

OTHERS

Health crisis

Hapur women battle anaemia Pg 6



Farm woes

Sundarbans' landless farmers face bleak prospects Pg 10



Overworked

In Najafgarh, ASHA workers struggle sans hope Pg 11



Airport expansion grounds livelihoods

Villagers displaced by Noida project not rehabilitated

Sahil Mathur

Jewar (Uttar Pradesh): In 2018-19, the Yogi Adityanath-led government in Uttar Pradesh announced the expansion of the Noida International Airport, slated to be Asia's largest and the world's fourth largest with an expected passenger capacity of more than 1 crore per annum. A year later, the process of acquiring 1,330 hectares of land began. In late 2021, the residents of five villages — Chetar Nagla, Dayanapur, Rohi, Nagla Sareekh, and Nagla Ganeshi — shifted to the newly built RR Colony in Jewar. More than a year later, the people in the rehabilitation and resettlement colony feel betrayed by the State government for being made to leave their villages on false promises.



FORCED MIGRATION: People displaced from their villages for the expansion of the Noida airport seen in their new settlement in Jewar | PHOTO: Sahil Mathur

land owners for a public-private project to get under way. However, the villagers here said that nothing of that sort happened; they insist they were barely given notice to vacate their homes. "We were told that everything was sorted and all we need to do was pack our bags as soon as possible," Khan said.

During a briefing, the residents of the five villages were given two options: go with one job per household in the airport or get the full compensation of Rs. 6.36 lakh. "Those who had some education opted for the job, while most villagers went for the full compensation," Sarik said.

Despite such promises, the villagers say that they have received neither.

For the second phase of the project, Kishorpur and Ranhera villages will be cleared alongside 15 other villages and their residents shifted to another similarly built colony at a different location.

The Ganga is not a welcome visitor here

Bhimagram faces floods often

Priyamedha Dutta

Malda (West Bengal): One night was all it took for Hussain Sheikh, 60, to lose not just his home but his identity as well. That was the day the Ganga overflowed its banks and carried his entire house in Bhimagram village in West Bengal's Malda district.

Bhimagram is just one of the villages in Malda and Murshidabad districts where houses are washed away when the river changes course.

Villagers attribute this to the building of the Farakka Barrage. The dam was built in 1975 to divert adequate quantities of Ganga waters that could improve "the regime and navigability" of Bhagirathi-Hooghly rivers, according to the barrage's website.

But it had one unintended consequence: it flooded the houses and land parcels.

"I have not just lost my house, I have also lost my identity in one night" says Sheikh, who could barely save his belongings.

Every year, thousands of families get displaced as waters from the Ganga erode land across villages in Malda district. The high rate of erosion leads to cutting of the banks, where a huge number of houses and agricultural land are washed away by the river.

"Even this sarree that I am wearing right now is borrowed," says Anowara Bibi, 50, from Lalutala who lives with her husband in a makeshift house.

Not just houses, schools, mosques, and temples have also been washed away by the Ganga. Displaced people are forced to settle in open spaces under makeshift houses.

Mehebob Bibi, who has a 10-year-old son, says, "Since we lost

I have not just lost my house, but also my identity in one night.

- Sheikh

our house, my son does not feel like studying. One cannot study in a two-room shed that I share with other families."

The barrage has obstructed the natural course of the Ganga, making it more capricious. According to a paper by Kalyan Rudra, the flow of water is obstructed which leads to increased pressure to the natural flow both in the upstream and downstream of the barrage. This leads to increased erosions.

In Paschim Ratnapur, most of the farm land has been washed off.

Says Dhiraj Mondal, a local resident: "Most of these are our ancestral land, we are agricultural people, whatever we grew we could sell, now we have lost it all."

Abdullah Musleuddin Secretary of Ganga Bhangan Protirodh Action Nagarik Committee, says, "food and shelter are the right of every citizen, when we lose our houses to the river we are left with nothing. It is the responsibility of the government to give us patta land and a house, these are the things we are fighting for."

DEADLY COURSE

School students in Manor have far to go

Manjiri Patil

Palghar (Maharashtra): It is easy to pass the Mumbai-Ahmedabad National Highway without registering the presence of the narrow unpaved roads that lead to villages at the foot of many hills on the way. It is there that the taluka of Manor in Palghar district functions. Unfortunately, policy-makers too seem to have missed the tiny hamlet-like villages that make up such talukas.

The district of Palghar was carved out of Thane in 2014. Palghar now consists of many talukas and census towns like Manor, which is mainly inhabited by the Scheduled Tribes.

According to the 2011 Census, Palghar block in Thane district has 398 primary schools in 203 villages. Palghar is divided into 32 school clusters. The Manor school cluster has 20 schools, out of which



CLASS ORDER: Students of a school in Palghar grouped as per basic skills | PHOTO: Manjiri Patil

14 are government.

While the objectives of the National Education Policy seems

achievable, the ground reality is different.

Sangita, a Class VIII student of

the Zilla Parishad School of Pole, walks more than half an hour to reach school at 10 am. "There is only one school in the village for students from classes I to VII. The children come from far away and at their own time. We understand they walk through treacherous terrain, so even if they are late we mark them present. In the rains, we even have to leave them earlier so they reach home safe," said principal Kashinath Vadhan.

For families below the poverty line, girl students get Re. 1 each day they attend school, and every student receives Rs. 1,000 a year as an incentive. Pole village consists of 400 households, out of which 250 are below the poverty line. The schools too receive Rs. 5,000 each academic year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the schools had not received the government-granted two uniforms per student for the last two years.

The Zilla Parishad School of Kondhan village has not received the maintenance money since two years. In most of these villages, schools are from classes I to IV and, very rarely, till class VII, after which they may get admitted to the residential Ashram schools.

The schools are mostly just two classrooms for four classes with one or two teachers, including the principal.

Lata Pandhre, the only teacher of ZP School Khadkona, explains that she divides the children in different groups based on their basic abilities; sometimes a student in Class IV cannot even read from Class II books. They are segregated as per their classes only for the purpose of official records.

Though the earlier scheme ensured there are government schools in a 1.5km radius of many villages, quality education can't easily be accessed in these parts.



LOOKING PAST: The now eroded land where Mehboba Bibi's house once stood | PHOTO: Priyamedha Dutta

Devanampattinam fisherfolk's future swims with the fishes

Preetika Parashuraman

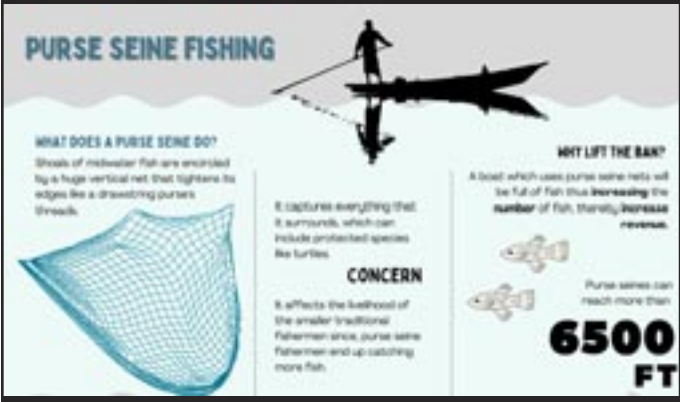
Cuddalore (Tamil Nadu): As Janarthan tried to calm his crying baby, his smile gradually faded to a frown. He feared he may not be able to make his son a fisherman like him. The ban on purse seine fishing strengthened that fear. The 2004 tsunami exposed the vulnerabilities of the fishing community on the Devanampattinam coast in Cuddalore. Since then, the villagers have been trying to reconstruct their lives and save their coast.

The fisherfolk of the coastal village have been agitating to lift the ban on purse seine fishing, which is known to harm endangered species. The restriction is now in effect within 12 nautical miles of the coasts of Tamil Nadu,

Kerala, Puducherry, Odisha, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The ban is unjustified, according to the fishing community.

Despite the State government's ban in 2000, it was never strictly enforced until the State government gazette announced Tamil Nadu Marine Fishing Regulation Rules on February 17, 2020, and started taking punitive action against the violators.

Retired Assistant Inspector of Labour (Cuddalore) K Sambasivam was there during one of the protests. He had been buying fish from the Devanampattinam fisherfolk for several years. "If you are imposing a ban, efforts should be made to study the issue, which is not happening. During the ban,



the fisherfolk were promised monetary compensation, but the amount is not enough to sustain their livelihoods in the long run," he said. As labour inspector, he had worked on implementing schemes that would provide monetary

compensation to the fisherfolk. However, they can get the benefit only if they are ration card holders. "Not all of them have ration cards. There is a gap between what the government is doing and what the villagers know," he said.

Fishermen use purse seine nets to surround a school of fish. The bottom of the net is drawn together to enclose the fish like tightening the cords of a purse. Without these nets, the fishermen will not be able to catch enough fish. "We are hanging by a thin thread. I feel scared to think about how I will raise my family," Janarthan said. He said he is struggling to find another job because the sea is all he knows. He does not know anything beyond fishing.

Usually, the women are occupied with household duties, minor trading, or carrying fish to the market while the men are out at sea fishing or on the coast mending their nets. Children have been attending schools in recent years. However, his wife said there is a high dropout rate among children,

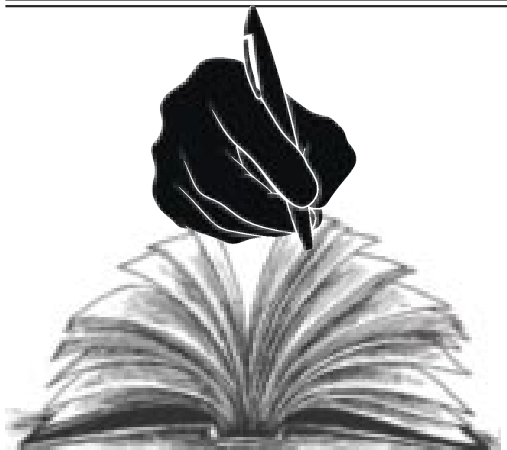
and relatively few of them finish school and pursue higher learning. One of them was his sister Sonali. She graduated from Periyar Arts College, Devanampattinam with a BA in English literature after she got married.

She said the government has scholarships for students, but the villagers are not aware of those, and this distances them from progress. Whenever she informs the villagers about the scholarships, they look forlorn. "They have become immune to the feeling of

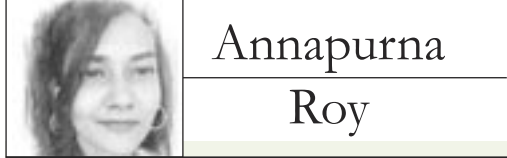
being invisible to the government and don't see a brighter future."

According to her, the fisherfolk are neglected and marginalised. Their father has shown them how the fishing community is a distinct group with a unique culture. And they understood their special relationship with the sea and the environment. "My brother would observe and imitate our father who taught him fishing like his father did, but I fear this inheritance will vanish soon as fishing is not seen as lucrative as before," she said.

The fisherfolk of the coastal village have been agitating to lift the ban on purse seine fishing, which is known to harm endangered species



REPORTER'S DIARY



Annapurna Roy

Fact or fiction?

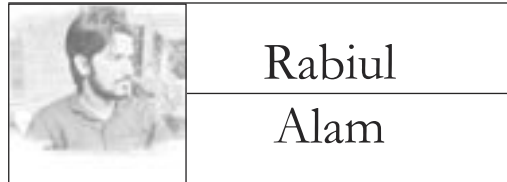
“They’re suppressing history,” Asit Mridha said, breathlessly. “The authorities, they don’t want anyone to talk about it.” I became acquainted with Asit in my search for his brother Anil Mridha, a doctor in Pakhiralay village in the Sundarbans. But our conversation took a strange and interesting turn. “Everyone who comes for a study cares about the present, the poverty,” he said. “But I can tell you about the past.” He began to tell me about the original inhabitants of the Sundarbans - the Gangaridai civilisation - which was conquered and destroyed by the Aryans who turned the area into an uninhabitable forest and erased its history. “I had heard the name Gangaridai, but could not really tell fact from fiction. Was it true? Was it a conspiracy theory? Had the authorities cordoned off the forests to protect the fragile ecosystem and its endangered species, or because they wanted to keep people from seeing the ruins of the grand palace of the king of Gangaridai that remain there?” “The proof is all hidden in the forest,” he claimed. Many histories and alternative histories are part of the national discourse these days. Most of the time, it isn’t the truth that matters but the story. I had stumbled upon a marginal alternative history in one of the remotest corners of the country.



Anindita Sengupta

No charity, please

Standing on the wetlands of Bortir Bil, a little over an hour’s drive from the centre of Kolkata, in North 24 Parganas district, I present my best journalist demeanour. While looking out for stories, a middle-aged woman in her forties offer me a cup of tea from her shanty. Initially hesitant, I agreed. “Are you a tourist?” she asked in Bengali. “No, I am currently studying journalism and I am looking for a story here,” I replied. “Here? You’ll get plenty of stories in a many other villages. So why here?” “I have come to know that the condition of the women is worrisome, so I wanted to know what is being done about it.” “With all due respect, I am really happy that you are doing this work but we do not owe you any information. We, rural women, don’t want charity, we want to be helped and empowered,” she said. That’s when it hit me. We journalists can indeed can contribute to the creation of platforms for rural women mentorship and development in communities around the world. This can help empower women to be confident and resourceful to live up to their potential.



Rabiul Alam

‘Take me to school’

It was the winter morning of January 3, 2022. I was sipping tea sitting beside a group of fishermen in a ramshackle tin-shed tea stall near Motirhat Fish Market in Lakshimpur district of Bangladesh. “What’s your agenda here?” a middle-aged fisherman asks me. I introduced myself as a reporter and told them why I was there. “People of your ilk come here, and later inform the local magistrate that we are catching fish during ban season,” he said. A fisherman named Bulbul takes me to a spot near his boat to share his story. “All my five children don’t know anything except catching fish. However, I want my youngest child Nurun Nahar, 5, to be educated.” Nurun’s face lit up on hearing this. But Bulbul doesn’t know how to get her enrolled in a primary school. Suddenly, I remembered that one of my aunts works at a nearby primary school. I requested her to help Nahar go to school. Bulbul promised me that he would take his daughter to the school the very next day. I hope he keeps his promise and she goes to school.

In the Sundarbans, girls get to study but boys drop out

Bad schooling, families’ financial condition force boys to take up work

Annapurna Roy

Sundarbans: Anima Biswas, 34, of Kumirmari village lost her husband in a tiger attack last year. He earned a livelihood catching fish and crabs in the Sundarbans reserve forests. Soon after this, her 17-year-old son Arup who completed class 10 migrated to Kalikapur for work. “There is no other work here,” she said. “Working in the forest is dangerous, and we have no land of our own.” Arup is one of the many boys in the region to drop out of school. The gender ratio in secondary and higher secondary schools in Gosaba, one of the 19 Sundarbans blocks in West Bengal, skews towards girls, as economic and environmental realities cause boys to drop out and migrate for work from their mid-teens. Kaushik Sarkar, 17, studies in class 11 in the Kumirmari High School. “Many of my classmates dropped out after the class 10 boards,” he said. Shubrata, younger son of 56-year-old fisherman Bishtupada Koyal left Kumirmari 3-4 months ago, dropping out after his 10th board exams, to work in construction in Tamil Nadu. “We were not able to earn much because of the lockdowns. He too lost touch with his studies,” said Koyal. “Now he earns around to Rs 8,000 a month. It helps us out.” The Sundarbans comprise 102 islands, separated by rivers, of which only 54 are inhabited by humans. Kumirmari island is at the farthest



ALL WORK: Rita Barui, 16, with her family, in Pakhiralay village | PHOTO: Annapurna Roy

edge of the Sundarbans, bordering the uninhabited forested areas. But the pattern persists even in relatively more inland villages. Tenth-grader, Rita Barui’s class, in Pakhiralay High School, in Pakhiralay village, a tourist hotspot, has about 30 girls and 20 boys. Another Pakhiralay native Nabanita Joddar, 18, is in her final year at

Rangabalia Higher Secondary School in neighbouring Rangabalia village. “Many boys left school for work, especially after the lockdown,” she said. “Girls have no other work, so they can study. Boys can work, so they may not continue studies.” “Families who can afford it send their boys to live in hostels and study outside the Sundarbans, to places like

Nimpith or Rahara. They hesitate to send the girls so far away, so the girls go to school here or in nearby villages like Rangabalia or Chhota Molla Khali”, said Bandana Mondal who teaches climate literacy at Kumirmari. Headmaster of Kumirmari High School Pranoy Bandhu pointed out the acute lack of space and teachers. His school of over 1,000 students has

only four permanent teachers, while the South Kumirmari Nagendranath High School has just one. “It is a remote area with no facilities. Transport and communication are difficult, and there are cyclones every year. Teachers do not want to come here,” he said. Moreover, over 100 students sit in crowded rooms and the school has no labs or libraries. “The boys’ families see no use in this education, so they send them out to work,” he explained. According to the teacher in charge of Rangabalia Higher Secondary School, Dolly Biswas, the gender ratio in high schools is about 60-40 favouring girls. “Boys go into work as their family’s financial situation is not very good.” She believes the West Bengal government’s Kanyashree scheme, which aims to reduce early marriage of girls, also played a role. The scheme gives girls who complete schooling and are unmarried Rs 25,000 at age 18. “Now the girls stay in school as they wait for marriage so they get the monetary benefit.” Kumirmari Gram Panchayat Pradhan Debashish Mondal dismissed the theory that the lockdown hurt households, causing boys to drop out for financial reasons. “They are only a handful,” he said. “Of course, you can blame the government,” he said. “But at some level it is about the sense of duty of the teachers who are posted here—do soldiers who are posted in Assam or anywhere else say they will leave and go home?”

Karbi Anglong schools left to fend on their own



Two classes being held in the same room at the Janani Girls ME School | PHOTO: Jayant Kumar Pankaj

Jayant Kumar Pankaj

Nawaibil (West Karbi Anglong): Schools in West Karbi Anglong’s Nawaibil village have been neglected by authorities for several years, making it difficult for the children to access education.

According to the Unified District Information System for Education database, there are 12 schools in the village. Of these, six are government schools, three are venture schools, two are government-aided, and one is a private school.

The schools that this reporter visited function out of makeshift structures or badly constructed buildings and provide free education to children of people who migrated to Nawaibil around 50 years ago from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Some of them are recognised by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC) and receive aid, but many of them require donations to keep functioning.

Laxman Chauhan (50), a teacher English at Modern English ME School, said that politicians have always “neglected” the area. “My forefathers came to this place around 50-60 years ago. Since then, we have been living in places which do not

have proper roads and transport facilities,” he said.

Established in 2003, the school still functions out of a hut even though it started receiving government aid from 2017. There are just eight teachers. The school lacks toilets and drinking water facilities.

Janani Girls Medium Education School, a government-aided institution, was established in 2005. In 2015, a permanent building was built with financial assistance of Rs 10 lakh from the KAAC. “However, the Council did not allot separate classrooms, so lessons for classes 6-8 are held in the same room. This is a huge problem (because the children can hear multiple teachers),” said Gyati Kumari Chauhan, school headmistress.

The Modern English LP School, set up in 2003, was one of the first English medium schools in the village. “Crowdfunding is the main source of funds that keeps the school running,” said its founder Sanjay Kumar Chauhan. This school is not recognized by the government.

Sri Satyadev Chauhan started one of the first venture schools – Sankar Basti Hindi LP School – in Nawaibil in 1991. KAAC allotted land to its owners to run the school in 1994. KM

Pushpa (36), the headmistress, said they had requested the KAAC to provide aid, but it has not yet been approved. The venture school provides free education but it is tough to run a school without government support, she said.

Bechu Rajbhar (29), who teaches in the same school, said that politicians have visited the village many times during elections and assured that they would improve education, but the promise remains unfulfilled.

Pawan Kumar, a BJP leader who is elected to the KAAC from the Kopili constituency, said, “I accept the fact that some schools that have been recognised by the Council do not have proper infrastructure.”

He claimed that the Council budget was minuscule, and that he received Rs 10-15 lakh for the development of his constituency, and that it was not enough. There were plans and policies to improve elementary education, but claimed that most had been foiled due to the Covid pandemic.

According to Census 2011 data, Nawaibil is the largest village by population in Karbi Anglong and its literacy rate is 51.47%, which is less than Assam’s total literacy rate of 72.19%.

WEST BENGAL

These farmers can’t afford their own produce

Nidhi Vashishtha

Mobarakpur: Even if no other dish he ate used Mustard oil, Alam Giri wished he could have used some in Sarso ka saag and Bajre ki Roti.

There is something in the way the oil flavours the Saag (mustard greens), that cannot quite be captured by vegetable oil, that he uses instead.

The irony is that Giri is a mustard farmer at least part of the time. His family owns half a bega of land (a bega is a local unit measuring one acre) on which his family grows mustard.

The 18-years-old Giri living in Mobarakpur village, starts his day at four in the morning, he is a young farmer, his brother and his father both are farmers. Giri’s family consists of seven people.

His meager landholding means Giri has to supplement the family income by working as a daily wage labourer. Still, he barely clears enough to buy mustard oil, which retails at Rs130 for a litre bottle. Hence his grouse.. Giri’s house is a mud-brick-house, like many other houses in the village. In the village there are permanent houses and mud-brick-houses.

“Working in a mustard field is like ek tarfa pyaar (one-sided love), no matter how much you work into it, it always lacks result,” Alam Giri.

All together, Giri’s family manages about 25 bags of mustard seeds. About four to five bags of mustard seeds give a litre of oil, according to Giri.

After spending few hours in his land grazing cattle and weeding out the mustard field, Giri goes to do, day’s Mazduri, it doesn’t earn him a lot he said. “our life is all about surviving.” The mustard field that he and his family grazes day after day every year, after all of that dedication

the mustard oil when enters the market becomes too expensive for them.

Parul Didi and Ahmed Sheikh of Buradagana village face similar problems.

According to Pinki Let, Sarpanch of Nabagram Panchayat. In all the houses, either the youth have migrated to other states like Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad, Mumbai or Delhi or abroad. Village Buradagana, which is 700 meters away from Mobarakpur, similar looking houses and similar struggles can be found.

Parul Didi, is a farmer too. She sows Mustard and Paddy. Due to difficulty in harvesting paddy Parul stopped sowing paddy and now relies completely on Mustard.

Parul has one son who is married and two daughters. Parul’s husband died a few years ago. Entering her house, there are cow-dung-cakes stuck on the walls, a huge pile of cow fodder kept outside of her house.

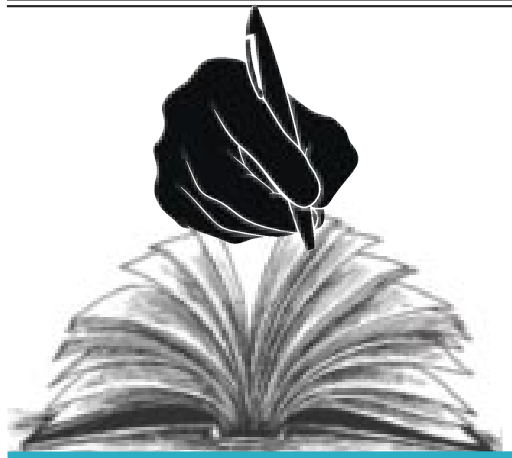
Equipments are kept outside the house, for cutting the dry fodder with hands, an axe kept outside the entrance for firewood. Parul said, “The flavour of food comes when you cook food in Chula and not gas”. She also said that her family has no money to afford an LPG cylinder.

According to the Sarpanch Pinkilet (Head of Panchgram Gram Panchayat), “Farmers who don’t have more than 10 Bega land cannot survive on agricultural alone, it is too difficult and therefore they shift to other, such as working as a daily wagger. The daily work doesn’t give him more than Rs 150 a day.”


“Every farmer should be able to eat what he produces” said Dr Mishra Horti (Professor at Kutchh University, Gujarat)

Working in a mustard field is like ek tarfa pyar (one-sided love).

- Alam Giri, farmer



REPORTER'S DIARY




Upasika Singhal

A terrible burden


I had met Arabinda in one of the villages I'd been roaming around in to report the effect of frequent cyclones on the local fishing community in the Sundarbans. Stout and jolly, he'd shown me around his farm. We chatted for over an hour over cups of tea and omelettes his wife had brought over. He recounted the time he had spent in Hooghly as a cold-storage supervisor. Hooghly, West Bengal's hub of potato production, always needs extra hands in the winter during the harvesting and storing season. When crops fail in the Sundarbans after the post-monsoon cyclonic storms, many make their way to the cold storages of Hooghly to make up for their losses. "Their conditions are just terrible there," Arabinda recounted. He said storage owners would give at least 100 sacks a day per person. The sacks would weigh up to 25 to 30 kgs. Arabinda said the muscles of their necks and shoulders would swell up after straining to carry sacks all day on their heads. At night the workers' barracks would be filled with groans of discomfort and pain. "One boy came to me one night and told me, 'Sahab, give me poison. I'd rather die now than die of this pain,'" Arabinda recalled. Both of us stared at each other in silence for a moment. The conversation eventually shifted back to the Sundarbans. He didn't bring up his time in Hooghly again, and I did not press.

Jayant Kumar Pankaj



Published?

During my trip to villages in Karbi Anglong district, people asked me multiple times, "Are you going to publish this in a newspaper? Please do that, people ought to know our problems." I answered: "As of now, this is just a part of my assignment. I will be assessed on how I cover your problems in my writing." They understood that talking to me was not helpful. However, people were still patient enough to talk with me about education, which was the topic of my story. People often essentialise rural poverty in India without having practical experience. But most of us still need to learn what rural poverty is. I would like to conclude that 75 years of independence have passed, and the government still fails to provide a decent education in remote villages. This is a deep flaw of the liberal-capitalist order that gives us the illusion of development.



Senjuti SenGupta

So near, yet far

"We harvest CR Dhan, Dudher Shor, and sometimes Gobindo Bhog also," said Asima Sarkar giving me the varieties they produce on their land. I remembered the aroma of my mom's special Ghee Bhaat cooked with Gobindo Bhog rice. Mouth watering, I gushed: "How do you like Gobindo Bhog?" Her blank eyes immediately made me realise my mistake. Asima Sarkar, 32, is one of the landless farmers of Kumirmari village in the Sundarbans region. Agriculture had become a livelihood cul-de-sac for them due to cyclones and the pathetic administrative system. The market price of Gobindo Bhog rice is around Rs 160 a kg in my locality in Kolkata. But Asmiadi sells her entire paddy production to the local dealers for a mere Rs 900 to Rs 950 per basta (1 basta= 60 kg). I regretted my impulsive question. But Asimadi recovered quickly and a gentle smile appeared on her face. Only the urban people can afford Gobindo Bhog. I was silent. Isn't it true?

Crocs in water, tiger on land

Sundarbans fishing, farming communities caught between climate change & poverty

Upasika Singhal

Sundarbans (West Bengal): Kamal Mondal sits with his fishing nets pooled around him. His fingers deftly sew patches and tie knots around the holes that have formed in them. Behind him, his wife Namita scrubs utensils. Their house sits right on the banks of one of the many creeks that cut across the Sundarbans in West Bengal.

"I don't own even a katha of land," Mondal says, not looking up from his nets. "We have only the river to live off." The shrimps they catch from the river generally dip in number during the winters. They manage to catch around a kilogram or two in a day this time of the year, if they're lucky. That fetches them around Rs. 50 to 100 in the nearest town's market. "Some days we even earn just Rs. 20," Namita calls out. "We have to run the household in that."

Their house, like those of many fishing folk who live in Purba Sridharpur village, is made from mud. A distinct line forms on the lower half of the walls below which the mud cracks and wrinkles. Living on the bank comes at a huge cost—their house is among the first to be inundated during the monsoon floods.

A delta formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, the Sundarbans is a low-lying area prone to tidal surges and flooding—something that is exacerbated by the frequent cyclones. Over the years the Sundarbans has been increasingly seeing several cyclones with devastating consequences, including Aila in 2009, Bulbul and Fani in 2019, Amphan in 2020, Yaas in 2021 and Sitrang in 2022. According to the Centre for



CAST AWAY: Boats lay abandoned along the banks of a village creek | PHOTO:: Upasika Singhal

Science and Environment's (CSE) annual climate change report, West Bengal is the worst-hit state in India in terms of climate change. It estimated that around 36 villages have faced severe soil and shoreline erosion—up to 500 metres—in the last four decades, Purba Sridharpur being one of them.

Kamal Mondal says that ever since the mangroves have started disappearing the floods have become more frequent. A decade ago the bank of the river was further away, and the

floods, though a part of their reality, did not occur so regularly. "Now we have to rebuild our homes every year, sometimes thrice a year," he says.

Subhash Mondal, a fisherman from Nagendrapur village, has not used his boat in months. One trip to the sea costs him around Rs. 4,000. He has to pay wages to the people who accompany him and take care of their food and drinking water for a week. He has come back from some trips with produce that barely breaks even his costs. "It's pointless," he says.

Besides, it has become difficult to find help for the trips since most young men in the village have left to find work in other districts or states.

Arabinda Mondal from Purba Sridharpur village owns three ponds and practises freshwater pisciculture. Regarded as a village elder, he says many farmers have left the Sundarbans to work in poultry farms in Andhra Pradesh or potato cold storage facilities in Hooghly district because the frequent cyclones and floods have inundated farmland with

salt water, making it difficult to cultivate crops, especially paddy. According to him, it takes around three years to completely leech the salt from the earth. The Sundarbans has witnessed five cyclonic storms in the last four years alone.

Freshwater fish rearing too has taken a hit. Arabinda Mondal's ponds were not spared either. The fish that he had worked all year to rear all died due to excess salinity. He spent three months draining and leeching the salt from the floor of his ponds. He still has to regularly mix lime and calcium powder into the pond to maintain its pH levels. In some community ponds the villagers simply did not bother to change the water. Namita Mondal and her sister-in law Ruma complained about their rashes and itching because some days they have no choice but to bathe in the salty water of these ponds. The alternative is to walk two kilometres to reach the community tap.

If it's not the cyclones or the salinity killing the fish in the rivers then it's the commercial trawlers. Their nets pick up vast hordes of fish, including the eggs and larvae, completely destroying the population. Their dumping then drives the rates down in the market. "We cannot compete with their numbers," says Raju Das, a fisherman from Dumkal village. "How am I supposed to feed my family after making just Rs. 150-200 a day?" he asks.

Yet the people hold on. Some women have taken up work with local NGOs that give them Rs. 2,500 rupees a month to take part in their projects. Others apply for 100 days of rural employment and wait for the government to give work. As Arabinda Mondal puts it, "*Etai jibon*" (Such is life).

Where debts are repaid with child brides

A beacon of light in midst of penury

Sweta Gupta



Moumita Barua, 13, was about to be married to a 35-year-old man in the village of Bortir Bill, West Bengal | PHOTO: Anindita Sengupta

Anindita Sengupta

Beraberia (West Bengal): Child marriage is not a shocking event in our country; many young girls from vulnerable sections of our society turn brides even before they reach the legal age of consent. Parents from weaker sections give away their underage daughters as child brides to settle their debts.

According to a UNICEF report (2005), the proportion of girls aged 15 to 19 is at an all-time high.

In April, 2022, Moumita Barua, a 13-year-old girl was about to be married off by her mother to a 35-year-old man in the small village of Bortir Bill. "I belong to a Hindu farmer family and I am the youngest child of my parents," said Moumita.

According to her statement to the police, her mother was forcing her to marry to repay a loan of Rs. five lakh that Moumita's father had taken from the man, but incurred huge losses. Her father died in 2020 due to Covid-19.

The day before her marriage Childline volunteers along with two block development officers and six police personnel from the Barrackpore

police station, reached the village. Her classmates intervened to stop her from being married off, says Barua.

Her mother tearfully promised the police officers that she will continue her daughter's schooling. "But my grandmother kept saying that we took loans for my marriage, we have already paid for the decorators, caterers. What can we say to the groom's family? They won't wait for her."

The police registered a case under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006, and invoked relevant Sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO).

Early marriage of children, especially girls, is prevalent in more than 40 nations. Though many of these countries have signed international treaties guaranteeing rights for children and women, including the requirement of 18-year-old legal minimum age for marriage, 62% of girls are wedded before the age of 18.

In July 2018, a 15-year-old girl was married off by her father to a 25-year-old man in the village to repay his debt. After her rescue by the police, she said her husband and in-laws used to beat her up every day and her husband

subjected her to sexual abuse.

Programme officer of the Women and Child Development Department Chitrangada Dutta said, "The department is taking strict action against culprits regularly by forming various teams to prevent child marriages. The squad includes the programme officers, Child Development Project Officers, police and the Childline. People are being made aware of the adverse effects of child marriage."

Dutta said, "27 child marriages were stopped in the district and four FIRs were registered last week under the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006. An FIR has been lodged against the friends of the groom, the groom, the relatives and those who solemnise the marriages."

Despite the claims of the Department of Women and Child Development, last year 42 cases of child marriages were reported.

Dutta said, "The flying squads have been working relentlessly for the past four months and have already saved 10 victims. Other complaints which were registered have been solved as soon as possible." The concept of child marriage is a grave violation of child rights.

Dhapa (Kolkata): Rekha Gupta, a home maker from a lower middle-class family, started the Little Heart School with only Rs. 500 and two students. The school stands intact in a small locality at Dhapa, East Kolkata, where solid wastes from the city are dumped.

Situated inside a narrow street that might go unnoticed stands a small building where children dressed in tidy school uniforms are seen chanting morning prayers.

The school has 37 students coming from families of workers, drivers, farmers, etc. who live nearby. With only two classrooms and three teachers, the school is a platform for these students who aspire to study and prepare a base for themselves.

Started in 2015 by Rekha Gupta, who is also the principal, the school is run at her own expense. "I actually run the school at a loss because most of the

students can't pay the fees," she said. The fee in 2015 was Rs. 150, which has now increased to Rs. 500. "There are government schools nearby but no one sends their child to those schools. They would get free food but no education," added Ms. Gupta.

This non-affiliated school has up to class 8, but hardly any student continues their education till that. Most of the students drop out due to the lack of will to study regularly.

"It's always the government schools that are highlighted for shaping the minds of the underprivileged and we are somewhere lost in the dark," said Ms. Gupta.

The school tries to provide students with the right ambience with its activities and events. Cooped up in the small area, the teachers put in a lot of effort to impart holistic education to the children.


"I can't be Mahatma Gandhi, but at least I can do something," said Ms. Gupta.



Students of Little Heart School assembled for morning prayer, at Dhapa, West Bengal | PHOTO: Sweta Gupta



REPORTER'S DIARY

	Annie
	Louis

All aboard!

I stood at Palur bus stand, waiting. There were women who had sat down with their stuffed jute bags, it was evident from their tired faces that they had been waiting for a while. After about 40 minutes, a private bus overflowing with people stopped with a jolt. Everyone rushed to get in, without care where we would fit ourselves into. More people got in at stops ahead. Everyone stayed put where their feet had managed to find some place, bodies often leaning against each other. Many old women boarded the bus, the conductor often yelled impatiently as they struggled to get it. But once they did, the bus collectively said “Ayyah come in”, and they were sucked into the safety of the crowd away from the door. Buses became a meeting spot for kids and teachers from different schools. They waved at each other from different ends, many travelling from Chidambaram, 40 km away from Cuddalore. Everyone broke into a smile, positioning themselves to stand the next one hour or so. A woman named Gayathri says, “In the evening, we don’t hope for a place to sit, we hope to get a place to stand in the bus.”

Preetika	
Parashuraman	

A god for everyone

A Perumal temple in the coastal village of Nanamedu in Cuddalore district is one place of worship Dalits can visit without fear. “For several years, we would pray from the doors of the temples in the town. We feared punishment, even death, if we dared enter the premises. In this temple, dalits are allowed,” said a woman who was hurrying to a farm to help her husband. Raja Bai, who stepped out of an autorickshaw in front of the temple, saw me gazing at the temple and remarked: “Whenever I enter this temple, it feels like a breath of fresh air.” She paused to bow to the deity, pulled out a box from a bag and offered me prasadam - sacred food she prepared for the deity and the worshippers. Pointing to a woman praying inside the temple, she said nobody fears to go inside. She said that to the government her people may be invisible. “But when we enter this temple, we know that at least He (referring to the deity) will listen to us,” she said.

	Nikhila
	Vellore

Bright side

I was at Kumbidi in Malappuram for the ‘Covering Deprivation’ stories. The area was quiet, perhaps because it was noon or perhaps also because the community lived atop a hill. One of the first people I saw was Janaki. Janaki walked slowly, with a slight limp. All her stories, the highs and lows, were told with a smile. She is recovering from a stroke that left her paralysed. Talking to Janaki was easy and the time kind of stopped after sometime. Her story is sad but like anyone else she tries to look at the bright side. She had only just started walking again, after being bedridden for four years, and was excited. Her parents had cut her off after she married someone she liked. but whenever she spoke about her husband, it is very obvious that she doesn’t regret her actions. The whole family lives off the husband’s income and their financial situation is not good. The community as a whole certainly helps a lot. Janaki also spoke about finding friends and acceptance after coming to Kumbidi.

Schools in Cuddalore test endurance of students

Despite multiple requests to authorities, little has been done to improve conditions

Annie Louis

Cuddalore (Tamil Nadu): Many government schools in Cuddalore lack an adequate number of classrooms, toilets and other facilities, which adversely impacts learning among children who are already struggling due to pandemic-induced learning loss.

Teachers at several schools spoke about how a particular type of lacunae distracts or disrupts student learning. Attempts to obtain infrastructure have had little effect on authorities. “We have asked for it, we are waiting,” is a common refrain that teachers in Cuddalore repeat.

Few classrooms

Girls of different grades at Sri Varadham Govt Girls Higher Secondary School (GGHSS) often have to share a classroom or else sit outside for lessons. This makes it harder for the students to focus on learning, said G Therese Catherine, a social science teacher at the school. The school requires more classrooms and toilets, as one of the buildings was demolished and is yet to be rebuilt.

The headmistress Indira at GGHSS Thirupapuliyur said the school has asked the officials to allot more space. “Next year we will see an increase in the student count from 1,600 to 1,900. We need a playground and new classrooms.”

Cuddalore Chief Educational Officer (CEO), M. Ramakrishnan, said old buildings affected by heavy rain in the last two years were demolished, and are yet to be rebuilt. He added that funds have been allotted to build 160 classrooms.

The Cuddalore CEO also said that boys in higher secondary schools tended to vandalise school property, making it difficult to maintain.



SORRY STATE: Broken chairs and student benches for teachers due to inadequate funds allotted for infrastructure | PHOTO: Annie Louis

However, Catherine, who worked with the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan from 2007-2011, said adolescent students behave thus due to pent up energy and frustration, and this is closely linked to identity formation.

Access to Sanitation

Asked what they would like to improve in their school, the girls from higher secondary classes at various government schools in Cuddalore had one answer: toilets.

Chidambaram GGHSS class 11 student, Renuka said that the toilets are few and using them is a hassle as the stench is unbearable. Her school has 20 toilets and 25 urinals for 2816 students.

According to the Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya scheme, there must be one unit (one toilet and 3 urinals) for 40 students. Most of these toilets also lack dustbins, water supply, have broken doors and

malfunctioning incinerators. The incinerators are out of order in the GHS of Thiruvanthipuram, Naduveerappattu, B. Mutlur and Chidambaram.

Need for a Compound Wall

The lack of a compound wall is also quite distracting for the students there. V Mahalakshmi, the Tamil teacher at the school, said due to the lack of a compound wall, children leave school midway. Vandalism is also on the rise

All in one

The govt. school teachers say they are expected to look after every aspect of the school - from teaching to repairs. “In private schools there are people to take care of repairs but here, teachers are required to look into it,” said Bhaskar Richards, PT assistant in Varakalpattu. “Technology is supposed to ease our work. But the government attendance app hangs, and we spend the first period just entering attendance on it,” said Catherine.

because people walk in and out of the premises.

While teachers complain that lack of infrastructure affects learning, children too have their own stories to tell. “There are three fans, but only the one over the teacher’s chair works. They have pulled the fuse for the others. There are no dustbins either,” Hasini, a class 9 student from GHS Thiruvanthipuram said.

B. Mutlur model school teacher J Vidhubala said about 60% of their students need benches and chairs.

Varakalpattu GHS, PT Assistant, Bhasker Richards said post-pandemic govt. schools have seen an increase in admission as parents could not afford the private school fees. According to him, this rise in admission has made it more difficult to accommodate students in schools. The school lacks a playground, library and requires 5 more classrooms for its students.

Arippa residents protest, but who is listening?

Athira Elssa Johnson

Kollam (Kerala): In a forest in Kollam district in Kerala, nearly 550 families live under blue tarpaulin roofs of their makeshift houses tucked in using palm sticks. They are denied access to basic facilities like water, electricity, food, healthcare; an ordeal they are facing since 11 years.

While Bhooparishkkarana Niyamam (land reform laws) in Kerala is lauded for justice-based land ownership, the adivasis, dalits, religious minorities, and the landless still struggle for their land titles. One such ongoing protest is the Arippa Bhoosamaram (Arippa land struggle).

Ninety acres in the Arippa forest were in the possession of business tycoon, the late Thangal Kunju Musaliyar, who retained ownership for 102 years. When the land tenure expired in 2001, the Kerala Government declared it surplus revenue land.

Around 21.54 acres was set aside for the beneficiaries of the Chengara land struggle. They were given land title deeds in 2009, and 13 acres was meant for the Dr. Ambedkar Model Residential School. The remaining 55.46 acres, meant to be redistributed among the Adivasis, Dalits, and landless, was instead set aside for developmental projects. Arippa Bhoosamaram was started to claim redistribution of this surplus land.

“On December 31, 2012, we decided to protest here. Since then we’ve been facing livelihood issues, all for living with dignity,” Ramesh, who is the secretary of the Adivasi Dalit Munnetta Samithi (ADMS), said.

“Governments think offering three cents and a 450-sq-ft house to us will solve the issue. If that were the case, we could simply apply for housing through the panchayat. We want the ownership of the land we tilled,” Ramesh added.

He further added, “We are denied secured land titles because land ownership would mean self-sufficiency and the dominant corporates cannot let go of our dependency on them”

Arippa residents practise various forms of resistance. When the Kerala government celebrated the 50th anniversary of land reform laws, Arippa residents protested by making porridge outside the CM’s residence.



THE NOWHERE PEOPLE: Many people on forest land do not have documents required to claim government aid | PHOTO: Athira Elssa Johnson

Elaborating on the health scenario of Arippa residents, Sulekha Beevi, 71, one of first protesters at the site, said, “I pay for medicines I can’t afford. I don’t have money for my surgery and these medicines sustain my life—these are all from donations,” she said.

Ramla Beevi lives in a hut adjacent to Sulekha. Ramla’s husband was killed by moneylenders 34 years ago, and she has lost touch with her three children. “I have my widow pension. I cry everyday thinking about my children,” she said .

Arippa residents like Pushpakumari do not possess the documents to apply for healthcare benefits. Some of them manage to get rations and share them with other residents. Pushpakumari lost

her children and husband to poverty, and lack of medical help. The residents did not receive Covid-19 aid too.

Residents go to the nearby forest to get palm leaves to make brooms and sell them for Rs. 15 each. Due to old age, working in the forest becomes a difficult job. “We don’t have the physical strength to harvest palm leaves for brooms from the forest anymore,” Pushpakumari said

Radamani, who lives on the hill above the site, lost her younger daughter to domestic violence, and her other daughter is chronically ill. Radamani’s husband suffers from a mental illness from the trauma of their loss. “Charitable institutions come and take pictures with us. Not a single penny do we get from any of those,” she said.

Thatha, the oldest of the residents, carries water from the well outside the protest site. “We only have a small stream inside the protest site, and that too is contaminated with the oil spills from the factory,” she said. Arippa residents seek solutions from the local administration and Kerala government on these issues.

ADMS Secretary Ramesh recollected the time Minister K Raju made insensitive remarks, belittling the Arippa struggle. He mentioned how leaders like Cheriyan Philip ensured them full protection, and promised to stay at the site during the elections. Cheriyan Philip commented, “I do not remember much of the issue. It was a long time ago.”

Free housing solves little in Kumbidi

Social situation unchanged

Nikhila Vellore

Malappuram (Kerala): Kumbidi in Malappuram district, Kerala, has 20 houses, which have inhabitants from all over the state. Each house comes rent-free, but residents have to pay the electricity and water bills, etc. While the scheme to build houses for the poor has been going on for years, it doesn’t improve their social situation much.

According to the Kerala Government’s Life Mission website, there are 3,41,095 households without homes, and 1,63,872 households with land but no homes. Malappuram (38,263) comes sixth in the list of districts with the highest number of families either landless or homeless.

In Malappuram, access to proper housing is hard for many. Usha, 58, came to Kumbidi after her son was diagnosed with cancer, and they couldn’t afford to pay rent. Her son died six months ago. When asked if not having to pay rent helps to relieve any financial tension, she replied, “What relief? Where would we get money from?”

Even with affordable healthcare in government hospitals in Kerala, many still avoid going. Janaki, 43, was paralysed for four years due to blood clots in her brain and has only just started walking again. After moving to Kumbidi, she has been on only two hospital visits despite needing an operation. “We can’t afford the expense,” Janaki said.

Rahila, 60, came from Thiruvananthapuram after her daughter and son-in-law died, leaving her with three grandchildren. Her daughter fought cancer for 12 years before succumbing. Their children could not get proper education either. “Except for the house, we don’t



The houses built for landless people | PHOTO: Nikhila V

have anything. It is very hard to live,” she said.

“In the next five years, we will construct five lakh houses. We aim to convert Kerala into a place where there are no landless or homeless people,” said Kerala’s Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, according to a News 18 report.

Various natural disasters render many families homeless. Nabeens, 50, lost her home in the 2004 tsunami, and had to live in a tsunami camp for eight years with her father.

Soon after moving to Kumbidi, her father died. “Apart from this house, I don’t have anywhere else to go,” she said.

Organisations like Warier Foundation Charitable Trust build houses for free on land parcels given by local people. Families to be granted aid are chosen at random.

KC Kunjuttu, a landowner who has donated land to build houses, said that every family which asks for a house needs to fulfil a long list of criteria.

People need not just houses but jobs and state assistance. The families in Kumbidi had help during the pandemic from the local body, but now, even that has stopped.

“We need proper houses, they should give us secured land titles

- Sulekha Beevi



REPORTER'S DIARY



Ekta
Sonawane

Caste, class and capitalism

During my Covering Deprivation field trip to Raigad district, I met Alankar Aptekar, a 35-Year-old gold medallist from the prestigious J J School of Arts. I entered his house that was surrounded by a verdant or green farm. Mud pots were piled one on another and statues of the deity Ganesh were stacked in a metal shelf was covered in dusk and cobwebs. Alankar said, “We are Kumbhar (a caste involved in pottery) and we share a close connection with mud and art”. “So do you make these pots?” I asked. “Not anymore. Now we source the ready-made ones from factories and sell them here. Naturally, we don’t earn as much as we once used to. Transportation and buying cost is so high that we hardly earn anything from this”. Once the potters took to statue making because of Lokmanya Tilak’s politico-cultural movement. Now Alankar says he is forced to learn traditional statue for purely commercial and economic reasons. Clad in a printed floral chiffon saree, Alankar’s mother joined the conversation. “People don’t like to do their traditional occupation anymore because it reflects their caste and these factory owners are taking advantage of it”. Suddenly it dawned upon me that telling complex ground realities in simple words and that’s what made me choose journalism over pedantic academics. Alankar and his mother were talking about important topics like disruption of rural economics and predatory capitalism that is making traditional arts and crafts bite the dust. Not all caste-based occupations need to survive because many of them are stigmatising and discriminatory. However, certain stories need to be told as milestones changing social ecosystem.

Ruchira
Kagita



A matter of perspective

The Goa that tourists enjoy is an enormous cry for the one experienced by the tribal population of the state. The steep, green Western Ghats were a joy to drive through, but finding people in the midst of seemingly scenic villages proved to be challenging. The only way to do so was by asking around. Every stranger I approached for directions was helpful, and reaching my destinations proved to be a tad easier. However, the fear that my long travels could be unfruitful remained lodged at the back of my mind. While enquiring about the Vanarmare tribe among people living in the vicinity of the tribal colony, the neighbours said, “People come to them, give them clothes. They regularly receive ration provisions. Yet they don’t make use of the amenities they have.” My first instinct was to ask, why not. Only a little later did those choices make sense. “Just like you are used to using gas, we are used to chulhas,” Bimli Powar told me. It is surprising that many within Goa are unaware of the plight of many Dhangers despite their decades-old struggle to be included in the state’s Scheduled Tribes list. Media coverage might not resolve many problems, but I realised that it can get a conversation started. Locating people might not have been too easy, and while the fact remains that Goa is one of states with the least poverty, it is not bereft of it. Behind Goa’s advertised glamour, there still lie unexplored pockets of distress.

Their 27-year struggle for jal, jangal, zameen still on

7 villages in tribal belt displaced due to Morbe dam are still fighting for their rights

Ekta Sonawane

Varose (Maharashtra): The demands of people affected by the Morbe Damle remain unheard and unmet even after 27 years of struggle. The villages affected by displacement are Varose, Ambedwadi, Borgaon, Thakkarwadi, Ramapir Ni Wadi, Buddhawada, and Nadhal Thakkurwadi. The displaced families were resettled near Tupgaon Chowk, Karjat. The construction of the dam that started in 1999 had affected 11 villages of Khalapur, Raigad district. Among them, the people of seven villages were resettled near the hills of Matheran at Tupgaon Chowk. According to the 1981 Census of India, the population of these 11 villages was 2,897. The place where Morbe dam is located today is also known as the tribal belt of Western Ghats. Adivasi groups like Thakkar and Katkari are in larger numbers across this belt. The Morbe dam was constructed by the Government of Maharashtra. But, in 2002 it was handed over to Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation. It was opened in 2006 and since then it has been the main source of water supply to Navi Mumbai. The displaced people say that they got a raw deal from the government. They were never given land in exchange, and were dumped into the middle of hills without basic infrastructure and civic amenities. The officers who had come to allot the land had just pointed to the plots and left without providing any documents. The compensation for the land acquired by government was given in installments to the affected people over a span of 27 years. Ganpant Vihir, a citizen of Varose village says, “My brothers and I had separate land parcels in the old village. When we were resettled here the officers pointed out our land parcels separately but now when we see it online because everything is



FAR FROM HOME: The displaced villagers were shifted to a location that lacked basic amenities | PHOTO: Ekta Sonawane

digital now, we can’t see any land registered in my brother’s name”. “Our struggle has become a major political issue; one vote was worth Rs 500-1,000 in the 2022 gram panchayat election” he added. The other striking fact is that the combined population of these seven villages is around 1,200-1,300. “The settlements here are very congested as compared to their earlier localities in the villages submerged by the dam. In our old village there used to be distance of at least 5km between two villages, but now everything is bunched together; even the ‘Buddha Wada’ (Dalit settlement)” says Yashwant Mahadu Praabalkar, 60, former Police Patil (village official), Varose. As per the provisions, dam affected

people are provided with a certificate as proof. On the basis of that certificate an individual is eligible to avail reservation in employment. Even in the Morbe dam project, displaced people were promised jobs for at least one member of each family. Vihir told this reporter that after 25 years they gave menial jobs to 98 people from the villages. These people who got this job are already 55 years-old and will retire in the next five years. He asked: “What is the use of these jobs which are not eligible for

A local resident alleged that politicians have captured their land for their recreational or business purposes

pension?” Dilip Nikalje, 47, a Public distribution officer at Varose, said that unemployment is the biggest issue on our side. Though we are very close to the cities we don’t get jobs because the education we get is of no use in the cities. The dropout rates are high. Kids here start working at restaurants and garages to fulfill their instant need of buying mobile phones and recharge. They manage to support families. Politicians have captured this land

for their recreational or business purposes, says Yogesh Prabhalkar, 38, husband of Police Patil of Varose village. His father had lost 99 acres of land in the Morbe land project. He is leading the movement for land rights. “The project was sanctioned for Rs 70 crore but was completed with Rs 5.5 crore in half of the taken land. We are demanding the truth and the money we deserve. Our mothers and sisters have spent their lives washing utensils and working as domestic help at others houses just because the government took our land. We were happy doing agriculture but now our generation is destroyed,” he said. The struggle that starts and ends with jal, jungle and zameen (water, forest and land) is not new to tribals and that is proved once again today.

Little done to ease plight of monkey hunters

Ruchira Kagita

South Goa: Hailing from Maharashtra, the Vanarmare are part of the subcategory of the Katkari tribe. They are known to be a nomadic clan, and have been living in Goa for almost three decades now. Settled mainly in two regions of Goa, the Vanarmare suffer extreme poverty. They remember little of their history, and they continue to earn a meagre livelihood from several sources. Yogini Acharya, the Assistant Director of the Tribal Welfare Department of Goa (North), said that the Vanarmare are not recognised as a tribe of Goa as they originally belong to Maharashtra. The Vanarmare are settled in Nirankal of South Goa district, and Pernem of North Goa district. Approximately 100 people live in the respective districts. Each family consists of at least five members. Vanarmare translates to ‘monkey-hunters’. Traditionally, people from the tribe used to hunt monkeys and sell their meat. This is no longer practiced. They are involved in seasonal occupations, mostly on sugar and cashew plantations. These plantations are located a few kilometres away from their colonies. The families have built makeshift houses with thatched roofs. The houses are covered with tarpaulin. These roofs need fixing at least once a year for them to survive the heat and rain. Both bastis, in Nirankal and Pernem, face severe issues of sanitation. The Swachh Bharat Mission has not reached these colonies. Those living in Pernem lack toilets. Upon being asked if they had filed any complaint regarding it, Vasanti Nikam, a resident, said they had not. “The few complaints we did file were left unheard. We’ve now gotten used to our living conditions,” she added. People living near the Vanarmare



ON THE MOVE: Vanarmare basti in Nirankal with around 22 houses roofed with tarpaulin | PHOTO: Ruchira Kagita

colonies say that though certain individuals try to help out by

“We don’t approach the government much. Even if our Mukadam (leader) does something, we don’t know of it.”

Sugandha Powar

providing some clothes and food items, the people of the tribe do not make much use of them.

Samvedhan Kendra, an NGO in Sanquelim, works for the Vanarmare in Nirankal. Dashrat Morajkar from the NGO explained that most of the tribe’s issues stem from the lack of awareness and education. None of the older members of the tribe is literate. The children attending school today learn little from their educational centres. “These children do not have any educational motivation. They are the first generation [of the tribe] going to school. Their learning is also slow,” Morajkar said. Morajkar said that the NGO takes steps to raise awareness among the elders of the community about the importance of personal hygiene. He added that they are in a phase of transitioning to “modern” living, and that it is necessary to take steps to teach them. While most women were forthcoming with regard to sharing information, they had little hope of rising from poverty.

With no medicare, they live in dread

Aminabad villagers’ call unheard

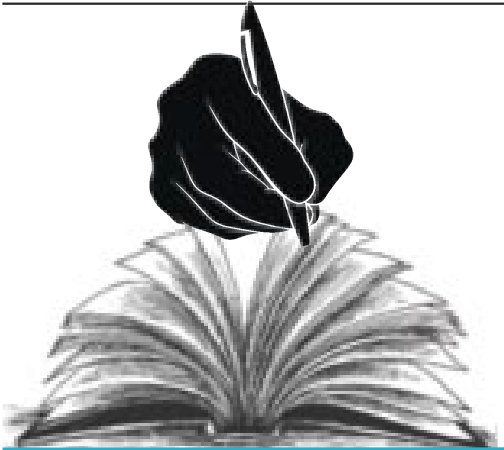
Jessica Rajan

Gautam Buddha Ngr (Noida): Manisha Bhati lost a child a year ago as she went too late to the hospital for his treatment. Pregnant for the second time, she caressed her belly and admits that she is terrified of losing her child again. Manisha lives in Aminabad Urf Nyana village of Gautam Buddha Nagar taluka with her mother-in-law. Her first son, who was only four years old, died of pneumonia. “I took him to the hospital but he died on the way,” says Manisha. The village has about 270 households but no hospital. The nearest hospital is Baba Sukhamal Dalc-hand Nambardar hospital in Dankaur, which is 9 km away. Manisha was devastated a year ago when she saw her child in pain. She managed to persuade her neighbour, a government employee, to drive her son to the hospital. But it was too late. “He would’ve been alive if only I had reached the hospital in time. Sometimes I think it was my fault, but I do wish we had a hospital nearby,” she says. Monika, her next-door neighbour, has a similar story to tell. It is, however, about her husband, who died six months ago. “Even if we get free treatment at the government hospital, the cost of the medicines is so high that I would rather pay for the treatment than the medicines,” she says. Monika



Manisha with her child | PHOTO: Jessica Rajan

has a five-year-old child who attends school. “At the very least, my child receives food and vaccinations at school and anganwadi, but nothing for us,” she added. According to Prakash Bhati, the village’s former pradhan, the pradhani culture has ended, and he is unable to address the issues in his village. “I do my best to assist them, but it is up to the BJP government to listen to our concerns,” he says. Daudpur, a village near Aminabad, has about 40 households with basic amenities such as running water and toilets, but no hospitals. Mangar village of Faridabad’s taluka and district is located below the hills and is a popular tourist destination, with The Lalit perched atop the highest hill. Several luxury vehicles, including BMW and Audi, can be seen entering The Lalit. However, there are no hospitals in Mangar. The nearest hospital is 10km away at Dhoj. Despite being a smart village, having a hospital in every village is still a far-fetched idea for them.



REPORTER'S DIARY



Anjali
Singh

Work is work

During reporting I learned that anganwadi workers work really hard every day, feeding the kids despite difficulties like lack of hand-pumps on the school premises, encountering poisonous snakes, and teaching with the help of toys, charts, and books. After hearing all of this, I asked a sevika why, in surveys and the Census, Bihar was at the bottom. She replied, “In this year’s survey, Bihar will show improvement because we have been working hard all these years.” I was deeply moved by what she said. I wondered: How could an anganwadi worker who only looks after 10-15 houses on an average have so much belief in her work—that her work is important and can bring a substantial change in the condition of the state. This incident made me realise that it doesn’t matter where you stand. What matters is how much you contribute and how much belief you have in your work.

Devanshi
Srivastava



Potential to harm

During my trip we went to visit the Forest Range Officer regarding issues the Adivasi community faces. Ms. Jatav turned to me and said, “Let him feel heard. And we cannot tell him that we have visited the village already or they might go and trouble the villagers.” Any unnecessarily confrontational questioning on my part could have put the village at further risk. I, with my institutional backing, my socio-cultural capital and access in situations like this, have significant potential to cause harm. I am not pushing up with guilt the boulder of my privilege. Rather, this realisation is humbling and generative. It asks me to accept the weight (read: responsibilities) and contours (read: extent) of this boulder and use chunks of it accordingly. And one of those responsibilities is to traverse a tight-rope: To be able to feel my anger at dehumanisation and deprivation without falling into abysmal numbness where each injustice becomes just another one and a slow despair sets in. But also to be able to direct this anger judiciously and not cause further harm or feed into the cycle of injustice.



Elisha
Vermani

A cup of warmth

Indians are usually regarded as exceptionally hospitable people. (The popular saying “*atithi devo bhava*” translates to ‘guests are god’s own reflection’.) However, experiencing it first-hand in a situation where I least expected it caught me completely off-guard. When I began this reporting assignment, I expected people to be guarded and hard to talk to as I was a complete outsider but I was immediately struck by the warmth and hospitality of every single person I came across. I was welcomed in like a family member or an old friend visiting after ages, not as a stranger, in every household that I visited. Every family I spoke to made sure to offer me a cup of tea and pulled out a chair for me to sit on even if it meant that one of them had to stand. Refusing their hospitality was harder than anything else I did on my reporting trip. It was such a simple gesture on their part but it made me feel truly welcomed into their community. I’m not a tea drinker but these few days saw no less than 12 cups of sweet, milky tea. The memory of this kindness will always stay with me and I hope I pass it on to everyone I’m yet to meet in my life.

Hapur women live with anaemia and related issues

Women increasingly seek help, but there’s still a long way to go

Asmita Ravi Shankar

Ghaziabad: Poor nutrition affects the health of women in villages in Uttar Pradesh’s Hapur tehsil. While pregnant women often receive attention and timely medical care, many women who fall outside this bracket often end up with conditions that remain undetected.

The biggest health concern is possibly anaemia, especially among pregnant women, according to Manju Sharma, a doctor at the Primary Health Centre in Pilkhuwa. “We’ve detected a lot of cases of anaemia in women from these and adjacent villages. I’ve been employed here for the past 25 years and the number of cases has not decreased in a significant manner.”

Sharma said the ASHA workers (one ASHA worker is assigned for 1,000 women) inform women about anaemia, healthcare, and prenatal care. Seema Sharma, 42, an anganwadi teacher in Raghunathpur village, said, “ASHA workers are quick to take pregnant women for anaemia tests and check-ups. They’ve caught quite a few cases at an early stage in the past and have taken the women to the PHC immediately.” Blood samples are taken at the PHC and sent to labs for haemoglobin and complete blood count (CBC) tests to screen for anaemia or anaemia-like symptoms in women. Mamta Devi, 38, an ASHA worker in Naya Gaon, said, “We always try to tell the villagers about healthcare, how to not let water stagnate for long in the open, about nutrition and symptoms to look out for. Of late, women have started looking out for symptoms and they come to us to understand it better or ask us for help. We do as much as we can.”



THERE FOR HER: The women gather to be each other’s support system | PHOTO: Asmita Ravi Shankar

The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) indicated that 58.5 per cent of rural Indian women aged 15 to 49 are anaemic. In Uttar Pradesh, half of all women in this age group are anaemic. According to the World Health Organisation, anaemia results when the body does not have enough red blood cells or haemoglobin to carry oxygen to the body’s tissues. Priyanka Dubey, also a doctor at the Pilkhuwa PHC, said that “Anaemia might result in short breaths, weariness, dizziness, and irregular heartbeats. In extreme circumstances, it could cause cardiac failure or disability.” She said that they administer iron folic acid (IFA) tablets and other medicines to pregnant women and recommend a diet as well.

The WHO website claims that anaemia is an indicator of both poor nutrition and poor health and can impact stunting and wasting. “School performance in children and reduced work productivity in adults due to anaemia can have further social and economic impacts for the individual and family,” the website says.

While better awareness has prompted women to seek help, poor nutrition means significant reduction in cases will be slow to occur. Women this reporter spoke to said their diet typically comprises two rotis, vegetables and occasionally some lentils. “There should be two rotis, one cup of rice, one cup of lentils, and some vegetables in an ideal meal. Other than that, at least one or two fruits should be consumed every day,”

said Sharma.

However, for women in these villages, nutrition is not just quality, but also quantity. Forty-three-year-old Antesh Tara of Anwarpur says she often eats less because the mid-day meal at school is not enough for the children. Although according to rules the children are supposed to receive two rotis, rice, lentils and vegetables for every meal, rice is rarely given.

“I just want to prevent my kids from going hungry,” she said. Many women recounted similar stories.

Dubey says that many women are left out of the health system. “In contrast to pregnant women, who are brought in by ASHA workers, other women are brought in by men in their families when they are no longer able to work or prepare meals. Only then

do they become aware of their poor health. It’s difficult to pinpoint just how many women are anaemic.”

Muhurti Sharma moved to Raghunathpur after she got married at the age of 19. Now 60 years old, she still does manual labour to support herself. “We’re just trying to get by in life,” she said.

“But it appears that women still suffer from anaemia. I believe it to be practically everywhere in UP, but nobody bothers to investigate in the villages,” she said.

FACT BOX

Facts about the visit made



Nishads in dire straits on the Yamuna’s shores

Krishna Yadav

Firozabad (U.P.): On a cold January afternoon, Rahul Nishad inflates an inner tube and prepares to swim across the Yamuna river to get to the market on the other side. Using the tube, Rahul hopes to get across the river rather than take the long way around—a detour of about 10 km. Rahul belongs to a community called the Mallahs, whose traditional occupation is boat building.

The Mallahs of Uttar Pradesh are classified under MBC (Most Backward Class). Mallah villages dot the shores of the Yamuna.

“Four people can cross the river with this tire,” says Rahul. “It’s risky sometimes, and many people have drowned in the river while crossing it on an inner tube, but this is the only way to reach the other side of the river as there is no bridge,” he adds.

“No one has boats now in our village, and no one is interested in making boats,” says 46-year-old Ramdas Nishad, who lives in the village of Ramajpura in the Firozabad district. “Rowing boats is no longer profitable as everyone has shifted to agriculture. There used to be one boat in our village but it is broken now. It takes a lot of money and time to make a small boat. One boat costs between Rs. 40,000 and Rs. 50,000 and can only last a year or two,” Ramdas explains.

“Earlier, our forefathers used to make big boats that could even carry a camel. Large boats can cost up to Rs. 1,00,000 and can carry up to 15 people, but no one has this much money in the village to think about making a big boat,” says another resident of Ramajpura village.

There is no solace for the people here. “A small boat is supposed to carry a maximum of five people, but 15 people come on the boat and overcrowd it, causing it to break,” says Laxman Nishad, another villager.

According to a research paper by anthropologist Smita Jassal titled “Caste and the Colonial State: Mallahs in the Census”, after the decline in river transport, the rise of railways and the construction of



Boys crossing the Yamuna with help of an inner tube | PHOTO: Krishna Yadav

bridges led to the loss of fishing as a viable livelihood for some members of the Nishad caste. As a result, many turned to agriculture, often working as landless labourers, sharecroppers, and tenants.

“The biggest problem here in our village is the lack of bridges on the river. A bridge could bring all sorts of development and fortune to our village,” said Ajay Kumar of Nisad village Nagariya. Farol. “Without a bridge, there is no way to reach Firozabad. Only people with bikes and other means of transport can go out. We have 30 bikes in our village and just one tractor. In the village or in any emergency, we assist each other through these bikes and tractors.”

“Due to the lack of a bridge and transport, people don’t come to the village to marry our daughters, and that’s why many old and young people remain unmarried,” Kumar added.

“There have been leaders like

Phulan Devi who represented the community but apart from that there isn’t much. Political outfits like the Nishad Party failed to accommodate the aspirations of Mallahs of the state. It just remained a party of a particular region, a family club rather than providing leadership to the Mallahs of UP,” Badri Narayan added.

“A barrage on the river was promised to us during the Rajnath Singh government in the state. Since then we have been waiting for the bridge. Today we have electricity and minimum developments in our village due to our Nishad leader of that time, Raghuver Dyal Verma. But Verma Ji is no more now. Since his passing, no one has looked after us,” said another resident of the Nishad village Choti Nagariya.

These demands related to the Mallahs’ occupational specialties, have been advocated by Nishad leaders and have met with some success in certain regions of the state but much remains to be done.

Arnav Deo

Ghazipur (U.P.): The landfill site in Ghazipur of Delhi has become an 80-metre-high hill of garbage. Over a 1,000 people’s livelihood depends on it.

Stepping out of the neat and clean modern Metro and entering the narrow lanes filled with garbage and dirty water leeching out of the landfill tells a story of extreme contrasts. The Ghazipur landfill was commissioned in 1984 and its life span expired 20 years ago, in 2002. However, most of the waste ends up here. Successive governments have promised to solve the problem but in vain.

“We are poor people. This is our main source of income. We pick plastic, steel, copper, etc. which can be reused and recycled. After working for about eight hours, we earn about Rs. 200-250 a day,” said Mabiya, a ragpicker.

A middle-aged ragpicker Heena said most of the ragpickers are either from rural Bihar or Kolkata, some even Bangladeshi migrants.

“Our income is shrinking as many houses give their waste to the MCD and the recyclables separately to the kabadiwalas,” Heena added.

“We sometimes pay the

chowkidaars, who keep strict vigilance on us. They won’t let us work if we don’t pay them.”

MCD workers allegedly demand bribes from the poor ragpickers. “As a result, most of us, particularly men, go there late at night when there are no chowkidaars there.” They have to carry torches as they get injured by sharp objects. During segregation they often come in contact with hazardous materials, including soiled clothes, needles, broken glass, sanitary waste, batteries, insecticide bottles, toilet cleaners, and injections, which lead to skin diseases.

There have been frequent fires at the landfill, with gases and toxic smoke causing breathlessness. Some have lost even their homes to these fires. Steps such as bio-mining have been taken by the Municipal Corporation. A waste-to-energy plant has also been set up to convert waste into electricity.

The locals are hopeful that the newly elected AAP government would provide enough drinking water, toilets, and health facilities like Mohalla clinics. NGOs such as GIZ, Chintan and Safai Sena Giffare Foundation have also been working for a number of years towards the improvement of their lives.



Ragpickers of Ghazipur | PHOTO: Arnav Deo

Dilapidated schools, disturbed students

Telangana grapples with crumbling education infrastructure

Ashresh Marupaka

Hanumakonda (Telangana): “This is all that we have,” said Bunty, as he pointed to the debris behind his friends. Past the rubble of bricks was a doorless three-walled washroom with no supply of water.

The testimonies of students studying at the Zilla Parishad Unnata Patashala, or the District Council High Schools, in Kothapalli village and Mulkanoor village of Hanumakonda district shed light on the current situation of education in rural Telangana.

“Government schools in interior Telangana have deteriorated due to administrative apathy and lack of funds,” said Jhansi Lakshmi, the Principal of the ZPHS – Kothapalli. Despite a 19 per cent increase in budget provisions towards education last year, she said that no real change was seen on the ground.

Students are deprived of the basic necessities of clean water and sanitary toilets on the school premises. “Mission Bhagiratha, which claims to supply 100 per cent tap water to all of Telangana, is simply a claim; here we have pipelines laid down but there is no water to use,” said Lakshmi.

Mulkanoor’s ZPHS stands relatively in better shape, but the issues

of students remain unaddressed. One of the major complaints is the absence of school staff. “We love kabaddi, and we want to compete in the district-level competitions. But we cannot, as we don’t have a PT sir to train us,” said Balu, a Class IX student. Students of classes IX and X make up to 50 per cent of the school’s strength, and most expressed their interests in sports. The high schoolers also raised the issue of the lack of computer labs in the school. “We want to learn how to use computers, but we are not allowed to even touch the systems,” said Kiran, a student who expressed great interest in smartphones and YouTube videos.

P Raviprakash Rao, the Principal of ZPHS - Mulkanoor, said that the computers were from the year 2003 and obsolete. “There is no point in hiring a computer teacher on deputation. What we need are new computers from the government first,” said Rao.

Students expressed their anxieties after high school, as the nearest government junior college is 15 kilometres away from both Mulkanoor and Kothapalli. “Most of our siblings discontinue their education after 10th, and lend a hand in agricultural work,” said Sneha, a Class VIII student who said that she wants to become a doctor. “I hope an intermediate college opens here before I pass out,” she said with hopeful eyes.



THE GAME MUST GO ON: (Clockwise from top) An abandoned classroom repurposed as a kitchen to cook mid-day meals at the Kothapalli ZPHS; children play picchi banti, or maram pitti, with a worn-out football at the Kothapalli ZPHS ground; Bunty and friends pointing towards the only toilet available on the school premises at the Kothapalli ZPHS | PHOTOS: Ashresh Marupaka



Gondhalis: Livelihood and legacies

Ravina Warkad

Satara: Potasathi Nachate Mi, Parva Kunachi? (I dance for my livelihood, carefree) is the name of a Gondhali group based in Maharashtra.

The name suggests that the art form Gondhal, practised by people of the Gondhali caste, is the source of their livelihood. There are 6,200 Gondhali parties in Maharashtra and 65,335 Gondhali artists, according to the audit conducted by Makrand Sathe, president of Maharashtra Rajya Gondhali Parishad.

They perform Jagran Gondhal. In Marathi, *jagran* means ‘staying awake’ and *gondhal* means ‘chaos’. As the name states, it is supposed to only be performed overnight. The performance is only done by males. But those who play the male roles are called vaghyas (bards of Khandobas) and those who play the female parts are called murlis (his courtesans). The Gondhalis perform to bless families on occasions such as weddings, childbirth, birthdays, etc.

The origins of this art form are usually traced back to the time of Maratha king Shivaji. But Somnath Nangre, a member of the Maharashtra Rajya Gondhali Parishad, said that Lord Khandoba is mentioned in the Ramayana and

Mahabharata. The art form has sustained and passed on through generations. However, the artists today struggle to sustain their livelihood while also no attempt is made to record their legacy.

“I can only recollect names of Gondhalis till my great-grandfather,” Nangre said. Amol Markal Patil who performs at the

Khandoba temple in Satara, says that Gondhalis do not get recognition from the government like other artists engaged in other art forms. There are no attempts to officially record and preserve the names of great Gondhali artists over the years, so they have no access to their legacy.

Nangre however thinks the bigger issue is the absence of any governmental committees to look

into the welfare of the Gondhali people. He said the government has the Varkari Parishad or Varkari Bhavan to look after the welfare of the artists who perform vaaris. “Even though Gondhal is performed more often and regularly, the government hasn’t taken cognizance of our problems,” Nangre said.

But he states that Gondhali artists are at fault too for this situation. There is no friction between the people of the Gondhali caste and the government. But the artists don’t come together to protest on a large scale.

Gondhali artists protested throughout Maharashtra during the COVID-19 lockdown for basics like housing for the homeless and education for their children. They sent letters, emails and faxes to the then Chief Minister and other ministers. But it made no difference. So they came on the streets with slogans like “*Aamchiya lekra-balanchya shikshanachi soy kara, soy kara*” (make arrangements for the education of our children). The protests died down over time but not one of the demands was met.

Nangre said, “If we visit four houses and no one puts anything on our plate, people are bound to get disappointed. And after that it was difficult to get all the artists together for protests because of their financial predicament.”

Education cul-de-sac due to erosion in the river banks

Rabiul Alam

Lakshmipur (Bangladesh): Akber Hosain’s formal education stopped in 2013, the year the churning waters of the Meghna claimed his house and school.

Losing home and school to the river changed everything for Akber Hosain. “After our displacement here, I never went to my school on the riverbank, not even for the cancellation of my enrolment there. It’s not possible to attend a school situated so far away. When I came here, there was no primary school nearby,” he said.

Now 17, he helps his father, Hadis Majhi, in running the only tea stall in the Badamtali area of Kamal Nagar Upazila under Lakshmipur district of Bangladesh. He moved to the area along with his parents and six siblings.

According to data from Kamal Nagar Upazila Parishad, erosion caused by the Meghna river has been affecting the Upazila for the last three decades, and nearly one-third of the Upazila has already gone to the riverbed. A total of 27 government-approved educational institutions out of 66, where around 40,000 studied, have been washed away in the last 30 years.

Among them, 14 are primary schools, six are secondary schools, and seven are madrasas or Islamic religious institutions. In the last decade alone, 17 educational institutions were devoured by the Meghna.

However, data from primary education department shows that a little more than 17,000 students are enrolment in primary education level in the Upazila and



Sudden erosion on the banks of the Meghna river has washed away many homes | PHOTO: Rabiul Alam

“Alongside government schools, there are roughly 30 non-government educational institutions, including the Qoumi madrasa and self-funded Ibtidi and kindergarten schools swallowed by the river. Thus, the dreams of 10,000 students have been torn apart.”

“Authorities should keep a database of affected students and ensure their enrolment in school after their displacement from their homeland,” he added.

Suchitra Ranjan Das, Upazila Executive Officer, said, “It’s a bitter truth that affected schools are lacking in students, but that doesn’t mean all of their old students dropped out of school. Most of them are enrolled in other schools.”

I always dreamed to be a doctor, but everything washed away due to the erosion.

- Faruk Hossain

a total of 14 primary schools have become the victim of erosion.

Akber is not the only student who has borne the brunt of the furious river. Faruk Hossain, 16, also lost his ancestral home in Saheberhat Union due to erosion before his family shifted to Turabgonj union of the Upazila back in 2015.

Faruk said, “My parents lost all their belongings to the river. They also didn’t focus much on my education. However, I always dreamed of becoming a doctor, but everything got washed away due to the erosion,” he added.

Kamalagar Upazila Primary Education Officer Jahirul Islam said, “Last year, the dropout rate was 2.35 at the primary level in our Upazila. We advised affected students, whose family were displaced far from their schools, to get enrolled in a new school nearby their houses. But we don’t collect details about whether they enrolled or not.”

The schools had lost a

significant number of students after erosion hit the schools. These schools also see a lack of a learning environment there, losing playgrounds and turning multi-storeyed school establishments into tin-shed-like small classrooms.

Jashim Uddin, acting principal of Moddho Char Jagabondhu Primary School, said that the school had a total of 495 students when it was hit by erosion in 2014. Now this school has only 55 students.

“We have witnessed a horrible decline in primary level enrolment. We have seen only 20 per cent enrolment compared to pre-erosion. That means we lost 80 per cent of our students after erosion,” he added.

Secondary-level school and madrasas also went through the same situation.

Advocate Abdus Satter Palawan, convener of Kamalnagar Bacau Monch (the Kamalnagar Saving Platform), said,

One day at a time

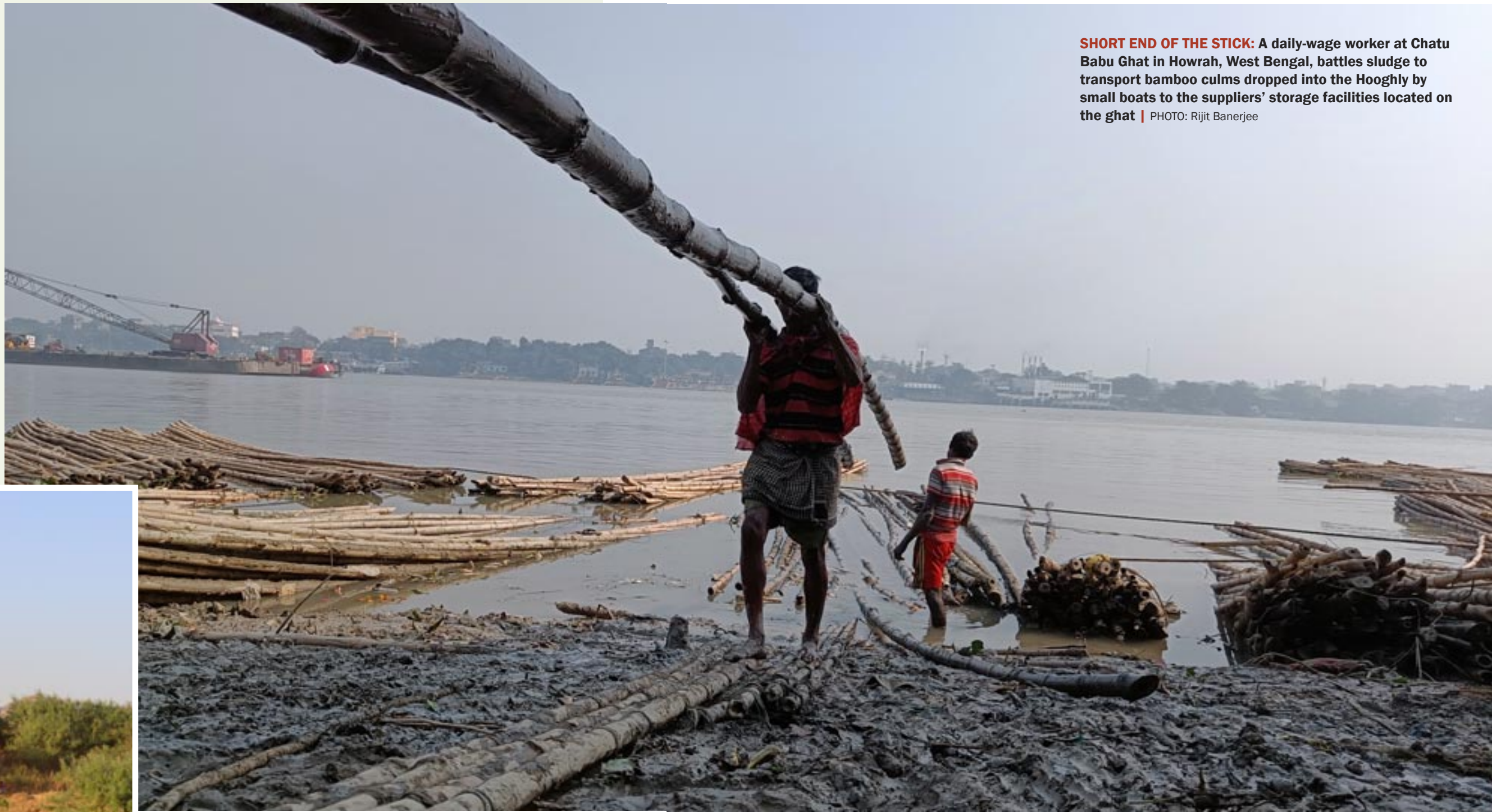
Whether about finding joy in unexpected nooks or working without reward, nature standing vigil or in peril, ingenuity winning or perseverance, these vignettes, captured by photojournalists from the Asian College of Journalism, portray life in its myriad forms



IN THEIR SHOES: Class VIII students of the Zilla Parishad School in Awalkhed village, a settlement of Dalits and tribals in Buldana district, Maharashtra, came first in the district-level kabaddi competition last year. The champions, however, won't be able to pursue sports — or even education — next year due to lack of transportation | PHOTO: Ekta Sonawane



CLAY AND PLAY: Poltu (12), Tabla (12) and Gojai (14) prove any place can turn playground as they soak in the swamps of Bortir Bill, West Bengal | PHOTO: Anindita Sengupta



SHORT END OF THE STICK: A daily-wage worker at Chatu Babu Ghat in Howrah, West Bengal, battles sludge to transport bamboo culms dropped into the Hooghly by small boats to the suppliers' storage facilities located on the ghat | PHOTO: Rijit Banerjee

TURTLE TROUBLE: The northern coast of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha is known to play host to the Olive Ridley sea turtles. In Kovvada village of Srikakulam district, however, many of the turtles are dying after being caught in plastic fishing nets and mechanised boats | PHOTO: Kondeti Chandini



HOPE FLOATS: Makeshift rafts are the only way in and out of Sautada village on the banks of the Vincharna river in Beed district, Maharashtra | PHOTO: Raveena Warkad



LONG VIGIL: Shyam Lal, a small farmer who owns an acre of land in Billah village of Panchkula's Barwala block, sits every night in his field braving the December cold, when temperatures drop to as low as 3° C, to prevent stray cattle from destroying his crop | PHOTO: Aryan Mahitta

ON THE ROPES: An elderly woman turns the wheel to make coir ropes. Seated on the side of the road leading to Vettaikaranpudur in Vettachi taluk of Coimbatore district in Tamil Nadu, the 80-year-old is one of the many villagers who continues to run her own small-scale coir-processing business | PHOTO: Swethavimala M



WAIT WITHOUT END: Sampatiya of Kasahai village in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh, has been waiting for a payment of over Rs. 10,000 for the MGNREGA work she did for the Forest Department of the district. Her record book was never filled and she has no proof to show | PHOTO: Devanshi Srivastava



OVER TROUBLED WATERS: This pebble bridge on the Kotri river in Kanker district, Chhattisgarh, connects people from one side of the river to the other. The "bridge" has been built by Adivasis without using any other material. The river bank here has become an iconic protest site where at least 15,000 people have been protesting for a year against the setting up of a BSF camp in the area | PHOTO: Shubham Tigga



STANDING GUARD: The dense forest on which the livelihood of the people of the Sundarbans depends is guarded fiercely by the sharp and pointy roots of the mangroves. The roots rise above the surface to breathe but they also seem to serve as a barrier between man and nature | PHOTO: Priyadarshini Kar

Bleak prospects crop livelihoods of landless farmers in Sundarbans

Exploitation by landlords, rising soil salinity, cyclones and apathetic admistrative system trigger migration

Senjuti SenGupta

Gosaba (W.B): Nabanita’s brother has a bad habit. The 13-year-old boy sells away his old books whenever their father is away. “He will get so angry if he finds out. He is away in Andhra Pradesh as it is the paddy harvest season. He started taking it up after cyclone Yaas hit the region for additional income to afford our education,” says Nabanita Joddar, a Higher Secondary School candidate from Pakhiralay village in Gosaba Block in Sundarbans, South 24 Parganas.

Seasonal migration of farmers in the Sundarbans has spiked after

cyclone Yaas. They go to Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala in groups of 10-15 people seeking work during the harvest. At times they take up construction work in large cities. They earn Rs. 40,000-45,000 every season, which gets divided among the team members. Back home, these farmers engage themselves in leased land for the rest of the year. “But the profit from cultivation in the Sundarbans is almost nothing these days,” says Nabanita, recalling her father’s words. Farmers like Nabanita’s father are landless cultivators who have been driven to a corner by

landlords, cyclones, and the administrative system. Tapas Sarkar and his wife Asima worked at a construction site at Kaikhali in Kolkata for two years while Kaushik, their 15-year-old son, stayed alone at their house in Kumirmari, another village in Gosaba Block, to attend school. They returned earlier this year and resumed cultivating on their leased land. “We took this land on lease for Rs. 20,000 a year ago. Our landlord has to return the money once the contract gets over. We will grow paddy and make profit out of the crops till then.” However, this is always a

verbal contract. Madhabi Sarkar took three bighas (1.85 acre) of land for Rs. 30,000 nine years ago. “Our contract got over three years ago. But the landlord said he couldn’t return my money. His wife is not well. So, he took another Rs. 10,000 from me. We wanted to return the land this year because the saline water affected its fertility. There were no crops last year due to Yaas. We managed to harvest only five bastas (300 kg) this year when it is usually supposed to be 10 bastas per bigha.” According to the Joint Project Director of the Sundarbans Development Board, Arunangshu Chattaraj, “The soil salinity should never surpass 1ppt for the favourable condition of paddy cultivation. It takes three to four years to get the land in the previous condition once the saline water floods the land. We compensated every farmer after the last cyclone.”

Asked about this, Sabita Mondal smiled. “How would we get the compensation? Our landlords get Rs. 20,000 after every cyclone. It is only for those who can produce the documents of ownership of the land.” Since 2020, the West Bengal Food and Supplies Department made it mandatory for all farmers to carry the Krishak Bandhu certificate (a Rs. 2 lakh life insurance benefit to the farmers who can produce the documents of ownership of the land), other land documents, and bank passbooks to sell their crops to the government. The landless farmers are now excluded from all these benefits. They are forced to sell their paddy to the local dealers at a lower price of Rs. 900-950 per basta whereas the government’s Minimum



COLD COMFORT: Farmers harvest the crops on a winter morning in the Sundarbans | PHOTO: Senjuti SenGupta



GOLDEN HARVEST: Swapan Mondal harvests paddy on leased land | PHOTO: Senjuti SenGupta

Support Price (MSP) is around Rs. 1,850 per basta. There are 14.4 crore landless cultivators in India out of the 26.3 crore farmers, according to the 2011 Census. But there is no regional data available in the Census. However, a report in *The Telegraph* by Prakash Kar published on July 27, 2019, says that of the 72 lakh farmers in West Bengal, 42 lakhs are landless cultivators. Professor of the Oceanography Department at Jadavpur University and a Project Leader of the DECCAM project, Tuhin Ghosh said, “The Census defines a farmer [as someone] who owns

the land. Considering this definition, the number of farmers is decreasing in India every year. The growing number of agricultural labours might also comprise these landless farmers. The local dealers take advantage of this. They buy the produce at a low price and sell it at a high price to mandis that are quite far from the Sundarbans islands. If the government builds a strong market linkage with the farmers, their reluctance to engage in agriculture could be curbed.” Hence, Swapan Mondal decided to send his 16-year-old son to Andhra Pradesh with his uncle to labour in the fields. He

can’t afford his education anymore. But he also doesn’t want him to continue cultivation in the Sundarbans. The Kumirmari Gram Panchayat under the Gosaba Block issued a notice in 2020 asking people to register their details whenever they migrate to other states. According to the BDO of Gosaba Block, Dr Biswanath Chowdhury, “Nobody wants to do this process because it will stop child labour.” However, Swapan Mondal dreams of his son joining the government service. Tapas Sarkar wants his son to get admission to a spoken-English class. The Child and Adolescent Labour Act means nothing to them. When Nabanita scolded her brother for selling his books, he asked, “*Pore korbo ta ki?*” (What’s the point of studying now?).

Landless farmers are forced to sell their paddy to local dealers at Rs. 900-950 whereas the government’s MSP is Rs. 1,850

Changing fates through schooling in Shirpur

Pranay Inbaraj

Shirpur (Maharashtra): Ashram Schools for the underprivileged in Shirpur are helping uplift a community ever since the town had a large investment in education. The Pawaras are a subcommunity of the Bhil tribals from the Khandesh region in central India. Now, they live mostly across Madhya Pradesh and northwestern Maharashtra. In Shirpur, the Pawara community has found work primarily as farm hands and labourers, mostly in construction. That is changing with newer generations. “Farmers here only get Rs. 80,000 a year and we are paid once a year,” said Sunil Pawara, 22, whose family takes care of a field in the town. Room to negotiate wages is little; as farmhands there are only so many jobs they can take up, meaning the opportunity to earn is limited. “We do get food grains in compensation from the farm owners but there is not much else to do and we are always looking for work,” said Sunil. “Sometimes if we are lucky, there is help needed on neighbouring farms but otherwise there is not a lot of work.”

When asked if he saw a different life for himself, perhaps with education, Sunil said that he could not think of studies. “Ever since I was able to work I had to help earn for the family and also so that my sisters could get married. So I did not really think about pursuing my studies at all.” Kumar Singh Pawara, 28, works as a bricklayer in the town, earning a weekly wage of Rs.

1,000. Unlike Sunil, Kumar does wish he had studied further because he believes he could have gotten a better job. “My cousin who studied and became a policeman told me to further my education many times, but I was not confident in my abilities.” Kumar has aspirations, though. He hopes to start a business of selling supplements and vitamins wholesale which he can buy from the internet. Through knowledge, the community is able to escape the fate of many who came before them. Principal of R.C. Patel Ashram School, Pralhad Dinesh Pawara, said that almost all the 650 students at his school belonged to the Pawara community, even himself. However, that did not mean that people outside the community

were not welcome, pointing to his teaching staff who were not of the Pawara community. “In terms of pushing these kids to dream, our school has been quite successful,” said Pawara. “At least 30 of our students have gone on to become doctors,” he said. A ‘Super60’ programme is available at the school for the top students of each class from VII to XII. There is also a package of Rs. 1 crore, awarded by the government to run these programmes, and provide students training for MBBS, NEET and JEE. “Students at the school now mostly want to be doctors or engineers. None of them are thinking about going to help out on the farm anymore,” said Pawara. According to Satish Nikumbe,

an English teacher at the school, one of the problems he faces in class is to get the students to talk and speak more. “They are shy and it is a common issue among people of the community. This is because the students are very conscious of their dialect, which is a little different from Marathi, so when talking to people outside the community they feel a little underconfident. Getting them to open up and be confident is one of our challenges as teachers.” The pass rate of students is about 80 per cent. However, they do see a significant amount of dropouts. “Every student who studies here all the way through is guaranteed to get a job. The community has reservation in government jobs, as long as they finish their studies”, said Nikumbe.



A group of students walking to the canteen | PHOTO: Pranay Inbaraj

Anganwadi workers living in squalor

Anjali Singh

Purnia (Bihar): Anganwadi workers are unsung heroes of the frontline rural healthcare and education system. What worries them the most is the low wages paid to them. Sunita Devi, employed in an anganwadi in Gokulpur, explained, “In 1996, when I started working, I was getting Rs. 400. In 2022, we are getting Rs. 6,000, and that’s why I have to do farming despite doing a so-called government job.” “The salary we are getting is less than the cost of a saree, and even then, sometimes we receive it after three to four months,” said Kumari Kavita of K Nagar Block. “My son qualified for the Navy examination, but we weren’t able to back him financially, and that’s the reason he’s giving tuitions to children today,” said Sadhana Kumari from Jagni village. “I fell down the stairs last month, and I had to mortgage my land because we don’t have any health insurance or security, and today, because that land is mortgaged, I don’t get a single penny from it,” she added.

Given the nature of their job, anganwadi workers do not get leave. “We only have 13 days of annual leave, and we don’t even get a summer vacation. For example, now in many districts, the District Magistrate has ordered schools to be closed because of cold waves in north India, but in this situation, they also have to cook food and deliver it to every child,” said another anganwadi worker. The government keeps increasing their workload. Every new education- or health-related

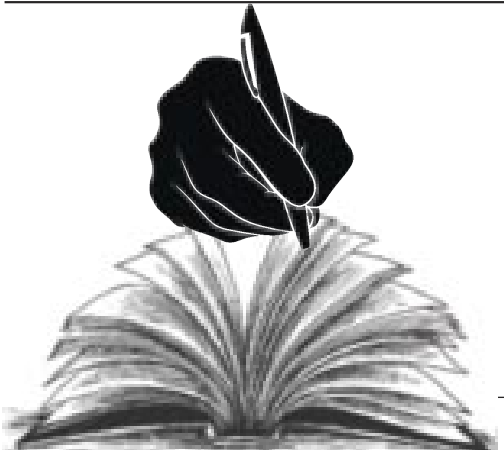


A worker checks the weight and height of a mother | PHOTO: Anjali Singh

scheme will add to the mounting burden of anganwadi workers. “For vaccination programmes like polio, we are asked to work. When the whole world was under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were out on the field doing awareness campaigns and helping nurses with vaccinations,” said Kumari Kavita. “During the campaign, I tested positive for COVID, but there was no relief from the government, so I treated myself at home,” she added. “I have been serving in this job for over 25 years. Sometimes I feel I did it successfully, but sometimes I feel like I failed because my sons are not getting jobs despite clearing all the entrance exams because we cannot afford to bribe the officials,” said Sunita, an anganwadi worker from Gokulpur village in Purnia, Bihar. “In my anganwadi school, we

don’t have a hand pump; we have to fetch water for drinking and cooking purposes from the nearby school,” said Sahika Kumari Kavita of K Nagar block. Many anganwadis are in the same situation, as they do not have access to hand pumps. “In this school, we have so many rat holes and we encounter poisonous snakes on a daily basis, and for that reason, we are unable to leave any child alone on the school premises; either a Sevika or I has to stay. Sometimes we used to bring cement and sand to fill some rat holes, but after a month or two they become hollow and snakes start coming out,” said Sevika Sunita Devi of Gokulpur. Sadhana Kumari of Jagni village says, “In my school, we have broken walls, and that is the reason we face water leakage in the monsoons. We don’t have sweepers or a playground. So, we used to clean the school premises ourselves.” For many months, these workers do not receive adequate food supplies; in such cases, they must bring raw materials from their homes, which is never recorded in official records.





REPORTER'S DIARY

Vaishnavi
Shukla

Casual casteism

By the time we reached Hariharpur, we were too cold to start work. Telling me about the farmers and agriculture in the village, my uncle said that most of the people who actually work on these farms are “farm labourers,” not of plot owners. When my uncle got one of the farm labourers to bring tea, there were two cups and one plastic tumbler. That made me realise how casteism continues to prevail in my ancestral village and how people are oddly proud of it. Our village, Hariharpur, also known as “Pandeypura,” is dominated by upper-class Brahmin families. Accompanied by my uncle, I visited a small locality where persons belonging to scheduled castes live. This legislative seat is reserved for SC candidates. But the elected representative is just for the namesake because most of the work is done by an upper-caste person. When asked about problems they were quick to say that they are extremely disappointed by the Pradhan in their area who has not done anything for the village and the villagers.

Kashvi Raj
Singh

Trust issues

The women of Saintha in Kanpur Dehat have weathered the winter huddled around the community bonfire, wrapped in tattered blankets, fuelling the fire with their shared grudge against journalists. Any time I introduced myself as a student journalist to the women at Saintha and neighbouring villages, they would immediately cover their faces with their ghonghats and fix their gaze on the camera slung over my shoulder. They looked at the inanimate object with such repugnance that I feared for it. I found out that earlier that year, a group of journalists had published their photographs on YouTube and social media without their consent, after promising not to do so. Since then, the women have looked at journalists only with disdain. “People think that because we are poor, we know nothing and it is easy to fool us. You get money and likes on social media by showing how poor we are, but for us, this is our real life,” one of the women told me. She added, “All reporters ask us how the government has wronged us. They never see how they themselves use us for their means.” In a rat-race to break stories and gain an audience, journalistic ethics today often take a backseat. Even as I took baby steps in this profession, I learnt that journalism is firstly an exercise in building trust.

Sahil
Mathur

Lend an ear

As soon as we reached RR Colony in Jewar—the site where people from five villages were resettled after their lands were acquired for the Noida airport expansion project—a crowd surrounded us. Ther people began to narrate their problems and complaints about the colony. One voice said, “Humare saath dhokha hua hai.” I couldn’t recognise who he was, but there was a lot of emotion in it. An elderly man in the crowd stood with his back arched and hands folded, murmuring something. He didn’t care if I listened. He spoke softly but quickly, and his voice was lost in the clamour of the 15 people surrounding me. I tried to listen to him and asked him questions, but he couldn’t understand what I was saying. For nearly half an hour, the man kept his hands folded in front of me and told me how he had lost all his money and there’s nothing left with him. In that elderly man’s eyes was a cry for help in front a group of ineffectual student journalists.

Heroes or victims? ASHA workers struggle sans hope

ASHA workers suffer as a result of deplorable working conditions and low incomes

Elisha Vermani

Najafgarh (Delhi-NCR): “I don’t do this work to earn money. If you come to me for help and I assist you, you would give me blessings and wish me well,” said Pinky as she toyed with a hank of grey wool while talking about her work. She is one of Dhansa village’s three Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers.

Walking through lanes that are barely wide enough for two people to stand together, Pinky visits some of the 400 households in her designated area on foot everyday. Without looking at a register, she listed out the different stages of doctor visits each of the 16 pregnant women in her area are on. The 38-year-old doesn’t see anything out of the ordinary in this task. “It’s a lot of work but they are all good deeds,” she said nonchalantly.

Pinky is one of many such frontline health workers who go door to door visiting some of the most vulnerable and economically disadvantaged sections of our rural population. ASHA workers like her are a part of India’s flagship healthcare access programme and form the backbone of healthcare in India.

ASHA workers were originally envisaged as a cadre of women that would support Anganwadi workers in expanding the implementation of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). Over time they have evolved to become the first responders for any health-related demands of deprived sections of the population, especially women and children. Their responsibilities include providing natal care to mothers, carrying immunisation drives, contraception, education programmes and vaccination surveys



ASHA AT WORK: Madhu, an ASHA worker in Jharoda, checking vaccination cards of the children in her area before the upcoming MR vaccination drive in Delhi | PHOTO: Elisha Vermani

in rural India. During the pandemic, they worked nearly 12-hour shifts. They were roped in for contact tracing, running awareness programmes on sanitation and distancing norms, community surveillance and follow-up visits to those infected with the virus.

However, ASHA workers are seen as volunteers and paid an honorarium for all of the work that they do. In New Delhi, ASHA workers get Rs. 3,000 per month and may earn up to Rs. 6,000 through incentive-based programmes that they carry out. In neighbouring Haryana, the fixed incentive is Rs. 4,000 from the State government and Rs. 2,000 from the Central government.

The accolades and gratitude for these workers, their characterisation “heroes,” and their work as “voluntary” does not compensate for the rampant casualisation of their labour in the system. According to National Health Systems Resource

Centre’s 2011 evaluation report on the ASHA programme, about 58 to 78 per cent of the ASHA workers in Rajasthan, West Bengal, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh reported a family income between Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 3,000 per month. The report took this range as the median monthly income and found that ASHA workers in Kerala, Orissa and Jharkhand were at the lowest end of the spectrum, with many of them earning less than Rs.

1,000 per month. The report also found that for 91 percent ASHA workers in West Bengal and 80 percent in Rajasthan, ASHA work was their main source of income.

The economic status of ASHA workers raises questions on the ‘voluntary’ nature of this work when the primary income for such a large number of them is much below the minimum wage. Delhi and Haryana are two out of the many states that saw protests over the working conditions and monetary compensation of ASHA workers over the last couple of years.

Madhu, an ASHA worker at Jharoda Kalan village, resorted to making residents pay every time she

accompanied them on a doctor’s visit or brought them medicines. “It’s better if we take care of us ourselves. If we call her then we have to pay her Rs. 100 and entertain her like a guest,” said Pallavi Pandey, a resident of Jharoda. She is 24 years old and pregnant with her third child. One of the key duties of ASHA workers is to provide vitamin and calcium supplements to pregnant women. Pallavi said Madhu barely visits her and even when she does, she doesn’t bother coming inside. Other women of the village have had experiences similar to that of Pallavi’s.

Gulabo Devi was sitting her 15-day-old baby on the steps of her house as she spoke about her experience with the ASHA workers in Jharoda. “Our old ASHA worker came to give me supplements and told me how to nurse the chil, I don’t even know the new ASHA (Madhu).”

While walking around the village with Madhu as she made her daily visits, she laughed and said, “This is not a nice area to live in. Most people here are renting houses, so the residents keep changing. I have to explain the same things over and over to them.”

This breakdown of trust between the ASHA workers and their community stems from workers being overworked and underpaid, according to Madhu. Seema, an ASHA worker at Lowa village, Haryana, said it may also stem from the fact that when ASHA workers are posted to a village that is not originally theirs, the likelihood of her work being effective depends on how quickly she is able to build a relationship with the people there. Both Madhu and Seema agreed that ASHA workers deserve better working conditions, stable minimum wage than mere lip service.

Several threats to crops in Barabanki

Avijit Gupta

Barabanki (U.P.): Many farmers in villages in Barabanki district suffered losses due to heavy rains last September.

In mid-September, Barabanki received 192.7 mm rain in 24 hours. Rains are good for agriculture if they are spread over a few weeks, but continuous heavy rains in a short span of time damaged paddy and banana crops in the district.

Ranjit Kumar, a farmer from Kabirpur village, explained how farmers like him faced financial loss due to excessive rains, which destroyed his rice crops. He also said that the rice crop is more likely to be destroyed than any other crop. “The heavy rains were unpredictable. None of us were prepared for it and could do nothing to stop the loss. We watched in agony as the rains damaged our crops,” added Sushil Yadav, a farmer of Gauriya.

Ram Haran, another farmer from the same village, spoke about the issues he faced because of the stray animals that run over the crops, eat it and even vandalise it. Nilgai is one of the animals that affects the farmers.

Karta Ram, a farmer from Kabirpur who grows rice, peppermint and wheat, said he had to hire someone to look out for the animals that may destroy the crops.

Sandeep Kumar, another farmer, complained about labour problems and issues relating to agricultural inputs such as fertilisers and pesticides. “Like for many others in the region, agriculture is my ancestral occupation. My father also worked as a farmer. I inherited his 7 acres of land. Nature can play havoc—excessive summer heat or heavy monsoon can cause us losses. The scorching sun has destroyed my peppermint crop and excessive rains affected my paddy field,” he said.

Many farmers in Barabanki are compelled to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They cannot even imagine shifting to organic farming, and few are aware of it. When it comes to pesticides, they are always



Farmer Karta Ram from Kabirpur village | PHOTO: Avijit Gupta

in a dilemma. One of the biggest concerns about the use of pesticides is toxicity to the environment which has an overall negative impact on air and water quality and especially the soil, said a farmer from Mohd. Bishanpur Chauki village.

Sandeep Kumar, who owns 3.75 acres of land, grows potatoes, wheat, paddy and even chilli, said, the use of pesticides, instead of saving his crops, had affected the yield. “Agriculture is not profitable but we still have to work as we don’t have any other

choice,” he said.

He also made a point about how animals like buffaloes and bulls, especially ones that are abandoned, are responsible for the ruin of crops. The farming of wheat has reduced significantly due to this reason and he was compelled to focus on other crops. In all the three villages the farmers rely on borewells for irrigation due to lack of reliable surface water sources such as ponds and streams. Borewells are expensive as they require electricity to pump water. If not replenished by rains, some years there is a danger of drying up of the water table.

Professor Vijay Sardana, a Supreme Court advocate and an expert on agriculture, said the farmers should focus on the production of oilseeds since there is a demand for it. If they work on cash crops, it will make farming sustainable and viable.

A majority of the farmers said that they were against farm laws but Professor Sardana argued that the farm laws would have benefitted many farmers. “Today they are at the mercy of traders in APMC. If there is an open market they can sell to anyone who offers them a better price.”

Anganwadis under pressure

V Anisha Rao

Pokhari (East Singbhum): It has been four months since the Hemant Soren government promised the Jharkhand State Anganwadi Sevika Sahayika Sangh additional benefits such as provident fund accounts, post-retirement insurance, and a hike in their allowances, following their demands in mid-2022. The State government passed a law providing for an honorarium that will be shared by the Union government, of Rs. 6,800 and Rs. 2,700 respectively.

Kumudini Gour, 51, an anganwadi sevika in Pokhari village in Karandih Block, said the salaries and assistance from the government were inadequate. This affected the availability of the take-home rations for the children of age three to six.

“People of the village have become much more aware today and demand various vaccines and welfare measures from us, but we are in a sad state,” she said.

A survey done by the Pokhari Welfare Association (PWA) in September 2022 found that only half the households with pregnant woman and eight percent of those with infants receive in-home ration.

Funds are released to anganwadis after around a three-four month delay. Gour therefore ends up spending her

own money to feed the children in her care. “I have to borrow money or essentials from the villagers and the shopkeepers in order to take care of these infants,” she said. Local mahila samitis grant loans at cheaper interest rates which helps sevikas like Gour buy essentials from shops. Reimbursement takes eight months.

Workers at all nine anganwadis in Pokhari under the Deoghar Zilla Panchayat face difficulties due to the difference in the prices set by the government and those at which ration is available in shops.

Each centre receives vouchers worth Rs. 6,000 each month, but the market values have no relation with the pre-set rates. If the market rate for potatoes is Rs. 26 per kg, the pre-set rate is only Rs. 15.

In the upcoming vaccination drive to be held in Turiyabada from January 27-29, the sevikas have to visit each of the 160 households. They are given just Rs. 275 to meet expenses.

The government increased their retirement age to 62 and promised to deposit six percent of the honorarium while opening their provident fund accounts. But Gour says that six months since they made their demands, the accounts have yet to be opened. They had also been promised insurance of Rs. 2 lakh, which remains unfulfilled.




“We watched in agony as the rains damaged our crops

- Sushil Yadav




REPORTER'S DIARY

	Arnab Deo
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School is cool

The project on Covering Deprivation was an eye opener for me! Ragpickers are almost invisible to citizens, authorities, and the civil society. The stories of young and old ragpickers were far worse than what I had read in news reports or I could imagine. Many ragpickers appeared resigned to their “fate”. All they wanted was better working conditions. Some children of ragpickers go to school and they dream of never having to work at the landfill like their parents. “Anything but this,” is the refrain. There are NGOs trying to make their lives better. For instance, SafaiSena Welfare Foundation has mobilized waste pickers, doorstep waste collectors into a registered group. It wants adult waste handlers to upgrade their work to green jobs. Supported by another NGO Chintan, the SafaiSena tries to wean children away from becoming ragpickers. It persuades parents to send their children to school instead.

Arya Mishra	
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No school, no meals

I made my way to Potka, asking people for directions to the village. I was an hour into the journey and Google Maps had already stopped cooperating. As I stopped to make sure I was on the right path, I heard the incessant ringing of a school bell to my right and screams of pure joy accompanying it. I asked the person standing near me if it was time for class dismissal already. “No, I think the mid-day meal is here.” I saw that the gates of the school were flung open. Inside, the mini-truck delivering the meal was parked in the centre of the courtyard, and the students were lined up to go to the ‘Rasoighar’. By the time the children settled down, two women took out huge utensils and started serving the food. Rice, dal and soya chunks, or ‘veg chicken’ as the children called it. “The government has ordered schools to close down because of the cold, so the students will have holidays from tomorrow,” the teacher said. “What about the meal then?” I asked. “No school no meals,” the teacher replied. “They can’t go from one house to another serving the meals now, can they?”

	Krishna Yadav
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Unholy row

Braj region is home to the holy River Yamuna. I wanted to dive into the reasons for the river’s poor state, including pollution and drying up. I also wanted to see it through the eyes of the Nishad community who live and work on its banks. But surprisingly, the first boatman I interviewed was a Jat. After his father, Mukhtar Singh took up the family occupation of rowing the single boat he owns. Meeting a man like Mukhtar Singh taught me how poverty and helplessness can break traditional caste barriers. Mukhtar Singh took us to the other bank where I met a sage from Junagadh Akada in a temple. He welcomed me and we sat down for a conversation over tea. The baba explained the legends of tYamuna in Hindu mythology and how the Braj region is considered holy. Curious, I asked if he bathed in the Yamuna. “I stopped long ago. It is neither pure nor healthy.” Sanctity is linked to rivers that are clean and not polluted.

Overworked and underpaid

Anganwadi workers in Chitrakoot district often get into debt to discharge their duties

Devanshi Srivastava

Kasahai (Uttar Pradesh): “When children of the village are unable to get poshahar and the women have to return empty-handed, it pains me,” says Rajyashree, an anganwadi worker in Kasahai village of Chitrakoot district. “Alone, I cannot do more with the Rs 6,000 I get. Can I even raise and educate my own children in that much money?”

In a dimly-lit room at the Nyaya Panchayat Resource Centre of this Karwi block village, Rajyashree sits surrounded by about 30 women and young girls. Some of the women are nursing infants. Others are consoling restless slightly older children. They have all gathered to get ‘poshahar’, the food items distributed under the Nutrition Supplement Programme. They have been here since morning and it is past lunch time.

Rajyashree has an open register in front of her. She is jotting down the names, Aadhar card numbers, and ages of the children. She then enters it in the Poshan Tracker app on her phone which hangs every few minutes. Sometimes she closes the app and begins again. Sometimes she restarts the phone. Only when it is done, does she hand the packet of food - 1kg chana dal, 1 kg rice, 1 kg dalia and 450 gm refined oil. She is left with less than a dozen packets. Not everyone present will get their food packet that day. The ones who do not will have to come next month.

“For a population of 5,000 they send poshahar for 1,000 people. Some people understand but some don’t. I have not been paid for two months myself,” says Rajyashree.



THE CALL OF DUTY: Anganwadi worker Rajyashree distributes rations to pregnant women in Chitrakoot district | PHOTO : Devanshi Srivastava

Anganwadi workers play a crucial role in the health of young children and pregnant women. They look after children from 6 months to 6 years of age in their zone until 2pm. The anganwadi worker and helper, cook, clean, feed the children and also impart informal education.

They are also responsible for enrolling eligible children, adolescent girls and women under various state

nutrition programs, vaccination or health check-ups. They maintain detailed records of height, weight, nutrition and vaccination. They go door-to-door and have to keep monitor the status of malnourished children and pregnant or lactating women.

In addition, they are often given election and Census duties and other miscellaneous government tasks. “We

go do the extra work they tell us but the pay never comes,” says Prema Devi, an anganwadi worker in Lodhwara village.

For the amount of work they do, the government gives them not a salary, but an honorarium. In UP, they get a total of Rs 6,000, of which Rs 4,500 is contributed by the Union government and Rs 1,500 by the state government.

Prema Devi, like Rajyashree, is the sole earner in her family. She maintains 17 record notebooks. “All the notebooks also have to be maintained because supervisors and officials only check that. But all this data must be updated online also on a regular basis. Only then the poshahar for the next month comes. So it is double work.”

Prema Devi and Rajyashree are among the very few Anganwadi workers who are educated enough to update all this data in English on the Poshan Tracker app. The Block Coordinator, Archana Gupta said, “The government must know about the education level of women in these areas. Not knowing English is a big problem for most anganwadi workers here. How much can we train them? We have advanced so much technologically. Why can the government not make an app in Hindi?”

“There used to be some unions and protest earlier but not anymore,” said Karwi block supervisor Rani Devi. “They have so much work in addition to the household work. There is no time left to protest,” said Gupta.

Having distributed the last of food packets, Rajyashree gets up to leave. She has to visit a new mother and advise her about breastfeeding and nutrition. Walking behind the women who were unable to get the poshahar this month, she sums up the response of the administration. “The DM knows about it, the CM has been here, the MPs and other higher officials have all been told about the situation. Yet there has been no improvement. Perhaps it is the government does not have the budget for.”

Poor healthcare in rural Jharkhand

Arya Mishra

Potka (Jharkhand): “There is no doctor at the hospital. What would have been the point of taking him there?” said Soma, whose child had come down with a viral fever in early December. A resident of Potka village in Potka block of Jharkhand, Soma has two boys aged nine and five. The lack of doctors and adequate facilities, even for general consultation, at the nearest Primary Health Centre (PHC) in Khariyasai forced Soma to nurse her son using homemade remedies. “Even during the birth of my children, we had to call a midwife,” she said.

Potka block has one Primary Health Centre that the villagers can visit for medical assistance. “We are lucky to have a PHC in the village itself because villages like Borotika and others in Paschimi Singhbhum don’t even have that,” Jyoti, Soma’s sister-in-law, said. However, she stated that the villagers can only get general consultations in the PHC.

“The doctor comes in only some days of the week. For the rest of the days, a nurse sits at the PHC,” she said, adding that villagers had to travel some distance even to get the Covid vaccine, except for a few days when the ‘Care Van’ organised by Tata Motors visited the village with the vaccine doses.

“It was an even bigger problem when the Coronavirus pandemic was at its peak,” Jyoti said. “There were no facilities and arrangements near the village so we had to go to Tata Main Hospital in Jamshedpur. Even there, we had to wait hours before getting a bed,” she said, adding that one of her neighbours had lost his life due to this.

Less than an hour’s distance from Potka, the Birsanagar Health and Wellness Centre is in a worse state, with doctors’ consultations being limited between 11:00 am and 1:00 pm. “But these timings are seldom followed,” Mukul Kumar, waiting for a general consultation with the full-time doctor Dr. Shubh Narayan Singh said.

“Even if there are doctors available at these centres, they are not specialised doctors but just normal physicians,” Dr A.B. Bhattamishra, who practices in Tata Main Hospital, Jamshedpur, said. This meant that due to lack of any other medical facility, the physicians in these centres refer the patients to the Mahatma Gandhi



Lack of doctors at health centres still a concern | PHOTO: Arya Mishra

Memorial Hospital in Jamshedpur or Sadar Hospital in Ranchi. “These are the only government hospitals that can offer quality treatment and the rural patients have to travel quite a distance to reach them and access medical treatment,” he said.

This leads to serious illnesses like typhoid, malaria etc. spreading among the adivasi tribes residing in villages like Potka and Khariakochawho are exposed to health risk, according to ANI. “The only time we get proper check-ups are when there are drives and camps organised by NGOs and other social groups and workers,” Soma said. However, these end in a couple of days and the villagers go back to “seeing the government doctor once a week and sometimes not even that,” she adds.

“We go to nearby villages for health check-ups and to encourage hygiene, make them understand how it leads to better health,” Anamika Majumder, founder of ‘Faith in India’, said. Faith in India is one of the few non-governmental organisations working in rural villages outside Jamshedpur. “But once it comes to

diseases and such, there is only so much that we can do. For that, proactive steps by the government healthcare system are needed,” she said.

The medical facilities are a bit better in villages like Gamharia in East Singhbhum that has a Community Health Centre and charges no fee for consultation. However, Jharkhand still lags behind with just 188 sanctioned CHCs in the state, as per the Rural Health Statistics released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in 2018-19.

Of these, only 171 are functioning, which leaves about 40% of Jharkhand’s population without access to these, according to Indian Public Health Standards. The gap widens even more in terms of the PHCs, with just 291 functioning primary health centres against a requirement of more than a 1000 PHCs in the state. “In a state like Jharkhand, where almost 75% of the population lives in rural areas, focusing on rural healthcare should be the primary priority of the government,” Dr. Bhattamishra said.

Of the 188 CHCs sanctioned in Jharkhand, only 171 are functioning. This leaves 40% of the state’s population without access to a nearby CHC

Buffetted in buffer zones

Don Tomslee

Idukki (Kerala): A large number of forest dwellers in swathes of land that come under the buffer zones of the Western Ghats are up in arms against the implementation of the Kasturirangan Report that stipulates at least 37% of the ghats be considered as Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs). This is a modification of the earlier 64% coverage suggested by the Gadgil Commission of 2012.

With Kerala’s landmass covering 27.83% of the total land area and 40% of these forests coming under the Western Ghats, there is an imminent threat to livelihood.

Idukki district has 5 of the 14 wildlife sanctuaries within Kerala. The district has a long history of border issues with Tamil Nadu, wherein several communities living along the border have been rendered homeless. Mokkaraj (59), a real estate agent from Chakkupallam village, says, “Long ago we lived on the border. At that time it was a belt forest. Jayalalithaa, who was the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, had instructed forest officers to remove every home along the border from Munnar to Kumily.”

Asked about the conditions for

identifying buffer zones, Kumily Panchayat president Santhi Shajimon says, “Regarding Kumily Panchayat, it is because the Periyar Tiger Reserve is nearby. The buffer zone is an area within 1km of forest land. The intention for making this is to protect wildlife or flora and fauna near the area which could be affected because of the people living there. However, our government is trying to prove that no such issue is faced by the local

people and there is no threat to the forests.”

As of now, the government has sent a map which was made by the KSREC (Kerala State Remote Sensing and Environment Centre) by means of a satellite survey to the Supreme Court for review along with a plea to not create buffer zones where many people live.

According to Kerala Government’s website, there are currently 3,944 subsisting structures within the buffer zone of the Idukki Wildlife Sanctuary.

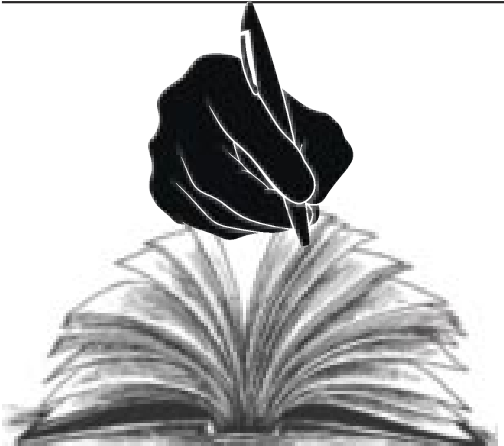
However, Vishwanathapuram Ward Member Sanil V K claims that at least 1.5 lakh structures are to be finally brought forth in the survey, out of which 45,000 have been found. He claims the satellite measurements are inaccurate.

“Our government is trying to prove that no such issue is faced by the local people and there is no threat to the forests”

- Santhi Shajimon



Nagarani and her family | PHOTO: Don Tomslee



REPORTER'S DIARY

Don
Tomslee

Conscious communities

When I entered Chellarcovil village in Kerala as a new comer, I didn't know how to approach Nagarani, a local resident, as the street where she lived was occupied by people who were thrown out from the Tamil Nadu border in the 1990s. Everyone seemed reserved and withdrawn. Her son Arjun, the caretaker in my homestay, had told me: "There are two streets, one where only Tamilians live and another where Tamilians who were thrown out in the 1990s live."

The entrance to the home felt like walking down a bunch of spiral stairs as the home was tucked away in the street where the ground was uneven. Welcomed by a Persian cat and the barks of a chained dog, I felt uneasy. As I entered Nagarani's home, the ambience seemed hostile and they were wary of my presence. My story being on the buffer zones in the Western Ghats, I started with basic questions on the issues they faced. "Not much," they hastily said. However, gradually they opened up about the underlying issues caused by recommendations in the KasturiranganReport which are not reflected in the media. Their answers were to the point.

Avijit
Gupta

Tuesday fair

It was around 1 pm on the third day of the New Year 2023. Travelling to Ghoriya Raiganj village in Barabanki district, UP, wasn't as difficult as I imagined or dreaded. Every Tuesday a fair is held. When I visited the fair, I saw many children playing and people from other villages coming to the fair. Groups of young men were warming themselves up in ad hoc bonfires lit in a couple of places. There were also stalls selling Budhiya ke baal (Cotton candy). It brought back memories of my own childhood. There was a vendor, wearing a sweater and cap on a cold morning selling cheap traditional sweets like laddoo and peda. He had cardboard boxes to pack them for the buyers. One hawker was selling burgers and other items like winter clothes for all, beauty items, bangles for women, and toys and balloons for children. The influence of city culture and cuisine in rural hinterland was evident. Most of the vendors had set up "shops" on the floor in an open ground, which had a few trees. One of them had bright yellow plastic sheet precariously hitched on wooden poles. In the evening, there will be hardly any trace of the village, except the garbage left behind.

Manjiri
Patil

School of thought

I am a planner. This trip, too, was planned thoroughly. In a robotic manner, I looked at the Adivasi areas in Maharashtra, went through the Census handbook, asked around for information and selected around 15 villages with low literacy rates. I read up. This was not my first encounter with rural realities. I visited all the government schools and observed low standards of education. Maybe because caring required too much energy and the people had given up after putting a fight to change it. In a classroom, the children were learning numbers inscribed on small tiles. A class IV student had to be prompted many times to identify numbers. As I was recording the teacher said "Don't put this on social media. The school looks bad. Come shoot this other girl." This incident came as a reminder of the extent of deprivation despite government efforts. I realised that only a modicum of compassion can separate covering deprivation or telling a human story from a survey.

Drug abuse has Haridwar residents in a chokehold

Villagers allege corruption and inaction by police and drug inspector

Rudransh Khurana

Haridwar (Uttarakhand): When Taliq Ansari*, 38, returned to his home in Sarai in Uttarakhand from work on a chilly December afternoon, he found his 28-year-old brother, Aman's hands and legs twisted inwards.

"Do whatever, just bring this medicine," Aman asked Taliq, handing him an empty packet of Alprax 0.25, a cheap tablet used to treat anxiety and panic disorders.

Taliq, the only one in his family of five who had been trying to keep his brother from drug abuse, was now forced to bring one to him. He checked a few pharmacies in his village Sarai, but didn't find it anywhere.

"I just got hold of another addict, told him about my brother's withdrawal symptoms and begged for a few tablets. He went to the same pharmacy and got it. They only give it to addicts. He was careful with me because the police had raided the village and sealed three pharmacies the previous day," Taliq said.

Ten kilometres from Haridwar, Uttarakhand, Sarai is an over 8000-strong, Muslim-majority village. 20% of the population are Dalits and the rest are upper-caste Hindus.

Such victims of drug addiction aren't difficult to find in the village. Teenagers can be seen sitting in open fields in groups of four or five every evening.

They sometimes share a handkerchief dipped in sulochan (an industry glue), pop tablets like Alprax, or drink Torax cough syrup together. All give different intensity of highs for Rs. 50 per bottle/strip. Then there's smack — a highly addictive low-quality version of heroin — which is occasionally sold by peddlers from Uttar Pradesh in and around the village.

"We already couldn't fulfil our basic expenses and then this addiction



AT WAR WITH DRUGS: Family members of drug addiction victims in Sarai | PHOTO: Rudransh Khurana

entered our house," Taliq said. "If my brother doesn't get Rs. 100 daily, he'll fight with and trouble others. Like giving tax to the government, families here are paying money for drugs... They used to say here that Punjab is drug inflicted, it's the most affected. Here it's even more than that."

A 2017 study by International Journal of Law Management and Humanities in Punjab found clear links of substance abuse with unemployment, exhausting jobs, peer pressure, lack of parental oversight and easy availability of drugs. Sarai is no different.

"70% people in the village are unemployed and almost all of the users are kids of daily-wage workers who are struggling to run their families," Farzan Ahmed, the former principal of a nearby private school,

said. "They ask their kids, 'Go do anything but bring some money'; the kids find easy money in selling drugs. They'll sit in these groups, do drugs, sell drugs and get money,"

Accessibility has changed drastically in the last few years as well. There was not even one pharmacy in the village until a few years ago. If someone needed basic medicines, they had to go to the city hospitals, the nearest one would be five kilometres away. Now there are 35 medical shops.

"There's not even one MBBS doctor in this village. There's still no hospital nearby which writes prescriptions. What is the need of so many medical stores then?" Mukkaram Ansari, a Congress politician, said. The three pharmacies sealed after the raids by a government Drug Inspector were reopened after

three days.

"I got into trouble because of my neighbour," Waseem Ansari, owner of one of them, said. "I come to my shop after 5pm. Two boys used to run it before that. She came before 5pm and sealed my shop for child labour. So I let them off. I do have a licence."

Drug inspector Anita Bharti, who conducted the raids, said the other two were sealed because of issues of inadequate space in the store.

"Legal medical stores don't do it, it's the quacks who are selling the drugs," she said. "These people are trying to divert attention away from themselves by providing false information. Twice it has happened that I went to check and found nothing."

However, Ajai Singh, Senior Superintendent of the Police, said otherwise. "Yes, medical stores are

selling drugs illegally," he said. "But even though we are authorised to check, our officers don't have the knowledge to distinguish a narcotic drug from a non narcotic one. We need more drug inspectors to work better."

Although the SSP, appointed in November last year, told the villagers that he has "adopted" them, not many are satisfied with his or the government's stance against drugs.

"I see kids gamble and do drugs everyday," Latif Hasan, a farmer whose eldest son has stopped living with him since starting drugs, said. "If I complain to the police, they'll take bribes and leave them and will even tell them the name of who complained to build animosity in the village. So no one tells."

"The drug inspector has her monthly bribe tied from these medical stores as well. That's why there's no action on them," Mukkaram said.

Villagers suggest limiting sales of narcotic drugs to registered doctors, no sales to minors and protection for the informants as short-term solutions. Long-term, they said, they hope that keeping their kids busy in schools and homework and education will help them survive.

For now, the future is looked at with only apprehensive eyes. "My younger brother, if he gets sick for one day, it takes him one month to get well," Taliq said. "He doesn't eat anything. It's his liver. He's febrile for a month and then repeats. He's gone very weak now. All of us have heard stories from people dying after fever or from overdose in other villages."

"The government says Hum do, humare do" — Two kids for each pair —, Latif said. "But the time ahead will be, Hum chaar, humare ek bhi nahi — No kids even for two pairs — this generation will be destroyed in such a way."

**Some names have been changed.*

Driven into debt

Aryan Mahtta

Panchkula (Haryana): Farmers suffer as government support, prices fail to keep pace with inflation. Marginal farmers, those with less than 2.5 acres land, are the worst hit and forced to farm under mounting non-institutional debts.

Sohan Lal, a small farmer from Billah village in Panchkula district's Barwala block, who grows paddy and wheat on his 1.5 acre land, said, "The last paddy crop failed miserably. Usually, one acre produces 25-30 quintals of crop. This year, we could only get 5-7 quintals".

He said that this was the case with nearly all farmers in his village, adding that "most of us couldn't even recover our input cost from the produce." Lal said that the wheat crop before paddy failed too, forcing him to borrow money from the arthiya, the middleman at government grain markets, for the next wheat crop.

Farmers blame bad quality of seeds and ineffective pesticides and chemicals for their crop failure. Karnail Singh, another small farmer from Billah, said, "I bought the PBW 725 wheat seed from a government shop. Now if the seed did not germinate, whose fault is it?" Singh said he had grown wheat on a land he leased for Rs.40,000, and that he suffered great loss.

In addition to crop failures, inflation of farm input commodities has led to financial vulnerability. Jagtar Singh, who owns 7 kanal (a local unit of land. Eight kanals make an acre) in Danghali village of Kurukshetra's Shahbad block, said that the cost of farming has increased while income has decreased.

"A bag of DAP (a type of fertilizer), which earlier cost Rs.500, now costs Rs.1300. Axial, a herbicide used for wheat, earlier cost Rs.600, now costs Rs.1400. On the other hand, MSP for crops increases marginally by Rs.20 or Rs.50," he said.

Jagtar said it had been three years since he made a single rupee from



Jagtar Singh hopes to repay his debt | PHOTO: Aryan Mahtta

farming. He is currently under a Rs.9 lakhs debt, borrowed from the

“
If farmers in Haryana are protesting, think about those in other states
”

- Jasbir Singh

arthiya. The lack of a fair price for their crops has prompted repeated protests by farmers across the state. The most recent of these has been the agitation to demand a price hike for the sugarcane crop. The Haryana

government has kept the procurement price at Rs.362 per quintal, unchanged from the last season.

Jasbir Singh, a leader of the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Charuni), which organised one such protest in front of the Shahbad Sugar Mill, said, "The government says that each year, inflation leads to increase in prices of commodities. The -price for our crops should also increase proportionally."

In 2018, the Haryana Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Department responded to an RTI filed by the Union, admitting that in 2016-2017, the input cost to produce one quintal of wheat was Rs.2,219. The MSP at the time was Rs.1,625 per quintal. For the 2022-23 season, MSP is Rs. 2,125, still less than the 2017 price.

Jasbir added, "If farmers in Haryana, which is considered one of the best states for farming, are protesting, think about what the condition of farmers in other states would be".

Jagtar Singh plans to move on from agriculture next year. "There is no future for farmers in this state. Next year, I am going to sell my farm equipment, and do labour instead," he said.

A village of scroll painters

Sattika Chakrabarti

Naya (West Bengal): The 90-plus families of Naya have been practising their art of Patachitra for generations.

The Patua settlements are found across Midnapur (now split into Birbhum, Bankura and South 24 Parganas) in West Bengal.

The words 'pot' or 'pata' are derived from the Sanskrit word 'patta', meaning cloth. One section of these artists doubles up as storytellers for a living. A long scroll is divided into numerous frames depicting scenes from Hindu mythology. These scrolls could be folded up and therefore called 'jorano pata'.

One painting is sold for Rs. 150-200 and their monthly income comes to approximately Rs. 1,500-2,000. Traditionally they make effective use of eco-friendly colours by extracting them from natural sources. However, with the rising cost of wood, aluminium, glass and other raw

materials, many are switching to cheap synthetic colours. Although they narrate stories about Hindu dieties, they're mostly Muslim by religion.

When the artists suffered during the lockdown, many chitrakars were taken by MeMeraki, India's first artistic-tech platform. "During the COVID-19 pandemic, we created a cluster of crafters from different parts of the country, handed them smartphones and tutored them to use Zoom," said an official at MeMeraki.

"During the thunderstorm, we suffer the most. The government only supplies us with free ration but has made no effort to improve the drainage system. We cannot have frequent fairs or exhibitions during this time," said Sanjay Chitrakar, 47.

Banglanatak dot com, a Kolkata-based NGO, had come to their rescue. They organised the annual Patachitra Mela in December. Officials were unavailable to comment.



Every household in Naya has an open space or "Dalan" for freshly painted items | PHOTO: Sattika Chakrabarti



REPORTER'S DIARY



Ravina
Warkad

A normal way of life

I stayed with a family in the Sautada in Beed district of Maharashtra for two days. Over the two days I interacted with all the members and neighbours and played with children. But before leaving I realised I hadn't interacted enough with the daughter-in-law of the family who was pregnant. One thing I had observed over my stay was that no one's house seemed to have a toilet. But I didn't want to pose the question to her directly. I wanted it to come from her. So I engaged in a conversation about all aspects of life in Sautada. But all she kept saying was that everything is perfect. The only problem was the lack of a bridge over the water body that surrounds the village from three sides and is their only way out – well, that was the story I was covering. So I was left with no choice but to ask directly if any household in the village has a toilet. She said no family has a toilet here. So I tried to explain that the government has allocated funds for the same. But she said that the water body makes it difficult to carry any heavy material to the village which is probably why nobody's house in the village has a toilet. I also visited Karmad and went for an early morning walk in the village at 7:00 AM. I saw a bunch of middle-aged women walking by there and struck a conversation. They so happily told me that Karmad is the best village. Later I discussed my reporting visits with my dad. "These issues become a normal way of life after sometime," he said.

Anamalai's ousted tribals still fighting for patta

Displaced by the Aliyar dam, the Eravallars are deprived of several basic rights

Swethavimala M

Anamalai (Coimbatore): Periyamani, an elderly Eravallar woman, sits on a small land elevation watching four men renovating her crumbling house. Her daughter Chinnamani picks up the discarded construction material in her basket. Periyamani's house marks the entrance of Anbu Nagar, a tribal settlement in the Pollachi forest range. Nearly 68 families live in the settlement, many of whom face similar trouble with building a house of their own. The root cause of the problem is that none of them have a patta, the land deed issued by the government. Eravallars are a small indigenous group living in Anamalai taluka in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu. Out of the 36 Scheduled Tribe communities in the state, Eravallars can be found only near the Aliyar dam in Anamalai. Traditionally, they were hunter-gatherers. Now, they work as agricultural labourers. When the Aliyar dam was constructed in the 1960s, many tribal communities including Malasar, Malai Malasar and Eravallar were displaced from their settlements. Since then, they have been pushed to live in poramboku nilam (unassessed government land). The government's Parambikulam Aliyar Project (PAP) not only displaced the tribals but also made the land exclusive. "The Public Works Department said that this land should not be used for any other purpose and should not be handed to any other person. The Eravallars live on this lease land so it has been difficult to seek a patta for them," says V S Paramasivam, district president of Tamil Nadu Tribal People's Association. After several protests and talks with officials, the people of Anbu Nagar received a No Objection Certificate (NOC). "The NOC facilitates us to get water supply and electricity. It has helped us get street



CONSTRUCTION: Periyamani's house in Anbu Nagar being renovated by four men using metal sheets | PHOTO: Swethavimala M

light and common water taps," says S Thangavel, a resident and member of the tribal welfare association. But an NOC does not have the same value as that of a patta. "To build a house, we take loans from microfinance institutions. Government micro credit schemes are not available to us yet," says Thangavel. "Suppose we take a loan of Rs 25,000. We will have to pay Rs 850 per month. It is around 25 TL (term loan) and the interest rate is 4 per cent," he adds. In contrast, the term loan provided by National ST Finance and Development Corporation (NSTFDC) under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has an interest rate of 6 to 10 percent with a repayment period of 5 to 10 years. Although the interest rate is higher compared to the

private player, the repayment period is more. Hence, although it would be more convenient, it is applicable only to "viable business units" and not for housing. In the state level, the Tamil Nadu Adi Dravidar Housing and Development Corporation website does not show any loan scheme for housing purposes. It reiterates the NSTFDC criteria under the heading "National Schemes". However, the Tamil Nadu government website shows that there is a scheme under the Adi Dravidar and Tribal Welfare Department that facilitates "construction of free houses for tribals". The catch is that the scheme is applicable only to "tribals who are having free house site pattas". Consequently, Eravallars can neither avail government micro credit

for housing nor apply for the free house construction scheme by the state government. The lack of patta also hinders the construction of toilets. Let alone individual toilets, there are no public toilets in Anbu Nagar. The people mostly defecate in the open. "We have to walk out of the settlement, through the forest and defecate where we have access to water. The girls have to do the same during menstruation also," says Chinnamani. Families have built a makeshift bathroom by nailing together four metal sheets so they can bathe in privacy. "The tribals have filed a petition for public toilets a month ago. The settlement comes under the Town Panchayat. Currently, the Town Panchayat does not have fund availability. Once they get funds, a



sanitary complex will be constructed on a priority basis", says S. Priyanka, sub collector of Pollachi. Even building a school in the vicinity has been a great struggle for the community. For long, the children of the tribe studied in temporary schools that were actually houses in the neighbouring official quarters. But after several years of protest, the tribals have now received the permission to build an elementary school near their settlement. "According to PAP, the land was not supposed to be allocated for any other purpose. But we are the first to break this record for building the school", says Paramasivam. While some of the tribals in the neighbouring Puliakandi have received their patta, it is still a struggle for those in this settlement.

Making plastic containers in Isseypur to make ends meet



Gulista making small plastic containers | PHOTOS: Shagufta Anjum



Shagufta Anjum

Isseypur (Uttar Pradesh): The sound of the machine can tell anyone walking down the lane of Isseypur village in the morning that the women have started making plastic containers. Working from 4 in the morning till 9 in the night has become a routine for the women who do the work of making small plastic containers. Mehsar, 67, works 13 to 14 hours daily. Everyday she and her daughters fill four to five boxes with plastic containers. Their salary depends upon the number of boxes they fill with the containers. But according to Mehsar the amount is not proportionate to the work they put in. "Nobody does anything unnecessarily. Poverty forces you to do anything that brings money home," she said. A majority of the male population of Isseypur, a medium-size village located in Najibabad Tehsil of Bijnor district, Uttar Pradesh, are involved in agriculture. The women, too, have found ways to make ends meet. A contractor had brought in the work of making small plastic containers to the villagers, which can be done from home, so some women took up the work. While the contractor had provided them a machine to make the containers, it's not an electric machine; it needs to be operated manually. Gulista, the youngest in her family, said that making the containers is not as easy as it seems. They have to continuously move both their hands and one leg to make them. "The body starts aching while standing the whole day making containers, but if we do not work how will we eat?" said Gulista. These women are multi-skilled because they have been engaged in various occupations. Kesar, 43, said that earlier she had done embroidery and sewing work. "We grab whatever opportunity comes our way. We don't have permanent work," she added. It's mostly women who are involved in this work. They don't attend school because they help their family earn money. Any work that can be done from home is a golden opportunity for them. Rahemeen, 18, said that she always wanted to pursue further education but the economic situation of her family meant she had to leave school after Class VIII. "I always wanted to complete my studies but poverty did not allow me."

Delay in NREGA wages worries tribals

Anish Pathiyil

Attappady (Kerala): The government has not paid tribals in Attappady in Kerala's Palakkad district employed by the government under its wage guarantee scheme. The MGNREGA programme was constituted in 2005 to enhance livelihood security by providing 100 days of wage employment in a financial year to at least one member of every household. One-third of the total jobs under this scheme are reserved for women. But the villages of Attappady are in distress due to the delay in the payment of their dues. The tribals feel that their day-to-day needs are affected by the cash-crunch they face due to the delay. Coupled with the livelihood security scheme constituted by the Kerala State Government, the tribals in Attappady are entitled to 200 days of work every financial year. "We are currently clearing forests as part of the programme. Yes, the money comes late, so it's difficult to spend on our children's food and clothes. If we have a temple festival then we will need money for that too," said Panali Moopan, the head of the Palloor village in Pudur panchayat. Jyothi Anilkumar, the President of the Pudur panchayat however denied the delay in payment. She said that the panchayat has been very dedicated in ensuring collection of details from the workers as well the payment of wages after the completion of the work. Based on data from the



Department of Rural Development website, over 8081 transactions have been delayed for a period of 9-15 days in the

The wage credit is late is because the unit leaders are not taking it up with the Panchayat

- Murugan

panchayats of Agali, Pudur and Sholayur in Attappady. Similarly, 209 transactions have been delayed for over 15 days in these

regions. "The main reason why the wage credit is late is because the 'maettu' (unit leaders) are not taking up the issue with the Panchayat. If some people's account details or identity card is needed, the unit leaders must immediately ensure that it is being sent, but that is not done," said Murugan, the head of the Kallamala village in Agali. The Kudumbashree (community organizations staffed by local women) are implementing an Advance Payment Program to overcome this issue. This program ensures that 75% of the wages are provided as an advance to those in dire need of money. "NREGA unit leaders will take a list of people requiring the advance which will be scrutinised by the panchayat. Anybody from tribal background who works in this program is eligible for this advance payment," said Karunakaran, Project Director of the Kudumbashree's Attappady Special Project.



REPORTER'S DIARY



V Anisha
Rao

Boon or Bane?

As soon as I stepped off my bus, I stumbled upon a disheartening sight. A boy child, who might be aged three to five years, stood in front of a barren hand pump. He kept on pumping the miniature, rusting hand pump in hope water might drop out from the either side. I was actually very thrilled to my heart even before deciding what deprivation I might come across. I had hoped to do well with the skills that I acquired during the course. However, the one thing I realised is the moment you are exposed to the realities of people less privileged than you, your expectations shatter. In a village near Pokhari, I met a woman who seemed deeply attached to her cow, Gopal. During my conversation with her, I found out that she was very fond of Gopal. Initially when she talked about Gopal, I thought she was describing her son. She said that her very own son sold Gopal's mother to a local butcher shop for some money which he later used to pay off his debts. My heart felt ripped out. My eyes stopped looking for what I actually came to look at. It navigated through stories likewise. It is through this deprivation trip that I recognised what a true deprived situation looks -like. It is the deprivation of the bare minimum and the deprivation of things which we are gifted with.



Athira Elsa
Johnson

Trust is earned

Journalism still hangs on to atrocity-poverty porn and gets away with it. Once in a while, though, I wish that elite journalists from elite journalism colleges who think they can save the world meet someone like Radamani of Arippa. She was sure that it is not worth it to trust anyone outside the protest site. After first shooin me away, she prodded me about my life, and said, "You might understand the health scenario here. You will understand how my daughter is surviving blood cancer. I can talk about her to you. Everyone knows what happened to my second daughter—it was all over the media. Will I be cursed for not talking much about her? My husband fell ill that day when she was killed due to domestic violence. Dowry, assets, mental and physical health...all gone." Radamani is one of the 550 people at the Arippa protest site. What charity does to Radamani is another cruel story—charitable institutions take pictures with her, promising to sponsor her daughter's treatment, and simply vanish. You should call this out if you plan to write about this. Tell them we won't let you in if you do not know about us already," she said, spitting out the tobacco.

Snakes lose their ‘charm’ for Irulas in Vellore villages

Snake-catching is increasingly difficult as the reptiles are now protected by law

Sambhavi P

Vellore (Tamil Nadu): The Irulas in Kosavanpudur village now depend on daily wage jobs for their livelihood forsaking their traditional occupation as snake-catchers.

The Irulas, classified as a Scheduled Tribe, is an ethnic group living mostly in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The community, in the Kosavanpudur village in the K.V.Kuppam block of the Vellore district, has made a livelihood from catching snakes for generations.

A policy to preserve wildlife has made it hard for people of this tribe to practise their traditional occupation and instead, condemned the Irulas to daily wage labour instead. Those who had made fifty rupees even before 1972 by selling leather and by hunting snakes since they were 14-15 are involved in tedious labour despite their age.

Importantly, their acquired knowledge and techniques for catching snakes haven't been passed on to the next generations at all.

"It is by catching snakes, we raised our family and paid for our children's



FORSAKING OLD JOBS: Gopal and his wife sharing experiences | PHOTO: Sambhavi P

education," said an Irula woman who only identified herself as Gopal's wife. She also serves as a priestess of the local temple.

However, the community now depends upon daily wage jobs like

agricultural labour, climbing trees to pluck fruit and catching rats from nearby fields.

While education has reached their doorsteps with the Illam Thedi Kalvi scheme and adult literacy programs,

their dependency on daily wage labour continues especially for the older generation who have forsaken their traditional occupation.

Referring to the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, Gopal said, "It was in

the Indira Gandhi period. The Act prohibited us from killing snakes. We haven't killed a single one since then."

He pointed out, "We are asked to catch snakes from the nearby fields. Usually, we kill them when we catch them and skin them. However, with the new order, we just catch it from the fields and leave it elsewhere. But where will they go? They'll come back where the food is, to the ponds and fields where the frogs and rats are. That is why we used to kill them at once."

Gopal and his family are among the last of the traditional snake catchers in the community. Rani, his sister-in-law, shared, "I am too old for manual labour now." She also said that they all are old now but choose to go for the money and do the available jobs.Appadurai, a tribal elder, is locally famous for curing snake bites with simple remedies and recital of mantras.

Sadly, no one else in the village is as specialised as Appadurai. In an effort to ensure that his expertise doesn't end with him. He is currently trying to tutor his nephew.

Kerala's Kani tribe is demanding land rights

Akhil P J

Thiruvananthapuram: Members of the Kani tribe express their anger at being denied land rights, citing reasons as varied as the Constitution and the Forest Rights Act (2006).

The forest-dwelling tribes, settled across eight settlements in the forests of Vithura, Nedumangad Taluk, are denied both land ownership and their claim over forest products.

The possession certificates issued by the district administration limit their authority over their land. "We do not own any land. We only have possession certificates for the land we live in and cultivate which are useless," said Raman Kani, the 70-year-old Oorumooppan – settlement head – of the Mottamoodu settlement. "Only Canara Bank gives us a maximum loan of 50,000 on our possession certificates," he says.

Though the possession certificates guarantee possession of land, the use of forest products are highly controlled. "We are stopped even if we take firewood or incense for a whole week," said Shibu, a former Panchayat member from Tholicode ward in Tholicode Panchayat.

Tribal habitations in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh have not been brought under the Fifth or Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which give the forest-dwellers autonomy over the land they live in, as well as over the



The mud-bamboo home that Shantha's family built in Kallar | PHOTO: Akhil PJ

forest products. The criteria for Scheduled Areas limit the possibilities of new additions. But over 13.4 million Scheduled Tribes people, who live in the Non-Scheduled states according to the 2011 Census data, face differences in treatment by the legal system that goes largely unnoticed.

"I had to build a door for my house, and the Forest Department officials allotted me the smallest tree growing in my field," said Shantha, who lives in the Mullamoodu settlement in Kallar.

The Forest Department officials claim that they are merely the enforcers of the laws. "We allow

people in the settlement to use minor forest products, but not forest wood. That is how the law works," said Arun Kumar, the Forest Section Officer, Kallar. Sunitha IS, Panchayat member, Kallar ward, said that the Panchayat is unable to help them beyond their capabilities. "Forest laws make us a part of Grama Sabhas and Forest Rights Committees, but our powers end with helping the claimants in availing their forest/community rights," she said. G. Stephen, the MLA from Aruvikkara Constituency, as well as Adoor Prakash, the Member of Parliament from Attingal Lok Sabha constituency could not be reached.

A woman's work is never done

Rangoli

Palamu (Jharkhand): The woods are about twice the height and weight of the women who have brought them home from the nearby forest. Each woman carries about 50 kg of wood every day to their home in Patan- a tehsil in Palamu district.

Sunita Devi, 40, and her daughter Parvathy are on their way back from a six-hour trek into the forest when Parvathy points to the 30kg bundle of firewood perched on each of their heads. "It's heavy", she says.

Every three days these women travel 20-25 kms from their village Semri to collect wood from the forest. "We need it for cooking", said Sunita.

The burden of firewood collection falls on women and girls. Sometimes girls as young as 12-years-old become responsible for the provision of household's energy needs. Collecting firewood is a chore that they must balance with taking care of siblings, hauling water, cooking and getting an education.

Often, with all the things education becomes the last priority. "There's no use of school. It's better to contribute to household chores and be productive," she said.

Asha Devi, 40, routinely makes her

six-hour trip to collect firewood, does household chores and helps her husband in farming at night. "Even if I get tired I have to cook. Pet hai to karna hi pdega- Will have to do in order to survive, for our stomach", she said.

She has started experiencing joint pains and frequently takes painkillers in order to work.The villagers don't

go to collect wood because of fear of leopards. A leopard killed a 12-year-old recently.

Firewood takes time to heat up and burn, often causing a delay in meals and subsequently delaying child's departure for school.

About 60 percent of the families in the village are Below Poverty Line a government classification of economic status. For them LPG cylinders are

completely unaffordable. The situation in the village shows the failure of Prime Minister's Ujjwala Yojana. Villagers contradict its success as none of the BPL families in the village have access to cylinders.

Ujjwala Yojana was launched by Narendra Modi's government in 2016 with a target of 50 million LPG connections for women living below the poverty line, to improve their condition.

Even if I get tired I have to cook. Will have to do in order to survive, for our stomach

- Asha Devi

Hooghly village lacks public transport

Peuli Bakshi

Chinsurah (W.B): The lack of public transport and street lights are among the foremost of the problems in the lives of the villagers of Panchrakhi, Kamdebpur and Purushottambati in West Bengal's Hooghly district.

Hooghly is one of the more economically developed districts in West Bengal. Yet, in its interior, people still have to walk miles or take up cycling to get to the main road.

"No auto, bus or anything else come here, because these are very interior areas and they won't be able to drive back if it gets dark," Santu Ghosh, a 30-nine-year-old resident of Panchrakhi, said.

There is just one electricity pole in Panchrakhi, illuminating the nearby houses. However, the interiors remain in darkness. "Lately concrete roads are built, but only when street lamps will be set up, their proper use will be made," Ghosh said.

It is very hard for the people to get around. Especially women, cannot go to schools and tuitions because it might get dark by the time they get home.

Due to such concerns, the males in their family, wait for them at the starting of the village and accompany them to their respective houses, according to Subhodip Koley, a fifteen-year-old Purushottambati boy. "I and my friends – Raghu and Rahul, wait for our elder sisters to return from tuition by the light post, as



Supriya Sing (20) off to her daily grind as a eKart delivery girl, on her bike | PHOTO: Peuli Bakshi

our parents are scared of having them paddle home alone," Kalya said.

Even reaching health care

centers is an ordeal for the inhabitants. The vast stretch of villages of Kamdebpur, Purushottambati have only one

health care center, while Panchrakhi has none.

"In order to get treated in Kamdebpur Prathamik Swasthya Kendra or Purushottambati Anganwadi Kendra, we have to walk or paddle a lot of kilometres, making it almost inaccessible for patients requiring immediate care," Dipak Patra, a forty-two-year-old resident of Kamdebpur, said.

Subrata Ghosh, from Sugandha Gram Panchayat, or village government, said the Panchayat was aware of the problems. "The Panchayat election is nearing, and most probably we will receive funds by March. Those funds will be used to build more street lights and other things of need," he said.



Women managing firewood in her home | PHOTO: Rangoli

Lives in grey, in black and white

At Bhognipur and Saintha villages manual scavengers are caught in a cesspool, with little hope of uplift

Kashvi Raj Singh

Bhognipur (Kanpur Dehat): “When you are in our profession, you begin to hate the colour yellow,” said Champa, a 35-year-old Dalit Valmiki woman of Saintha village in Akbarpur tehsil of Kanpur Dehat. She first began cleaning human excreta when she was 14 years old. “For days, I would puke at the sight of dal,” she said. Champa stopped cleaning dry latrines two years ago and now cleans toilets and unclogs sewers in her village.

Nandu, her 11-year-old nephew, recalled watching his aunt and his late mother leave the house every morning at 9 am with a cane basket and two metal plates. He didn’t have to ask what their occupation was, as it was very evident from their scent that they were manual scavengers.

He remained unbothered about this till one of his teachers told him, “Gandagi ke keede, gandagi main hi marr jayenge.” (Insects of dirt will die in dirt).

Manual cleaning of dry latrines and human excreta was banned in



NAKED TRUTH: Blisters on Gauri Nandan’s feet remind him of his past

India when the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act was passed in 1993. The Prohibition of

Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 defines a manual scavenger as “a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act, or thereafter by an individual or a local authority, contractor or an agency for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open-drain pit”.

Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of manual scavengers in India. Of the total 58,098 manual scavengers identified by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in December 2021, Uttar Pradesh accounted for 32,473. According to the 2011 census, there are 3.26 lakh Valmiki households in Uttar Pradesh, out of which 2.19 lakh are in rural areas.

As per data by the Safai Karamchari Andolan, 98% of the people employed in this profession are Dalit women. “Chachi says that the men have to go out to work and the women have to work in the village because they cannot travel very far,” Nandu added. Uneducated and otherwise unskilled, this leaves them with no job prospects other than cleaning toilets.

Gauri Nandan, Nandu’s 40-year-old father also used to clean human excreta by hand till two years ago. Now, he travels nearly

150km twice a day to drive a loaned rikshaw in the state’s capital. “The work I did has left its permanent marks on my body and mind. They are reminders of the horrible way in which people of upper castes have treated my family,” he added, pointing to the marks on his feet.

Manual scavengers are entitled to skill development training, rehabilitation, and one-time cash assistance of Rs. 40,000 from the government as per the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Easy loans up to Rs 10 lakhs would be available to them and they would receive a monthly stipend of Rs 3,000 for up to two years. Even their dependents would get skill training. However, the Valmiks of Kanpur Dehat claim that they have received no assistance from the government.

Champa and Gauri Nandan claim that they have never heard about any rehabilitation schemes and even if they were given the fund, it would serve as loan repayment and not a sustenance amount.

Kanti, a 65-year-old Valmiki woman from Bhoganipur village in Bhognipur tehsil of Kanpur Dehat echoes this view, “I never received any money from the government. My husband and I have cleaned human excreta for nearly 40 years. All I got for it was one roti, some leftover sabzi, and



A SHUNNED LOT: People belonging to the community live in ramshackle houses in drab surroundings | PHOTOS: Kashvi Raj Singh

about Rs 30 a month from the homes I went to.” She added, “Not dal, because I hate dal. I hate everything yellow. Most days, I hate colour in general.”

Kanti left this job five years ago but had to resort to cleaning community toilets when her son and daughter-in-law passed away in 2019 in a manual sewer cleaning accident.

Her six-year-old grandson Umesh said, “Dadi says that she does this ganda kaam (dirty work) so I don’t have to, so I can study and become a bada aadmi (rich man). Once I get rich, dadi dadu will not have to work so much. Hum gareeb nahi rahenge.” (We will not remain poor).

However, Sameer Singh, a member of the ruling party from Lucknow, told journalist Shivani Gupta, “Our government ensured that manual scavenging is banned. You must have seen how Prime Minister Narendra Modi cleaned the feet of Dalits in Kumbh. Manual scavenging is no longer practised thanks to the toilets constructed in Uttar Pradesh under Swachh Bharat.”

As per data by the Safai Karamchari Andolan, there are still 5,58,090 dry latrines in Uttar Pradesh, out of which 2,271 are in Kanpur Dehat.

In February 2022, Gupta reported that as per government documents, in 2013, 19 manual

scavengers in the district were provided with one-time cash assistance. Namita Sharan, the district panchayat raj officer, told Gupta that in 2017, the government started a scheme under which Rs. 40,000 was to be given to each family “but at that time, we did not find any such

families in our district and so no such amount was distributed”.

Meanwhile, Chanda and Kanti’s families have been doing this work for decades. The only rehabilitation the women have experienced is going from cleaning dry latrines to now cleaning public toilets.



FACELESS: The women from Bhognipur village have no choice but to clean toilets



Mangeram, Umesh's grandfather

A village without men

Ishwar Dahal

Murshidabad: Abdul Sheikh left Mobarakpur in 2018 for Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, to find a job. He was a single son with three sisters, therefore, his family was sad to send him far from home. “He cried so much while leaving, I was also tearful,” his father Mahiruddin Sheikh said.

Sheikh is just one of a number of people from this majority Muslim village in West Bengal’s Murshidabad district to leave home in search of work. The village has few young men.

Abdul passed class 10 from Panchgram High School. His family couldn’t afford to continue his studies, although they wanted to make their son well educated, so he could earn a lot of money and break the vicious cycle of poverty that the whole family was trapped in for generations. He quit school to work on their own small land parcel, but it was not enough to make a living. “The scarcity in the house always existed. He decided to go to Muradabad,” Mahiruddin added.

Abdul started to work in a construction site where he was offered Rs 12,000 a month initially. He says his salary has increased now, he collects Rs 17,000 a month. “It is really difficult to survive with this meagre salary. I send Rs. 5-8,000 home every month,” Abdul said.

Mahiruddin asserted that his family has taken a loan of Rs 2 lakh from Bandan Bank. They had made a small cramped house in the beginning of 2017 by taking a loan. But, they don’t know how to get rid of this burden. “This is the



FORCED SEPARATION: With hardly any jobs for them at Mobarakpur, young men of the village migrate to cities across the country in search of work | PHOTO: Ishwar Dahal

country of beggars,” he said.

In Mobarakpur, most of the young age men are away to take up jobs, only children, women and elderly persons can be seen. Like Abdul, they have migrated to cities across the country and come back once or twice a year.

A narrow lane leads to Mobarakpur village and goes through the middle of the village. As you enter, a wide pond full of green scum can be seen on the right side. The water is muddy.

There are houses on both sides of the lane till the end of the village. Mudbrick houses can be seen all around. Some of them are metal-roofed. Some are thatched.

Only some three or four houses are made of bricks. All of them look old. Cow dung cakes are stuck on the wall of almost every house. In the middle of the village, there is a Masjid. In the Muslim dominant village, it appears to be the only solid structure around.

Chameli Bibi’s husband Noodle Sheikh has also gone to Mumbai in 2019 to earn money. They have a son and a daughter. Bibi said that she is living with her children and in-laws in the village. Her husband tried farming for a while, Bibi said. Eventually he “left in search of a better life for us...”

According to Bibi, Sheikh

sends Rs. 8-10,000 every month. “But this money is not enough to run his house of five members,” she said.

Pinki Let, Sarpanch of Panchgram Panchayat, heading eight villages including Mobarakpur, also accepts that many youths from the village have migrated to other states for jobs.

She said, “We have no data but many people have migrated from the villages, some have also gone abroad. It is because of lack of job. We are conscious about the issue but the government has not come out with a programme to offer them employment.”

Kaushik

Tiruchendur (Tamil Nadu): Krishnammal, 63 (name changed) is a palm jaggery (karupatti) maker in Tiruchendur. After doing this work for 20 years she has now stopped making jaggery as she got old and more importantly the harvest of palm tree sap or (padhaneer) has gone down drastically over the years.

Karupatti, a dark-brown, sweet, jaggery-like substance is one of the many derivatives of the palm tree. The karupatti along with the brown country sugar were some of the indigenous sweeteners native to Tamil Nadu dominantly used before white sugars derived out of sugar canes.

India has an estimated eight crore palm trees belonging to 105 different species. Out of that total, Tamil Nadu alone is said to have four to five crore of them.

“Do you think palm groves are watered by us three times a day and are taken care now and then? These grow wild on their own,” said Sangaran, head of Thoothukudi’s Salt Workers’ Association in a conversation.

Sangaran’s family and his predecessors were palm tree climbers who later were pushed to work on Thoothukudi’s salt pans as palm tree climbing and tapping became an uncertain and unreliable livelihood. Sangaran, worked as a salt pan labourer and went on to become the head of the salt workers’ association.

Despite the palm tree being the state tree of Tamil Nadu, the people dependant on these trees are unable to fully harvest what it has to offer. For example, toddy

Jaggery making is dying after toddy tapping was made illegal in Tamil Nadu

(kal), a traditional liquor indigenous to Tamil Nadu, was banned back in 1987 because of adulteration into a toxic, unstable and highly alcoholic substance. Though the tappers are not the ones involved in brewing of these drinks, they continue to face the brunt of law that has criminalised tapping an originally harmless and a refreshing drink.

Krishnammal was cautious in her answers when asked about toddy tapping. She clearly stated what distinguishes the padhaneer from kal. “Before they climb, the men smear sunnambu or limestone in their kuduvais or clay

pots to prevent it from fermenting into alcohol,” she said on how climbers carefully avoid holding any fermented alcoholic liquids.

Though tapping toddy has been made illegal in Tamil Nadu, making jaggery out of these palm tree saps has been the most supportive livelihood for many of these people in regions where palm groves are in abundance. While men scale palm trees, the women sit down to boil this gathered water to turn them into jaggery.

“The year when my son was born, I got plenty of padhaneer. Now there is not even enough to quench your thirst,” she said on the diminishing returns of the harvest every season. For every five pots of padhaneer, one kilogram of karupatti comes in return, she said.

Toddy tapping has now become seasonal work. Many leave for cities for daily labour work.



FACING THE BRUNT: Krishnammal and her grandson amidst palms which once sustained them | PHOTO: Kaushik