

COVERING DEPRIVATION

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'Slavery' in brick kiln run by pradhan

Bonded labour and child labour witnessed at Hardwari in Uttar Pradesh; officials look the other way

ROHINI ROY

**Hardwari (U.P.):** Caught in a debt trap, as many as 70 dalits and Gond adivasis from Chitrakoot are stuck as bonded labourers in a brick kiln owned by the pradhan of Hardwari village in Uttar Pradesh. After they borrowed money from a local contractor and couldn't repay him, they were brought to work here 15 days ago, the labourers said. Ankit Shyam (15), who works for 12-15 hours a day at a rate of 60 paise per brick, won't be paid until his contract ends in June. "Our *maalik* fears that we will run away if we're paid before that. We're given Rs 3,000 every 15 days as *kharcha-pani* (expenses)," he said. "That gets considered as a loan with interest rates too," added his father Ajay Shyam (55). Together they manage to mould 500 bricks every day, which translates to Rs 300 daily. Their earnings will go towards repaying the Rs. 40,000 borrowed from the moneylender at 10% interest, after the funds disbursed under the PM Awas Yojna turned out to be inadequate for building their house. "My son should be in school, but had I not brought him to work here, I would never be able



Children at work in a brick kiln in Hardwari | PHOTO: ROHINI ROY

to repay the debt," Ajay said. Shamim Bano, an activist at the Manav Sansadhan Evam Mahila Vikas Sansthan in Varanasi, explained how these workers, often belonging to marginalised castes, get stuck because they're always in desperate need. According to her, that is what powerful moneylenders use to trap and exploit them. "If you add the principal amount, the interest and expense loans, the

amount they owe comes to Rs. 83,600, while in six months they will be able to earn only Rs. 54,000," she said. Dr Shikha Singh, Professor of Social Work at Lucknow University, added that these debts are passed onto future generations because of the borrower's inability to pay them back in their lifetime. While the Global Slavery Index, 2018, estimated that nearly 8

million people in India are living in modern slavery, NHRC's 2018 report on bonded labour ranked Uttar Pradesh second (2,394) in terms of the number of cases registered across the country. Ankit is not the only child labourer working there. Vishesh Kumar (10) and his sisters Pinky Kumari (8) and Khushi Kumari (9) work along with their parents Alok and Suchitra Devi.



Suchitra (30), who developed chest pain a week ago, not only works at the brick kiln but also cooks and cleans for her family. "We don't even know which village we are in. Even if we were allowed to go out to visit the doctor, how would we go?" she asked looking up from the pot of watered-down daal she was cooking. The workers said that they have no access to washrooms, clean

drinking water or adequate clothing to brave the harsh winter. They are made to live in shanties, which can't fit in a standing adult. They are not allowed to leave the kiln except for getting groceries from the farm right next to it, said Santosh Manjhi (40), another worker. "We were told that a government doctor would visit us every week, but so far no one has turned up," he said. His youngest

daughter of eight months, Anjali, has been suffering from pneumonia but all their requests to get her treated have fallen on deaf ears. "We're labourers, we aren't allowed to fall sick," he added, smiling wryly. "It's not like we forced them to borrow money. We're aware that this is illegal but at least we are giving them a way to feed and clothe themselves," added Hariom Mishra, the pradhan, who is a partner in the brick kiln. Ramashankar Yadav, the other owner, said that whenever the police and government officials come for inspection, the children are asked not to work. "In one or two instances, when they made surprise visits, they asked for bribes ranging from Rs. 5,000-10,000 to not report what is happening here." The Uttar Pradesh Labour Commission can only intervene once an individual or NGO registers an official complaint at the DM's office, said Rizwan Ali, the Coordinator. "The legislation on bonded labour states that we can't send officials for inspection until a complaint is registered," he added. He declined to comment on the fact that this was happening at a brick kiln owned by the pradhan.

Toil takes a toll on Beed farm labourers' health

JAI NARAYAN TIWARI

**Khadaki (Maharashtra):** "My body aches, my hands and legs hurt, but I still have many trucks to load. If I delay it, the workload will increase. I can eat something only after the task is done," says Sarika Laxman Chole, a 25-year-old labourer working on a sugarcane field in this village. Gruelling work from 8 am to midnight for a wage of Rs. 300-350 a day has taken a toll on the health of sugarcane labourers, especially women, in Beed district. The labourers are hired on contract basis for a few harvests, and several couples take it up as they have no other livelihood option. Each worker is paid Rs. 1 lakh, and they can meet their target only if they work 16 hours a day. Taking a break means they have to work extra hours/days. Women are encouraged or sometimes even forced to undergo hysterectomy (surgical removal of the uterus) so that their work would not be interrupted by menstruation and pregnancy. A survey of 200 women in Beed district by the Maharashtra State Commission for Women in 2018 found that 36% had undergone hysterectomy. Vrundavani Panchal (40) got a hysterectomy done five years ago. "I used to work in sugarcane farms and when I experienced irregular periods, a doctor advised me to go for the surgery." She still cannot eat properly and gets tired fast. The women labourers say that even for minor gynaecological problems doctors in private hospitals advise hysterectomy. An emaciated Changuna Sadashiv Munde (32), has been working on these fields for the last 17 years "It might look like I'm performing a menial task. Even for



On a farm in Khadaki | PHOTO: JAI NARAYAN TIWARI

a bare minimum wage, I've to cut the sugarcane and carry at least 40-45 kg on my head and load it on to the tractor," she says. "When we are menstruating, we experience cramps and excessive bleeding at times, and it is almost impossible to work. Still, if either of us (referring to her husband)

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**Even if I am sick, I work so that my children can have a better future.**  
**- Shalu Babadev Chole, labourer**

takes a day's leave, we have to compensate later by working additional hours," said Changuna. Changuna Munde and Sarika Chole said that during their periods, carrying loads of sugarcane gets especially difficult. The body gets so weak that they rest for five minutes and resume work even

though they feel uneasy. The workers don't get leave even if they fall sick. instead, the *thekedar* (contractor) asks them to go to a doctor, take medicines and come back to work the same day. Shalu Babadev Chole (25), who was taking care of her child on the field, said that after working the body pain gets severe. But, she and her husband have to work to make ends meet. She has two children. The younger child is in the company of many other children brought by their mothers. "Even if I'm sick, I work so that my children can have a better future." Asked why the women labourers fell sick frequently, Dr. Khedkar, who has a 24-hour clinic at Dhekan Moha, a village in Beed district, said: "Diet is one of the major factors. Since they don't meet the basic calorific requirement, most women are underweight. However, the labourers have deadlines that don't allow for such breaks." The workers are caught in a debt trap, from which there appears to be no escape.

AJAY TOMAR

**Malur (Karnataka):** In Malur, a town some 25km from Bengaluru, the story of India plays out in microcosm every day. Every day, some 4,000 daily wagers get on a train to travel northwest to work in the upmarket apartments and industrial complexes of Bengaluru because they cannot make enough money in Malur. And every day, thousands from far more impoverished areas in states like Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar stir from their dormitories or their homes to work in one of Malur's many factories. At 7.30 in the morning, Malur's three-platform railway station is packed. On the platform are hundreds of men and women waiting for the train to Bengaluru to pull in. When it does, horns hooting and brakes hissing, they surge forward towards the doors. There are people spilling out the doors hanging on with their fingertips until the train reaches the first of the stops in suburban Bengaluru and some people get off. Malur is a small town situated almost midway between Karnataka's capital of Bengaluru and Kolar, home of the eponymous Kolar Gold Fields where a now defunct company mined gold. Every morning, starting at 7.30, almost 4,000 people throng the otherwise little-used railway station, according to Aasha, a commercial clerk at the station's booking office. Srinivas, an electrician, is a case in point. "I have been travelling to Bangalore for the last 10 years. I earn Rs. 500 a day—Rs. 15,000 per month—which is not sufficient. If



Malur residents en route to Bengaluru | PHOTO: AJAY TOMAR

I work here, I won't be able to earn half of it." The 45-year-old adds, "Unless you work in a physically demanding factory or construction work, the jobs in Malur don't provide regular work." But, in recent years, the town also witnessed an influx of workers from various parts of India. According to the 2011 Census, Malur has a workforce of about 30,000. Half of these people are reportedly employed for more than six months a year. The other half are marginal workers. The town first saw the setting up of industries in 1985, in the first phase. With three phases completed now, the town has over 200 industries in clay-tile-brick, granite, pharmaceutical goods, chemicals, food processing and automobiles. "Many students here discontinue their studies after completing

school and work in the cargos of these big companies or in the industrial area. Everywhere it's performance-based contractual work," said Venkatesh, Economics teacher in a pre-university (PU) college in town. The census says the town has literacy rate of 82.5 percent. Sriram, a 50-year-old former office assistant in Exedy Clutch India Private Limited in Malur Industrial Area, said, "My son too works as an office assistant in one of the factories. He earns only Rs. 10,000." The father of three has been fighting a case against the management of his former company in the Kolar labour court for five years after they suspended him without reason. "Implementation of the Sarojini Mahishi Report, 1984, which directs industries to appoint local people on priority, should be done

**Some 4,000 daily wagers travel daily to Bengaluru, while thousands from across the country work in factories in Malur**

immediately," said B.V. Sampangi, president of the Industrial & General Workers Union (IGWU). The activist-turned lawyer is fighting Sriram's case too. "Natives have been losing their land, acquired by the Karnataka Industrial Area Development Board (KIADB). The compensation amount is less than what they would get after selling their land themselves. Industrialists use resources and infrastructure of our region but provide no job to those farmers or their children. They get away by keeping migrant workers at cheap wages because the locals demand full rights and better wages," he added. On being asked about the state of migrant workers, Sampangi said that they live in the most dismal conditions. "Many people live in one room and drink tap water as they can't afford purified water. In the past, there have been deaths of workers due to chemicals released in LED factories." The lawyer explained that questioning the employers who violate the eight-hour-duty rule framed under the Factories Act, 1948, would open the exit doors for these workers. Local police also back the employers. "Migrant workers don't even come to Unions for help." Professor Y.J. Rajendra, State President, People's Union of Civil Liberties, said, "Migrant workers become victims of employers' tyranny. It has increased more after Covid-19 lockdowns as the source of livelihoods has decreased in their home states. Labour contractors also swallow a lot of their incomes. If they come directly they can't bargain much, have no social security and are exploited."



## COMMUTE

**In Aymadanga, a road remains a distant dream**

KUSUMIKA DAS

**Panchkhuri (West Bengal):** The residents of Ayamdanga village in Panchkhuri gram panchayat of Paschim Medinipur district need rain, but when it comes it brings with it a host of problems. There is no road in the area, so when it rains the entire village becomes a cesspool. It becomes difficult to even walk. Besides, the muddy water gets mixed with the drinking water at times.

“Because of the lack of proper roads and drains, our entire village gets flooded after five to six days of rain. Sometimes, the area remains waterlogged for more than 20 days,” said Sita Tudu, a villager of Aymadanga.

Another villager, Aroti Tudu, said, “We have asked the panchayat for *murram* roads several times, but nothing has come of it.”

Lack of roads causes multiple problems for the villagers. Transporting a sick person and travelling to school on uneven, muddy tracks are trying.

Ruyan Tudu, a 70-year-old daily wager, said, “Over 70 families live in this village. Most of us do not have our own land. We work in other people’s fields. We are poor. During the monsoon, we get stuck in our homes and we starve.”

When asked, panchayat head Dinesh Singh said, “The pitch road in front of the village was made of mud during the former government’s time. We took the initiative and made a road under different national schemes. We are also planning to make concrete roads inside the village, but we lack funds.”

Mahadev Tudu, a farmer, said, “It is very difficult to walk here after sunset as the village does not have street lights. These paths are uneven. We often stumble and fall.”

In the past two to three years, no official from the panchayat has visited this village that is in the back of beyond.

# Farmers in these Bengal villages are thrice unlucky

Unseasonal rains washed away the crops three times

SHREYA BASU ROY

**East Midnapore (W.B):** Untimely rainfall resulting in floods, thrice in 2021, has caused a losses worth lakhs of rupees to many farmers of East Midnapore. One such region is the Panskura block in Tamluk subdivision where agriculture is the lifeline of the rural economy.

This area, nestled in the upper expanse of River Kansai or River Kansabati, is also popularly known as the Valley of Flowers because many farmers grow flowers. The farmers supply not only to various regions of West Bengal but also to Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kanpur and Bengaluru.

Arup Ratan Binya, a farmer in Khirai, said he lost crops worth Rs. 80,000 in 6 katha of farm land (one katha is about 720 square feet). He had spent the money on planting saplings of chandramallika, aster and marigold, most of which were washed away during the September floods.

The farmers have found it extremely difficult to depend on agriculture as their primary source of income. Biswajit Jana, a farmer, forced to give up his 4-5 katha of farmland on lease after incurring an estimated loss of Rs. 70,000-Rs. 90,000. With that money he bought a toto and became a driver, to augment his monthly income.

“To run a family of four, we cannot just depend on farming. Moreover, with the uncertainty of profit due to flood and lockdown, I feel it is wise to have some sort of a permanent income like mine,” he said



Farmers in East Midnapore collect crop waste after the floods | PHOTO: SHREYA BASU ROY

Besides the wrath of nature, the prolonged lockdown in the state has exacerbated the abysmal condition of the farmers.

Mira Jana, a homemaker, who also helps her husband in farming said, “Fighting all odds, we have still dared to plant saplings of different crops in our land. But if the government declares another lockdown, we will be rendered penniless.”

According to a report in *The Telegraph*, after the September floods over three lakh people in East and West Midnapore were rendered homeless.

Vast parts of the two districts, along with Hooghly’s Khanakul, faced another devastating flood in August this

year.

The Khirai-Panskura region primarily grows various flowering plants.

However, some farmers also grow crops like mustards (oilseeds), water chestnuts, nuts, potatoes and even paddy. Mustard is sown from September to October, which is when floods occurred and caused huge losses. Other crops like potato, water chestnut and rice were also damaged due to waterlogging for weeks in certain areas.

“Governments promised to provide us relief. However, we have not received any effective remedy,” said an elderly woman working in a paddy field in Khirai, unwilling to share her name.

The BDO of the Panskura block claimed that the government did take a few measures for the welfare of the farmers of the region. However, the practical

implementation was not visible in the villages.

Some farmers in the region have, however, benefited from the Krishak Bandhu scheme by the West Bengal government, where all farmers having land more than one acre receive Rs. 5,000 per acre in two instalments. The farmers having less than one acre of land receive Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 4,000 annually.

“We have been receiving an amount of Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 from the Krishak Bandhu scheme since the last two years, irrespective of whether it rains or not. After the flood, we were promised an amount from the Shashya Bima. We completed all the required paperwork for the scheme, but did not receive any money yet,” said Tapas Kumar Jana, a farmer and a member of an NGO in East Midnapore that works in the field of agriculture.

# Stealing from the poor in Bihar’s Purnea

APOORVA JHA

**Purnea (Bihar):** Unfair practices in Public Distribution System shops in Purnea are depriving families in the below poverty line (BPL) category of adequate rations.

While BPL families are entitled to get 20-35 kg of ration per family at subsidised rates through their ration card under different government schemes, people living in the municipal wards of the district are being denied it.

Sita Devi (36), a domestic help and the only earning member of her family of four, said the PDS distributor is giving her 15 kg less than what she is entitled to, and this is not sufficient. Once they realised that she was a single mother with no financial support, the distributors started creating problems and would often give her low-quality rice.

“I faced a lot of problems during the pandemic, and my family often survived on chapatis and salt,” said Devi.

Amit Kumar Babloo, Ward Commissioner of the Municipal Ward, said he was aware that the distributors do cut a portion of the ration that citizens under the BPL category get.

“Since the distributors do not get enough money to pay their rent and for other expenses, they keep 1 kg of ration for themselves,” he said.

He said many people do not complain about such practices due to lack of awareness. However, whenever he receives complaints, a thorough monitoring is done in all the wards, and the ward commissioners try to solve the problem.

Babloo claimed many people did

not include their names in the 2011 census. As a result, they have been denied the government benefits.

Baanke Lal Rajak (72), resident of Purnea, said that for his family of 10, they only get 20 kg of ration.

“In Purnea, the distributors always withhold at least 5 kg from each person,” he said.

During the lockdown last year, the Bihar government had announced the distribution of free ration to compensate for mid-day meals for children studying in government schools.

Ruby Kumari (30), a domestic help, said the school children do get

ration, but the distributors take away a portion of it.

“If we have to get 5 kg of ration, the children only get 2 kg,” she said.

Anita Devi (45), another domestic help, said that during last year’s lockdown, a government official visited the municipal ward for a survey of those who did not have ration cards.

“They made us fill forms and asked for a bribe of Rs. 500, but we did not get the card,” said Devi.

Devi said that despite prohibition in Bihar, her husband is an alcoholic and takes away her money, making it difficult for her to survive through the pandemic and raise a child.

“If I had a ration card, it would have helped a lot,” she said.

Another problem the people face is getting ration cards. Kumari said she applied for a ration card along with her friends. While her friends got the card, she did not.

She was not provided with a reason either.

“I made many visits to the Sub-Divisional Officer office, but nothing happened,” she said.



There are no toilets in Dengimacha, which is an adivasi village | PHOTO: MAMATA SAHU



# Is Dengimacha open-defecation-free?

MAMATA SAHU

**Dengimacha (Odisha):** Chandrakanti Bhoi (39) is compelled to walk one kilometre to the canal running through her village everytime she needs to defecate.

There is no toilet in her house in Dengimacha, an adivasi village on the outskirts of Sambalpur town in Odisha.

Despite the vaunted Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, there is no access to toilets nearby.

“I am a woman and dignity is the most crucial thing for me. Also, I have a 12-year-old girl child, so whether it’s day time or night, it’s difficult for me and

my daughter to defecate outside as we are afraid and feel shame if someone says something, or stares at us then,” Bhoi said.

The majority of the households have no toilets and people are

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**It’s difficult for me and my daughter to defecate outside. We are afraid and feel shame if someone says something, or stares at us**  
- Chandrakanti Bhoi

compelled to defecate on the cultivated fields, roadsides or near the canal or village pond.

The 2011 Census says Odisha has as many as 62 different tribal communities.

Almost three quarters of all tribal households in the country have to defecate in the open because they do not have access to a toilets.

Dengimacha is one such village. Most residents

belong to the Khadia caste, which is listed as a Scheduled Tribe.

Despite being part of the Sambalpur Municipal Corporation (SMC), this village is sorely lacking in sanitation facilities.

Numbers are hard to come by but a survey of anganwadi teachers of the village found the total population of the village to be 1,171 with a total of 254 houses.

But the entire village has only 25 toilets. Out of these four have been provided by the government and 21 are self-constructed. Eight are unused by the people as there is no water connection and lack of awareness.

The Enforcement Director of Sambalpur Municipal Corporation, in Sambalpur, Subhankar Mohanty was unable to share data for this story, simply saying,

“I will send my expert team to Dengimacha village to check

whether th government provided toilets are there or not and then will decide what we have to do.”

A couple from the village, Sasi Nai (70) and Binodini Naik (63), said that they don’t know about any government help to build a latrine.

“For the past 60 years we have been going canal-side for defecation as we don’t have a toilet and we both are labourers. We don’t have money to build a toilet for our physically challenged daughter,” said Binodini.

According to the 76th National Sample Survey (NSO) between July-December 2018 report, 71.3% of households in the rural areas and about 96.2% in urban areas have access to latrines. According to the Swachh Bharat Mission Urban 2.0 website, 62.64 lakh individual household latrines have been constructed in urban areas.

# Menstrual issues pose a threat in remote villages

SHRISTY RAJ

**Jonha (Jharkhand):** Menstrual practices among women in Jonha village would shock many people. Let alone not having used a sanitary pad in their entire life, many women here use ash, dried grass, dried cowdung, etc as a form of sanitary pad.

Jonha, a village in Angara Block of Ranchi district, has a population of 1044 females as per the Census 2011 against 938 males. Despite having a high literacy rate of 69.33% and a female literacy rate of 60.95 %, in menstrual hygiene the village ranks poorly.

People living in this village belong to tribal communities. Most of the men and women are involved in small trading, agricultural activities or are daily wage earners.

Some NGOs tried to address this issue by distributing sanitary pads but this was not done regularly. There is one shop near the village that sells sanitary pads but not at the subsidized price fixed by the government.

Therefore, women tend to use cheaper but unhygienic options.

“I had never heard of the word periods in my life, and this is the first time I’ve heard of it,” a woman from the village said.

When she hit puberty, she was asked to use cloth, stay away from the kitchen and sleep on the ground during menstruation.

“We use the ash that is left after we cook food to make pads,” she added.

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, 83% of women in Jharkhand are victims of unhygienic practices.



A street in Jonha village | PHOTO: SHRISTY RAJ

Mangesh Jha, a Jharkhand-based rights activist, said, “At a time when people are talking about gender equality and women empowerment, these women do not even feel hygienically empowered in their own homes, which is really alarming.”

In Dhanbad and Ramgarh regions, coal mine workers end up using coal dust in the form of pad, he added.

Government schemes like Menstrual Hygiene Scheme (MHS), Free Pads for India (FPI) are ineffective in remote places such as these villages in Jharkhand.

In 2020 Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a Rs. 12,000

crore scheme to ensure access to sanitary napkins across India at a cost of Re 1 at Janaushadhi stores set up by the government under PM Bhartiya Janaushadhi Pariyojana (PM-BJP). There is no Janaushadhi centre near these villages, nor are the villagers aware of government

schemes.

Multiple lockdowns have worsened things as girls are not able to get sanitary pads.

An NGO named Motivate that works with women said that pads should be distributed free and it should be made accessible to everyone. Government schemes need to be implemented effectively in remote areas too.

Apart from this, under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan toilets are being built in remote villages. This includes this village but people face hardships if they want to use it.

“These common toilets are not accessible during the night, especially for the women; they find it unsafe to walk the distance to use it, so they prefer open defecation,” said the activist. He also added that maintaining the toilets is hard due to water scarcity.

“This poses a serious threat to the health and hygiene of women. There is an increased risk of getting ovarian cancer by this. It can impact the reproductive tract and cause Reproductive and Urinary Tract Infection,” said Dr. Neelam Choudhary, a gynecologist.



# Illegal quarries blast livelihood

Residents of Kotputli have to cope with crop failure and lung diseases like silicosis

SNEHA S

**Kotputli (Rajasthan):** “The first thing I do in the morning is sweep the dust off our *tipad* [terrace],” says 12-year-old Shiv Singh, a resident of Chotiya village in Kotputli in Rajasthan.

Shiv Singh lost his mother to silicosis (a lung disease caused by excessive inhalation of silica dust found in mines and quarries) in 2019 and is now single-handedly taking care of his two-year-old sibling while their father works as a daily wage at a stone crusher right across their settlement.

“The dust from the crusher travels in the air and settles on our terrace. The air in our surroundings is so dusty that often we are gasping for air,” adds Shiv Singh.

As Kotputli, located between Delhi and Jaipur, is growing as an important centre for stone quarrying in the country, several villages around the municipality continue to suffer in the shadow of illegal quarrying.

“I have not slept properly in years. The noise created by mine blasting is so terrifying that I have sent my children to Jaipur, to my brother’s house,” says R K Meena, an entrepreneur and social worker in Shuklawas village, Kotputli. The blasts have also caused cracks in the walls of his house.

Illegal mining is also responsible for the onset of silicosis, a long-term respiratory disease in people working in these mines without safety equipment.

An appalling discovery is that most of these workers do not have



**1. Water at a limestone mine containing sulphur and other toxic minerals**  
**2. Lakhmi Chand, a mine worker who has silicosis, holds up his medicines**  
**3. A fine layer of dust is a permanent feature of life in Kotputli**

PHOTOS: SNEHA S

an identity proof and cannot give thumb impressions on government documents as their fingerprints have faded from working in the mines.

“I was diagnosed with silicosis two years ago. Who will run my house if I don’t continue working

in the mines?” says Lakhmi Chand, a 50-year-old crusher in Chotiya village.

As per the Factories Act and Employees Compensation Act, silicosis is recognised as an occupational disease, which mandates employers to pay



compensation to afflicted workers.

In 2012, the Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission announced Rs. 1 lakh to workers diagnosed with silicosis for treatment in government hospitals and Rs. 3 lakh to families of those who died of it. Most workers are

unaware of this compensation and those who know, find the process for claiming it too tedious.

Illegal quarrying has also caused crop failure in one of the driest parts of the country. Most of the residential settlements in Kotputli are located near blasting sites and crushers. The dust that is released accumulates on the crops.

“The yield is so poor that I have lost buyers. No matter how much we try to save the produce, the dust always overpowers us. I have now given up,” says Kamla Devi, a farmer from Chotiya village, who owns 100 square metres of land.

Kamla Devi and several others had filed several petitions and even protested illegal mine blasting and environmental degradation due to excessive dust from crushers in 2017, but nothing concrete has been done to date.

Across the municipality, the hustle to meet the growing demand for construction material and the monetary benefits from those activities have had a catastrophic impact on people, livelihoods and the ecosystem. Activists like R K Meena allege that the violations by gigantic quarries and crushers go unnoticed by the authorities due to alleged nexus with politicians.

What remains in Kotputli is the debris of collapsed families, livelihood and heritage. Once an untouched village, Kotputli has become a classic case of over-extraction, resource exhaustion, human rights violations and penury.

## Tibetan refugees ‘sweater out’ the Covid-19 crisis

SHWETA DABHOLKAR

**Nagpur (Maharashtra):** Wednesday mornings in the Tibetan Refugee Sweater Market here begin with an hour-long prayer for His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Prema, a seller from Norgyeling, the Tibetan settlement, says Wednesday is a good day for her, as per Tibetan custom. She holds up a thin book of scriptures and starts chanting. The prayer ends at 9 am, after which it’s business as usual until 10 pm every day.

Rows of colourful sweaters, manufactured in Ludhiana, hang inside each stall beside a sign that says ‘fixed rate’.

Union leader Tenzin Pasang says this year there are only about 50 stalls, instead of the usual 75, due to the Nagpur Municipal Corporation’s Covid-19 restrictions.

The market starts in late October and continues until January. This is the busiest and most lucrative time of the year for these refugees in Maharashtra’s only Tibetan settlement, 150 km from Nagpur. Established in 1972 in Bhandara district (now Gondia), Norgyeling is spread across 400 acres housing 1,000 residents, most of who come here

every year.

“*Agar season acha raha toh saal nikal jayega* (If the sales during this season are good, we’ll get by this year),” says Sonam, who runs a stall with his wife. “We do business here for four months and depend on rice farming the rest of the year.”

His family has grown, but the land they have remains the same. The Tibetan government in exile has allotted 0.6 acres of land for farming and housing to each

“ ”

**We do business here for four months and depend on rice farming the rest of the year - Sonam**

citizen over 18, but there is a long waiting list. Sonam has three children and a wife to feed, with just 1.75 acres passed down from his parents. “No matter how hard we work, it isn’t enough. Usually, we harvest 25 *bhori* with 40 kg of rice. This year we didn’t even get three *bhori* of harvest due to crop disease,” he adds.

In 2020, the sweater market remained shut, leading to huge losses for the Tibetans, who resorted to growing vegetables.

“Government *apne aadmi ke liye nahi kar sakti, hamare liye kitna karega?* (The Indian government can do little for its own people, how much will it do for us?) If you go to the villages and forests, you will find lots of poor people, much more poor than us,” adds Sonam. “They are Indian.”

## Medicare is a luxury for villagers of Ganjad district

ANAGHA GANESH

**Ganjad (Maharashtra):** As the pandemic rages, people in Ganjad village in Palghar district face a host of health and sanitation problems.

Vijayrama Deyat, a resident of the village, says they cannot depend on the ambulance of the nearest government hospital as the driver is often not available. Ailing people and pregnant women have to be taken to hospital in autorickshaws.

“Another problem is that we have to go to a medical facility or any medical store outside our village whenever someone falls ill. The gram panchayat authorities

seldom come to our help. They come only at their will,” said Vijayrama.

Health issues are compounded by the fact that all dwellings in the village do not have toilets. As part of the Gharkul Yojana, rural households are to get financial assistance of Rs. 20,000-30,000, but few people in the village have received it. Most of the people defecate in the open.

Sanitary pads are not easy to come by for the villagers. Says Pallavi Bongya, an undergraduate student of Agriculture: “I have irregular menstruation. The local anganwadi gives pads only to school going girls who are below

18. Not all older girls can afford to buy it. Others resort to unhygienic practices.” She said that her college admission cost her around Rs. 7000, and her father had to borrow from people in the village.

During the pandemic, they were not exposed to Covid-19, but they did have food and water shortages. She said if someone falls sick, they have to go to a private hospital and the medicines cost at least Rs. 1,000.

Most of them cannot afford a sonography or an x-ray if asked to take it. So they make do without it.

The villagers say they have approached the gram panchayat with their issues. Promises are made but seldom kept.

HRIDAY SAHJWANI

**Beed (Maharashtra):** Covid-19-induced lockdowns and unfavourable weather have dealt a serious blow to the farmers in Beed, Maharashtra. However, they believe that a minimum support price (MSP) for all crops and a government-run insurance system could soften the hit.

Abhimaan Pandurang Karande, one such farmer, sold half his watermelon produce last year at a rupee per kg, while the other half was left untouched by traders despite the throwaway prices. Traders cited travel restrictions.

Karande then decided to focus his efforts on his papaya crop. However, that too was damaged due to heavy rains. When the sale period of August-September arrived, his crop found no takers.

“This is the problem,” said Prakash Singh Kacchua, Sarpanch of Dhekanmoha, Beed. There is a reasonable rate for grains like wheat and bajra as they are backed by MSPs. However, perishable items like papaya were ruined during the lockdown as farmers in the region couldn’t hold on to their produce for more than eight days.

To finance this year’s crops, he has taken loans from Chhatrapati Bank, amounting to Rs. 5 lakh and an additional Rs. 4 lakh which he borrowed in his father’s name from Ramalingam Sansthan. He would be paying an interest rate of 13 percent on the loans.

“We don’t have money left now,” said Karande, who spent Rs. 2 lakh on his father’s Covid treatment last year. Additionally, he spent Rs. 25,000 as fees for his son who is completing his 12th grade in a college in Beed city. He was charged the entire amount despite colleges being shutdown.

“The situation of the farmer in Marathwada will never improve,” said Om Prakash Giri,



**Ratan Tukaram Savashi sits amid a destroyed papaya crop. He lost Rs. 12 lakh during the Covid-19 pandemic but received no relief | PHOTO: HRIDAY SAHJWANI**

District Program Officer, Oxfam India. Unless there are structural changes and the farmer sets the market rate, they will always be trapped in the cyclical poverty caused by the unpredictable climate of the region.

Ratan Tukaram Savashi, another farmer from Wadwani taluka, Beed, suffered a loss of Rs. 12 lakh as most of his produce—watermelon, papaya, onion, chillies and soybean—was either destroyed by the rains or left untouched during the lockdown.

He lost five acres of farmland and his ancestral home due to the failed crop. During the lockdown, his goats fell ill and 40 died as there were no veterinarians available during the lockdown.

Savashi has sold most of his land and shut down his goat farming business. Along with his two brothers, he grows sugarcane on the remaining family land.

Savashi, like all other farmers of the region, has paid insurance premiums on his crops. However, none of the farmers have received their dues for losses suffered from Covid-19-induced lockdowns.

Giri, who is studying the situation of farmers in Maharashtra, said that the problem with the insurance system is that it does not cover losses caused by failure to market the crops. Therefore, farmers who had a good crop but were unable to get it to the markets were ineligible for insurance cover.

Sarpanch Kacchua, however, believes that the failures of the agricultural insurance system shouldn’t only be looked at as a Covid-19 phenomenon. Farmers in the region have never received a fair insurance payout for any crop damage.

The companies visit one or two

villages and apply a blanket rate for the claims received from the rest of the region. While agricultural insurance is provided by the government, it is run by private companies. An FIR should be registered against a private insurance company that unjustly rejects a farmer’s insurance claim.

The only way a farmer can continue in this country is when he is backed by an MSP for all crops and is insured by the government for losses, he said.

Vilas Vidhate of the Shiv Sena said that the government should go address the root cause of the issue. Rather than launching schemes that provide no help, it’s important they understand that the core issue is to provide them with assurance and insurance. Once they have that, they will not beg for your schemes, he said.

Asked if he had received the Rs. 2,000 transferred by the central government to the bank accounts of all farmers, Savashi smiled and said, “Yes, received.”

## Cops barricade sex workers, put their livelihoods at risk

SRUSHTI ATKARE

**Nagpur (Maharashtra):** “The first and second waves of Covid-19 have already snatched away our livelihoods, with police barricading the area for the last six months. Now, we are struggling to manage two meals a day,” says Laxmi a 30-year-old sex worker in Ganga Jamuna, Nagpur. Ganga Jamuna is a 300-year-old red-light area of Nagpur which over 3,500 sex workers currently call home.

In August 2021, Commissioner of Police Amitesh Kumar issued a notice ordering that the area be sealed and barricaded. The cops identified the locality as a ‘prohibited zone’ for allegedly having brothels, which are illegal under section 7 of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA).

This has all but destroyed the livelihoods of the 3500 sex workers who live in the area.

Fifty-seven-year-old Lata, who was a sex worker earlier and who now helps the girls and women earn a living, says, “*Bhook to rooz lagti hai*. (Hunger is felt everyday.) It cannot be resisted. Now, we no longer have any source of income, the ration we get through ration cards is not worth eating.”

“Police talk about rehabilitation, but where will we go? The police have no plan for us. If we ever go and



**A house in Ganga Jamuna, a locality where sex workers live | PHOTO: SRUSHTI ATKARE**

work as domestic helpers, will society accept us? If we make essence sticks and candles, who will buy this stuff which is made by a sex worker?” Lata says. While many women are taking loans from wherever they can to survive, some are managing with money earned from two or three clients to meet their needs.

The Police Commissioner has issued a notice for barricading the lane and deployment of heavy police personnel under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, wherein entering the locality for

sex-related work would be considered a crime.

Ayesha Rai, national coordinator at National Network of Social Workers (NNSW), said, “Now if these women move out of this restricted area, sex work will continue, no doubt, in hotels, bars, flats, etc. They will be deprived of the facilities that we provide them, and everything will go haywire.”

NNSW educates sex workers about Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) and provides regular check-ups for HIV and distributes condoms.



# Ghaziabad village untouched by Ayushman Bharat, struggling

Health centre in Surana failing as residents unaware of universal health scheme

PIHU YADAV

**Ghaziabad (U.P.):** An overview of Surana village will show you how well the villagers are doing. People are opening up fast food joints and cyber cafes to be at par with the city life. People say that they have access to excellent education.

One thing that does not resonate with the village's growing development is the Health and Wellness Centre (HWC) here that was an initiative of the Government of India as a part of the Ayushman Bharat scheme (2017).

The government has done its job of providing an infrastructure for the villagers, where they can avail of health services, diagnostic services and also free essential drugs. According to the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana website, "The emphasis of health promotion and prevention is designed to bring focus on keeping people healthy by engaging and empowering individuals and communities to choose healthy behaviours and make changes that reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases and morbidities."

The HWC is supposed to be a 24-hour facility that also provides maternal and child health services. The reality of it is the exact opposite. Lokesh, who lives right across the road from the wellness centre, says that the doctor rarely



The Health and Wellness Centre in Surana village | PHOTO: PIHU YADAV

visits. "We have a government-appointed doctor but he also has other duties like post-mortems and court visits. So he comes and goes as he pleases," he adds.

Other than the ever-absent

doctor, the centre has only one other person to call staff, who is the ward boy there—Anand, who is in his seventies. He is responsible for administering medicines to patients and closing up when it starts to get

dark. "We have to take these medicines because there is no other option. They are not of much help but we have the mental satisfaction that we're doing something," he adds.

The wellness centre also comprises a labour room and a ward for up to six patients but no one to attend to those patients and no facilities other than beds with mattress and white sheets over them. While the premises also have accommodation for resident doctors and enough space for an ambulance, none of them are being availed of. At night, the area looks like a haunted, abandoned building. The villagers have sent letters to the authorities on multiple occasions to take some action but nothing surfaces. Is that how a 24-hour government-mandated facility should be run?

The second component of Ayushman Bharat ensures "a health cover of Rs. 5 lakh per family per

year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization to over 10.74 crores poor and vulnerable families (approximately 50 crore beneficiaries) that form the bottom 40% of the Indian population." Most people do not even know they are eligible to avail of this because of lack of awareness at both ends.

A 22-year-old Chanchal had her spine broken in an accident almost a year ago. She was eight months pregnant at the time and was coming back from a hospital with her husband after having her ultrasound done. While both of them were injured, her condition was more serious. She got paralysed with her daughter in her womb. She went to many doctors and hospitals—both government and private—but it was difficult to say if she would ever walk again.

"At first, they couldn't even identify that my spinal cord had been broken. It was later when we went to AIIMS that we found out," she adds.

Chanchal's husband is the sole breadwinner of the family and earns Rs. 7,000 a month. Her treatment has cost them Rs. 9 lakh and she does not even know if she will ever walk again. "We have taken loans from private money lenders who are sharks. I don't know what we will do if we are not able to repay them," she says.

When asked if she knew about Ayushman Bharat, she said no and that at no point during the course of a year did anyone inform her or her family about the scheme.

The problem is not that the government is sitting idle and printing money, but that there isn't enough awareness and those personnel involved in the process are looking out for themselves. Many eligible candidates have benefited from this scheme, all people who would otherwise never have been able to afford healthcare. But the scheme's implementation remains a hit or a miss.

It is important that we raise awareness about campaigns like these and ensure that we leave no one behind and achieve the vision of universal health coverage.

# Pay of midday meal workers late, missing

ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY

**Meerut (U.P.):** Munesh Devi, who works as a midday meal cook-cum-helper (CCH) in the Upper Primary School in Teharki village near Meerut is the sole breadwinner of her family. "My husband has a breathing problem, and my son gets seizures. All of my income goes in buying medicines for my husband."

Out of 24.95 lakh midday meal cook-cum-helpers (CCHs), around 65 percent are paid less than Rs. 2,000 a month, as per a report in *The Indian Express*. Around 3.93 lakh CCHs were not paid in Uttar Pradesh in 2021.

Three CCHs, including Devi, cook food for 150 children in the school. Their work includes cleaning the kitchen and washing the utensils.

"First, we used to get Rs. 1,000 and now it's Rs 1,500, which also is not enough," said Devi. She said her salary is often delayed by six to seven months, which causes difficulty in running the house.

"We work all day here, and even

then we don't get paid."

Devi said she last got her salary 15 days after Diwali. When she does not receive her salary, she borrows money to run her family. "There is no support from the government," she says.

Balbiri and Parvesh, who work in a primary school in Teharki, have similar stories to narrate.

Two weeks after Diwali, Balbiri got Rs. 6,000, and Parvesh got Rs. 7,500.

According to the report, the monthly income of the midday CCHs in Uttar Pradesh remains below Rs. 2,000. However, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, it is Rs. 9,000 and Rs. 12,000, respectively.

Rasida, who has been working for 15 years in the Composite Vidyalaya at Khirwa Jalalpur, U.P, cooks food, along with four others, for 800 children.

She said that five months have passed and she has not received even a single penny.

The CCHs say they cannot sustain themselves for long under such circumstances.



A midday meal worker serving food in Teharki village | PHOTO: ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY

# Alongside Covid-19, a fraught financial and sanitation situation

MUSKAN

**New Delhi:** With the compulsion to feed her six children and to get her husband's treatment of tuberculosis done urgently, Ranju (45) migrated from Begusarai district (Bihar) to Safeda Jhuggi, Geeta Colony, a slum in east Delhi.

Ranju's husband was the sole earner of the family. But, now all the pressure to sustain the family is on her. The pandemic made it worse. Even though promised by Rajkumar, the area's MLA, that she would get Rs. 500-Rs.1,000 for her husband's treatment, she got none.

Ranju used to work as a house help in nearby homes but due to the pandemic followed by a lockdown, she is not able to earn a living. Now

the whole family is dependent on savings and the Central Public Works Department to provide jobs through a Labour Card.

"Most applications for a Labour Card have been rejected by the CPWD citing that the name and address on Aadhaar Card are fake. They are delaying giving out the job to Ranju and other residents of Safeda Jhuggi," said Sangita, associated with CPWD to help the slum.

Where Ranju and other migrants from Bihar stay, there is no sewage system, due to which the children often fall sick. "We are less scared of getting Covid-19. We are more worried about our kids catching diseases like typhoid, malaria, dengue and other severe diseases

caused by poor sanitation," said Ranju.

According to the slum residents, the permit to make the sewage system has been signed by the local MLA. It states that the project has been successfully completed and the whole slum has the proper sewage system. All residents walk to the other side of the road to use a public washroom, itself dirty and without proper sanitation.

Only rice and wheat are provided by the government and Ranju often fails to get it. Two of her children also suffered from malnutrition due to protein and calcium deficiency.

All Ranju wants is gainful employment so that she can earn an income and overcome at least some of these problems.

MALAVIKA MURALI

**New Delhi:** Pankaj Kumar, a resident of Chiri, Rohtak, reached the All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) early on December 29 with his ailing eight-year-old son to get him treated in the country's foremost government hospital.

His son, Adarsh, is suffering from a condition called Nystagmus, in which the eyes make repetitive, uncontrolled movements. He needed urgent surgery. Adarsh's prescription showed that he was given the surgery date three months in advance.

However, he had to leave after waiting for hours as no one attended to his son.

"They [hospital administration] told us the doctors are on strike and asked us to come back after three days. We can't travel back 100km and come again. What will we do for three days in a city where we don't know anyone? We don't have money for rent," said Kumar.

Hundreds of resident doctors of several government hospitals in the national capital have been on strike since November 27. They are protesting the delay in NEET-PG counselling, which has resulted in a doctor shortage in hospitals, an increase in workload for existing resident doctors, and uncertainty for candidates.

Doctors from AIIMS, Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, and Safdarjung Hospital have been leading the agitation in Delhi. With patients left in the lurch, long queues were seen outside the OPD and Emergency wards of these hospitals.

Says a crestfallen Pankaj: "This is about my child; we can't



Patients queue up in AIIMS | PHOTO: MALAVIKA MURALI

compromise on this. He is young and has a long life ahead of him. Doctors had told us that if we don't fix this now, it will cause problems in future."

The Safdarjung Hospital, another government hospital, has been the epicentre of the ongoing protest. The doctors are protesting outside the hospital, disrupting the emergency and OPD services.

Shanta Devi came to Safdarjung Hospital from Bhangel with her six-months-pregnant daughter, Sudha. They were issued OPD slips, but couldn't consult the doctors. Shanta said the same thing happened when she came three weeks ago. "The hospital asked us to wait till the strike is over or to go to a private facility," she said.

"Sudha has some complications, that is why we came here. They are asking a pregnant woman to wait for the strike to get over," Shanta said, frustrated.

Another patient, Shyam Sundar,

who was waiting at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital, said no one was getting proper treatment there. Earlier that day, a nine-year-old child died waiting and the child's mother was waiting for two hours, he said.

Murali Kishan, a resident of Dallupura, said he came to AIIMS as he needed a disability certificate for his son, Gaurav, to enrol him for the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) exam. He said the doctors were on strike when he came the last time as well.

"I know the doctors are suffering, and sympathise with their cause. But what about us? My son is autistic, he cannot cope with crowds or waiting," Kishan said. He has no clue where to go, as the NIOS demands certification from specific government hospitals.

Like them, hundreds of patients across the city are being denied access to healthcare. They know that if they had more money, they

can get the services they need.

The agitating doctors have their share of grievances.

Dr Avishek Roy, a junior resident at AIIMS, said that it is difficult for them to not follow the oath they took but that oath is coming at the cost of their lives.

"None of us has been able to get good sleep because not working is gnawing at our conscience. But we can't help anyone if we are not okay. And we are not okay," he said.

AIIMS media coordinator B.N. Acharya said they have received complaints from several patients since the strike started. "We have held several rounds of talks with the doctors, but their demands are also legitimate. We hope the government takes a decision fast in the matter," Acharya said.

He said the hospital is trying to pressure the government to start NEET-PG counselling as soon as possible.



Ranju supports herself and her family with only her savings | PHOTO: MUSKAN

# ‘Open-defecation-free U.P.’ claims unfounded

In Hasaekala, a village of approximately 1,000 people, there are only 20 toilets

ASHISH TIWARI

**Lalitpur (U.P.):** Despite the Uttar Pradesh government’s claim that the state is 100 percent open-defecation-free, stories from rural areas raise questions.

“In a village of approximately 1000 people, we have only 20 toilets, and the rest of us, including the women and children, walk out to the fields to defecate,” says Ram Ranjan, resident of Hasaekala village in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh.

The talk of toilets led to an argument between those who had a toilet and those who didn’t. However, both parties expressed discontent with the authorities. While a majority of women spoke of the dangers of going out in the night, the people who received funds under the scheme to build toilets said that Rs. 12,000 is enough to make the cabin and seat, but to make the pit (for waste management) more funds were needed, which they don’t have, leaving the toilet useless.

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) was launched in 2014. The primary goal was to make India open-defecation-free (ODF) by October 2, 2019, by building over 12 crore toilets across rural and urban households. The Centre defines an “open-defecation-free place” as the absence of visible



faeces in the environment.

The beneficiaries are given Rs. 12,000 in two instalments of Rs. 6,000 each. The Central government’s share in this incentive is Rs. 9,000 (75 percent) and the State government adds Rs. 3,000 (25 percent). And if the cost of making a toilet exceeds the given amount, the beneficiaries have to pay the extra amount from their own pockets.

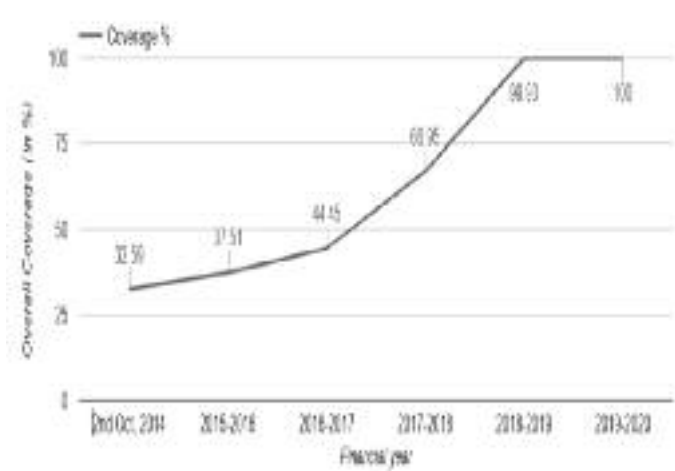
Shivnarayan Nayak, 73, a resident of Bhuchera, Lalitpur, was asked to build his toilet from the first instalment, and only after an inspection was he scheduled to

receive the second instalment. “My second instalment is stuck since no official came in for the inspection. And whenever I go to the head office in Talbehat (nagar panchayat in Lalitpur district, which is 20 kilometres away and takes around two hours to reach from the village), they ask me to put in my own money to finish the work,” said Nayak. When asked if the officials visit the village for inspection, he said that no official has ever visited the place.

For verification of the ODF declaration, the guidelines suggest that ‘at least’ two verifications

should be carried out. The first level of verification should be done within three months of declaration, and the second level—to ensure that villages do not fall out of the ODF status—within six months of the first verification. And once the toilet is functional, a photo of that toilet is uploaded on the website for geo-tagging.

As of October 27, 2021, the government claims that rural India has become open-defecation-free, and about 1087.79 lakh toilets have been constructed under the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin. It declared 6,02,990 villages ODF.



**A toilet in Bhojla that is shut for most of the year (left); U.P. coverage status | PHOTO AND GRAPHICS: ASHISH TIWARI**

Meanwhile UP was declared 100 percent ODF in 2019, with 97,641 villages being declared ODF in 75 districts. But, according to the National Family Health Survey-5, Uttar Pradesh has only 64 percent of the rural population using improved sanitation facilities.

“Households that didn’t have toilets were identified based on the baseline survey of 2012. But with the increase in population, the number of households has also increased, so for that we are conducting another round of district-level surveys,” said Santosh

Prajapati, District Consultant for SBM-Gramin, when asked about the missing toilets around the state.

Even though the government claims to have made around 97,640 villages open-defecation-free, access to toilets does not mean that open defecation has ended. According to the Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (RICE) survey conducted in 2018, 40 percent of rural households in India that own a toilet have at least one person who defecates in the open. In Uttar Pradesh, the number is 38 percent.

Geeta Raja (30) is one such example of how people who have toilets in their homes are forced to defecate in the open. “Only kids can fit in this small hole, which the government calls a toilet, so we go out in the fields,” she said pointing towards her 4x2-ft toilet cabin.

Not everyone is eligible for the scheme. The SBM-Gramin is based on two criteria. One for the identified Above Poverty Line (APL)—in which STs/SCs, landless labourers with homestead, physically challenged and women-headed households and farmers who own less than 2 acres of land are considered—and another for households classified as Below Poverty Line (BPL).

There are often unofficial societal criterion too, where the gram pradhan favours a select few while sending names of beneficiaries to the authorities. Those who stand against the Pradhan are often excluded.

Two such residents of Bhuchera, Yugendar (24) and Rajkumar Nayak (45), face social exclusion when it comes to welfare programmes that pass through the pradhan.

“On paper, I have a toilet. But one has to be a *chamcha* of the Pradhan to get one’s work done without any delay,” said Nayak, who stood against the current pradhan in the last election.

## When the forge’s fire lies cold

Haryana’s Gadhiya Lohar ironsmiths struggle due to loss of livelihood, official apathy and social exclusion

SHRIMANSI KAUSHIK

**Narnaul (Haryana):** The wrinkles on Seth Singh’s forehead are timelines marking the past and present of the Gadhiya Lohar community. He is the oldest of a 75-member settlement in Narnaul, a town in Mahendragarh district of Haryana. He has spent 70 years of his life in this area, the generations that followed spreading around him like the tails of his turban.

Members of the community were traditionally reputed to be skilled craftsmen of swords and shields, blacksmiths who possessed immense skill and were known for their decorated iron bullock carts, ornaments and utensils. Hence, the name Gadhiya Lohar (gadiya meaning “cart” and lohar meaning “blacksmith”).

Legend traces the community back to the 16th century, when the Rajput king Maharana Pratap was forced to flee from Chittorgarh (in Rajasthan) on account of the Mughal invasion. The community, naming themselves his descendants, vowed to leave Chittorgarh, giving up the comfort of a bed, a house and fire in the lamp and return only when the Chittorgarh fort was reclaimed by their king. However, that victory never came.

“Our grandfathers used to say it’s been 646 years since the vow. Our community survived as long as there was support from the society. But we don’t know that world. We grew up here and have been scrambling to make ends meet,” says Amar, a garbage seller.

The traditional occupation of making iron tools, shields and



**Seth Singh | PHOTO: SHRIMANSI KAUSHIK**

utensils has now come to a standstill, the craft and skill lost to the hands of modernisation. The present generations have no knowledge of the trade. Consequently, garbage selling, contractual labour, and other temporary jobs are the only options left, which are most often taken up by the male members of the community. “By selling scraps we earn Rs. 200-300 a day and all of it is used in buying food for the family,” adds Amar.

Education has been elusive to the community, as they find themselves cast out from society. It is easier for them to send their children to a low-fee private school than a government school. “Teachers do not teach our children. They don’t allow us in

schools. They say, what do Gadhiya Lohar need education for?” says Amar.

“We even tried our hands at sewing and stitching but no-one was ready to teach us or give us work,” says Aarti, one of the many women in the community who depend on the income of the male members. “I studied up to class VIII but dropped out due to lack of resources to study,” adds Aarti.

Living in makeshift homes with no proper shelter and sanitation has its consequences—Aarti’s father lost his life to a stomach infection 10 years ago. “We don’t have toilets here, so when we go out in the open, those who have houses nearby say we are dirty people who spread diseases. Where else would we go? When it rains, sewage water

comes till here,” says Lehri, pointing to her neck. “When someone is ill or a woman is pregnant, we take her to a private hospital 3 kilometres away. They ask for Rs. 30,000-40,000 for a delivery. We all then have to contribute Rs. 100-200 or more and collect money like this for a delivery,” she adds.

“I am seven months pregnant and I cannot visit the doctor for regular check-ups. They say first get the injection,” says 24-year-old Pooja. She was in a dilemma about getting the Covid-19 vaccine as she is pregnant. Local transportation services do not allow the community members to travel without being vaccinated. She could not even travel to visit the doctor to confirm whether pregnant women could get the vaccine.

The Haryana government identifies the community as Scheduled Castes, informed Amit Kumar, District Welfare Officer, Mahendragarh. “There are no specific schemes for the Gadhiya Lohar community but by being identified as SCs, they are eligible

**Legend traces the community back to the 16th century, when the Rajput king Maharana Pratap was forced to flee from Chittorgarh**

for some benefits, such as the Rs. 80,000 that is given to families with houses that need repairing. A fixed amount of money is given as kanyadan in marriages of girls belonging to the community. Scholarship is also given to the meritorious students.”

However, these benefits can be availed of only when they have proper documents and a permanent address. Central government schemes such as MGNREGA, the Public Distribution System, and the PM Jan-Aushadhi Yojana identify the community as beneficiaries but due to lack of awareness and mismanagement they are unable to avail of these benefits.

Producing their ration cards and bank account documents, Sobharam and Shantidevi say they have been making many fruitless trips to the government offices to get their documents updated but the officials misguide them. “We end up not receiving ration for some reason or the other,” says Sobharam.

During Covid-19, as movement was banned, there was no option for even the meagre income that the male members earned to support their families. “We depend on what the generous people came to distribute. Rice, vegetables, etc. we ate only when they gave it to us. Other days, we slept with hungry stomachs,” says Shantidevi.

Vineet Kumar, Block Development Officer, Bhiwani, cites shortage of employees in the administration, mismanagement and corruption as some reasons due to which these benefits do not reach the marginalised populations for whom they are designed.

## Incomes slithering away in Auraiya



**A snake catcher | PHOTO: SHIVAM VERMA**

SHIVAM VERMA

**Auraiya (U.P.):** Snake catchers of Lalpur, a small village in Auraiya district, are finding their only source of income dwindling fast. Around 2,000 people live in this village, a majority of them snake catchers.

These people, who belong to the Jogi community, entertain people by making the venomous snake dance to the music of their *been*, or *pungi*, or gourd flute. On a good day they earn Rs. 200 to 300. And there are days when they earn nothing. Enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, which makes it illegal to catch snakes and use or own them for business purposes, has impacted the lives of these villagers. Jahar Nath (75), said, “We go to nearby villages and ask for food, spices and vegetables. Whatever they give us, we keep. Sometimes it’s enough to feed our children, sometimes it’s not.”

Kishan Nath, 32, has been catching snakes since childhood, as his father was also a snake catcher. “I lost my father a few months ago after he was bitten by a venomous snake. I will still continue to catch snakes as this is the only work I know.”

Most of the villagers have not benefited from the Prime Minister Awas Yojana that ensures poor people get brick houses. They live in huts. The village has no school and proper water connection.

The District Magistrate’s office is just 100 metres away from the village, but nobody listens to their problem. The authorities are even asking them to leave the village. Lalpur villagers can’t help but see a dark future.

## Haato: Helping hands that need help

ARUNIMA MAINI

**Kangra (H.P.):** A tired and weary Muhammad Anwar gets Rs. 30 after unloading cartons of fruits on the bus going to Baijnath. Hailing from Ganderbal, the 60-year-old has been coming to town and working as a porter for almost all his adult life. His father and grandfather were engaged in the same profession. He is scared that if things don’t improve in Kashmir, his son, who is a B.Ed holder, will meet with the same fate. “No one thinks about poor people like us. Only during elections, politicians come to ask for votes with promises of jobs.”

Such apprehension and angst is common amongst the Kashmiri porters in town, locally known as haato (which means “helping hand”) or khans.

Dressed in traditional pherans and warm caps, with older members often donning long, white, beards, haato can be spotted carrying all sorts of load either on their backs, or, where the terrain permits, on wooden wagons.

They are a common sight in the area where many houses and shops are inaccessible by roads, with haato providing cheap and sturdy labour. They migrate from regions of north Kashmir around November, before the snow blocks

off their access to the world, and go back only around May once the roads are clear.

Faruq Ahmadun (45) hails from Gurez Valley, barely a few kilometres from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Razdaan Pass, which is the sole link connecting the region is covered in 10-12 inches of snow, thus cutting off access to the region for more than half the year.

Their remote location is forgotten by those in power who visit the place either to vacation or to seek votes, Ahmadun adds, making isolation and solitude a characteristic feature of the lives of these people.

The abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019, which promised more jobs and greater integration to the Kashmiris, has done little to benefit these porters. “Even the little work that we used to get before has been stopped now,” said Ahmadun.

While they have to undergo an arduous three-day bus journey to reach Kangra, they just manage to earn a meagre wage out of which they have to pay a monthly rent of Rs. 2,000-3,000. “On good days we earn Rs. 450 per day and on bad days like today, it’s 3:30 p.m. and I have made only Rs. 100 till now,” said Abdur Rahman.

Each time they manage to carry

around 100 kg of load, which often results in body pain and injuries, which they treat on their own with traditional medicines.

When the khans are not lifting, they engage in subsistence or small-scale farming in their villages in Gurez, where they grow potatoes and maize.

Being a border town, there’s a significant Army presence there, so the summer months are spent carrying load to the border posts. Unlike other parts of Kashmir, the relation between locals and the Indian Army is not adversarial. Rather, the Armed forces help them with ration and medical care during winter.



**The haato | PHOTO: ARUNIMA MAINI**



# Migrant workers face a covert landlord mafia in Kapashera

Does the Centre's ARHC Scheme come to an end in March 2022 without having addressed local housing issues of migrants?

ADYA GUPTA

**New Delhi:** "All I did was buy some biscuits for my niece from some other ration shop. She was sick and needed to take her medicines urgently. My [then] landlord brutally threw me out the next day," recalled Aroop Srivastav (46), a migrant from Bihar who moved out of Kapashera three months ago.

Reverse migration during the pandemic made the Indian government take cognisance of the shortage of affordable rental housing crisis. The Pradhan Mantri AWAS Yojana Urban (PMAY-U) then launched a sub-scheme of Affordable Rental Housing Complexes. This came in to ensure that migrant workers could access rental complexes. It comes to an end in March 2022.

The complexities of the ARHC scheme, however, manifest in different ways on the ground due to local socio-economic issues of the migrants, like in the case of urban villages like Kapashera.

The Kapashera village is a low-income slum-like settlement near the Delhi-Gurgaon border that is home to migrant workers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and other north Indian states. Its buildings tower up to five floors and consist of approximate 10 rooms on each floor. Every building houses many workers and their families. The landlords mostly reside on the ground floor of their building and have shop fronts.

Living in Kapashera is advantageous because it is affordable and neighbours locales where migrants earn their livelihoods. However, it is also a breeding ground for poor living conditions.

Landlords in Kapashera own shops of ration or water in the neighbourhood and pressurise their tenants to solely buy from them. This promotes a dual inflow of money for the landlords—rent and shop earnings.

According to Srivastav, about half the landlords practise this in



**Scenes from Kapashera**  
PHOTOS: ADYA GUPTA

Kapashera and use force and verbal abuse to enforce the policy.

Like Srivastav, tenants are usually asked to vacate immediately if caught purchasing groceries or other essentials from shops not owned by their landlords. The word of such slip-ups by tenants always reaches their landlords, added Srivastav.

Tenants are forced to oblige and are at the constant risk of being evicted because of the lack of enforceable contracts. Like in most urban villages, rental agreements are mostly oral or on paper without legal validity.

This gives a monopoly status to the landlords, who double as shopkeepers in the local area, and indirectly encourages them to abuse their power.

"This happens often in here, but no one is willing to talk about it because they are scared of being vacated," said Ashok Kumar (44), who lives in Rajokri, a village adjoining Kapashera, and works as an office boy in Udyog Vihar—a working hub for most migrants



living on the Delhi-Gurgaon border. "This is not an issue that is limited to Kapashera. It is also prevalent in other nearby villages like Dundaheera, Nathupura and Salapur Khara," he added.

Mukta Naik, a Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, wrote in a study that "migrants report cordial relationships with landlords, largely out of fear of reporting incidents of exploitation. Besides being forced to buy rations from the landlord's shop, migrants reported arbitrary increases in rent

and occasional evictions as overt forms of exploitation. [There are also] subtler forms of aggression, like imposed codes of conduct, especially on female tenants."

Contrary to this are stories of trust and benevolence, with undercurrents of caste hierarchies, which also contribute to the stronghold of power of the landlords. Naik noted in her report that "this dual relationship of fear and patronage characterizes the tenant-landlord relations in the informal private rental market."

Mahendar Singh, 65, a landlord in Rajokri, said, "In small villages like Kapashera and Rajokri, landlords solve interpersonal issues of the tenants. Everyone looks up to me. I know caste is important. But I never stop someone from a lower caste [points at Ashok, his tenant] from speaking to me. In fact, I am like his grandfather. This is why people choose to stay."

Rumi Aijaz, Senior Fellow at Observer Research Foundation (ORF), said, "Recently the government has given importance to making arrangements for better living of migrant workers through the ARHC scheme. However, to achieve things on the ground has not been easy."

According to him, there is a lot of unutilised housing stock that exists as most of the government-constructed houses have remained unoccupied.

However, even if enough housing were created, factors like affordability, transportation and proximity to livelihood are key factors in choosing housing for migrants, which is a rare combination.

There are numerous factors that also stop migrants from seeking better housing. These include sticking with their social networks for security and support, according to Debarpita Roy, a Fellow at ICRIER. Thus, even if the ARHC provides rental complex options, the housing problems for migrant workers may not fade.

Aijaz said, "Despite enough housing, rents would be common all around Kapashera and landlords would have the same mindset. Therefore, the same situation would be faced by the tenant even if they relocate to another place. They are trapped in this situation and system."

Roy added, "On paper, migrants are covered. But the magnitude of demand at price points of Rs. 2,000 to 2,500 rent a month is huge! So anyway the policy will have difficulty covering most migrants. I don't see much of a change or a positive outcome of this policy."

# Winter clothes sold illegally



**The homeless queue up outside Safdarjung Hospital |**  
PHOTO: UDBHAV SETH

UDBHAV SETH

**New Delhi:** AIIMS and Safdarjung patients sleeping on footpaths outside government winter shelters in the hospital area have been unable to access blankets distributed by Samaritans due to groups who hoard and sell them.

Officials say this practice recurs every winter across the city, and that the hospital area needs far more shelters to accommodate all homeless patients.

"These people snatch blankets from us and those distributors in vans too, and then sell them at rupees 200-300 a piece," said a woman from Jhansi who came to AIIMS for her eye treatment.

"You will find massive hoards of unsold blankets here in the subway soon. They come here for the season and will start selling later," said a man who came to AIIMS from Bareilly with his wife for the latter's cancer treatment. "We sleep in the cold every night under cardboard boxes. We have only come so far because we don't get such treatments back home."

"They know we are new to the area so don't tell us where we can buy cheaper ones either," said a woman from Sarangpur in Delhi, who's here to get her son's blood cancer treated.

"No, these blankets aren't mine. These people can take them home," said a man standing next to a pile of blankets on the footpath — indicated as a perpetrator by a

crowd of patients, shortly before he approached them, and began arguing. "Nobody comes here to sell blankets."

"This has been happening for a long time," said Pooja Pathak, a caretaker from the Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM), the NGO contracted by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) to manage all tents in the hospital area.

"This kind of scam happens in AIIMS a lot, as in other hubs around the city, like Jama Masjid, Bangla Sahib and Kashmere Gate, where homeless people are known to stay," said Bipin Rai, Member Expert, DUSIB.

"It's difficult to stop this practice and verify which patients genuinely need the blankets because we would need to rope in police and that might lead to more harassment of homeless people," said Sujit Nath, the SPYM supervisor of AIIMS tents. "These tents are always full because patients are coming in all the time. We have blankets and food in these tents, but they fall short."

According to Nitesh Kumar, an SPYM project coordinator, "There is no space for tents. We can only put up tents in PWD land because AIIMS comes under the Central government and removes tents we put up in their area." He added, "The Delhi government is powerless. Only the Centre can help now."

# Arsenic in veins: The sad tale of UP's river of doom

VANI SHARMA

**Meerut (U.P.):** Nangal village in Uttar Pradesh is suffering from water contamination, villagers say, because the failure to reopen a dam is making the arsenic-laced water leach into the groundwater.

The village in Baghpat district's Baraut tehsil has a population of 4,187. With no other sources of water, the villagers are forced to tap groundwater through wells and tube wells. At least one person from each house suffers from cancer, physical deformities, or cardiovascular disease. The villagers attribute the contamination to chemicals released by factories and slaughterhouses upstream.

Saksham P, a Meerut-based lawyer, said, "On an average, 10-15 deaths happen every year because of problems caused by the water. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed the government to stop the discharge from factories to the river. The government did not follow NGT's directions."

"The NGT directed the district administration to remove handpumps provided by the government and to provide 30 litres of filtered water to every household without any cost," he added.

The NGT even ordered the Department of Water Resources to provide clean water to the village. But locals say the board has failed to implement the order. The NGT's decision came after a not-for-profit, Doaba Paryavaran Samiti, filed a petition after testing water in the area. A former Haryana State Pollution Control Board member, Chandraver Singh, found the presence of arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead, mercury, nitrate and other heavy metals and compounds in water sample tested independently.

"If the metals are consumed for long, it causes cancer; that is precisely what is happening in Nangal. We also identified eighty different types of diseases in people who reside near the Krishna river," he said.

"Our village and surrounding villages give the best sports players to the state and in return, the Uttar Pradesh government is not capable of giving us clean water to drink," said social activist Puneet Bhardwaj.

*At least one person from each house suffers from cancer, physical deformities, or cardiovascular disease*

born. Today, he can't even walk. He is suffering for the past 14 years. Even the doctor said there is no remedy. I believe the reason is the water. The whole village is aware of the condition of water, yet we drink this poison every day."

The toxic elements get dissolved in the water and, as a result, bacteria starts developing and the biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) of the water starts decreasing rapidly. This, in turn, affects aquatic life too, said Agni Dutt Sharma, who holds a degree in Chemistry and is a retired Principal from Kendriya Vidyalaya - Delhi Cantonment.

"If you keep the water in a basin for some time, it turns yellow. The water stinks and tastes bitter. When I work on the fields, I prefer drinking water from Doghat, a town near my farm," says Vedpal Choudhary, a farmer who was diagnosed with cancer.



**Physical deformities are common among residents of Nangal |** PHOTO: VANI SHARMA

# Not a sweet deal for sugarcane farmers

In Modinagar tehsil, increased labour costs don't come with a corresponding increase in sugarcane prices

SHREYANSI SINGH

**Ghaziabad (U.P.):** Farmers in the Modinagar tehsil in Ghaziabad district in Uttar Pradesh, the country's largest sugar-producing state, are struggling to make ends meet due to rising production costs and a price increase that is being seen as too little, too late.

Each State government determines its own sugarcane advised price (SAP) for the procurement and sale of sugarcane, which is generally higher than the fair and remunerative price (FRP) fixed by the Central government.

Farmers in poll-bound Uttar Pradesh are irked with the State government after neighbouring Punjab bumped up the SAP of sugarcane to Rs. 360 per quintal, still Rs. 10 higher than the recently hiked price in UP.

"The labour cost, price of diesel and electricity has risen way more than the price of sugarcane. A 25-rupee price hike in five years is nothing," said Mahendra Kumar, a sugarcane farmer from Khanjarpur in Modinagar tehsil.

The Rs. 25 hike was announced in late September 2021, shortly after the Centre caved in to mounting pressure from farmers' lobbies and opposition parties and increased the floor price (FRP) for 2021-22 by Rs. 10 to Rs. 290 per quintal. This is still less than the Rs. 450-per-quintal price, recommended by the 2006 National Commission on Farmers (NCF) constituted under Dr. MS Swaminathan. Before this, the SAP was only increased by Rs. 10 per quintal in 2017, soon after the Yogi Adityanath government came to



**A sugarmill in Modinagar |** PHOTO: SHREYANSI SINGH

power in the state.

The price increase was "too little, too late," according to Amarjeet Singh Biddi, chairman of the Sugarcane Development Council in Modinagar.

"The price of sugarcane in the entire state has been increased by just 35 paise per kilo in five years. They need to catch up on pending payments. These electoral stunts will not work this time," Biddi, an elected representative of the farmers, added.

In the run-up to the last Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, the

BJP promised to ensure that all sugarcane dues are cleared within 14 days of sale.

Cane arrears in Uttar Pradesh were still at Rs. 3,895 crore, Food and Consumer Affairs Minister Piyush Goyal announced in a press conference in November.

In Ghaziabad, the district in which Modinagar tehsil is located, payments worth Rs. 85 crore are pending for crops purchased between November 2020 and May 2021, according to OP Singh, District Cane Officer, Ghaziabad.

Rising cost of production due to

**In Ghaziabad, the district in which Modinagar tehsil falls, payments worth Rs. 85 crore are pending for crops purchased between November 2020 and May 2021**

the Covid-19 pandemic has spelled trouble for many of the about 45 lakh sugarcane farmers of the state.

"The four labourers I got from Bihar asked for a Rs. 50,000 advance. That was the standard rate and there is nothing I could do. I had to pay them," said farmer Krishnapal Singh, 57, who has an auto-immune disease that prevents him from working on the fields.

Sugarcane is a labour-intensive crop that needs manpower at the time of sowing, binding, and hoeing. "The farmers need to focus on their income being doubled, the government can't do anything alone ... If farmers don't want to work on their own fields, then the cost of production will obviously rise," said Vedpal Singh Malik, Vice President of Modi Sugar Mill in Modinagar.

Sugarcane is a perennial crop that has a host of by-products, including ethanol, which is used for sanitiser production. In March 2020, sugar mills ramped up their manufacturing capacity to almost 100,000 litres per day to cater to a rise in demand after the coronavirus pandemic led to hoarding and a shortage of sanitisers.

"Decades ago, farming was a respectable profession and more lucrative. I didn't want my children to become farmers and beg for payments from mills and a fair price for what we grow from the government like I have to," said Kalyani Devi, who has two children who relocated to Meerut and Moradnagar for work.

"If all farmers keep migrating to cities for work, what will the government do?" she added.

# A village frozen in time

The residents of Cheetar ki Naal struggle for basic amenities

GARGI NANDWANA

**Rajsamand (Rajasthan):** Cheetar ki Naal is a sub-village in a remote corner of Rajsamand district in Rajasthan. It comes under the Thoria panchayat which has seven villages under it. Cheetar Ki Naal translates to ‘valley of panthers’; this wild animal is a common sight in the sub-village.

It is situated on a mountainous terrain and is cut-off from the rest of Thoria village. It does not have a proper road to connect it with nearby villages, and other basic amenities. The sub-village has just 13 houses and is neglected by local leaders and government officials. Most of the people here work under the NREGA scheme or other low-paying jobs.

Poor connectivity has given rise to several problems, aggravating their poverty.

No one here has studied further than 10th standard.

Ganpath Kharwar, a resident, who recently passed class 10, is set to go to Mumbai to work in a jeweller’s shop. “One of the reasons for not studying further is the bad condition of the road from our village; it is extremely hard to travel daily on it. Everyone my age has left studies to work. No one stays back.”

The government school that the village kids go to is around 7 km away, with around 2 km of mountainous terrain and a kutchra route and no facility to board a vehicle.

The sub-village is under constant threat of attack by panthers.

Only two years ago, a panther attacked a minor girl causing her death. Students have to risk the journey to school and back.

Some households have arranged for an autorickshaw to ferry the children. “It is difficult to convince an auto-driver to come to our part of the village,” says Leher Singh (49). The driver charges Rs. 600 a month for each child. Five or six children go to school on foot; it



There are no proper roads | PHOTO : GARGI NANDWANA

takes them an hour. “Until he returns from school, I feel tense,” says Parbati Bai, whose son walks to school and back.

The worst affected by the lack of connectivity are children below 6, who are not enrolled in anganwadi centres. The nearest anganwadi is 8-9 kilometres away.

Their enrolment is crucial not just as a part of pre-school education but also to ensure proper nutritional and other necessary amenities like timely health tests, and the benefit from schemes implemented through anganwadis.

The sub-village is dominated by the Rajput community, with three other castes—Kharwar, Kunwar and Parmaar—residing in it.

“No wants to marry my son. Everyone says there is no road, no school in this area,” says Sundar Parmaar. Even riding a bicycle on

that route is dangerous and fraught with risks.

There has been a proposal to build a cement concrete (CC) road.

However the problem lies in the fact that people like government officials and the local leaders, including the sarpanch, cannot take a decision.

Says Kailash Das Kaamad, Village Development Officer: “The route is too long. The gram panchayat cannot make a CC road of this length as we have a limited budget. It will cost around Rs. 50 lakh. Only the Public Works Department (PWD) can do this.” Sarpanch Kishan Lal Gameti said the panchayat has raised the matter with PWD and is awaiting its response.

On the other hand, Rakesh Kumar, additional District Magistrate of Rajsamand, said he

was unaware of the problem; the same response was given by Member of Parliament Diya Kumari through her secretary.

The uneven path has caused much trouble for pregnant women, who are usually taken in an autorickshaw. The nearest health centre is 8 km away, and the journey is wearisome.

Besides, basic government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), and the Jal Jeevan Mission are not implemented in adequate measure. There is no beneficiary of PMUY in this sub-village,

Just less than half of the households have toilets built under the SBM.

The heart of the problem lies in the area itself. It has just 13 households. The villagers find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of backwardness, which is stalling their progress in all spheres, including education.

This, in turn, has left them to become unaware of their right to demand rudimentary facilities and attain the fulfilment of basic and human necessities.

# The road to Kinwat goes through politics

Lack of roads poses daily challenges to residents

RENUKA KALPANA

**Nanded (Maharashtra):** Bullock cart is the only option for pregnant women and ailing residents of Premnagar, Vasawadi and many other villages to access the government hospital, 15-30 km away, in case of an emergency. The absence of transportation due to the poor quality of road has claimed many lives in the forest of Kinwat.

Kinwat, a semi-urban town with a large tribal population living in remote and extremely remote villages surrounded by a dense forest, is notorious for teak wood smuggling. Even though the taluka falls under the municipal council of the Nanded district in Maharashtra, approximately 150 km from Kinwat, Adilabad, 54 km away, in Telangana is the nearest district place. Despite prolonged demand, many of the villages haven’t got a road since Independence.

Before getting into a bullock cart, Neeta Atram, a 24-year-old mother of a newborn, walked 4 km while in labour from her village Premnagar, two weeks ago. “Neeta suffered from a white discharge for two days. When she got into labour I advised her to go to the government hospital in Kinwat,” said Meenal Rathod, who works as an anganwadi sevika in Premnagar. “She first walked up to Damandhari. A bullock then dropped us to the government hospital,” said Neeta’s sister-in-law. Following community tradition, Neeta wasn’t allowed to talk to outsiders for a month after childbirth.

“My husband had an attack of paralysis five years ago. The villagers put him on a cot and carried it on their shoulders. The treatment wasn’t available in the government hospital of Kinwat. We then took him to Nanded in an ambulance,” Babibai Prakash



A young mother with her newborn in the village | PHOTO: RENUKA KALPANA

Rathod recalled. “We never get *amrutahar* (a daily nutritious meal) for children in the anganwadi. It is difficult to get the take-home ration. We have to go to Dhamandhari and collect it every month,” said Meenal.

Be it for the wage work or to fill a form for a government scheme the villagers need to go to Kinwat. With the fear of wild animals, they return by 8 o’clock at night. The monsoon, too, poses a nightmare when an overflowing stream isolates them from the rest of the world.

Premnagar, Vasawadi, shares a gram panchayat with Dhamandhari, which has a concrete road. From there, the residents of Vasawadi too walk for 6 km carrying bags of fertilizers and groceries over their heads. “My uncle was carrying two bags of groceries over his head. He had a stroke and collapsed. We brought his dead body in a bullock cart,” said Nagorao Atram (59).

Along with Premnagar and

Vasawadi, Pitambarwadi, Shaktinagar, Pimpleshende, Kajipod and Varguda are also demanding a road. Villagers of Vasawadi were told that to build a road, permission from the forest department was needed. The forest officers refused permission saying that a road in the forests would make teak wood smuggling easier.

“The smugglers have already finished the forest. Nothing is left to smuggle now,” said Dr Ashok Belkhode, who runs Sane Guruji Charity Hospital in Kinwat. “A national highway is proposed to go through some of the villages here instead of bypassing the city. Why didn’t the forest department say anything then?” he asked.

A road to Ghogarwadi village was built when villages boycotted six municipality elections. It was under a Naxalite movement then. “A simple daily necessity like a road makes villagers struggle, because the road to the villages of Kinwat goes through politics,” Dr. Belkhode said.

# A village in a blind spot of development

Kadamban Kombia in the Nilgiris has no motorable road or power

NETEN DORJI

**Kotagiri (Tamil Nadu):** Kadamban Kombia, the home of the Irula indigenous community in Coonoor, the Nilgiris district, is in a blind spot of development..

As many as 27 families, comprising 84 members, reside in the hamlet located 1,500 feet above sea level and surrounded by forests. In the absence of a motorable road to the village, there is no option but to walk 6 km up the hills to reach it. People buy necessities from the foothills, carry them on their back and trek through densely forested areas, starting from the main road of Pillur village.

If someone falls sick, people carry them in a makeshift stretcher to the nearest motorable road that ambulances can reach.

“During any medical emergency, we have to carry patients to the main road,” said Vellaiyan Chinnaraj (30). “And during night hours, there is the danger of attacks by tigers and elephants.”

He said that of the 24 villages in the region, only Kadamban Kombia doesn’t have road and electricity connectivity.

“Without road connectivity, it is difficult to travel, especially in the rainy season,” says Nagaraj Maruthan (27). “Whether it is a pregnant woman or someone who is down with fever, they have to travel more than an hour. Walking is tough.”

He said the soil in the village is suitable for growing cotton, coffee and other cash crops.

“We have resources, natural and from our fields. If we had a road, we could have sold these. It is difficult to take it to the market without roads,” says Gandhimathi (27), a mother of three: “It is difficult for pregnant women to walk every month for a medical check-up. We have to walk 6km uphill and take a vehicle to go to the nearest hospital in Velliangadu.”

If an X-ray is needed, they have to travel another 16 km, from Velliangadu to Karamadai. Children in the village have no option but to study in government residential schools.

Villagers say construction of a road is a long pending demand, which no government has bothered to act upon.



Residents of Kadamban Kombia | PHOTO: NETEN DORJI

“We have been submitting representations to build a road for several years, but no one is bothered to do so. “We face difficulty even in getting rations from Pillur,” said a village elder.

The residents had even approached their elected representatives several times.

For power, the villagers had been dependent on solar energy since 2016. However, the batteries stopped working six months ago.

Nellithurai panchayat leader Selvi said that in the 2019-2020 financial year, they have allotted Rs. 3 lakh to install a greenhouse, but due to lack of road infrastructure they could not transport the material.

“To lay the roads, we have allocated Rs. 3 lakh under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme. We are waiting for confirmation from the

forest authorities to construct the road,” she said. She said they have reached out to NGOs like the Rotary Club of Mettupalayam for funds to get the materials required for building a greenhouse.

“Since it is difficult to install a greenhouse using main power, machinery has been sought from the forest officials,” said Selvi.

For the residents of Kadamban Kombia, a road remains an unrealised dream.

# In dire straits

SAURAV SINHA

**Auraiya (U.P.):** Blacksmiths who earn their living by mending and repairing iron tools in this district are living in appalling conditions, with no proper houses, hygiene and little food for their children.

They live like migrants in search of shelter and they move from place to place when an official asks them to vacate the area.

A majority of them have been living on a piece of land in Samadhanpurva for the past 40-50 years in shanties, while the others live at their place of work in tents.

Prema Devi, 40, who lives in a shanty along with her family members in Samadhanpurva, said, “We were supposed to get brick houses made by the village head under the government scheme, but we still have to live in a *jhopadi* (hut).”

The washrooms are in such poor condition that the walls

keep crumbling, which makes it dangerous for us to use. So, along with the children, we have to go to the farms to relieve ourselves.” Many people like Premadevi don’t have a ration card, though they have made several attempts to get one.

Many days, they don’t earn more than Rs. 300, and the money is just sufficient for some food. On some days, when they are not able to do any business, the family sleeps on an empty stomach, although they try to feed their children with whatever is available.

Tara, a 23-year-old who lives under a tent at Baisundhara along with her husband, Raju (40), a child and mother-in-law, Meera Devi (60), said, “We send our children to school as they get food through the mid-day meal scheme, while 5 kg of wheat and rice along with other food items which have been allotted to us per child isn’t given to us.”

“The washrooms are in such poor condition that the walls keep crumbling” - Premadevi



Kashipur village | PHOTO: ADRIJA SAHA

ADRIJA SAHA

**Kashipur (West Bengal):** The government acquired land from the farmers of Kashipur to construct an industrial hub, promising them jobs in return. Instead, a housing complex and a private university are coming up on the plot, and the farmers have been left with no means of earning a living.

In 2001, around 300 acres of land was acquired from the farmers in the Raipur-Supur area, near Bolpur in Birbhum district, by the Left Front government in West

Bengal through the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the farmers are stuck between politics and poverty. They are demanding their land back for cultivation.

The government’s reaction has been the same each time: using the police force to neutralise the protests, resulting in lathicharge, false cases being filed against them, and protestors being put behind bars. “Whenever we protest they charge us with false cases, scare us, threaten us. This has happened

before too; they filed a police case against eight of us, so we had to leave our homes. We fled and lived outside our village for six months,” said Shiek Salim, a farmer who also lost his land.

“This was our land, and instead of giving it to us they sold it to the promoters at a much higher price. The land that they bought from us for Rs. 48 lakh is now worth Rs. 73 lakh to the government,” he added.

Most of the farmers also claim that they are yet to receive the compensation promised from the government.

The loss of land has resulted in a loss of livelihood for the farmers. Their children have to migrate to the cities in search of work.

“There is already a well-known university, Visva-Bharati, here, which is only 4 km from here. Despite that they are building another university here—Bishwa Bangla Bishwa Vidyalay. They are ruining the legacy of Tagore—this is a private university and we can’t afford it,” added Shiek Salim.

The West Bengal government claims that the new project, Biswa Khudra Bazar, aims to create

opportunities for small-scale cottage industry workers who cannot afford to take their produce to the market.

Nikhil Bachar, the panchayat pradhan of the area, said, “For people who are unable to carry their products outside in the market, our CM has done this for them. They can buy these [stalls] and sell their products from here itself. The buyers will be able to buy directly from the maker.”

Online retail is difficult, too, due to lack of awareness and poor internet connectivity.



# All in a day's work

From Mannar in Kerala to Pratapgarh in Uttar Pradesh, Beed in Maharashtra to Cuddalore and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, photographers from Asian College of Journalism capture the matchmakers and the corn sellers, the school-goers and the truants, the train riders and the bell makers



**GROUND REALITY:** Students of the Pre-Secondary School in Bhojla, Uttar Pradesh, have no choice but to sit outside on the cold floor, as the classrooms lack furniture | PHOTO: ASHISH TIWARI



**IT TAKES A VILLAGE:** On a rainy day, residents of Pratapgarh village in Uttar Pradesh gather outdoors (hookahs et al), in the absence of a Panchayat Ghar, to finalise a marriage proposal | PHOTO: ANOUSHKA SAWHNEY



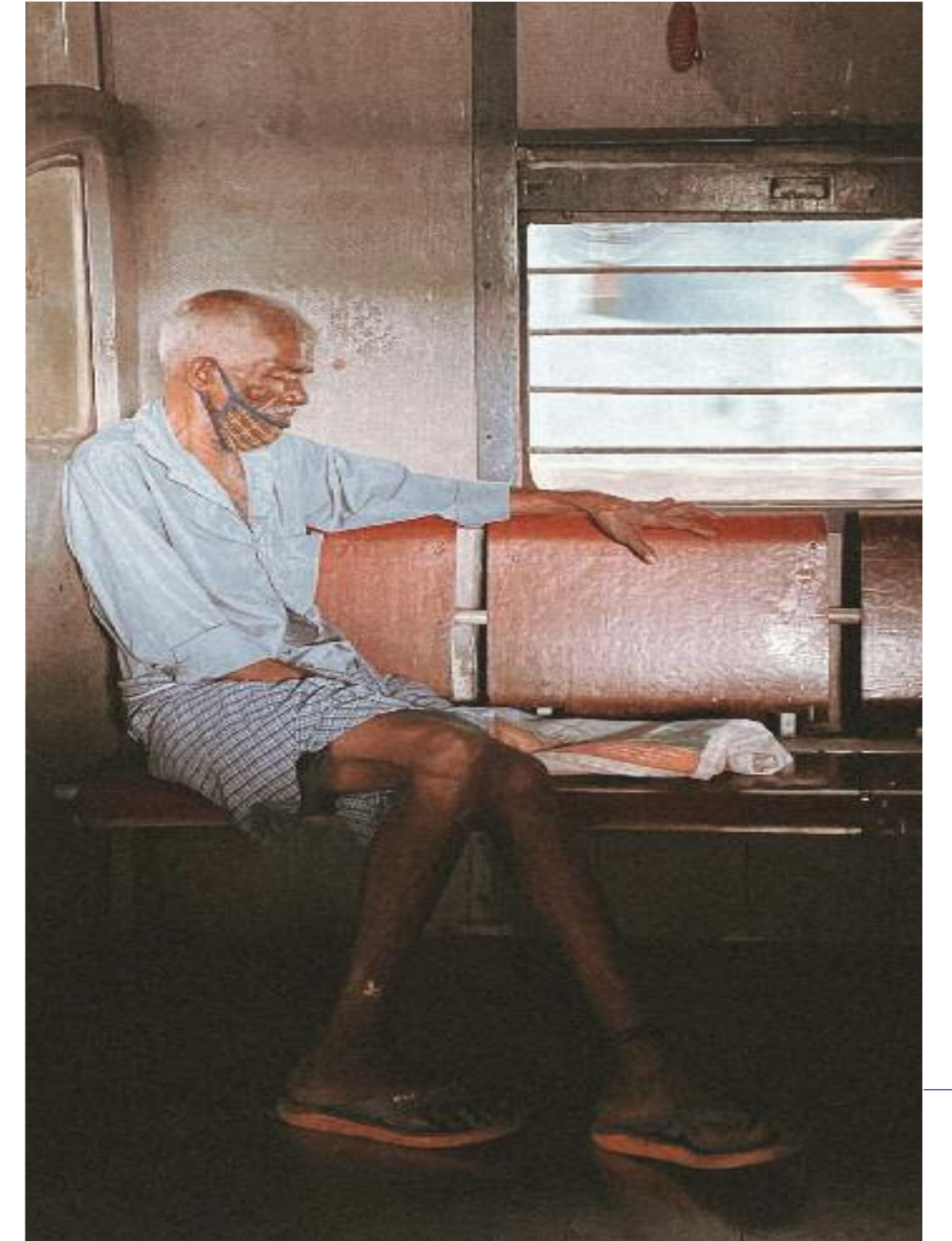
**A TASTE OF HOME:** In Kodiyur, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, a boy polishes off the last morsel on his plate as he can't resist the food his mother has prepared | PHOTO: PALANIVEL RAJAN CHANDRASEKARAN



**TO HER OWN TUNE:** Rebecca, 45, is a resident of Kanniyankuppam in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu. Passionate about singing—and about teaching children in the village how to sing—every year during Christmas she goes door-to-door singing Christmas carols | PHOTO: MALVIKA SUNDARESAN



**SHIFTING PLAYGROUNDS:** Children of sugarcane farm labourers in Khadaki, Beed, Maharashtra. Too young to be left alone at home, they accompany their parents to the fields | PHOTO: JAI NARAYAN TIWARI



**SIESTA ON WHEELS:** An elderly passenger catches up on some sleep on an MRTS train in Chennai, Tamil Nadu | PHOTO: DORJEE WANGMO



**COB ON A CART:** A corn vendor near Triplicane Railway Station in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, catches a break as she waits for customers | PHOTO: VANI SHARMA



**ALL SMILES:** Families of migrant workers from Bihar, including Ranju (left, seated) and Aradhna (right corner), share a few laughs in Safeda Jhuggi, Geeta Colony, East Delhi | PHOTO: MUSKAN



**BELLS AND THISTLES:** Mannar in Kerala is known as the Bell Metal Town. Located on the banks of the Pamba river, Mannar is known for its 1,400-year-old legacy in bronze and bell metal craft and traditional utensils. However, what was once a thriving trade, passed down generations, has dwindled—from the earlier 300 families, only 30 to 40 remain associated with the craft today. Artisans like Lakshmana Iyer (in picture) has been in the business for over 40 years. Falling demand and rising raw material prices are major challenges. Also, while a significant volume of the goods used to be exported to Europe and the Middle East, Covid-19 restrictions have led to severe roadblocks and suffering for the artisans | PHOTOS: AMAL RAJ





# Forest dwellers in 24 settlements fight for access to their own land

“We can preserve the forest only if we get title deeds,” say villagers of Pillur

PALANIVEL RAJAN C

**Pillur (T.N.):** “We are fighting for our inherent right to access the forest in which we have been living for generations,” says Mariyappan, Forest Rights Committee Leader. “Without the Community Forest Rights (CFR), we are deprived of our right to even go into the forest and collect what we need.”

The Forest Rights Act, which was enacted in December 2006, came into force in December 2009 to give the forest-dwelling communities right of tenure and the power to manage and conserve their forests. FRA includes Individual Forest Rights (IFR), Community Forest Rights and Forest Management Rights, which provide the right to the individual people to access their land.

Pillur, a reserved forest area, has a cluster of 24 settlements belonging to the Irula community. Irulas are one of the six indigenous communities listed under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG's) in Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu has reportedly been assessed as one of the worst performers in the country in implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). “We are basically dependent on non-timber products (NTP) like honey, bamboo, grasses, etc., that are produced in the forest. But, the CFR, which has not been issued to our forest land, prevents us from using the NTP for our livelihood,” says Mariyappan.

“We got around 86 titles for IFR a year ago, which allows us to stay in our ancestral lands, but the non-approval of CFR nullifies the rights



**A man belonging to the Irula community carrying logs from the forest | PHOTO: PALANIVEL RAJAN C**

we get out of FRA.”

Under Section (6)(1) of the FRA, the Forest Rights Committee

Mariyappan said that the FRC’s decisions, which are taken after collective responses, are used to claim their usable area in the forest. “We draw a map which depicts the areas we use for collecting the NTP and other purposes and it has to be approved by the forest department and the RDO,” says Mariyappan. “But, the map we submit is rejected or sometimes they are said to be lost in the RDO office.”

“We don’t receive the claims in a proper format, so we are forced to reject the claims,” says Coimbatore district Revenue Division Officer (RDO) Ravichandran. Asked about the maps that are being rejected, he declined to answer. He said that those things are to be taken care of by his senior officials.

“Only the gram sabha has the right to determine the area of forest that has to be claimed,” says C.R. Bijoy, an author who writes on resource and governance issues. “Other officials like RDO, collector and forest department can only record and issue the titles.”

When the claims for FRA are discussed and confirmed in the FRC, which has seven members, they are taken to the gram sabha meeting, where the claims are decided to be moved further.

The next level is the subdivision committee, where the RDO, the forest ranger and the tehsildar decide on the claims and pass them on to the district-level committee headed by the collector, the District Forest Officer (DFO), the ST welfare officer and a tribal representative.

The last and final deciding stage is the State Level Monitoring Committee headed by the ST director and the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF).

## Valavadi weavers in dire straits



**Chandrasekar at his loom | PHOTO: ARNAV CHANDRASEKHAR**

ARNAV CHANDRASEKHAR

**Udumalpet (T.N.):** Close to the textile manufacturing hub of India, a small community of weavers at Valavadi village find themselves pitted against companies making clothes on powerlooms.

“There is not that much difference between saris made here and elsewhere. However, we are one of the few who still use handlooms instead of electronic power looms, since the handloom produces better quality saris,” said Chandrasekar, a fifth-generation handloom weaver from the village of Valavadi in Tirupur district.

Chandrasekar has been weaving saris for 15 years. He says that saris from the village of Valavadi were once sought after in the area. But these days, its weaver community is facing severe pressure on their traditional lifestyle.

There are an estimated 200 families engaged in handloom weaving in Valavadi.

According to Chandrasekar, powerloom-manufactured saris are often passed off as handloom products, since handloom saris are more expensive. This has a considerable negative effect on

traditional weavers such as those of Valavadi, who may take several days to complete a single sari.

The days of individual sales to customers are over, too—Chandrasekar and others like him sell their products directly to sari and textile stores instead.

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has also caused considerable financial damage to the weavers. Chandrasekar says, “Because of supply issues, we were forced to use inferior raw materials rather than the higher-quality materials sourced from Chennai.” Sales became difficult in the midst of the pandemic. Labour has also been an issue—the weavers have been unable to employ apprentices or hire workers to assist them.

In recent months, the weavers of Valavadi have slowly been recovering from the financial impact of COVID. But this was not the only threat to the hand-woven saris of Valavadi, as fewer people are interested in taking up the profession of handloom weaving each year. Chandrasekar says, “These days kids from here are not interested in weaving saris. They want to get their college degrees and pursue their dreams outside the village.”

## Dreams of home inside a Rohingya refugee camp

They hope their basic rights will be restored

SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK

**Chennai:** It is around noon on a sunny day. Lunch preparations are underway in the front yard of Kelambakkam Refugee Camp in Chennai. This is where the food served to the 20 Rohingya families living in the camp is cooked. After the food is distributed to the families, they go back to their respective rooms to eat.

The idea of a “room”, however, is deceptive—here, everything from sacks, to tin sheets and plywood come in handy to separate one family’s living space from another. “It is a curse to have so many people in such a tiny camp. Somehow, we managed to live here. But is this life?” said Mohammed Yusuf (34), a resident of the camp.



**Rohingyas at the camp | PHOTO: SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Chennai office is working to help the Rohingyas living in the camp. According to the UNHCR, a total of 90 Rohingyas from 20 families are currently living in the Kelambakkam camp. Half of them—about 45—are children, and there are about 10 elderly people.

Yusuf said, “They are helping us a lot [by working with] the local government to get us various facilities, including an Aadhaar card and a UNHCR refugee card.”

However, overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitation facilities pose daily challenges to the residents of the camp.

The local Rohingyas said that there are only two toilets for the 20 families in the camp, alongside a fenced area in front of the camp for bathing.

Taslima Bibi (30), a resident of the camp, said, “There are no separate toilets for women. There are so many people here, so it is not possible to do that. As a result, the women living in the camp face a lot of difficulties. There is no special importance attached to women’s

**90 Rohingyas from 20 families are living in the Kelambakkam camp. Half of them are children, and there are 10 elders**

survival? I still sometimes wake up in fear at night. Staying there seemed to kill us at any moment. We had no rights, we were not considered human beings. Compared to that, now we are living with at least minimum security.” He added, “But what is our future? To spend the rest of our

lives as refugees? In Myanmar, we also had our houses, shops, and some assets. So why do we suffer so much now? What is our crime? We are Rohingyas—is this our crime? But it was not our wish to be born as Rohingyas.”

Another Rohingya, Md Selim (32), said, “We can’t officially seek employment here. We have to make a living by doing some odd jobs, including repairing broken appliances. The children in our camp are getting the opportunity to study in the government school here. But what about their future?”

At the end of the conversation, Rohingya leader Salimullah said, “All we want now is to return to our country safely, with civil rights.” It’s a sentiment echoed by most of the Rohingya refugees living in the camp.

An officer of the crime branch of Chennai Police, requesting anonymity, however said, “The Rohingyas are safer here than in Myanmar. But it is very difficult to live like this... so many people together in such a place. If they can return home safely with civil rights, they may have a better life.”

## In patriarchal Padalam, women face oppression, domestic violence

Men stick to old values that restrict women to traditional roles

DEEPA SINHA

**Padalam (T.N.):** The women in Padalam village, like Munniammal, still holds the view that the place where they live may develop but the people and their thought process adhering to the so-called societal norms will never change.

Located 16 km away from Chengalpattu town, Padalam village comes under Maduranthakam tehsil of Kancheepuram district in Tamil Nadu. It is an important and emerging suburb of south-west Chennai, located along the busy GST Road.

According to the 2011 census, Padalam, a gram panchayat, has a population of 2,238 people with a healthy sex ratio of 1,121 males and 1,117 females.

Munniammal (77), who continues to work as a labourer, says, “We have a panchayat in our village itself for minor issues. Usually, the panchayat consists of one elderly woman in the decision-making process but they are elected without allotting any power. The woman in the village were not given any right to be involved in any decision-making. I was a bit rebellious in my younger days and hence got beaten up for doing so.”

She further added that at present her children are well settled and nobody stays with her. Thus, finally, now she can lead an independent life and take her own decisions.

Shanti (45), another woman who works as a farmhand, lives with her husband, three children and her mother-in-law.

She says, “I have three sisters. From my childhood, I have seen my father scold my mother for giving birth to a girl child but he always showered love on me. There have been instances where my mother was beaten up for suggesting a point that would benefit our family. Only my father



**Saraswati, a seasonal worker, breaks down while narrating her story | PHOTO: DEEPA SINHA**

was allowed to do so. My grandmother, too, used to curse my mother for not being able to deliver a boy and thus tortured her with rigorous household chores.”

When Shanti got married at the age of 20, she underwent the same issues that she witnessed during her adolescence. “Nothing has changed in the way men treat women,” she said. “Society is changing rapidly but people like us are still stuck with these old societal norms. I don’t want my children to suffer the same and want to bring a change but I don’t know how to do it. All that I am doing is talking about it,” said Shanti.

Another woman, Devi, shared her story, which is no different from those of others in her village. She, along with her husband and two children (daughter, 8, and son, 3), used to live in a small but well-cemented rented house in a nearby village.

When her husband became an

alcoholic and began to indulge in behaviour bordering on domestic violence, she could not leave him because of her financial situation and dependence on him.

The very severe cyclonic storm Vardah that hit Tamil Nadu in the year 2016 was like a bolt from the blue for Devi. “In that fiery and scary storm, I went out to look for my drunk husband. When I came back, I saw my daughter’s dead body under a collapsed wall. My daughter sacrificed her life to save my son. If I had been in the house, I could have saved her. This incident traumatised both me and my son. I held my husband responsible for this. So, I returned to my mother’s home in Padalam with my son.”

Renuka, Deputy Director at the Centre for Women Development and Research, says there are shreds of evidence from mythological stories where men showed their dominance over

women (like in Ramayana, when Lord Ram abandoned Sita as he doubted her fidelity). She said, “In the patriarchal society, women are thought of as subordinate to men. Thus, men impose their power by means of violence and ill-treatment to dominate over women. Women are forced to put up with abuse and violence as they face many socio-economic and cultural issues. But, nowadays women are asserting themselves and are fighting against the odds. Hence we came to know about the mistreatment. Earlier, they used to be voiceless and keep to themselves.”

Two generations of women tell stories of oppression they faced. However, the new generation of educated women are trying to change the situation. Women like Muniammal and Shanti who are aware of the realities are encouraging younger women to fight for equality



# Water scarcity drowns Kanniyankuppam village

“Since there are only 300 people in our village, the government takes no steps to improve our conditions”

MALVIKA SUNDARESAN

**Cuddalore (T.N.):** According to the villagers, Roman Catholic (RC) Kanniyankuppam is comparable to an “island with no basic amenities.” However, one issue seemed to be their strongest concern: water scarcity.

RC Kanniyakuppam is a small, predominantly dalit village in Cuddalore district. It has some 300 residents but it doesn’t have even one well. And that is its residents’

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**Before the drinking water facility was provided, we would consume water from the artificial lake reserved for agriculture - Robert, a resident**

biggest concern.

Whatever drinking water the residents of this village, some 16 km from Virudhachalam town receives, it gets from a neighbouring village, according to Arockiamary (25), a resident of Kanniyankuppam.

The RC in the village’s name, which separates it from Kanniyankuppam—another



**Sometimes, the food gets ruined because of the dirty drinking water.**

**Veeramma (78), resident, Kanniyankuppam**

village—stands for Roman Catholic. It is so named because the residents converted to the Christian faith.

“Kanniyankuppam is different from RC Kanniyankuppam,” said Arockiamary. The latter is a dalit village, and only half the size of Kanniyankuppam, she said.

The three-inch underground pipe, laid three metres deep, runs seven kilometres to reach RC Kanniyankuppam, said Balu, the head of the Kanniyankuppam village panchayat. “However, due to the highway construction work, the

pipes get damaged, affecting the water flow and, sometimes, completely stopping it.”

The government has not allotted funds to the panchayat either, he added. “Before the drinking water facility was provided, we would consume water from the artificial lake reserved for agriculture,” said Robert (37), a resident.

There are motors and wells available 5 km away from the village, said C Anthony Sami (80), a farmer and resident.

“However,” he added, “the village has no road infrastructure for

us to travel 5 km to fetch water. Especially during the rains, the pathway becomes too damp and muddy for us to even walk to our agricultural lands, which is hardly a kilometre away. The pathways here are merely made up of sand and gravel.”

Water lorries don’t even enter our village due to lack of roads, he added.

### The demands

A borewell water system is essential for this village, said Esakkian (50), a resident. Esakkian said that last year, Rev Fr Z.

Devasagayaraj, the rector of Periyannayagi Church, Konankuppam, had arranged to set-up a borewell facility in the village.

Fr Devasagayaraj said that soil and water testing for setting-up the bore was done last year. It was found that drinking water is

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**Besides, when the coil of the pipe doesn’t function properly, we don’t get water for days together. In that case, we just get through days without water or drink from the artificial lake. We could survive with this water but what about the children? - Sheela Mary**

available 1,200 feet below the ground level and it would cost Rs. 20 lakh to set up the bore, he said. “However, the dealer I approached was willing to help us with a maximum amount of Rs. five lakh only,” said Fr Raj.

Salty water can be found 700 feet below the ground level and “that is of no use, even for irrigation,” said

Anthony Samy. “*Idhu vaanam partha bhoomi* (this is a village where the cultivation land depends on the rains for water),” said Anthony Samy. The farmers also depend on the artificial lake for irrigation, he added.

However, “even that would last only up to two or three months.”

Paddy crops that have grown in the fields have been completely

ruined due to the mild rainfall that lasted for about 30 minutes today, said Robert. “Imagine the plight of our village, let alone agricultural lands, when we experience heavy rainfall.”

The entire village depends on agriculture for food, said Robert. Besides that, the government also does provide us with 5 kg of rice per person per month, said Arockiamary.



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**We spend the entire rainy season looking up at the sky. If the gods permit, we get rains twice a year. Otherwise, just once.**

**Chellapangi (70), farmer and resident, Kanniyankuppam**

## Kannagi Nagar turns housing nightmare

SHAURYA SINGH THAPA

**Chennai:** Kannagi Nagar is described as “Chennai’s first Art District” by travel publications. This refers to the huge murals painted on the buildings. Sadly, this artistic adornment is nothing but a pleasant facade for the buildings that house people resettled from city slums. The tenements have 23,000 units housing more than one lakh people.

For starters, Kannagi Nagar was built to relocate survivors of the 2004 tsunami, but it has been taking in marginalised people since then. Beyond the colourful façade lies a host of problems—drug abuse, domestic abuse, lack of access to clean water, and shoddy housing conditions.

“Rain is a curse for us because the water can reach up to knee level,” Manivan, a 36-year-old resident, said, pointing to the walls of his house. The plaster is crumbling, and Manivanan has given up hope on restoration work.

“Every rainy season, it is the same story. Getting the plaster redone is the cheapest alternative to fix the wall, but I have to get it done three to four times. No matter what we do, the plaster will come off. Now we just let it be as we can’t afford to do it over and over again.”

Asked if he receives any aid from the Greater Chennai Corporation, Manivanan said that’s such a hassle. “The office people come, take a look, but don’t do anything.”

Nalini, who lives in a house a few steps away from Manivanan’s, faces not only seepage issues but also the fear of her ceiling falling apart. Ever since a neighbour’s ceiling crashed and injured a child, her concern has risen.

“When we told this to the GCC, they asked us for a receipt. They said they would start restoration work only if they get a receipt. Even then the work is taken up only after a month.”

Nalini said the work is shoddy and it doesn’t really make much of a difference. “If we happen to lose the receipts, then we have to do the work on our own. Anyway, since the corporation does such a bad job, we have to do the maintenance on our own with or without a receipt.”

Another resident, Shashikala, lost faith in the GCC after she tried to call them up when her ceiling began to collapse. “Whenever I



**Plaster peeling off in a house | PHOTO: SHAURYA SINGH THAPA**

called up the corporation, they blocked my number. It has been 10 months since they blocked my number.”

Even the exterior of the roof proves to be a health hazard. Shashikala said often rain water

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**Every rainy season, it is the same story... The office people come, take a look, but don’t do anything - Manivanan, resident**

accumulated on the roof along with waste and the only way to drain it out is through a pipe. Since the accumulated waste can also clog the pipe, the residents have to manually remove the excess water and waste.

“But since that takes time and we

can’t always do it, this rainwater starts seeping through the walls,” said Shashikala.

As the water seeps through the walls and trickles down, Shashikala and the others are worried about their children’s safety. Take the switchboards, for instance. Water seeping into it can be dangerous. She herself has suffered electric shocks from the switchboard.

While such problems have become quite common for the residents of Kannagi Nagar, the GCC seems to have normalised the issue. As Shashikala puts it: “When we go to the office, they say such problems happen in every house and this is nothing new.”

Officials at the nearest GCC office at Thoraipakkam were not available for comment. While the coming months would be relatively drier, residents of Kannagi Nagar know they will face the same old issues when the monsoon peaks in October and November.

The rain may not remove the bright pictures on the walls, but Kannagi Nagar’s future looks dull for now.

PRANAY RAJIV

**Thiruvananthapuram:** Bhagavathikonam, a small out-of-the way corner of a state that boasts 100% literacy, shows that the number hides more than it reveals.

Sure, the people are literate but access to anything but the most basic education is still denied to certain people, and Bhagavathikonam is an example of that.

Bhagavathikonam is a small colony primarily inhabited by Kuravas and Pulayas (both Scheduled Castes), in Nellanad village panchayat in Thiruvananthapuram district. According to the 2011 Census, SCs constituted 14.46% of Nellanad’s total population of 25,981, whereas they comprise only 9.8% of the total population of the state.

“Dropping out of school for the sake of temporary financial stability through part-time jobs is common here in Bhagavathikonam,” said Bindu T, whose three sons stopped studying after 10th standard and started working at a mechanic shop. “They made the decision on their own. The school administration did try to retain them, but the boys were insistent as our financial situation was very bad.”

“I lost my job during the pandemic and I now regret my decision to quit school,” said Jenu (22), Bindu’s eldest son. His two younger brothers, Hari (20) and Vishnu (18), still work at the same shop, but get paid only Rs. 50 each every day. Doing a course from an ITI (Industrial Training Institute) would help us earn better salaries or even better jobs, but that is unaffordable to us at this point, said Jenu.

To be sure, the state has done much better than most to ensure basic literacy, even among such socially disadvantaged groups as the scheduled castes. The SC literacy rate of the state is 88.7%, which is significantly higher than the national rate of 73%.

According to Shanta Kumari, an SC ward member of Nellanad panchayat, these cases of school dropouts, mainly among the SC community, are also a byproduct of the lack of awareness among parents, many of who she says don’t understand the value of education. “We have been going around trying to convince both parents and children to complete at



**Residents of Bhagavathikonam at a Covid-19 awareness programme | PHOTO: PRANAY RAJIV**

least their schooling, but more often than not it is a futile exercise”.

She also said that the upliftment programmes targeting SCs in the future will focus more on the parents to create a sustainable change. Such programmes would only be successful in the long run only if they are implemented uniformly and effectively across the state, she added.

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**No one in our neighbourhood has received the funds to construct these study rooms. When we approach authorities after hearing about such programmes, they send us away saying that such announcements are just for namesake - Lathika TR**

Kerala Study Room Scheme was one such programme launched by the State government in 2017 and conducted statewide by the Scheduled Caste Development Department of the state. In this scheme, Rs. 2 lakh would be

granted to SC households, with construction of a separate study room within the house along with other benefits like study materials and computer facilities. According to government data, 12,500 such study rooms have been constructed by 2020 for SC students in the state.

But the residents of Bhagavathikonam claim that these numbers don’t trickle down to the

announcements are just namesake,” said Lathika TR.

According to data from the panchayat, over the last five years, only Rs. 30 lakh has been allocated in the region, out of which only Rs. 26,50,000 has been utilised. This means that only a maximum of 13 study rooms could have been constructed among the SC community of Nellanad that numbers close to 4,000.

There is more. A cursory perusal of panchayat data shows that less than half of the funds allotted for furniture (Rs. 6.22 lakh out of Rs. 13.68 lakh) has been used.

“There have been occasions when these funds (for study rooms and furniture) have been allocated to undeserving families, who use it to expand their houses,” added Lathika.

Even when students push past all these adversities there are more barriers left to overcome.

Sumesh TR (20), a differently abled student from Bhagavathikonam who is currently studying at Nedumangad ITI, said, “Even though I am eligible for a minority stipend from my ITI, I still haven’t received it since I started my course, which was five months ago. When I approached the college administration, they asked me to talk to bank officials, who asked me to make a new account in a branch closer to college.”

Despite doing all the required steps, he still can’t access the stipend that would help his financially ailing family significantly, added Sumesh.



ground level. “No one in our neighbourhood has received the funds to construct these study rooms. When we approach authorities after hearing about such programmes, they send us away saying that such



# Cut off, Kethesal villagers are locked in the past

People moving to nearby towns due to lack of connectivity

HARINI MADESWARAN

**Sathyamangalam (T.N.):** Over 18 years ago, the hunt for India's most wanted sandalwood smuggler, Veerappan, was in full swing in Sathyamangalam, a reserve forest in Erode district of Tamil Nadu. Members of Oorali Sholagas, a Scheduled Tribe that had settled in Kethesal village of Sathyamangalam, dispersed into various parts of the Nilgiris and Karnataka after comrades of Veerappan attacked the villagers, suspecting them of helping the Government by spying on the smuggler. After Veerappan's death, the tribes relocated to the village. However, the lack of transport facilities continues to drive the villagers again to Karnataka regularly for employment opportunities.

Kethesal, spread over 44,736 hectares and comprising 140 dwellings, comes under the Hasanur division of Sathyamangalam. Due to the absence of road connectivity, the lives of the villagers are affected one way or the other on a daily basis.

Since the region is a tiger reserve forest, no companies and factories are located nearby, and the villagers travel to the town for jobs.

"Job opportunities are available only in the town area, and it is quite scary to walk to our homes in the evening due to the threat of wild elephants," said Devi, a resident of Kethesal for over 50 years.

Mallan, another resident of Kethesal, says that the villagers quite often move to different parts of Karnataka for jobs. "Villagers find it difficult to travel to adjoining areas for daily jobs, so every month 10 families move to different parts of Karnataka, work there for months, earn and come back later," he said.

"Despite being provided with land for agricultural purposes, the lack of irrigational facilities ensures



The route to Kethesal | PHOTO: HARINI MADESWARAN

that we are not so dependent on agriculture for our income," said Mari, another resident of Kethesal. "The region experiences rainfall once a month and Aadi Pattam is the only month where we can expect a good harvest. However, over the years, the heavy rains in the month destroy the crops, thus making us depend on other jobs for an income," she added.

"The lack of employment opportunities, and the resultant constraints, impact the mindset of the parents in the village," said Jayamani, a resident of Kethesal who works as a primary school teacher in Kethesal High School. The village has only two graduates, and Jayamani is one. "As there is

no proper road connectivity, there are no transport facilities available for the students who want to join college, which makes the teenagers work after school instead of pursuing a college degree," she said. Jayamani is worried that several teaching posts in the school remain vacant as those who received the job offers choose to ignore them because of the difficulty in reaching the village.

In addition to the students, pregnant women and women who need to vaccinate their children face transportation issues.

"Despite the availability of an ambulance service throughout the day and night, the lack of network connectivity makes the scenario

chaotic," said Radhika, mother of a one-year-old and a resident of Kethesal. "It is tiring to carry babies for vaccination," she added.

Students from the nearby villages like Kottamalai, Sujalkarai, and Boothalapuram depend on the high school at Kethesal for their studies and find it difficult to travel to the school everyday.

Ruthran Lakshmanan, Village Administrative Officer in Hasanur Division, under which Kethesal falls, brushed off these claims made by the people.

However, Devendra Kumar Meena, IFS, Deputy Director of the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve of the Hasanur Forest Division, expounded on the various job opportunities in the broom-making, honey processing, and management of eco tribal cottages that are to be sanctioned very soon to resolve the unemployment issues faced by the tribes living here. "While 80% of the profits that these jobs make will be provided to the villagers, 20% will be used to improve the lifestyle of the villagers," he says.

The Deputy Director said the road facilities are being considered. "Since the region is a Tiger Reserve Forest, there has been a delay in providing road connectivity and network connectivity to the village. However, considering the difficulties that the villagers face due to the lack of transportation, inspections are being carried out regularly to resolve the issue. The village would get the road connectivity after a few inspections, and the proposal will be approved within months. There have also been talks going on to provide a network to the nearby village of Kkanakarai, which would also benefit the residents of Kethesal."



The edge of the village | PHOTO: HARINI MADESWARAN

# In Padalam's lone ration shop, 'no supply' for those in need

Low-quality goods and dwindling stock greet villagers who are solely dependent on the Public Distribution System

NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

**Padalam (T.N.):** Saranya, a 43-year-old seasonal worker was waiting in a queue outside a ration shop in the scorching sun holding her green card (rice) in Padalam village, only to find the store had run out of goods for the day.

Dejected about not getting any supplies, she was forced to visit the grocery store 5 km from the village and buy a day's supply of pulses and rice.

The Public Distribution System (PDS) was established by the Government of India so that all citizens of the country have access to staples like rice, sugar, palm oil and pulses and no one went hungry. The ground reality, though, is starkly different.

With reduced agricultural activity in Padalam, its residents are dependent on the village's sole ration shop.

"I have been in this village for 80 years and have witnessed the



A disappointed Muniyammal after seeing the 'no supply' board outside the ration shop | PHOTO: NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN

depletion of farming in this village. It is heart-breaking to see how we sacrificed our own produce and are dependent on shops that provide low-quality goods. With the

meager amount we earn, we cannot afford to go to the grocery stores and are completely dependent on the ration shop, and if there is no stock there we are left in hunger till

we get the supplies," said Munniammal, an 82-year-old seasonal worker.

According to the 2011 Census, the village has a population of

# For Irulas, the burden of safety is on women

Contraception is a woman's responsibility

SAMREEN WANI

**Nilgiris:** "Ayyo! We don't speak about things like this here!" laughs Vasanthi (37) as she realises what the topic is. A mother of two, she adds, "The first time I heard about condoms was when I was studying to be a nurse. I saw it at the hospital, but I didn't know how it was used."

Vasanthi, now a journalist with a community newspaper, belongs to the Irular tribe which is spread across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and parts of Kerala. For a community that believes in the practice of consensual marriage, somehow contraception is still seen as a woman's responsibility.

"People of my community don't use condoms. They don't even say the word," says Ranjitha (27), who has been married for the last four years. "To be honest, people feel that they won't have complete sexual fulfillment if they use it," she adds with some hesitation.

Thangamani, a health worker, says her husband need not use contraception. "Only men who have sex with women outside



Copper T is compulsory for all women who deliver their first child at the government hospital -N Vijaya, anganwadi worker

marriage use it because of suspicions about disease (sexually transmitted diseases)," she says.

Vasanthi, meanwhile, tells me she knows of women who have travelled to Erode from her village at Anaikatti to buy condoms. "They

do this to avoid getting HIV or for appropriate birth spacing."

N. Vijaya, who has been an anganwadi worker for the last 17 years and works across 10 villages, explains, "Copper T is compulsory for all women who deliver their first child at the government hospital and they are advised to have a gap of three years between children."

When asked about who speaks to the men in her village of Poochamaruthur about contraception, Nanjammal, an Asha worker, laughs and says, "I don't know who speaks to them. They don't sit with us to talk about it."

Vijaya adds "Even though condoms are available for free at the village nursing homes, hardly 10 people use them."

Lalitha (52), an area coordinator with an NGO, tries to put things into perspective: "Only people from government programmes or from NGOs speak to the youngsters about contraception and family planning."

Ranjitha nods her head in agreement. "We only talk to girls about this, not boys."

# Dropouts in Wayanad get a lifeline in football

This stops them from leading a deviant life

SANDRA CYRIAC

**Wayanad (Kerala):** Living in small, dilapidated houses made of scraps of wood and gunny sacks, the football players of Paniya community get ready to face the ball every day, even if it is a hot Sunday afternoon. Around half of the tribal population in Wayanad belong to the Paniya community.

K.K. Surendran, a Dalit and a supporter of Adivasi-led land rights movement, says this community might deteriorate further not only due to alcohol addiction but also because they are scattered everywhere, even in parts of Tamil Nadu, and fail to pursue their cultural activities and follow their customs.

The government also recognised this issue and brought about certain projects.

One such initiative was to identify the talents of children so that they do not walk the same path as others in the community. Due to the struggles faced by tribal children to attain adequate education, the dropouts were given hope in the form of clubs in their communities that trained these children to play football.

Wayanad district panchayat



Football is the topic | PHOTO: SANDRA CYRIAC

president Samshad Marakkar says, "They cannot separate football from their life." He says the main aim was to identify a creative activity that engages them in the long run, and which in turn, stops them from drinking or leading a deviant life.

With the help of social workers and tribal extension officers, the clubs were granted spacious grounds and a sports kit worth Rs. 1,000 each. Children, clearly, responded well. Vishnu, a football player, says, "We started small.

Now we have higher hopes. We have already gone for tournaments around Kerala." He also spoke about how football helped them to reach out to the outside world and how that in itself was an experience, not just to learn, but also to enjoy a sense of freedom.

Marakkar says this is one among the very few tribal projects that have been successful in Wayanad. This scheme was not only beneficial but also progressive, turning these tribal dropouts into professional football players.



An empty road outside the lone ration shop in the village | PHOTO: NANDHINI LAKSHMINARAYANAN



# A struggle for individual, community forest rights

Nilgiris tribals denied their due under Forest Rights Act

SAI CHARAN NATARAJAN

**Anaikatti (T.N.):** It's been over three years since the 200 families living in Anaikatti village submitted their claims for Community Forest Rights (CFR) under the Forest Rights Act. However, the implementation of the Act remains marred by delays and challenges.

Anaikatti is a tribal settlement inside the core zone of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. The people, who belong to the forest-dwelling Irula and Kurumba communities, are engaged in primitive agricultural techniques. While the Irulas generally cultivate millets, pepper and silver oak, the Kurumbas are involved in honey extraction and minor forest produce collection. The two communities are not just economically backward, they are also part of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG), whose population is declining in the state.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, provides for handing of the rights over land and other forest resources to the Scheduled Tribes and other forest-dwelling communities. This includes Individual Forest Rights (IFR), Community Forest Rights (CFR), and Forest Management Rights.

Anaikatti's residents were not informed of this Act when it came into force in 2006. Moreover, they didn't have any land documents or maps to claim the rights provided under the act. It was only in 2018 that, with the help of non-governmental organisations and tribal rights activists, the villagers started claiming the Individual Forest Rights (IFR). Under section (6) (1) of the Forest Rights Act, the Forest Rights Committee (FRC), which consists solely of villagers, is entitled to initiate the process of land claims for both IFR and CFR.

Recently, 140 families in the village got their IFR approved after three years of continuous struggle. The claims of 35 families, though, are still pending at different levels. According to the Act, all claims have to be processed at three levels: the Gram Sabha, the sub-district level committee and the district-level committee. The decision



An Irula tribal settlement at Anaikatti village | PHOTO: SAI CHARAN NATARAJAN

made by the district-level committee is final and binding.

All the 200 families living in Anaikatti are yet to receive the CFR for nearly 12,500 acres of land. With the help of the village elders, the FRC has drawn a map showing the areas that fall under their rights. They also plan to create a digital map using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology.

A trench that the forest department dug around the village settlement to protect them from elephant attacks, before the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, poses another challenge to the villagers. The trench left out IFR land belonging to 35 villagers, who were assured by forest department officials that they would still be able to access it. Now, the department has claimed those areas outside the trench as forest land. Villagers' access to their IFR lands remains cut off and their pleas have been rejected.

"This forest land belongs to us and our ancestors lived here. Before the implementation of FRA, the forest department officials illegally removed the markings inside the forest areas," said M

Lalitha, who heads the movement among the Irulas to get CFR in Anaikatti.

"The forest department is delaying the approval process because they will lose the forest management funds," she added. "The department also claims that [Adivasis] are destroying the forest, which is not at all true. We have been living in the forest by protecting it for centuries, and the forest department came into existence only after Independence."

According to Lalitha, the forest officials are not following due processes in utilising the forest management funds. If the CFR are given to the villagers, the funds will be transferred to the Forest Management Committee, which will be maintained by the villagers.

Securing CFR is crucial for building community assets such as schools, primary health centres, storage units and ration shops. Now, the residents of Anaikatti have to travel more than 15 km to reach Vazhithottam to access these facilities. The Forest Rights Act allows the diversion of CFR land to create community assets that involve the felling of up to 75 trees per hectare.

The Act also guarantees the right to hold and live in forest areas as well as the right to collect minor forest produce. However, the villagers of Anaikatti face difficulties in collecting the non-timber forest produce such as honey, gooseberry, tamarind, etc. because of the trench.

"CFR is very important for the people in this village because they completely depend on the forest for all their socio-economic-cultural activities," said Bagavanidhi, a tribal welfare activist who works in Anaikatti.

He said that the Act is not only a recognition of their rights but also a step to rectify the historical injustice done to these forest-dwelling communities.

"Post CFR there is ample scope for the communities to combine their scientific and traditional knowledge in ecological welfare. Forest, Revenue and other departments of the government have to facilitate tribal people in forest management," said Dr Jyotsna Krishnakumar, director of the community wellbeing programme of the NGO Keystone Foundation, which works towards tribal welfare at Anaikatti.

## Communities in the Nilgiris caught in the buffer zone

YUVASREE S

**Mudumalai (T.N.):** Development in remote pockets can improve living standards of communities depending on it. But it can also be detrimental if the consequences are not foreseen.

In 2018, as per the directives of the Supreme Court, 27 resorts that were operating in the buffer zone of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve were sealed by the Nilgiris District Administration. The reason was stated as illegal occupancy of the elephant corridor.

As a result of this tug of war between the government and the private resort owners, the livelihood of the tribal communities, which was entirely dependent on tourism, came to a grinding halt. Among the many affected tribals are the Irulas and Kurumbars of Bokkapuram near Masinagudi.

There are around five villages in Bokkapuram that are home to nearly 400 families.

"I am not well educated but I can identify 800 birds in and around the forest. I was hired as a tourist guide back then. Tourism provided us employment," said Siddhan, a 45-year-old tribal who is a trained ornithologist and naturalist. Talking about how working in the resorts improved their livelihood, Siddhan said, "There are 16 naturalists in our village who were trained by experts from the resort and were taught the names of the species in English."

Tribals as well as non-tribals were picked by the resort owners depending on their skill set. "We used to receive funds from the resort to educate our children. We benefited much from it," he added.

"Our ancestors grazed cattle and cultivated land for a living. We knew no individual rights or community rights back then. We lived peacefully with whatever we had. But tourism changed our lifestyle and we find it difficult to adapt back to agriculture, as a result of which many are left jobless now," said Rajesh, Joint Secretary of the Mudumalai Palangudi Sangam.

The tribes condemn the sudden closure of resorts without prior notification or any consultation with the Gram Sabha. "The fact that our livelihood was dependent on tourism was completely neglected by the forest and district authorities," said Siddhan.

# Fishing colony in Kovalam in deep water

Fisherfolk struggle to stay afloat



A fisherman in Kovalam sorting his catch | PHOTO: AYAAN PAUL CHOWDHURY

AYAAN PAUL CHOWDHURY

**Chennai:** Covelong beach, or Kovalam beach as it is more popularly known, is noted for the good times you can have there. A popular beach near Chennai, it has many resorts, and even a surfing school.

But the fishing community settled on the beach are far from the good times the beach promises.

The fishing community settled along this beach and their tribulations are often robbed of the spotlight. "I think the biggest problem that we face is that we do not have a fixed income. It varies according to the catch. On one day we may earn a mere Rs. 100, on another it could be Rs. 2,000," said Mohan, who has fished here for 15 years.

During the pandemic, these people had no choice but to keep going out to sea, else they wouldn't have survived. "Three months after the first lockdown, we had to go out because we had no money but no matter how many times we went out to sea during the two years of the pandemic, we still incurred losses," said Akash, who has worked as a fisherman here for eight years. The pandemic, coupled with the severe rains, resulted in a massive loss of livelihood for these fishermen who received no outreach of support from the government over this period of time. "Even if there exists a government scheme to support fishermen during the pandemic, we have never heard of it. There aren't even any NGOs who asked around or helped us during the pandemic," said Mohan.

Of the handful of government schemes in existence, those that these people are aware of are not particularly of any help. "There exist government schemes to provide us easier access to loans to obtain fishing equipment. Just maintaining the boat and the nets alone can cost Rs. 30,000. There are schemes that can help us get loans for this but this is only in writing as the process is long-drawn out in the banks and we lose money during that time," said Akash.

"The previous generations weren't educated so they were not aware of their rights. That's why they never approached the government or filed cases. But with the new generation, we are getting more educated and that's why we can agitate more. But our efforts are often futile," said Sunil, a third-generation fisherman.

# “Let this sanitation work of generations end with me”

Ramamma equipped her sons with technical skills

MARIAM RAFI

**Mysore:** She strolls leisurely on the sidewalk as the sun rays intensify after noon. With two plastic bags, green and blue, dangling from her hand and a khaki saree swaying around her feet, she walks with her gaze cast down. Ramamma strolls around Nagavala, the village she calls home.

After working for around three decades as a sanitation worker, she has the honour of being the highest paid 'pourakarmika' or sanitation worker in the village.

"I do all sorts of cleaning work in the village, including most houses and the office. I haven't studied anything, and I am a Dravida. My job is not permanent even today. Back in those days, my salary was Rs. 600 and today it is around Rs. 13,000. Sometimes the money from the bank is delayed and during the lockdowns it was worse"

Ramamma worries about her future. With her children living far away from her, she manages to work in the filthy canals and hopes to make a better living out of it.

A young Ramamma joined the force along with her mother-in-law Kaveramma soon after her



Ramamma at work | PHOTO: MARIAM RAFI

marriage and learned the skill from her.

Although she sees her job as a dignified profession, she is not happy that she might not receive pension after her retirement.

But hereditary career choices stopped with her, as she decided to

equip her sons with technical skills before she married them off to far off places—Krishna Raja Sagara (KRS) dam near Mysore and Tamil Nadu—for a better life for them. While one is a mechanic by profession, the other too has found a different profession.

## Chennai's transgenders still face blas

FATIMA TUJ JOHARA

**Chennai:** Chennai is home to around 4,000 trans people. However, despite the efforts of several NGOs to empower them, they continue to battle stigma and lack of employment opportunities.

"When I was in class six, I started to dress like girls. After that everyone started making fun of me. My uncle started abusing me physically. I ran away from home. A few days later, I was brought back to my home. Then, secretly, I have started communicating with my community. After that, I ran away from home for the second and last time. I started begging. Later, to earn a living, I worked as a sex worker," said Pallabi, a trans woman.

"Why can't society accept me? One day I was even ready to attempt suicide. I felt alone and helpless. I was desperately searching for a job. I have qualifications. The only problem is that I am a trans woman. When everything is not in our hands, the only thing we can do is to trust God. After a long struggle, I got an identity. For the last eight years, I have been working as a social worker," said trans woman and social worker Nila. Princee, another trans person, said, "When my family got to know about my identity, they started to harass me. At the age of 12, I left my home. I start begging. It's been more than 10 years since I left home. They still haven't contacted me."

# Water woes plague Maqta

For Hyderabad's art district, every year monsoons spells a flood of trouble

SANGITA RAJAN

**Hyderabad:** Not everyone welcomes the with open arms. A case in point is the MS Maqta settlement on Raj Bhavan Road in Hyderabad.

The settlement, better known as the art district of Hyderabad, is in actuality a slum that has been painted over with murals to attract tourists on Tank Bund Necklace Road. A low-lying locality, every time rains lash the city, residents here brace for their homes to be flooded and the loss of property. The last monsoon season saw the death of an elderly woman due to water contamination.

While there have been complaints made to the Greater Hyderabad Municipality Corporation (GHMC), there have been no improvements in the drainage system. This is not a recent issue. The residents have been facing flooding for the last 20 to 30 years.

The drainage pipes are narrow (only 200 mm), and this prevents the water from flowing out smoothly. Also, the pipes for drinking water and the drains are laid out side by side and have not been repaired for a very long time. Mohd Yunus, a resident of the area who repairs sofas, says, "These pipes leak and the drainage water enters our drinking water stream."

Residents in the slum have to purchase drinking water at Rs. 50



The locality has been flooding for the last 20-30 years | PHOTO: SANGITA RAJAN

for 20 litres on a daily basis, irrespective of rain, and not everybody can afford that luxury. Those who cannot afford it, consume the contaminated water after a homemade filtration process. On an average, each household spends Rs. 2,000-2,500 every month on drinking water.

Every time it rains, the municipality pumps out the flooded roads of Maqta and releases the water into Tank Bund, further contaminating the water body.

In March 2018, 40 residents of the locality wrote to BJP MLA C. Ramchandra Reddy of Khairatabad, seeking a permanent resolution to the issue. Reddy wrote to the general manager of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water

Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB) but no further action was taken. Sheik Abdul Khader, another resident, says, "We're not hopeful that there will ever be a resolution." GHMC and HMWSSB officials visit Maqta periodically and promise the residents that things will get better, but none of the plans have reached fruition.

**On an average, each household spends Rs. 2,000-2,500 every month on drinking water**



# Mang-Garudi: A condemned community

ASHUTOSH S. PATKI

**Latur (Maharashtra):** “Some years ago, the entire community was arrested overnight on suspicion after the phone of a senior police officer was found stolen. They are taken into custody for any crime in the city because they belong to a so-called criminal caste,” said Sanjay Kamble, a social worker from Latur, while talking about the Mang-Garudi community.

Once a nomadic community, they now live in the densely-packed Vilas Nagar area of Latur, Maharashtra. They make a living out of rag-picking, which fetches them Rs. 200-500 a day.

As you enter the crowded locality, where the road is filled with sewage water and filth taken out of the gutters, you find a few concrete houses on one side and a slum on the other side, both equally grubby. Their housing conditions are dreadful, and so are sanitation and water facilities. In 1993, out of more than 200 families, 52 households were given concrete houses by the city municipal corporation. The rest, who are also promised houses when an election comes, still live in sheds or in cubicles created by using sarees and bedsheets. The houses built 18 years ago for a few families are also not very safe.

Ravaji Kamble, a 48-year-old

resident of Vilas Nagar, is one of the 52 beneficiaries. He lives with his six-member family and is the sole breadwinner.

“I still remember the excitement when we got a permanent house, but now we don’t know when which part of the house will come down” His older son, Udhav Kamble, who is in class 10, said that in the monsoon studying at home is nearly impossible as the water starts seeping through all the walls.

“During the monsoon we have to wade through knee-deep water in the house. Sometimes water from the gutters gets mixed with drinking water,” said 50-year-old Rupabai Upadhye, who lives in a makeshift house with other four members. She only asks for one thing: concrete homes that were promised when she was a child.

Only the concrete houses have toilets. Women and girls go outside the locality to relieve themselves.

Digambar Sakat, a 46-year-old father of three girls and two boys, said the condition of public toilets built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is dismal. “I am scared to send my daughters to public toilets as often drunkards trouble women going there.”

With Latur being a drought-prone area, life becomes even more of a challenge for the Mang-Garudi community.

“ ”

**During the monsoon we have to wade through knee-deep water in the house. Sometimes water from the gutters gets mixed with drinking water - Rupabai Upadhye**

# Discovering the hidden beauty in screw pine

A local NGO has trained dozens of women to weave the leaves

MAHESWAR THAMPI

**Vaikom (Kerala):** The thorny, inedible, unattractive leaves of the screw pine tree have long been woven into mats in Vaikom in Kerala’s Kottayam. Now a not-for-profit is teaching artisans how to make handicrafts and sell them.

The handicrafts include purses, handbags, even a model of the big temple in Vaikom. The screw pines grow in the wild in the backwaters region of an area that is now famous in Kerala’s textbooks for the Vaikom satyagraha or movement, a protest against rampant caste prejudice.

The mats that the people of Vaikom wove earned them only Rs. 5 at the most.

Geethamma (52), a traditional weaver belonging to Vaikom, says, “I started helping my mother even when I was a school-going girl, and my elder sisters too used to help my mother. Together all of us could finish only one mat a day. Later we too started weaving mats to earn a living as there was no other option for us because in those days our village was one of the most deprived areas of the district.”

In those days women belonging to the deprived categories were the main earning members of the family as work for men to earn enough to support the family was rare in the backwater belt. As a result, most of the girls in the area became school dropouts and had to face deprivation in education, health, and nutrition.

Called the Jawahar Centre, the Jawaharlal Memorial Social Welfare and Public Co-operation Centre helps the weaker sections of society, especially women and children of economically and



A woman at Jawahar Centre busy weaving

**SCREW PINE PALMS**

Screw pine palms grow abundantly in the loose soil along backwaters. Vaikom taluk of Kottayam district, near Vembanad lake, is famous as a traditional screw pine mat weaving centre. The processing of the thorny leaves for mat weaving and handicrafts is a strenuous task. The thorns have to be removed, then the leaves must be dried, shredded and boiled. For making diversified colourful handicraft items (mats, pen-holders, purses, etc), the leaves have to be boiled in water mixed with synthetic colour for 45 minutes.

socially marginalised sections of society, by training them.

The centre started by organising skill development programmes in craftsmanship. Soon the centre caught the attention of all the

Ministry of Textiles) visit the centre to give specialised training to batches of SC/ST women artisans in making designer bags, mats, wall hangings, baskets, pen holders, pouch, table mats, and various other showpieces.

The artifacts made by these women are being exported to different foreign countries where there is a huge demand for such things. As all the products are handcrafted and made from natural fibre, foreign nationals are especially taken in with these products.

Tourists visiting Kerala also like to buy these natural handwoven mats and other products. NRI Indians too have a special fascination for handmade handicrafts and they have no hesitation in spending any amount of money to buy such items.

Now compared to pre-covid times the export of handicrafts has come down drastically and so the sale of products is possible only at exhibition venues.

The trainee weavers get Rs. 300 as a stipend during the training period and the best performers among them are given a chance to attend a 15-day special training programme at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, Ashish N, the centre’s coordinator, said.

The registered weavers get the processed raw materials and they are free to work and make the products either sitting at home or at the centre.

The women screw-pine artisans of Vembanad backwater belt of Vaikom, who were an excessively deprived section for decades are at present in a slightly better position because now they earn at least a regular income, Geethamma said.

# No toilets in slums near temple of Dakshinেশwar

SEJAL GUPTA

**Kolkata:** The slum dwellers of Dakshinেশwar temple area must get up before the sun rises and complete their morning ablutions as their shanties do not have toilets.

Namita Das (50) said she has lived here since she was a child and that the lack of toilets has been a cause of worry. “When I was younger, all of my family members, especially my mother, sister, and I, used to get up before the sun rose and go to defecate near the railway tracks, but now we at least have a pay-and-use toilet a little further away from here. The women, especially, end up using that one,” said Das.

People living in the slum have been concerned about lack of washrooms, sanitation facilities, and drinking water. “The one thing we don’t have to worry about is paying the rent for the huts,” Uma Malik, a slum dweller, explained.

“We have built a temporary toilet only for women,” said Malik, who works as a domestic help in the neighbourhood. “For other uses, we use the pay-and-use washroom outside the temple, and for bathing we go to the river [Ganges].”

“We barely earn anything by pulling the rickshaw cart,” Saraswati Das (35) explained, “so we neither have space nor funds to build bathrooms or toilets for ourselves.”

She added that the area is owned by the Railways; they will not allow them to build anything, and if they did, they might demolish it. “We don’t have a problem giving washrooms to every ward,” stated the councillor’s secretary, “but the railway officials are denying us permission.” Representatives of Chorus, an NGO that functions near the slum, teaches the children there, provides them with meals, and offers sanitary napkins to female students, said they are unable to work at full capacity due to a lack of funds during the pandemic.



Virender Paswan, Archana Choudary and their children suffer to due lack of toilets  
PHOTO: AAYUSHEE BAJORIA

# Bihar: Swachh Bharat Mission more real on paper

AAYUSHEE BAJORIA

**Vaishali (Bihar):** The State and Central governments claimed that the nation and Bihar state have eliminated open defecation. However, a visit to some villages in Vaishali tells a different story.

“In the villages, there aren’t enough toilets. We, both men and women, use the field as a toilet,” says Virender Paswan (40), a resident of Daulatpur Deoria in Hajipur, Vaishali.

“Using the fields as an open toilet has been a major reason for various infectious diseases,” says Archana Choudary (30), another resident of the same village.

Lack of toilets causes a lot of problems. Besides making it difficult to relieve themselves when needed and having to wait till dawn or dusk, women become vulnerable to different bacterial infections. The most common of infections is reportedly Urinary Tract Infection (UTI). If left untreated, it can affect the kidneys, bladder and the tubes connecting them.

It is a difficult choice for women —being caught between open fields and the difficulty of maintaining clean toilets that do not

have water supply. “My husband has refused to build a toilet saying it would spread foul odor. Because of all the walking, I occasionally feel the need to use the restroom indoors. It is difficult for women during their periods, but the prospect of using a toilet that is not maintained properly and hygienically in the house is even more terrible,” says Nirmala Rani (40), a resident of Hajipur.

“Till now none of the members from Swachh Bharat Mission has come to our village neither to provide toilets nor to inform us about how to use them,” alleges Mandal Kumar (72), resident of Beri.

Women in villages say that during floods it’s difficult for them to use fields as open toilets and they have to relieve themselves along the road.

Rita Kumari (40), a resident of Mattiyar, shares an incident where she and her daughter faced the risk of exposing themselves to strangers when they needed to use the toilet. She says, “Once, my daughter was suffering from diarrhoea and could not hold it any longer. As a result, we had no option but to defecate near a busy road. She was verbally abused by motorists, who were

mostly men.”

Another problem that came to light is the misuse of funds allocated by the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin. Villagers allege that no funds have reached them so far. They stated that all funds are misappropriated by notorious middlemen or the sarpanch or panchayat secretary. In support of their allegations, villagers point to the absence of development works, sanitation or sewage pipelines in the villages.

“Our house does not have a toilet. So, we went to the panchayat office to get a toilet installed. They wrote our complaint but till date there is no response,” says Sudhir Ram (45), a resident of Sarai.

According to the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin 2021 data, there are 1,207 verified ODF villages in all the 16 blocks of Vaishali district, Bihar. The number of not verified ODF is zero.

Rakesh Kumar, Station Officer at Sarai Railway Station, says, “We get Rs. 10,000 monthly to clean the whole station but that is not enough. The major problem here is that we have 700 employees and one washroom, so it’s difficult to accommodate everyone.”

# Poor transport adds to job woes

ASTHA KISHOR DAS

**Jawahar (Maharashtra):** The villagers of Jawahar in Maharashtra are facing a grim prospect of unemployment and poor transportation connecting to towns and lack of basic amenities in the village further adversely impacts their standard of living.

The scenic Jawahar, a lesser-known hill station in Maharashtra situated 1800 ft. above sea level, has always been known to be an ‘Adivasi region’ or for its poverty and malnutrition. Malnutrition went up by 2% during the lockdown, taking the toll to 2,459, according to an NDTV report.

Vaibhav Jadhav, a 25-year-old graduate who hails from Dongar Pada village, has been going from place to place in search of work. Pre-Covid, Jadhav used to work as a helper in a general store in Vikramgad, 27 km from Jawahar. But after the nationwide lockdown

in 2020, which imposed restrictions on the functioning of public transport services, he lost his job.

Villagers, especially tribals, complain about poor education in Jawahar despite government claims about setting up Ashram schools in village clusters. Lack of proper transportation results in dropouts among children and adolescents.

Ramrang Vade (26) of Pathdi village, who has studied in a secondary school and could not pursue college education, says, “I and almost all my friends have tried to get out of our villages but it’s not that easy. It’s not like we can leave this village overnight and live a comfortable life. Here, at least we all have our own house. Also, to get out of here, we need money—money for food, money for a place to stay and most importantly, money to travel—and we don’t have that. So, we are stuck here.”

After the state transport staff in Maharashtra went on strike on

October 28, 2021, travelling became impossible as the village buses are the only affordable means of transportation for them. As a result, claim villagers, they lost their daily income.

Tribals are just a vote bank for the government, says Rajaram Mukane, an 81-year-old lawyer and social activist from Jawahar. Mukane has proposed a rail route connecting Thane to Nashik via Bhiwandi, Wada, Vikramgad, Jawhar, and Mokada and a separate route connecting Vikramgad and Dahanu in 1989.

The route connecting Thane to Nashik was approved in 1999 by Ram Naik, the then railway minister who hailed from Maharashtra. As the government changed as soon as the proposal was accepted, the project remains pending.

Mukane believes that if the villages get connectivity through the trains, the villagers will be able

to secure proper education and get adequate jobs, which will efficiently help the tribals overcoming poverty. Train connectivity may also help in industrialising the area, which will automatically generate more employment.

Lack of transportation has become a hurdle for tribals to get employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MNREGA) scheme.

Savitri Bai, a 30-year-old woman who works under Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, says many women are unable to travel to find work. “Very few of us manage to travel to get work under the scheme but a major part of the wages are spent on travel and we are often unable to find the money for travel as wages reach us later.

“I earn Rs. 200 per day. Out R. of that, I spend 80 on transport and Rs. 50 on buying food and vegetables.”

# WINGING IT

# For the love of birds

SHALMALI BHAGWAT

**Bhor (Maharashtra):** The Pisavare Primary School has the appearance of any other government school in Bhor, blessed with a huge playground that doubles up as school verandah for the morning assemblies and an L-shaped building that neatly borders the space. But once you step inside any classroom it’s unlike any regular school. With pretty pictures of birds crowding all the white walls in the school is quite reflective of the love for birds among students, teachers and now villagers alike.

The passion of two teachers, Santosh Dalvi and Dhananjay Kothawale, is behind this initiative.

“It all started with a change in the state syllabus in 2013,” says Dalvi. When the students were asked to recognise a bird by its feather as a

part of Environment lessons, he and his colleague Kothawale had to learn more about birds to the point where they were poring over huge volumes and distinguishing a ‘Barn owl’ from a ‘Mottled Wood owl’.

Soon, each weekend, they were organising bird watching trips—taking the kids not only for birdwatching, but to maintain registers and even hold elections (with ardent canvassing done religiously) for the past four years to “(s)elect” the “bird of the village”.

“This could have been impossible without the excitement, interest and active participation of students. They responded so well to the initiative and have taken it forward so well that I think this spirit shall stay in our village now,” says Dalvi as he further lists out students who have opted to pursue Zoology or Veterinary Sciences. They have

managed to identify over 185 bird species in Pisavare alone and have shifted to butterfly, trees and flowers now.

Visited by the Bhor Forest Department, the Pisavare school has also collaborated with famous ornithologist Dr Satish Pandey of the Ela Foundation to propagate the knowledge gained.

With bird-feeders now placed outside every house in the village, the love for birds has percolated deep in Pisavare. If asked whether they will be ready to deliver lectures in Pune both said that they are willing to share their knowledge with more people. “But we like the calm atmosphere here. If crowded by tourists the village will lose this,” he adds as we spot the larva of the ‘Red Period’ butterfly resting snuggling on a leaf as ‘Common Norman’ flies away.



# Nilgiris kids brave wild jumbos, eye strain, for class

Education is an adventure in this part of the world



A catamaran is a means of transport for some children in the Nilgiris | PHOTO: NEHA SASI

NEHA SASI

**Sigur (T.N.):** Twelve-year-old Priya, of the Badaga tribe in Sigur, had been looking for a way to earn a wage so she could buy a mobile phone for her online classes. She finally saved Rs. 8,000 by working in a tapioca and garlic farm. Even so, Priya, who wants to become a collector, said that she finds it difficult to concentrate due to the eye strain.

Access to education was not easy in the Sigur region of the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu and the Covid-19 pandemic only made it worse.

Mary (32), a daily wage labourer, also lives in Sigur. A mother of two children, aged seven and eight, she is the only earning member in her family. Lockdowns made it difficult for her to earn a steady income and support her children's education.

"Some days there is work, on others there isn't any," she said.

When she does find work, she earns Rs. 200 a day.

Ganesan, a Tamil language teacher in the school which Mary's children attend, said that the teachers made door-to-door visits in the tribal villages to show the children how to use the internet.

The school has students from Mayar, Sيريور, Bokkapuram, Kalhatti and other villages from the district.

He added that even though they did not compel the students to attend classes, many students stopped being regular with their class work.

"Around 30-40 of 500 students either stopped attending classes regularly or dropped out. Many got into jobs like driving, their minds got diverted," Ganesan said, adding that most of the girls were forced to go into work.

Epsiba, a government school teacher in Pillur village, said that middle-school children found it difficult to recall even the basics. A resident of Kotagiri, Epsiba also found it difficult to check on students during the lockdown as bus services were disrupted.

Another resident of Pillur, Ramesh Subramani, said that a big challenge was the lack of proper roads.

Pillur is surrounded by 24 other villages from where children come to study in a government school that offers classes upto class V. They then attend high school in Parli. However, for further studies they have to travel to Velliankadu, 30 km from Pillur.

Frequent wildlife encounters pose another challenge for children travelling to school.

"It becomes difficult for students to go to school because of the wild

elephants here. Out of fear, some even discontinue their schooling," Subramani said.

Children coming from the village of Poochamarathur have to cross the river in small circular boats to reach their school.

Ajith, who lives in the village, ferries six school children across the river in one boat. He used to make a living by doing this for tourists but his earnings have also taken a dip after the pandemic.

Fourteen-year-old Malathi said that students like her go to an expanse of land near the dam to attend online classes for a steady internet connection. However, as many as 10 students end up converging there at the same time, which she finds distracting.

"It is already very confusing to learn online," she added.

Sophia (43) is a tea plantation worker in the town of Kotagiri in Nilgiri district. As the only earning member of the family she found it difficult to support her children's online education. With her work being irregular during the pandemic, she said she had to borrow money to buy a mobile phone for her children.

"My daughter wants to become a teacher but I don't know if we will be in a position to make that happen," Sophia said.

The closure of resorts during the lockdown also affected the residents of Bokkapuram village. Rajesh, who used to work as a manager in one of the resorts, said that they usually got sponsors for their child's education as benefits but even that came to an end due to the pandemic.

SIMRAN JEET

**Ashraf Nagar (U.P.):** "Clean drinking water and water supply in toilets is a luxury for us. Also, the water, though it appears clear, is rather unsafe and contaminated," quipped Rajani while she peeled potatoes for dinner for her family of five. The 50-year-old resident of Ashraf Nagar village, while she sat outside her house with its earthen floor, narrated her tribulations of residing in Ashraf Nagar.

"For some, a toilet is not even a necessity as they don't mind going in the open fields. Look at the condition of toilets—the floor is earthen. How will we squat here? How can an old person use this toilet?" asks Rajani, a short and skinny woman.

The Ashraf Nagar gram sabha in the Sarojini Nagar tehsil block of Lucknow district, Uttar Pradesh, is an agglomeration of about 12 villages. Ashraf Nagar village, situated 20 km from Lucknow city, covers a geographical area of 258.36 hectares. With a total population of 2202 and about 377 houses, the village stands deprived of basic amenities like drinking water and sanitation, which together are fundamental to the health and well-being of people.



Toilets in Ashraf Nagar are unusable | PHOTO: SIMRAN JEET

An improved source of drinking water includes piped water, water available from public tap, tube well, borehole, protected dug well. An improved sanitation facility includes a flush, piped sewer system, a septic tank, pit latrines and a composting toilet (as per the WHO report 2010). However, in the village, though a few of the above-mentioned facilities

were present, they were non-functional as there was no water supply. Most of the toilets had broken doors (a few had curtains instead of doors for privacy), no locks, and damaged ceilings, due to which women felt insecure using the toilets.

A few toilets had badly damaged rusted doors, and a few were walled off, rendering them useless.

In a total of five villages surveyed, there were more than 1,000 toilets constructed in Ashraf Nagar under the Swachh Bharat Mission.

The total subsidy allocation is Rs. 12,000 allocated by the government to construct an individual toilet and promotes twin pit toilet for on-site waste management. The amount under the scheme is gradually released in two equal instalments of Rs. 6,000 each. Complaining of insufficient subsidy, few households used their own money in addition to the government subsidy in order to construct their personal fully functional toilets. Visiting a few toilets revealed that the pits were not functional as there was no water supply.

Interviews with many people suggested that the mission fell short of its objectives as the pipelines connecting pits did not have water supply rendering the toilets inoperative.

As a result of lack of water supply, people, especially women and the elderly, had to face the inconvenience of travelling a long distance of 2-3 km to a nearby village, Manikhedra, to fetch water in huge pots. The same water is used for bathing and other household purposes for days.

# Basic facilities elude Taltor village

SOMASREE CHAKRABORTY

**Taltor (West Bengal):** Heavy rains and floods in West Bengal have caused excessive damage to the paddy fields and homes of the residents of Taltor village.

"No one from the administration or any political party comes down to check on us," said Phuleshwari Devi (60), a farmer in Taltor village in Birbhum district, who lives next to the Kopai river in a lowland surrounded by fields.

Phuleshwari, who resides in a two-floor mud house with six family members, said, "It's really difficult to start afresh after the floods, as everything gets dismantled." They are provided temporary shelter on higher land by some locals.

The village doesn't have streetlights, so life comes to a halt after sunset, said her oldest grandson, Bikash Lohar (21). Bikash, also helps in their paddy fields and works as a field hand in a nearby field. He has no educational background, though he adds that his siblings have entered school.

Speaking about other issues in Taltor, the villagers said they didn't have water connections despite the Swajaldhara scheme instituted by the State government. There's one hand pump that serves as the source of their drinking water and for use for other purposes.



Villagers hard at work in Taltor, Birbhum district | PHOTO: SOMASREE CHAKRABORTY

"We are Kishani farmers," said Mamoni Lohar, her elder daughter. (Kishani farmers only do subsistence farming.) "We don't own any land. We harvest chattis (paddy) on our landlord's land, to whom we give back 2 % of the yield and the rest is used for our own consumption."

Asked what they earn, Phuleshwari said, "Nothing other than what my husband and older grandson earns from manual labour. Everything from the mustard oil to potatoes and onions is grown by us."

A decade ago, under a project in Sriniketan, Birbhum, they were asked to harvest vegetables and do

gardening, and were given a cow.

When asked about the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana instituted by the Central government, they said they are aware of it but hadn't received any benefits under the scheme yet though there are some beneficiaries in the village. "We can do nothing but hope and wait for a pucca house," Phuleshwari said, adding, "Didi [Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee] wants to provide, but these middlemen take away everything."

Tapasi Chakraborty, panchayat pradhan of Ruppur, commenting on the Central government scheme for rural housing, said, "It's in process. It

takes time to implement such schemes." Phuleshwari also recalls a recent incident where, during the harvest season, two women died in the fields due to thunderstorms.

"It's difficult to track such accidents happening every now and then. Also, we regularly don't receive these amounts from the State government, so where do we pay from?" said the panchayat pradhan when asked about it.

The district hospital is 6.5 km from the village; there is no other hospital or health facility nearby. Due to bad roads, it takes the villagers one hour to travel there by an e-rickshaw.

# Gajoldoba waits for progress

DEBOSMITA GHOSH

**Gajoldoba (W.B.):** Gajoldoba has been waiting for development for long. An hour's drive from Siliguri, it is an emerging tourist spot in north Bengal. The development of tourism, however, not translated into development for the local people. The contrast is evident when you compare Bhorer Alo, a resort built by the West Bengal tourism department and the neighbourhood of No.18 Milanpally, Gajoldoba—a village 2 km from the bazaar where the local vendors live.

Sadhan Sanyasi (30) is one amongst the vendors of the Gajoldoba bazar. He sells different types of fried fish at his stall; prawns and boroli (small river fish found in the rivers near Gajoldoba) are his best-sellers.

There are many like him who sell these fried fish and other snacks. Arati Sanyasi, Sadhan's mother, was among the first few vendors here at Gajoldoba. She started the stall some 15 years ago to earn a living after her husband fell sick.

Sadhan has a younger brother

and both of them look after the stall. He has a six-year old daughter. He says, "I want my daughter to study but there isn't even a high school in our village. My daughter will have to walk to the No.10 Milanpally high school, which is 2-3 km away. There is also no college or hospital in Gajoldoba. Anyone who wants to study further after school has to either go to Siliguri, Malbazar or Jalpaiguri, all of which are at least an hour away. For any medical emergency, we have to rush to Siliguri, Malbazar or Jalpaiguri; transportation at such times becomes a problem from this area."

Sadhan says that even though the government is building roads, and many resorts are coming up in the area and it is growing into a tourist spot, there is hardly any development for them. The vendors have had these stalls for 15-16 years but the bazar still doesn't have a properly constructed road or a concrete floor for the stalls.

The State government has started here at Gajoldoba. She started the stall some 15 years ago to earn a living after her husband fell sick. Sadhan has a younger brother

RIYA AGGARWAL

**New Delhi:** "Last year, this time, I contemplated taking my own life," says Shiv aka Shivani, a transgender person living in Mangolpuri, Delhi. She stays in a cramped, rundown apartment with four other members of her community. "Money has been very tight—sometimes we don't even have enough to buy milk for making tea," she says. Her house is bare, consisting only of a mattress, and a small deity. She and her roommates earn a living by performing at auspicious occasions. The paltry sum they make is barely enough to put food on the table. They often rely on begging and charity.

The lockdown imposed last year hit the community hard. The shutting down of restaurants and public gatherings took away their primary source of income.

Mayuri was shunned by her family at a young age. She ran away to Delhi at the age of 14. Having no educational qualifications, she found it difficult to survive. "I had dreams for my future. I thought when I left home, I would finally be free," she



says. However, as days passed, she realised that she had no option but to resort to sex work. "Hunger can make you do anything."

Unfortunately, this is the story of most trans women who lack formal education and family support.

Most trans children drop out of school at an early age, and they can't get a decent job. Vinny, a trans

woman, recounts her journey through school. "I was sexually assaulted by several boys who would lock me in the bathroom regularly," she says. She was also subjected to physical and verbal abuse by many classmates. When she complained to her teachers, she was met with the standard response: "Change who you are to fit in." She was blamed for her own

abuse. Another trans girl, Aarohi, was bullied by her teachers into quitting school in the 7th grade.

Transpersons need education to safeguard them from prostitution, begging and further abuse. This is the first step in bringing them independence and dignity. Gauri is a trans makeup artist who lives in this community. Although she received taunts from her family and friends for pursuing a 'feminine' career, she was determined not to give up. She enrolled herself in a course at VLCC and became successful. Today, she makes more than Rs. 50,000 per month. "Once the money starts coming, people stop asking questions," she says. Now, she is able to live life on her own terms, without any explanations.

Salman, a trans activist working at Deepshikha Samiti, highlights the importance of getting a college degree. "I would be nowhere without my education, which has helped me to embrace myself and help others in my community." Salman's NGO works towards educating and counselling young trans youth on their rights and sexual health. They

believe that more educated trans people would mean empowerment for the community as a whole. "Once I learnt about my rights, there was no going back. Now I do not take any abuse," they said.

Sanjana, the Delhi head of the NGO, is referred to many as 'mother'. Her NGO has provided a safe space for trans people to express themselves without fear of judgment. "It is like finding a second family," says Salman. Many members of the community come there to sing, dance and learn about their rights in a society that keeps them in the dark.

While these organisations are doing their bit, greater change can only occur with government involvement. "The need of the hour is the creation of specialised and free schools for trans children," says Salman.

"A safe space where trans children can learn and make something of themselves." Salman suggests awareness camps to help trans children accept themselves as they are. Moreover, de-stigmatisation of the community at the school level can also bring about social change.



Kashmiris have to live with internet blackouts

RWIT GHOSH

**Srinagar:** Ever since internet shutdowns first began in 2012, as of 2017, Jammu and Kashmir has reported blackouts for 7,776 hours, according to a 2018 report from the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. Adding the 18-month lockdown that came after the reading down of its special status in 2019, the number is likely to be much higher. “Certain pockets of downtown Srinagar haven’t had internet for the past two to three months,” said Junaid Kathju, a journalist at the weekly magazine *Kashmir Walla*. “We don’t have internet till 11 am, then from 11 am to 3 pm it works, and then again from 3 pm to 11 pm it remains shut. Like power cuts, we have internet cuts,” he added. What’s curious is that, according to Kathju, no formal commands or written orders have been given as to why these pockets remain without internet. “The IGP says it’s due to security issues,” said Kathju, “I have no access to internet on my phone at home,” said the resident of Rainawari, which is a part of downtown Srinagar. In fact, since 2012, the now Union Territory has seen 319 lockdowns, out of a total of 552 lockdowns across India. The region accounts for 57% of all internet related blackouts countrywide.

The burning issues of charcoal workers

Govt welfare schemes continue to evade Seemakaruvelam charcoal makers in Tamil Nadu

GODHASHRI SRINIVASAN

**Madurai:** Work starts at 9 a.m. for Alagarsamy, when he and his brother begin tending to two burning piles of Prosopis Juliflora, locally known as seemakaruvelam. In a week or so, the bark of the trees would have turned into lumps of charcoal. These lumps are their livelihood. They sell charcoal made from karuvelam trees to buyers located as far away as Chennai from Nadvankottai, Madurai district, their customers primarily being hoteliers, tea shop owners, blacksmiths and iron box stall owners. After covering living costs, they’re able to save Rs. 1,000 to 2000 a month. Some days, when it rains, it becomes harder to keep the fire going and the work stretches on for extra days, making it hard to start work on a fresh batch of karuvelam wood. Besides this, constant exposure to smoke causes frequent health problems. For Dhanavel Palanirajan, a kari mootam worker in Tiruchuli, Madurai, fever and cough are regular illnesses, and the medical bills come to around Rs. 400 a month. “We wouldn’t be able to sleep for four days, but what do we do? We have to get through these things to support our children. We even enjoy these pains,” he said, laughing.



Charcoal being produced in Tiruchuli | PHOTO: GODHASHRI SRINIVASAN

Rajendran, who is in his sixties, has seen his father making charcoal from these trees and started helping him when he was 12. He could not continue doing the work after his lungs were affected. His doctor asked him to stay away from the smoke in the future to avoid the constant exposure. News reports estimate the industry to be worth around Rs. 1,000 crore. While there is no complete ban on making charcoal this way, the government hasn’t acknowledged the significant occupation either. Elango is a member of ODM, an NGO engaged in making biochar from karuvelam charcoal to boost red soil yield. He pointed out that the State government does not list karuvelam charcoal workers as part of its list of unorganised workers. Because of this, the workers do not get the benefits given to other unorganised workers like those working in construction. Construction workers are offered financial assistance to fund their children’s education at different levels under the Model Welfare Scheme. Similarly, a health cover of Rs. 30,000 rupees was made available to workers after 2008 through the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana scheme. Schemes like the Handloom Weavers’ Comprehensive Welfare Scheme and Handicraft Artisans’

Comprehensive Welfare Scheme provide benefits for weavers and artisans. These benefits are health and insurance coverage through the use of health cards issued to beneficiaries. However, schemes do not exist for karuvelam charcoal workers that take into account education expenses for their children. Kali, Alagarsamy’s 17-year-old son, did not attend online classes regularly since the family had only one mobile phone. Kali studied on and off because he had to share the device with his younger sister and brother. “We are not seen separately as kari mootam workers. We are seen as doing agriculture coolie work instead,” Palanirajan said. “Political parties usually have trade unions for unorganised labour of other kinds, but charcoal producers, be it kari mootam makers or firewood makers, don’t have trade unions — even a labour party like CPI(M) doesn’t. So, it’s hard for kari mootam workers to avail of these benefits,” Elango said. The Madurai Collector could not be reached for a comment. Data about the amount of charcoal produced through kari mootams is not available with any government department, Elango said. “Only if this data generation happens can we think about what we can do to phase out production,” he added. The ubiquitous tree has marked the landscape of much of rural Tamil Nadu after former Chief Minister Kamaraj introduced the plant in the 1960s to help meet coal needs easily. With time, the plant spread across the State, raising concerns about its invasive nature and tendency to suck out water and hinder agriculture. The issue came to a head when, in 2017, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court ordered 13 districts to clear the weed. Later, the order was stayed after concerns were raised on the impact this could have on livelihoods of people who make charcoal from the tree. People like Palanirajan and Alagarsamy have learnt to get by with what they make and are happy they can continue doing what they have seen their fathers do. Regular illnesses and long working hours don’t reduce their love for the occupation. At the same time, they want to educate their children, too. However, despite karuvelam charcoal-making being a significant source of employment in districts like Ramanathapuram, Sivagangai, Thoothukudi, and much of East Virudhunagar, there are no targeted schemes for these workers, unlike workers employed in other unorganised work.

Worli Koliwada hit by coastal road project

The fishing community says proposed pillars will obstruct their boats

SHARNYA RAJESH

**Mumbai:** At the southern end of Mumbai’s Bandra-Worli Sea Link, the iconic cable-stayed bridge and symbol of privilege, lies Worli Koliwada, an artisanal fishing village in South Bombay. It is hard to miss the obsolescent Worli Fort, and the village’s rainbow-hued walls that house an expansive population of the tight-knit Koli community. The Kolis migrated to Mumbai in the 12th century from the banks of the Son and Vaitarna rivers. It was here that they found their livelihood as fishermen. Their seaside shacks came to be known as Koliwadass, 39 of which survive to this date. The centuries-old Worli Koliwada has over 200 families involved in fishing or retail selling and employs a considerable number of migrant fishermen. The Kolis’ connection with the coast has, however, changed considerably after the Sea Link was constructed. Since 2020, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), along with its contractors Hindustan Construction Company and Larson & Tubro, has been altering Mumbai’s western waterfront to build the 9.8-km Coastal Road interchange that connects to the existing Bandra-Worli Sea Link. Johnson Koli, director of the Worli Sarvoday Machimar Society, says, “Just about a kilometre off the coast, the proposed pillars of the interchange will hamper the only navigational route for the boats. Today, we have to get past a 30-metre compact, rocky, tricky path between the existing pillars of the BWSL. Though the distance between the pillars is only 30 metres, their wider cylindrical foundations make the passage even narrower. Our singular demand is, increase the gap between the pillars at the Worli end to 200 metres so that our boats can pass safely.” This area is known to have notoriously strong sea currents in addition to being a rocky patch. A sudden gust of wind or a singular strong wave can throw the boat against the pillars. The small-scale, sustainable fishing practices of the community are extensively dependent on the tide and largely concentrated in the shallow waters. This is where the interchange is being constructed, posing a major threat to the Koli community’s livelihood. “The dumping of debris in the area reclaimed for the Coastal Road has destroyed the rocky intertidal shore that fish use as their breeding grounds,” says Vijay Shantaram Pawar, a fourth-generation fisherman. “Two decades ago, women used to dive and catch oysters in this same bed, but all that has gone since the BWSL construction began,” Pawar adds. Members of the Koli community made representations to the BMC since 2018. But they never got a response. Vexed by the BMC’s firmness on an “independent expert review” to validate the need to increase the gap, fisherman Vijay Patil said, “There are practical problems that no bookish knowledge can fix. The least the local MLA and environment minister Aaditya Thackeray can do is come here and see the issue first-hand.” In October 2021, the BMC directed the Worli fisherfolk to not cast their nets or use boats for 500 metres on either side of the under-construction interchange, and that they shall compensate the fishermen for two years. Nitesh Patil, director of the Worli Koliwada Nakhwa Vyavsay Society, said, “You can’t strip us of our livelihood with the false promise of compensation. Our compensation from the pandemic is still pending.” During the construction of the BWSL, the Kolis were promised a bigger gap between the pillars. But when the time came to do the job, the BMC enforced Section 144 on the village overnight, locking them for 48 days, and getting the construction done. Since October 14, 2021, the Kolis have been protesting at the construction site, demanding that their grievances be heard. The local community says they suspect the land generated will eventually profit builders in a larger nexus with politicians.



The coastal road project | PHOTO: SHARNYA RAJESH

*A sudden gust of wind or a singular strong wave can throw the boat against the pillars*

Gadia Lohars: A tale of woe retold

Community lives on the periphery



A Gadia Lohar settlement | PHOTO: JIGYASA SAHAY

JIGYASA SAHAY

**New Delhi:** Hailing from the royal lands of Rajasthan, the Gadia Lohars—a community of blacksmiths—now live on the fringes of civilisation. Dotted across the national capital, there are about 58 Gadia Lohar settlements in Delhi alone. Historically considered a nomadic tribe, the Gadia Lohars have had a gruelling journey since they left the sands of Chittorgarh in Rajasthan. Legend has it that the Gadia Lohars worked as blacksmiths in Chittorgarh around the 16th century under Rajput King Maharana Pratap. They were considered skilled craftsmen making shields, swords and other weapons for the king’s army. Toward the end of the 16th century, the Mughals invaded Chittorgarh, and Maharana Pratap and his subjects left the city. The blacksmiths took an oath before the king that until the army reclaims the fort, they would not come back home, not sleep on cots or light lamps at night. In the course of time, meanings and associations have changed in various aspects for this community. Post-Independence, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, met the Gadia Lohars at the Chittorgarh Fort and urged the community to return to their land of origin. He assured them that with India’s Independence, the fort was free too. But, the community continued with their nomadic lifestyle and settled in Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In Delhi, the Gadia Lohars have had over 90 ‘informal settlements’ for several decades, according to a report published by Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) in Delhi. In another report in 2019 it said that despite being settled in Delhi for several decades, most of the settlements have not been surveyed or recognised by the Delhi government or its Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board. Today they live alongside the roads or pavements to run their trade, and do not have the basic necessities. They constantly live in dread of being evicted. The State government’s policy of “Jahan Jhuggi Wahi Makan” (where there is a temporary house, there will be a permanent one) failed the expectations of the dwellers. Sanjay Gadia Lohar, a 35-year-old Lohar from Dhaka village in Delhi, said this promise will remain hollow. “How will they construct permanent houses in place of these digy-shanty jhuggis? There is no space here,” said Sanjay, whose family has been residing in Dhaka village for almost 40 years. “When any of us has an upset stomach, it becomes very difficult even to walk for a few minutes to the public toilet. It closes at 10 p.m.,” said Sita, Sanjay’s wife. “We always go in groups of two or three. It is very unsafe and unhygienic, but we don’t have an option,” said Kajal, a 22-year-old girl from the community. Their safety too is at stake. Sanjay recounted that one morning, his wife and his younger sister were readying the shop for the day when they were hit by a vehicle. His sister died and his wife suffered severe injuries. The Gadia Lohars fight every day for a hand-to-mouth existence and claim to live by God’s will. “I have done this ancestral work, and that is enough. I want my children to study and become better than me and, unlike us, live a life of dignity and respect,” said Sanjay.

Online classes lost on these kids in Delhi slums

ESHA MISHRA

**New Delhi:** “School *kabhi nahi gayi mai* (I have never been to school),” said nine-year-old Radhika rocking her eight-month-old baby brother to sleep. “*Jaana bhi nahi hai mujhe* (I don’t even want to),” she added and went on to make chapatis on a burning brick stove. Radhika is just one among the numerous children who are rendered helpless and whose dreams have been shattered by the system put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Shankar Camp at Rangpuri Pahadi in South-West-Delhi, which has been neglected by the municipal authorities, is home to several migrant families who live in makeshift tent-like homes. They struggle for basic amenities as there is no representation for them. “There is no one to look over us, that is why we are in such a pitiable state,” said Haseena, a 32-year-old mother of four children. Haseena’s husband is a daily wage labourer. Her three daughters and son struggle to access a smartphone, which is their only means to get education these days. “There is one phone in the house, which my husband takes with him; when he returns and shows the children the messages that came from the school, they are unable to access them due to poor internet connectivity,” she said. “I’m scared my children will remain illiterate as their foundation is not being laid properly.” At Shankar Camp, education is limited to a Madrassa — an islamic religious school — and a local tutor who engages the children for an hour in the evening. In March 2021, UNICEF estimated that with the closure of over 1.5 million schools in 2020, 247 million children who had been enrolled in elementary and secondary schools were affected. Rekha, a 33-year-old mother of two, said a local set up where the children of the camp could get education was the need of the hour. “Ask someone to come and teach our kids here so that they learn something,” she said. “We don’t own a smartphone, so our children can’t attend online classes, nor can we afford to send them to tuition centres.” A primary school teacher of Sarvodaya Co-ed Senior Secondary School, said it is difficult for a government school to fully function online. Hence, there is a semi-online system, which is impossible to follow when there is a complete lockdown. “In a class of 40 students, only 10-15 can join an online link for a class, so we send voice messages and worksheets for the students to complete at their own pace, whenever they have internet connectivity,” she said. Asked about how the students would do the worksheets without support from the teachers, she replied, “Mostly parents help, sometimes older siblings too. We make sure students send in their work; if they don’t, we follow up.”



Basic necessities elude slum residents | PHOTO: ESHA MISHRA