GothraSarathi projects, which transports the children to schools have reduced drop outs. There are three jeeps for children in Madhyappadi and Gajagadi. However, Gajagadi is not connected by road to the schools and it takes a 2km trek to reach there. “Even if we leave home at 8 a.m., it would be 10.30a.m. when

entrance exams,” she said. Soorya is determined to write the equivalence exam that will enable people to continue education with no restrictions on age.

“If I don’t go to students’ homes and urge their parents to send them to school, there would be only three or four students who will come,” said Vijayan N.B, a promoter who works tirelessly to enhance the educational prospects in the colonies. The real progress lies in the fact that till three years ago many children in the region used to work alongside their parents in the coffee estate at Kodagu, Karnataka. Stringent action against child labour and frequent checkings in the Kerala border by police have diminished the extent of such practices, he added. “Education in Gajagadi still remains deplorable. The anganwadi that existed since 2005 was shifted to Madhyappadi in 2018 as the region was hit by floods and placed under a red alert zone,” he said.

“Many children in fifth grade do not have foundational literacy and numeracy on account of erratic attendance and disinterestedness,” said Mr. Jayaram said. Anoop, a class 5 studentsaid he had difficulty in writing and reading Malayalam. “The locals converse in their native tongue and the parents’ illiteracy reduces the children’s vigour in learning,” he added.

A ray of hope amidst the disarray is the toiling promoters like Vijayan. “I had an instructor called Ashiq who used to confer me with pocket money when I was in hostel. Many a day, when my family couldn’t afford, these provisions came in handy,” said Ratheesh.



PHOTO: AISWARYA RAJ

Kattu Naicker children..moving ahead

six and some children move to the town for better education when they are ten. “Many children are reluctant to attend classes and even parents are lackadaisical. Online classes have made it easier for them to circumvent these classes,” Jayaram P. A, a History teacher in Tholpetty High school who visits the colonies to persuade the children in going to schools said. “The students run off into the forests to evade teachers coming to fetch them,” he said. He walks 4 km from the nearest bus stop every day to teach high school students in the colonies.

Many schemes by the

we reach the school. Sometimes, we would have to stay outside the class for being late,” said Ratheesh M.R, the only student to pursue a degree in the colonies.

This has impeded many dreams. “I studied till 10th standard and could not go for higher studies,” said Soorya K, a 19-year-old-homemaker. It is difficult to reach higher secondary schools because of the limited number of buses on time and lack of concession tickets for students in the first year. “I wanted to continue in the residential school I had done my schooling from but I was unaware of the dates for application and

Rush to private schools

Kurubalana Hundi students want to study English

MEDHA NIDHI S

MYSORE: Kurubalana Hundi is a small village with three main roads and about 120 huts stacked next to each other. The village belongs to the Tirumakudalu Narasipura Taluk in Mysore District. There is just one public school right outside the village -- the Government Higher Primary School. Right now the school, with one teacher and less than 20 students from 4th standard to 6th standard, is closed due to Covid-19 pandemic..

While there is no knowledge of the number of children living in the village, TK Ambuja, who lives here, said that most of the children in the village attended private schools in Talakadu, T. Narasipura or Mysore. Ambuja’s own children studied in the government school till the 7th standard before moving to a private school in Gundlupet. Since the government school only had classes till 7th, students were forced to attend high school outside the village.

“The quality of teaching used to be good before. There were six teachers, including lady teachers. But now everyone prefers to send their children to private schools or convents because they are English medium,” said Ambuja.

Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, her son has returned to the village and takes his online classes in the government school. A handful of students like him come to the school for their classes, but formal classes are not going on.

HundiK Murali, the only teacher at the school, has been teaching there for 4 years. “Before there were about 70 students here, but over the years the number has



PHOTO: MEDHA NIDHI S

K. Hundi Government School...struggling to survive

declined. Now, only the ones who can’t afford fees come here. Even the really poor students are joining private schools through Right to Education,” he said, referring to the 2009 act that allows poor students to get free primary education in private schools.

During the lockdown, some of the students approached the city-bred farm owners living around the village to teach them English. Tania Ramesh, who visits her farm house every month, spent a few weeks teaching some of the students during the lockdown. The biggest problem with the school, she said, is the lack of human resources. “There aren’t enough people to teach. The kids are keen on learning but people who can mentor them properly are few,” she says.

Yesnas Aradhya is a 14-year-old local who used to attend Jnana Gangothri High School in

Talakadu, which is 3.4 Km away from the village. Due to the lockdown, Aradhya attends online classes on his phone. Aradhya’s parents had wanted their son to study in an English medium school so he could get a job in the city, he said. “I’ll do what they [parents] say.”

While students like Aradhya are encouraged to pursue higher studies outside the village, and can afford to, there are some who cannot. Gauramma, who only goes by one name, is a local living on a private farm where her husband works as a care-taker. Her son Mukunda is in the 5th standard at the village government school. Gauramma did not think that her son would need to study further. “In a few years, Mukunda will start going out to do farm labour and coolie work. He can bring some money home everyday.”

Dropout rate impacts progress

KAMALA MENON

MALAPPURAM: Jithu gets ready to go to work - weed cutting - in a nearby estate. He stopped going to school after class 10. His younger brothers, Sojan and Kannan, are also dropouts. “I didn’t feel like pursuing my studies,” says Jithu, as he wears his face mask, sliding it down to his neck. “My father was diagnosed with TB. I had to start working,” says the teenager who earns Rs 600 a day.

A survey by the Samagra Shiksha Kerala has identified an average of 20 dropouts a year in Mankada SC Colony, a hillside village in Malappuram, mostly from theGovernment Model Higher Secondary School where Jithu studied.

“The dropout rate has been a major hurdle in tribal development. Education has never been prioritized here. Some reasons for the high dropout are parental ill health, family discouragement and juvenile addiction to illicit alcohol. Most tribal families consider education a phase, that’s all. But some are beginning to change their thinking,” says Ramdas, SC promoter of the colony.

The Sai Snehatheeram hostel in Perinthalamanna, about 10 km from Mankada, does its bit to educate the tribal children. It has about 60 inmates.

“We ensure that the students are enrolled in government schools,” says K.R. Ravi, a social activist and hostel trustee. He adds, “The hostel was not closed even during the lockdown but visitors were not allowed. The municipality helped us by giving money



PHOTO: KAMALA MENON

Mankada Colony children engaged in work

and food. Had we sent the children back to their colonies, they would have gone astray. Most men are drunkards,” he says, pointing out that the chances of the children drinking illicit liquor are very high. “There have been cases of children going away from here and gradually dropping out of school.”

When online classes started in Kerala, the dropout rate began to increase further among the tribals because many cannot afford smart phones or laptops. The Internet connection is also very poor in Mankada.

In Wayanad, the Samagra Shiksha Kerala has implemented a project through which mentors translate the Malayalam content aired in the State’s educational channel into six tribal dialects- Paniya, Kuricha, Oorali, Kattunaykkar, Adiya and Kuruma. Butin Malappuram, the progress of the project has been slow.

“The Sai Snehatheeram hostel is a godsend for my three children. They attend the online classes without any hindrance,” says Leela, a woman belonging to the Kattunaykkan community.

Lack of higher secondary schools affects students

MONA PACHAKE

TIRUCHENDUR: “Education in all forms plays a crucial role in moulding teenagers into perfect human beings but it is not the child’s fault if it is brought up without proper education” said teacher Madhinan, 53, sitting on a rusted chair inside a leaky building at his Little Flower High School at Periyathalai, a coastal village near here

A major problem in coastal villages of Tuticorin district is the absence of higher secondary schools.

There are, in all, nine schools in the coastal villages near Tiruchendur, two of them government schools with higher secondary classes, and the others private elementary school.

As a result, children are asked to work after class X or get married.

While there is a government higher secondary school at Arumuganeri and Kayalpattinam near Tiruchendur, in the interior Periyathalai, Chettivilaiand Kootapanai (the last one in Tirunelveli district), people rely on the nearest school at Padukapathu.

Children end up having to choose between travelling vast distances to reach school and taking up a low-paid job after completing

class 8 or 10. Also, some parents do not send their girl children due to a lack of transport.

Often, coastal villagers end up sending their sons to work in the sea and getting their daughters married.

In some cases, the children may be sent to work in to big textile showrooms in Chennai.

Lorrete Silvia (22) of Periyathalai dropped out of school to work in a textile store for Rs 8000, before getting married and having her children.

Her parents did not have money to send her to other places for education, putting her in a hostel, she says.

Fr. Stanley Fernando from Chettivilai says he raised Rs. 40 lakhs for building a school in the village in 2018.

But the money was spent otherwise without his knowledge, he regrets.

“I really felt a little irritated when the people thought that the luxury of church is more important than a basic building for a school,” he said.

Sr Mercy Vincent, teacher of the elementary school at Chettivilai adds that there are enough children in the area to start classes 11 and 12.

“Now we have started to raise some money for a school.”

Challenges in implementing tribal education schemes

Irula families of Kanchipadi are torn between plunging into education and retaining their idyllic lifestyle

MEENATCHI PRABHU

TIRUVALLUR: Kanchipadi, a village in the Tiruvallur taluk, is home to 100 Irula families. But you won’t find them in the main square.

Around 2 kms away from the town, close to the reserve forest area, live the Irula community. They live in a separate area designated as Irular Colony. “Those people are different from us. That’s why they don’t live with us,” says Krishnaveni, a farmer from Kanchipadi.

All the houses in the Irular Colony have thatched roofs and many, exposed brick walls. Youngsters play volleyball in the ground in front of the primary school built for the Irula children. The school building is old with peeling walls and the playground is filled with rusting equipment. The building, not unlike the state of education in the community, is in

want.

“After much effort, the parents have started sending their children to school,” says Kanchipadi Panchayat Vice-President Bharathi Raja. The primary school in Irular Colony has classes up to Grade 5. Children come to the school in Kanchipadi from Grades 6 through 8. The few who choose to go to high school travel to the nearby village of Kanagamma Chatram.

R. Veeraraghavan, 28, has lived in Irular Colony all his life. His parents moved here from Manavalan Nagar in Tiruvallur. Veeraraghavan says there was no electricity or roads when he came here. He has studied until 12th grade, but chose to help his family and work in the fields. When asked why he did not pursue higher education he says that he “wanted to stay at home with parents.”

M. Sita is one of the few women who

has studied till Grade 10. “In our time, we had to walk all the way to Kanchipadi and pick our teachers up. We also had to drop them back,” she says. When asked why she didn’t continue her studies she says that “I have already achieved my dream. I wanted to be a tailor, and now I am one.” She beams with pride as she shows the sewing machine that was given to her by the Panchayat President a couple of years back. Her sixth grade daughter, Rajeshwari, dreams of being a nurse. “But if I have to live away from home, I won’t go,” she says.

The bonds of family and community seem to be strong. S. Vinoth, one of the few graduates in the colony, is a diploma holder in Electronics and Electrical Engineering. “I got placed in a company in Sriperumbudur, two hours away from here. But it’s too far. I want to be close to home,” he says. He now works whenever

there is work to be done on the fields or where work is available.

Job opportunities are few when you don’t want to travel far away from family, and education is not given importance. Most of them are employed in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act’s 100 day work scheme. They are employed in odd jobs like digging bunds for creating reservoirs, temple painting work and weeding work.

Vinoth’s elder brother has a degree in catering from Chennai’s Amirta International Institute of Hotel Management. He says that he was given a job at a hotel but that he refused it as he had to travel far from home. “We have happiness here. We’re not happy with the outside world. We want to come back home at the end of the day,” he says.

D Vijayalakshmi, a panel lawyer at the

District Legal Services Authority, is baffled at why the Irula community is not developing at all. “All the other communities have come up to a certain extent. You now have SC representation in pretty much all offices, be it administration or banking, but there are no success stories in these Irula tribes, and there’s nobody to really help and guide them.” Raja, too, adds that he has tried encouraging parents to put their kids in school. However, they do not seem to want it, he claims. “It’s hard to understand how to help them.”

Perhaps the problem merely lies in very different world views and value systems. Veeraraghava seems to indicate as much. “We don’t really believe in possession or being rich; just live for the moment and live a simple life. I think running after money and ambitions is foolish.”



M. Sita from the Irula community

PHOTO: MEENATCHI PRABHU

Pulicat fishermen uneasy over plans for expansion of port

People's livelihood and marine life stand threatened, residents and environmentalists

MEENATCHI PRABHU & GAUTHAM SELVARAJAN

TIRUVALLUR : M. Kumar, 30, brings his day's catch to the shores of the Pulicat Lake. Kumar keeps aside a few fish and king prawns, the specialty of Pulicat, for his family. The rest is sold at the market. "Since I was 7 years old, I've been going to the sea with my father. Fishing is the only thing I know," he says.

The livelihood of 10 lakh people like Kumar, who depend directly or indirectly on fishing, stands threatened, say the fishermen.

Adani Ports has proposed an expansion of the existing minor port at Kattupalli, about 15 km away from Pulicat or Pazhaverkadu., according to reports in the media.

A seaside lake on the border of Tamil Nadu, Pulicat acts as a natural bulwark against floods and cyclonic rainfall. But, all this may change, say the residents.

"If the company expands the port, we will have to leave fishing and work for the construction company," says Kumar.

There are close to 58 villages surrounding Pazhaverkadu, all dependent on fishing.

"Fishermen were one with nature. We knew which direction the ocean currents would flow in which month. But now, it's not so easy to gauge," says 36-year-old M Kalaiarasan from Kattupalli Kuppam, who works at L&T now. Fishermen knew where to go to catch fish. The breakwater, which is constructed to protect ports from



M Kumar, 30, returns to the shore with his day's catch

ocean currents, can alter the flow of currents. The revised plan proposes the construction of two new breakwater of a total of 12 km in length.

Political parties such as the DMK and MDMK and environmentalists have opposed the plan.

Though attempts were made to get a comment, Adani Ports have not responded. Meanwhile, the Thiruvallur district administration postponed a public hearing on the revised masterplan for development of Kattupalli port in order to avoid a gathering because of the pandemic.

However, a company spokesperson was quoted in media reports as saying, "Adani Ports & SEZ, as a responsible corporate citizen, always strives to operate responsibly in an environmentally-sustainable manner. The

construction of ports and harbours is a permissible activity according to CRZ Notification 2011 & 2019 and EIA Notification 2006 notified by the Government of India."

Environmentalists argue that the oceanic currents will be altered and change the entire marine ecosystem of Chennai and that Pulicat Lake will cease to exist.

The sand dunes in Pulicat prevent the sea water from joining with the lake and the groundwater from becoming saline. If the expansion takes place, the lake will merge with the sea, says J Prashanth, a researcher at the Coastal Resource Centre in Besant Nagar.

The sea water will enter the ground table, he says, adding that it will pose serious challenges to escalating water shortage problems

in the area.

There are fears that the mouth of the Pazhaverkadu lake will be closed. The lake water, along with sand and other sediments, will enter the ocean, says S. Ilayaraja, a 41-year-old fisherman from Pazhaverkadu. "Many species of fish thrive near the place where the lake reaches the ocean. Our livelihood will be impacted by this port," he says.

A Linges, a 24-year-old fisherman from SP Kuppam, has a walking stick for support. He said to continue his father's profession. "Whether we live or die, it is with this land," he says.

"If this port comes here, everything will change; the ocean currents will be altered, soil erosion will occur, and the sea will come into the shore," he adds.

MEENATCHI PRABHU

Though fishermen will be directly affected, the impact on women and children are far greater. R. Bhaskar, a 52-year-old former fisherman, says, "Women, who go to sea and help fishermen in selling their daily catch, will have to cover a lot of distance on foot because the route will be blocked by the port."

R Selvi, a fisherwoman from Pazhaverkadu, "If fishing is taken away, there's nothing else we can do. My family already has a loan that we can't pay back," she says.

Adani Ports, in its revised proposal, has promised employment to those who will be displaced by the expansion.

However, the residents of Kattupalli Kuppam, who were relocated by L&T when the existing port was built, complain that the employment is unskilled and ill-paid.

The men are employed in jobs like ship painting and cargo loading and unloading.

"How can we run a family with a Rs. 3000 monthly salary? We women also started going for work. I have been forced to clean bathrooms for a living," says 45-year-old Sivakami.

P. Anbu, 47, works at the L&T ship-building company. But he continues to fish. From his grandfather's time, his family has been in the fishing business.

"On days when I go for fishing, I leave around 3 a.m. with my boat, catch whatever fish is available and sell it, and then leave for work around 8 a.m. In the fish trade, I'm my own boss. Nobody can question me," he says.



Sojan's poster as a school leader

R KAMALA MENON

Youth alcoholism: a havoc for tribals

R KAMALA MENON

PERINTHALMANNA (MALAPPURAM): "We had such huge expectations from him. Look at him ... he can't even speak properly," cries Kumaran, pointing to his son, Sojan. Wearing a yellow school jersey, Sojan stands in a corner, looking down and nodding when someone talks to him.

People of the Mankada SC Colony still talk about Sojan. "He was such an energetic child who won many prizes in school. He was the school leader but now he has become hopeless," says a neighbour.

Sojan studied up to Class 10 in the Government Model Higher Secondary School. But, with time, he started behaving differently. "He was good in studies and took part in extracurricular activities but he started changing. He even misbehaved with one of the teachers," says a GMHSS teacher.

Juvenile alcoholism has played havoc in the lives of the colony's tribe. Besides leading to low life expectancy, drinking has become a

major reason for an increase in the number of school and college dropouts.

"Soon after he stopped going to school, he went to work with me," says Jithu, Sojan's elder brother. Then he started walking around with a gang from a nearby colony. He slowly became addicted to alcohol." Outsiders sell illicit alcohol and drugs at cheap rates in the colonies and the tribal children often fall in their trap.

Nights of fun and socialising, when the tribe sang and danced, have given a way to nasty-squabble nights. "The addiction to alcohol and the so-called development have killed their culture. Now all that the tribals do is work during the day, get drunk and fight at nights," says Ramdas, promoter of the Mankada SC Colony.

In some households, parents offer alcohol to their children. They grow up thinking that drinking is not wrong. Among some tribes, celebrations are incomplete without alcohol. "But things are getting better now," says Sukumaran, Circle Inspector, Mankada.

Chellanam, a life beyond monsoons

The area that is in the news for flooding in rainy season, is forgotten later

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

KOCHI: "Had it been July, the chair on which you are sitting would have vibrated with each wave that struck the sea wall," said Sebastian V. J, a winning candidate in the recently concluded local body polls at Chellanam, Kerala.

Sebastian, belonging to Chellanam 2020, a newly launched non-political organisation to fight against the apathy of the mainstream political parties, said that the newspapers and television channels were filled with news of Chellanam floods only during monsoon time. "No one bothers what happens after that or how we live here," he said.

During every monsoon, the 17.5 km long coastline of Chellanam in south Kochi is battered by strong waves that erode the land and invade people's homes. Left without government support and apathy to their long standing demand for the construction of pullimutts (groynes - a low wall built perpendicularly) to prevent sea erosion, the people of Chellanam bear the brunt of the sea all year long.

The people of Chellanam have also devised unique ways to fight the raging sea: they have removed



Remnants of a house destroyed by the raging sea

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

the sand bags kept by the government near the sea and placed them as reinforcements for their compound walls; the gates are barricaded with mounds of sand deposited by the sea during the previous floods. The children play football near the beach and use the sea wall, which abruptly terminates at the Bazaar area, as a gallery to cheer for their team. There have been long standing demands to extend the sea wall all along the

coast line and also to construct pullimutts to break the enormous force of the sea.

Treesa (70) said that she and her family had moved out after their home was completely destroyed in the cyclone Ockhi. Abandoning their fish hatchery to the vagaries of the sea, they have resettled in the east end of their plot, in an attempt to move away from the sea.

However, with each year, the frequency and the intensity of the

floods rise. K. A. George (85) and his wife, Annie George (78), recollect how the water had breached the sea wall and the sand bags, inundating their home.

"We had four steps at our entrance. Now all of them are under the sand," said George, who needs a walking stick for support. He said that the walls of his house developed cracks in July, when the flood water had risen as high as his waist.

The Chellanam Janakeeya Vedi, formed by the locals of Chellanam, has been holding relay hunger strikes demanding a permanent solution for the issue of sea ingress. The protests have reached their 415th day with each member of the Vedi taking turns to fast in a day.

Outgoing vice-president of the Chellanam panchayat, K.D. Prasad, said that the government had rehabilitated 17 families in the first phase of the Punargeham project of the State government. "It is a voluntary project where we give Rs. 10 lakh to people who are willing to rehabilitate. We are not forcing anybody," he said.

A. Kunjachan (65), a fisherman, whose house is less than 50 metres from the sea said, "With the Rs. 10 lakh even a house cannot be built, let alone buying land."

Reduction in fluorosis cases in Nalgonda

TANISHQ VADDI

HYDERABAD: A recent government scheme to control fluorosis, a disease caused by the deposition of fluoride in body tissue, in Nalgonda district is working.

Inhabitants of the area have been struggling with the condition since 1937.

However, there appears to be a drastic reduction in cases over the past few years—it went from 967 to 0 in the last few years.

Excess intake of fluoride through food or water causes the disease. Nalgonda's groundwater has always contained high fluorine levels of more than 2.5 ppm, affecting the teeth and bones of its consumers.

Severe forms of the disease can lead to disability and death. According to a report in Telangana Today, Veeramala Rajitha (30) who actively participated in the protests for clean drinking water in the Nalgonda district passed away recently due to a fluorosis-related health issue.

In November of 2013 District Fluoride Monitoring Center (DFMC) was established to help

mitigate fluorosis in the district. Then, in 2016, Mission Bhagiratha, aimed at providing safe drinking water to all the villages and cities, was initiated. Its efforts have been very beneficial to the people of the district.

The late Rajitha submitted a memorandum to the Union Health Minister Jagat Prakash Nada requesting a 300-bed hospital exclusively for fluorosis victims that seems to have been approved.

Speaking to Telangana Today, Fluorosis Vimukthi Porata Samithi president K Subash said "She was very happy when the fluoride-affected village started getting safe drinking water through Mission Bhagiratha,"

In fact, Mission Bhagiratha has created a positive impact all across the Nalgonda district.

According to Anil Thav (44) from Shivannaguda village, nearly every other person in Nalgonda suffered from fluorosis, when he was younger.

Thav, who is affected by dental fluorosis, admits that he grateful that the government is paying attention to this problem. "The coming generations won't have to deal with this issue."

Poverty affects mental health

ABIRAMI RAMESH.

CHENNAI: Poverty, as the adage goes, may be a state of mind. But real poverty also affects the mind. Shankar Mahendar, a psychology student, agrees. "Poverty affects your mental health," he says, adding that access to a mental health professional is often dictated by income.

Psychologist Mr Vardarajan Sundaramahalingam points out that while the struggles with mental health are universal, children born in poverty have to deal with poor nutrition, have less access to resources and education, and their parents are too busy trying to make a living to spend time with them. "There is a lack of awareness and availability," he says.

All this affects cognitive development. According to a 2019 paper published by The Banyan, a 25-year-old NGO providing mental health care to people living in poverty in Tamil Nadu, India is home to an estimated 150 million people with mental illness.

"Mental health services are grossly inadequate and tend to approach mental illness from a disease perspective ignoring complex economic and social problems that contribute to wellbeing," says the paper.

Flooded village: people tensed

A. SRILEKHA

THIRUVANNAMALAI: Surplus water in the Kalampur Lake near Arani in Thiruvannamalai District has flooded many villages in the area. J.Babu, a social worker from Pulavanpadi panchayat, claims that aggressive land-grabbing in the area has exacerbated the issue.

The public in the villages has petitioned the district administration several times. But no action has been taken. As a result, more than 15 villagers staged a protest and asked for permission to stage a roadblock against the lake canal's encroachment near Arani.

Kattu Naicker children's nutrition level on borderline

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

WAYANAD: A few years ago, a local government hospital in the district turned back a pregnant woman of the Kattu Naicker tribe and she gave birth the same day at her home, said Sicily Jacob (48), the accredited social health activist (ASHA) at the Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Appapara village. This and incidents like a Kattu Naicker woman giving birth inside a vehicle en route to the nearest hospital has made the tribals reluctant to approach a PHC, she added.

The Kattu Naickers or Kattunayakans which translates into 'king of jungles,' are tribals found in the forests of Wayanad, Malappuram and Kozhikode districts of Kerala. Until a decade ago, they kept to themselves, allegedly practicing black magic and sorcery.

Today, the Kattu Naickers found in Madyappady and Gajagadi colonies at Aranappara village, next to the Kerala-

Karnataka border, in Wayanad district, are a semi-modernised tribe. There are 48 families in the former and 21 in the latter, with nearly 70 children in total. They mingle with a limited number of outsiders, their children have started going to schools and they receive rations supplied by the government. "Even though we have eradicated stunting and wasting among the children, the birth weight of a new-born is as low as 1.5 kg," said Jacob. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, babies with less than 2500 grams of birth weight have a greater risk of dying and are an indicator of poor nutrition standards of the mother.

The Madyappady Anganwadi maintains a list of all the pregnant and lactating women in the two colonies and supplies them iron and vitamin supplements along with wheat flour, oil and urad dal. "To ensure that they collect

the supplies, we walk to their houses and inform them of the date they need to visit the Anganwadi. Still some don't turn up," said Sheena Manoj (36), a teacher at Madyappady Anganwadi, adding that in such cases, she and the ayah deliver the supplies on foot.

The road to Madyappady colony was widened a few years ago and is accessible by vehicles. However, the Gajagadi colony is a 2 km trek from the Anganwadi. For the same reason, meat, fish and vegetables are brought for sale to the Madyappady colony on small vehicles and do not reach Gajagadi, restricting their diet to rice.

"The adults go for work in nearby coffee plantations or at Kodagu in Karnataka. They leave by 6 am and mostly skip their breakfast," said Vijayan N.B. (48), the Tribal Promoter of the two colonies. There are a total of 33 children in the age group of 0-6 who are supplied

with food supplements and who take home rations. However, it is for the age group of 3-6 alone that the Anganwadi is able to prepare breakfast and lunch. The ones in the age group of 0-3 are dependant completely on their parents for their food. The children who attend boarding schools after the age of six, fare better in terms of their nutrition. They are given breakfast, lunch, tea, milk and eggs. Another advantage, which comes with staying in a hostel, is access to medication and timely vaccination. Since many adults do not believe in it, children often do not turn up at drives, despite repeated intimation, said Jacob.

"Seeing their father returning home drunk, there have been a few cases of children consuming alcohol," she said, adding that forest officials at the Kerala check post are attempting to curb the problem by ensuring that no alcohol is brought home from Kodagu. .



Kattu Naicker children

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

Trade-off between health and development

Seven years after SIPCOT started its operations, Thervoy village in Tiruvallur grapples with the ill affects allegedly caused by industrialisation

MEENATCHI PRABHU

TIRUVALLUR: Are polluted water and skin problems valid trade-offs in exchange for a stable income?

After a four-year-long failed protest against the State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamilnadu Ltd (SIPCOT), the residents of the second largest village in Tiruvallur have accepted its health and environmental implications.

In 2007, SIPCOT acquired 1500 acres of the village's meikkal porambokku (village grazing) land for the creation of a special economic zone (SEZ) in Thervoy.

A tyre manufacturing company, was the first to set up its factory in Thervoy. It began operations in 2013, according to Panchayat Head M Munivel. It remains the largest unit in the industrial area, spanning over an area of over 250 acres.

Several other companies have been established in Thervoy since then. A resin factory, a petrochemical factory, a glass factory, a prawn feed factory are among other companies in the premises.

Thervoy village, home to some 1000 families, has all the hallmarks of an idyllic rural setting. There are lush green fields. The lakes overflow from this year's generous

monsoon. Young boys play games on the roads.

But things are changing. The coming of SIPCOT is changing the village, from an agricultural society to an industrial one.

The companies are perhaps attracted to Thervoy's distinction of having the highest number of graduates from any village in the Tiruvallur district, says Ward-5 panchayat member A Lakshmanan. Some of them travel to the colleges nearby and pursue higher studies there.

Dhanasekaran waits, with six other Thervoy men along the side of the well-paved road that connects the industrial area and the village.

"We wait here and supervise the construction work that's going on," says Dhanasekaran.

They all work on contract to the various industries that will be coming up in the SIPCOT industrial area.

"We'll have work till construction is done. Once, it's over, we'll have to search for a different project," says Suresh, a contractor.

Though the companies only provide temporary jobs, the residents prefer this work to farming. Around 30 men from Thervoy work as contractors for SIPCOT. Many others work as



A tough choice for villagers... jobs or pollution?

PHOTO: MEENATCHI PRABHU

manual labourers in the factories while the women work in the housekeeping sector.

"We too need to go to work to make ends meet. Even if the work is demeaning, like cleaning toilets, we do it," says 38-year-old Thilagavathy Mohan.

She now works as an accountant at the local panchayat, after having worked for 10 years at a bio-technology company.

Residents complain of the adverse impacts these companies

have on their health and on the environment.

Dhanasekaran and his six friends pull up their sleeves to show black, scaly patches on their arms.

"We have it all over our bodies. It's because of all the waste these companies emit," says 35-year-old contractor, Ashok Kumar.

Even the water has lost its taste, the residents say.

"Till 2000, Thervoy water tasted like bottled water, that's how pure it was. Now, everything has changed.

The water from the five different water tanks around the village all have different tastes. We can taste the chemical in the water," said Bhuvana Jeeva who works in the waterworks department.

Ever since these industries cropped up in Thervoy, the primary health center in the neighbouring Kannankottai village has seen three confirmed cases of cancer, two cases of tuberculosis and multiple complaints of skin rashes, says health department official, Nesa Murali. Two people have died of cancer so far.

While nobody has yet established a direct correlation between these companies and the diseases at Thervoy, a paper published by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) established a strong correlation between stomach and bladder cancer and the rubber industry.

A recent paper published by the Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology found that contact dermatitis, a skin ailment, is also common in rubber factories.

A US news source, tusaloonews.com, reported that in 2001, six workers filed a series of suits against a tyre factory, claiming that the chemicals used in the workplace made them develop cancer.

Several other research papers also connect the incidence of cancer to petrochemical industries. Neither the companies or SIPCOT responded to telephone calls and e-mails seeking comment.

Nesa Murali says that there is not adequate information to draw the connection between the coming of the companies and the cases of cancer. However, the skin lesions, he says, may very well have to do with the companies' emissions and waste discharge.

Another challenge is that many of the residents do not trust the medical facilities at the health care center in Kannankottai. They prefer to go to RSRM Hospital or Stanley hospital in nearby Tondiarpet.

Ilango, a 38-year-old contractor, says his wife was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He claims he has spent close to Rs. 22 lakhs on chemotherapy and his wife is cured now.

"We were saved because we diagnosed it before it went downhill," he says.

Another contractor, Arun Kumar lost his mother earlier this year to stomach cancer.

"There are many who are afraid to speak up in the village. If people know they had cancer, they would be ostracised. We are all simple-minded people," Ilango says.

Before SIPCOT began

operations here, there were no cases of cancer or tuberculosis, says Nesa Murali.

"Nobody ever falls sick here, we used to live a healthy life, with nature," says A Lakshmanan.

Lakshmanan had complained to the Pollution Control Board about the smell in the air from the emissions of a biotechnology company which usually turns on the chimney late at night, around midnight, he says.

"The air smells so bad it's hard to sleep." He says that the companies' effluents sometimes make its way into the fields. "We've all seen the black water in the fields from one of the factories," he notes.

The factory has promised to treat its waste responsibly. However, during the rains, Ashok Kumar, a contractor, notes that the drainage overflows and it makes its way into the fields.

During the rains, he claims that the drainage system leading to the fields from the factory has foam.

But for all the damage to the environment, all the diseases and other discomforts, the villagers know they need the companies there.

"There is damage to the environment, but the people can't starve. We need the jobs these companies give," says Munivel.

Setback to restoring village pond

Brick kilns in Anaikatti destroying Vellakinar pond, economy

S.N.THYAGARAJAN

COIMBATORE: Vellakinar pond, the overflowing waters of which flooded the village in 1983, has been dry for almost three decades now. The Vellakinar village panchayat records testify to the fact that the pond was live and full of water once. When the Vellakinar Water and Greenery Protection Committee (VWGPC) began restoring the pond in 2019, it discovered that the surface area had shrunk from 6.75 acres to 4 acres. The committee wanted to salvage what was left of the pond and continued work till March 2020, when the Covid lockdown came into effect.

The rainwater from the hills near Anaikatti was the main source of water for the pond in the village on Mettupalayam Road. The water reached the pond through the Rajavaikal canal. However, the increasing number of brick kilns near the Anaikatti hills obstructed the water over the years, resulting in the drying up of Vellakinar. Agriculture, the main occupation of the villagers, is fast disappearing.

Till about 30 years ago, traders from Mettupalayam and Karamadai who came to the

Coimbatore weekly markets camped around the Vellakinar pond with their cattle. The pond was the centre of agricultural businesses, which disappeared when it started drying up.

Arul Krishnan, a representative of VWGPC, says: "Over 2,000 acres of land were once cultivated in the village. The Vellakinar pond was the only source of water. The farm lands have now become godowns or residential complexes. Only 800 acres of farm land are



Vellakinar pond now resembles a barren land.

S.N. THYAGARAJAN

left. I am sure they will disappear sooner than we anticipate"

As per the records available in

the Salim Ali Centre, "fourteen species of birds migrated to the pond during winter every year. They stopped appearing after the pond dried up," says Arul. Thanks to the restoration work, "the pond filled with two feet of water for the first time in many years and four species of birds were spotted in 2020," he claims.

With almost a generation passing since the pond went dry, it became a den for anti-social activities. The VWGPC's first step

pond in full glory. Many believe that since they have found an alternative, the land can be used for other purposes. They fail to realise that the pond was the village's main source of water." A 92-year-old villager is miffed. "The pond was on a private land. The owner donated it to the public. It was the people duty to maintain it ... they have failed," he says. Since the restoration work stopped in March last year, residents have converted the pond into a garbage dumping ground.

Even though boards were put up advising people not to do so, they used the lockdown as an excuse to dump garbage. The bore-well in the pond still remains the main source of water for many. The villagers say that the water table has remained high in the pond because of the soil's absorption capacity. The VWGPC approached the authorities in 2019, seeking a ban on the brick kilns in Anaikatti, along the water path. The authorities have said they will take action. The VWGPC has spent Rs.13 lakhs so far to restore the land. The organisation got the District Collector's permission to carry on the restoration work. They have now sought the help of private companies to build a walking and cycling path around the pond.

was to create awareness among the villagers. Ramaswamy (62), a resident, recalls: "I have seen this

Ignored dump yard woes

TANISHQ VADDI

HYDERABAD: It is not the smell of coffee brewing that the residents of Jawaharnagar wake up to ever morning. Instead, it is the stench of the garbage piled outside their homes. Spread across an area of about 135 square metres, the landfill in Jawaharnagar affects the areas of Balaji Nagar, Dammaiguda, Kapra, Yaprul and Sainikpur. The locals allege that the dump yard is also polluting the groundwater in the area.

LakshmaReddy(50), an inhabitant of the area, says that the municipality's water is sufficient only for a couple of days. For the rest of the time, inhabitants are dependent on this polluted groundwater. "In monsoon, things get lot worse the smell becomes unbearable, and the water turns into black," says Reddy who inhabits a government-subsidised apartment less than 1 km away from the dump yard. These apartments were constructed under the Rajiv GruhaKalpa Scheme to provide housing facilities to economically- weaker sections of the society at a subsidised price in urban areas. Ironically, they were constructed well after the dump yard started operating. The dump yard has also polluted a lake in the area, adds Reddy. "Children play cricket in the evening near the lake they are



VADDI TANISHQ

Lake polluted by the dump yard

exposed to all sorts of health issues."

This year, a scientist from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) inspected the Jawahar Nagar dumpyard, says an Indian Express report, dated November 18. The inspection was a response to a letter written by A Revanth Reddy, the Malkajgiri MP and TPCC working president to Union Minister for Environment and Forests, Prakash Javadekar. According to the Indian Express, Reddy alleged that the leachate from the dumpyard was causing groundwater pollution in a radius of 5 km and pollution in 14 lakes located in and around the area. However, nothing seems to have come out of it yet. The close

proximity of the dump yard to residences have also lead to inhabitants struggling with various health conditions. Bhupal Reddy (53), who has asthma, says breathing is very difficult, all through the monsoons and at dawn, every day. Despite overhead tanks, the municipality hasn't given water supply connection yet, he adds, and his grandson--Jashwanth Reddy-- had skin allergies due to groundwater use for bathing. The recent inauguration of Waste To Energy(WTE) plant by K.T.Rama Rao, the minister of municipal development and urban development, has helped make things better. "But there still seems to be a lot that needs to be sorted out," says Bhupal Reddy.

Rural kids miss the bus

MONA PACHAKE

TIRUCHENDUR: "We have only one bus in the morning and evening and if we miss that we cannot go to school," said Alwin Infanton (15) a boy from Periyathalai. This becomes a barrier to education of children from coastal villages in Tuticorin district. In the absence of regular transport, it is a struggle for children from Periyathalai, Thisayanvilai, Kulasai, Udangudi and Kootapanai to go to school. Attendance in schools is poor.

Students in classes above 10 travel about 60 km up and down every day.

"We are illiterate but we want our children at least to go to other places and educate themselves. But this seems very difficult with poor transport," said Gilbert Fernando (58), whose daughter Shibani Fernando (22) travels every day from Manapadu to Tiruchendur to her college, a distance of 17.4 kilometre.

The head of every village has made a tempo van ready in case the single bus does not arrive.

"People with money can drop their children in their own vehicle but many of us cannot send them to



The bus stop at Udangudi

MONA PACHAKE

school", said Jayaseelan Fernando (60), panchayat leader of Periyathalai.

Lack of transport adds to the mindset of people in these villages that they cannot send their daughters, after they attain puberty, alone anywhere, even to school.

"I got the first mark in my class 10 but as there is no proper bus my parents did not allow me to study further," said 17-year old mother Lincy V Rayer, who got married at 16.

Every time people complain about lack of bus facility, parish priests write to the Regional Transport Officer in Thoothukudi but the situation on the ground has not changed. "There is very little population in those villages for us to operate more buses there," said RTO Subramanian.

A divided stance on coir and pith industries

The villagers of Kallipatti Pudur have different opinions on groundwater contamination

S.N.THYAGARAJAN

POLLACHI: The residents of Kallipatti Pudur village, 14 km from here, have limited access to clean water. The village, which is home to about 800 people, comprises mostly of coconut farmers and workers. The residents depend on the water from the four village wells for farming and their daily use.

The ground water quality, however, has decreased considerably over the last three years. The villagers allege that the improper disposal of waste by coir and pith industries around the village has caused water pollution. In December 2019, some residents petitioned the District Collector of Coimbatore and the Ministry of Jal Shakti, seeking a solution.

The pollution has affected the rich and the poor of Kallipatti alike. While no one denies that the water is contaminated, the opinion is divided on the cause of contamination. A 55-year-old coconut farmer, who owns five acres of farm land and some cattle,



A coconut farmer points to the poor quality of water

S.N. THYAGARAJAN

says the decline in the water quality has affected him financially. "The yield has come down by 50 per cent. The water that I get now can at best be used to clean my cattle." There are three coir and pith processing units around his farm, which he feels may be causing the pollution. Amsaveni, 40, a resident of the

village, is mother of two school children. She says: "Even though we have ample water in the well throughout the year, we cannot use it for cooking. We depend on the water from the government water connection." But the water supply from the government connection is "irregular," she claims. Raghunathan, a school

student, also has a tale to narrate. "I got fever and throat infection last year. My parents thought I had COVID-19 but we later found out that it was because of the ground water." Raghunathan's father, who works for the Water Works Department, claims "the ground water here is unfit for drinking. Being an employee of the government, I cannot say anything more."

Some residents feel that the rich and the powerful are targeting the village because they bypassed them and went directly to the authorities. A resident said: "There are more than 15 coir and pith units around the village, and they are owned by people with political affiliations. People across party lines ignore our pleas on water, which is why we were forced to take matters into our hands."

Thiruvengadam, the village panchayat president, agrees that the ground water is polluted. But he denies that it is because of the coir and pith industries around the village. "The coir industry is non-polluting, a lot of people from the

village work in the industry. Only some people with ulterior motives are trying to make a big issue of it. All government departments have said that the coir industries do not cause pollution. If the industries close down, many villagers will be out of jobs."

Thiruvengadam feels coconut farmers might have caused the water pollution. "They use 9 kg of chemical fertilizers per tree every year to increase their yields. These chemicals are absorbed by the ground," he explains.

Many villagers suffer from problems in the respiratory tract. But there is no conclusive evidence connecting the coir and pith industries to them. The Tamil Nadu Water and Drainage Board (TWAD) tested the water at Kallipatti village in November 2019, and found that it was contaminated.

But the reason for the contamination, in just one village, is yet to be ascertained. There have been no reports of water contamination in the surrounding villages.

Promoting education among tribal children

"I had no one to advise me to continue my studies beyond 11th standard. I want to be that person to guide the tribal children," says Vijayan

ADARSH B. PRADEEP

WAYANAD: "Come out Subramani. Didn't I inform you yesterday itself? Haven't you had your breakfast yet? Put your textbooks, notebooks and pen in your bag. The teachers are waiting," said 48-year-old Vijayan N.B., waiting outside the 15-year-old's house.

Vijayan, then briskly walks to the next house, 2 km away, in the Gajagadi tribal colony and calls out for Aparna, who is also a tenth standard student.

After the schools closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, high school teachers make a weekly visit to the Madhyappadi Anganwadi near Thirunelly in Wayanad district to teach the Kattu Naicker tribal children.

Before the teachers come to the Anganwadi, Vijayan, the Tribal Promoter of Madhyappadi and Gajagadi colonies, bolts down just a cup of black tea and rushes to the tribal settlements to force the reluctant children to attend the classes.

"I stopped studying when I was in 11th standard. There was no one



Tribal Promoter Vijayan N.B. holding a meeting with the Kattu Naickers

to guide me back then. So, now I have to be there for these children," said Vijayan, who belongs to Kakkeri colony, another tribal settlement.

Right from registering the birth of the child and obtaining its ID card to ensuring that the elderly get their pensions, the Tribal Promoter acts as a bridge between the government and the tribals.

"There are a total of 70 children in these two colonies. Thirty five male and thirty five female," said

Vijayan reading out from his blue pocket diary that contains all the details of the seven colonies of which he is the promoter.

The job of Tribal Promoter is not a permanent one and their contracts have to be renewed every year. Despite the need for frequent travel to all the tribal settlements, they are not given any travel allowance in addition to their gross salary of Rs 13,500 a month.

"Many people ask me why I do this for this paltry sum. It is not for

the money. It is a service," said Vijayan, whose contract as a Tribal Promoter has been renewed every year from 1995.

Before becoming a Tribal Promoter, he had worked as a daily wage labourer and a Forest Watcher after his parents passed away.

"When I came to Madhyappadi in 1995, there was not even a single child who went to school. Now, there are primary and high school students and even a guy studying at degree level," he said.

Ratheesh M. R. (22), the sole degree student from the settlement, said that, "Initially, I used to bunk my school classes. But, my parents and Vijayan Chetan forced me to study. Now, I am grateful to them."

When not visiting the colonies, Vijayan is at the tribal office in Kattikulam where he has to file all the reports regarding the tribes. Other than these, he also has to attend the training hosted by the Tribal Department, the police and the health officials.

"These people are at the lowest rungs of the society. They have a lot of reluctance even when help is offered," he said as he started to walk quickly to the next colony.

GARIMA SADHWANI
BAKHTIYAR NAGAR
(UTTAR PRADESH): Mohd. Raees bought a buffalo and chicks so that he could sell milk and eggs to earn a living during the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19. However, since he had no experience in rearing them, the chicks got sick and died. He lost Rs. 40,000, all his life's savings.

Raees is the trustee and caretaker of the S.S. Shiksha Niketan, a private school in this village in Lucknow district. Into teaching for the last 22 years, he said, "I had to switch fields because I couldn't afford a meal. I haven't been able to pay the EMI for the two vans I bought for my school."

Since not everyone in the village had a smartphone or could afford recharging the connection every month, the school could not conduct online classes. The net result: the school, with nearly 400 students, has neither charged any fee since March, nor paid its teachers, numbering 10, and other staff salaries.

Masee Khan (50), who teaches Urdu at the school, has been driving an auto since May and earns Rs. 300 a week. Earlier, he would earn Rs. 2500 a month from the school, and Rs. 4000 from giving tuitions. He said, "We have received free rations from the government. But what do we do with five kg of rice, if we cannot afford a gas connection to cook it?"

"Even if the school reopens, I don't think the parents will be able



Newfound company: Mohd. Raees, a private school teacher, unpaid for months, has taken to cattle rearing

to pay the fees. Only if the government helps private schools, can we expect to get our salaries."

Saeed Khan (27), who teaches Hindi and Maths, had to start zardozi (embroidery) work in November. But since the farmers' protest began, that too has stopped as the raw material has to come from Punjab. "Earlier I would get Rs. 5000 from the school, and in this (zardozi) work, I earned Rs. 400 after a whole month's hard work," he said.

Vinay Kumar Saini, another teacher, said "In April, I laboured at construction sites. But I had to do it in secret because I was ashamed. I have an MA and a BED

degree, I am not supposed to be doing this." In May, he put up a mango cart at Malihabad. After the mango season ended, he, with a friend, started selling vegetables.

Saini said, "When the other labourers were getting Rs. 300 a day, I got Rs. 200 because the managers thought I wouldn't work properly as I wasn't habituated to it. When I went to the market to sell vegetables, people wouldn't buy from me because I was new."

Mohd. Raees said, "The government schools have received a lot of help from the government. The private schools need help too, if not for our sake, at least for the students."



Ashok Bhaat selling puppets on the street

Puppet art dying a slow death

SANSKRITI FALOR

JAIPUR: "From performing puppet shows in hotels and at events, we've come to streets after this lockdown," says 30-year-old Ashok Bhaat, selling puppets in the street, hoping to earn some money.

Katputli Nagar, a small slum in Jaipur, is home to thousands of these puppet artists. Most are struggling to make ends meet during the pandemic.

A narrow pot holed lane, filled with garbage, leads to small houses in Kathputli Nagar. In one small room, four men of the Bhaat community, sit on a heap of wood carvings and paint the puppets' faces. "I used to go to colleges and institutes to train students, but after the virus struck I have done nothing but sit here, carving smiling puppet faces with no one to buy them," says Vinod Bhaat (32).

The Bhaat community has been making and selling puppets and performing for generations. "The 3-hour-long puppet shows have come down to 15 to 30 minutes because people neither have time nor interest in the art. It is only the foreigners who find it fascinating and after the pandemic there are no tourists," says Vinod.

"The daily wage workers also earn by working daily, where do the artists go?" adds Anil Bhaat, sculpting a puppet's face.

The puppet artists have transformed their shows to suit the new generation of audience, yet they believe that their art has lost its value because of the new forms

of entertainment. "The art has become a business now because the value that puppetry had earlier has been lost," says Vinod.

Since the lockdown began, these artists haven't had an income. They were forced to take loans to get by. After the city started opening up, they were filled with hope but are still struggling to make ends meet.

"We now roam around the streets to sell these puppets, but there aren't any buyers. Events were a source of income, but due to this virus no shows are taking place," says Anil. The artists have no financial support and nowhere to showcase their talent.

"We just want to be recognised for our art. We want a platform, a theatre or a space that we can call our workplace, where we can perform our shows on our demands," says Ajay Bhaat. They are tired of fulfilling the demands of event managers and hotels, he added.

Making the puppets is a family business of the Bhaat community. While they make the wooden faces and paint them, their wives make the stitch the clothes and the artists also teach their children to perform the art and make puppets. However, despite the difficulties, they do want to pass this legacy to their children, says Vinod.

"We send our children to school, but we also teach them the art because if they don't continue the legacy, the art will die. They have to learn it and pass it onto their children, that is the only way this art would survive and grow in this world."

Struggle for survival in Pochampally

TANISHQ VADDI

POCHAMPALLY: When Ivanka Trump visited Hyderabad in 2017, Telangana's Chief Minister, K.Chandra Shekar Rao, gave her a bright red Pochampally Ikat, a weave distinct to the small town it is made in. However, this age-old tradition, like handloom all over the country, is at the risk of going into a decline.

The weavers of Pochampally sarees traditionally belong to Padmshali caste, Padma meaning lotus and Sali meaning weavers. Despite other weaving centres in Chirala and Jentrepeta slowly closing down, Pochampally managed to survive. The tide seems to be changing as the weavers complain that the profession doesn't give them enough to run a family. Also, the younger generation does not show enough interest in it.

Rajnikanth(22) comes from a weaving background, but he has no intention of going down that path because the money isn't enough, he says. Instead, he is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Hyderabad. "I would like to join a job in Hyderabad after completing my degree."

His concerns seem to be justified. Anjaneyulu (29) who has been working on Mahateshwari Ikkat Sarees for 14 years agrees that the work pays very little. Also, it is not a stable profession. "Nobody offers us a bride," he says, adding that it is challenging to sustain a family on their current earnings.

However, he doesn't seem to have any choice. His parents took money from the owner of Mahateshwari Ikkat Sarees; he is repaying the loan by working for the business, he says. "No banks gives us any loan if we need money; these are the only people who lend us money, so there is no

way out."

The debt cycle, he adds, is a never-ending one. For instance, he needed a loan of Rs 3 lakhs the previous month to treat his father, who met with an accident. "We have an emergency; we take the loan and increase our debts," he adds. "Our children and grandchildren continue to repay it." Throw in the fact that they have had limited access to education and "it is very difficult to do anything apart from this."

Balaya (47), who works alongside him, says that his constant interaction with people like Anjaneyulu makes him want something very different for his two children. "I don't want my children to suffer like him or me," he says, adding that he would prefer that his children studied and went to the city to work.

However, educating them remains a concern. Though the government does offer a scholarship to weavers' children, the cost of living remains a concern.

"I am thinking of taking a loan from the owner so that my son does not have to stop his education," he says. "Once he gets a good job, it will be easy to clear the debt."

The recent pandemic has worsened their already-dire situation. Fifty-three-year-old Laxman says that there has been no help from the government during these troubled times. "A few NGOs come every ten days and distribute rice and clothes," he says.

However, with many workers losing jobs or having to take a wage cut, things are difficult. Many weavers have started working in petty stores, a few have even begun selling vegetables and fruits at roadside stalls, he says.

"The prices of sarees are increasing, the demand is increasing, but we are still struggling," he says. "No one seems to care about us."

ANUSHKA JAIN

NEW DELHI: Fifty year-old Anita Devi is a cancer patient from Bihar. Running around trying to raise funds from her neighbours for

much of the lockdown, she managed to collect Rs 60,000 to clear some of her medical bills running to over Rs 2 lakh.

Devi has been receiving treatment at India's premier All India Institute of Medical Sciences, after a Bihar hospital referred her there. With two children and a meagre salary of Rs 1500, she is now under heavy debt.

"We don't know about any free beds schemes, you need connection and access for it," says her brother Ranjan.

In 1973, the Delhi administration leased subsidised land to private hospitals in exchange for reservation of beds for poor patients. In 2007 a committee headed by Justice AS Qureshi noting non-compliance, issued guidelines reserving 10 per cent in-patient and 25 per cent out-patient cases for EWS across all applicable hospitals in the city. However even after 50 years and 61 such hospitals dotting the city, there is a lack of clarity and awareness about the scheme leading in part to cases like Anita's and 30 to 40 per cent of the beds remaining vacant.

Ramani Bhowmick, in Noida, has been delaying his father's cancer treatment out of



Anita (right) fighting against all odds

the fear that he would have to bear a heavy cost for it. Bhowmick had recently gotten him operated under the EWS scheme at a Punjabi Bagh-based private hospital. However, he is afraid of going through the process for the

second time. He was helped the first time around by Delhi High Court's EWS monitoring committee member Advocate Ashok Aggarwal. "They would make us go around to different offices a lot. Get different papers, it might take 2-3 months," he fears.

Gagan Bhartia, who works with Delhi-based Charity Beds which connects patients with any vacant EWS beds says,

"The government never carried out any awareness drives or campaigns in slums or villages for this."

Lalit Bhatia, who works with Bhartia says, "The rules keep changing very quickly so sometimes it may happen that a doctor doesn't know about them."

"It is a long process, from admission to the end of the surgery so we stay with them all throughout. Sometimes the helplines, also don't pick up their calls," says Aggarwal, "These people die and nobody cares."

"A lot of poor people do not go the hospitals because they can't afford it. They can't even afford the conveyance and once there, they will have to stand in lines for hours together and still not get anything at the end, so they stay at home," he says.

Future bleak for Kuthampully weavers

MANEESH T

THRISSUR: Sundaran's (54) hands flit over the white threads in the loom. The room is filled with the clack-clack sound of the loom. Outside, the street is filled by similar sounds other houses.

Crafting the distinctive-looking Kerala sari fills Sundaran with pride. He is part of the 400-year-old history of the Devanga Chettiar, a weaving community in Kerala's Kuthampully village. The Devanga Chettiars were first brought in from what is now-Karnataka, by the erstwhile Maharaja of Cochin, for their craft in handloom.

The community now holds a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for their products. Even with this reputation, they find it hard to survive because of a combination of technology, the pandemic and changing societal values.

"This saree takes 3 days to finish. I get Rs.1000 at the end of it, which means Rs. 300 a day," Sundaran said. The saree would be sold to a private

textile shop in the village, for which he works on a contract.

"They give me the threads and attai (design cards) and deduct its cost while paying me. The saree would be sold for Rs.5000 in their shops," he added.

With the Cooperative Society for the weavers in the village having paid no wages for the past 3 months, most of the weavers depend on the private players now.

"There is no other option for my family of four to survive. Normally, we have contracts with both the Society and the private shops. Now, the Society does not want us to weave sarees."

According to Saravanan A (53), the secretary of the Kuthampully Cooperative Society, there has been no funding from the government since Onam season, to pay the wages of the weavers.

"The sales have been hit by the pandemic. We were forced to advise the weavers to stop weaving sarees and limit them to 'double mundu' (dhoti),"

he said.

R. Babu (48), Sundaran's brother, who weaves the 'double mundu', said "The Society gets us the paavu (bundle of white cotton thread). It takes three days to finish weaving two 'double mundu', for which they would give me Rs.500. I haven't even got that for the past 3 months."

Babu, who has been in the profession for 35 years, said there was no future for their legacy.

"Most of the children have started doing business and other jobs. Nobody wants to get paid like this. This will end with our generation," Babu said.

Saravanan said all the active weavers in the village were above 40. "Only the ones who have been doing it for at least 15-20 years are in the profession now. Not the youngsters," he said.

According to the NITI Aayog, weaving is the biggest employer after agriculture in the country. It provides direct employment to 4.5 crore people and another 6 crore in allied sectors.



PHOTO: MANEESH T