

The wounds of war still fester

People maimed in the civil war in Sri Lanka yet to get proper medicare, struggle to survive

MIRUDHULA THAMBIAH

Mullaitivu (Sri Lanka): Seventeen years after the devastating civil war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, Jenita (19) still carries a piece of that conflict within her. A shrapnel got wedged in her leg, causing constant throbbing pain.

“I have a terrible burning sensation in my knee. It feels like a burning ember,” she says shuddering. “I can’t wear a shoe or a slipper for a long time. My leg swells. Whenever it’s cold I get cramps on my knee. Sometimes the pain does not stop even with medication. I have had sleepless nights because of the pain. I wish I was never injured.”

Jenita Jeyaruban from Unnapilavu in Mullaitivu district of Northern Sri Lanka was only four when she was injured in a bombing in 2004. She and her family were moving from their village to the nearest safe zone. “I don’t remember how I got injured. My mother said we lost our father during the same bombing. My father was carrying me and he died on the spot due to injuries, I survived,” she said.

She is one of many who were injured during the 30-year conflict.

Jenita’s mother Sasikala is the breadwinner, and works as a domestic help. “When Jenita was injured we couldn’t rush her to hospital, but first aid was provided. I was terrified that I would lose her. Later we were taken to a hospital. The doctors tried their best to help Jenita recover. I wasn’t satisfied with the treatment, but my child was safe. There were not enough medical facilities to remove the metal shard in her body,” Sasikala said.

The doctors now say that if the shard is removed from Jenita’s knee she will not be able to move around or carry out her daily activities. Therefore,



SCARRED LIVES: Sasikala shows her daughter Jenita’s shrapnel injury she received in a 2004 bomb attack. | PHOTO: MIRUDHULA THAMBIAH

her family has decided not to remove the metal remains.

In the midst of the terror, during the last phase of the war, 39-year-old Arunasalam Naguleswaran was desperately crossing the Mullivaikkal borders to save his life. He was caught in a bombing while fleeing with a large crowd. As the bombshell hit him, he blacked out. When he regained consciousness, he was shocked to discover his right leg amputated below

the knee. A fisherman from Silavathai in Mullaitivu district, Naguleswaran said his leg was further amputated by the doctors to remove metal shards. Though he could not afford to pay the lakhs of rupees needed to receive the best treatment, he was treated at three different state hospitals to completely remove the shrapnel.

“When I was injured in 2009, I was admitted to the Mullaitivu hospital. I had to spend almost three to four

years to receive treatment. Initially I couldn’t obtain adequate treatment. My wound was infested with worms. Doctors informed my family that the wound had become cancerous. I was then transferred to the Jaffna Teaching Hospital, and later to the Colombo National Hospital. They couldn’t remove the shrapnel,” he said.

His cancer medications have damaged his kidneys and he is currently appealing for financial assistance to

undergo a transplant.

Before dawn on a summer day in 1998, Ganesh Yogendran from Theonagar, Mullaitivu, had joined other fishermen on the coast, when a sudden a Kfir attack injured him and many others. Forty five-year-old Ganesh was rushed to hospital, but his right arm had to be amputated.

“We did not have enough medical facilities because we were living amidst the war. Since it was a war zone Mullaitivu did not have medications or equipment to treat the injured. Had I been financially stable I could have spent some money to treat my injuries and the doctors wouldn’t have amputated my remaining arm,” he said.

Ganesh is now a farmer and cultivates various crops and vegetables in some leased land. “I’m a father of three children. I’m the breadwinner of my family. We are differently abled, but we don’t get enough support or relief from the authorities. We also cannot involve in hard jobs. Therefore, I chose cultivation and fishing. But my income is not sufficient to support my family,” he said.

He appealed to the authorities to provide assistance by establishing livelihood schemes for differently abled persons affected by the war. The assistance provided by the government is yet to reach all victims.

Former parliamentarian of Vanni district representing Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchi Sivasakthy Anandan said the newly elected Sri Lankan Government should make such victims register at every district hospital of the war affected areas to provide medical assistance.

“Some of them have visited hospitals in Chennai with the help of politicians and social workers in Tamil Nadu to remove their shrapnel splinters. However most victims do not receive such treatment,” he said.

Cardamom farmers battle the elements

SANIYA RAAHATH

Idukki (Kerala): In the lush green hills of Idukki, cardamom farmers have their task cut out. In summers, they scramble for shade nets and water reservoirs to prevent their plants from wilting, while the monsoon period brings along anxiety induced by fungal infections and decay in the plants. Things weren’t always like this.

“Earlier, during summers, we used to pour 20-30 litres per plant every week. Now, it’s increased to 50 litres per plant,” says Sibi John (60), a small-scale cardamom farmer from Irattayar, Idukki.

The year 2024 proved to be one of the most devastating years for cardamom cultivation in Idukki, often referred to as the cardamom hub of India. Prolonged heat waves, with temperatures rising above 30°C and a 120-day rainless period from January to May, significantly reduced crop yield and production.

Cardamom thrives in temperatures ranging from 12-30°C, with a constant water supply and well-distributed rainfall at altitudes above 600 and 1,200 metres above sea level.

A study published in Nature Scientific Reports, analysing 60 years of climatic data, found that annual rainfall in the Indian Cardamom Hills (ICH) has been declining by approximately 13.62 mm a year.

Irattayar Agricultural Officer Govindaraj M says nearly 30,000 hectares of cardamom plants have wilted due to the worst drought in 40 years, leading to a 55 per cent reduction in production.

John lost two acres of his plants this season despite setting up a 350,000-litre irrigation reservoir. “I had to replant the entire area and start from scratch. This meant I had to hire more workers.”

In one acre of cardamom plantation, a farmer needs around



AN UPHILL TASK: Sibi John, a small-scale cardamom farmer from Irattayar, sets up a sprinkler to prepare for the summer. | PHOTO: SANIYA RAAHATH

700-800 kg of dry capsules every year. But this was slashed to 200 kg of dry capsules in 2024 because of the drought, says John.

With production drastically reduced, cardamom prices surged from Rs 1,600 per kg in the beginning of 2024 to Rs 3,000 per kg by the end of the year.

However, John explains, the

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income is barely enough to cover production costs, including labour, pesticides and fertilizers.

“We need at least Rs 1,500 per kg to sustain ourselves. Even daily wages for labourers have increased to Rs 600 a day,” he says.

While John and thousands of other farmers endured heavy losses due to the drought, Anthony Joseph Karyadil (70), a cardamom farmer from Kattapana, was not severely impacted by the heatwave. His three-acre farm, located in a shaded area, remained relatively unaffected due to

the use of shade nets and a borewell water supply. His relief was short-lived. “With the monsoon came new pests and diseases I had never seen in my 40 years of farming,” Karyadil says.

He lost 80-85 plants to stem borers and cardamom thrips, which spread rapidly across his farm. He had to cut down the affected plants to prevent further infestation, facing a loss of nearly Rs 1.5 lakh.

“Once you apply fertilizer for one, another pest emerges,” he adds warily.

Asha John, assistant manager at Thalir Krishi Bhavan, Erattayar, notes that diseases have increased in 2024 from 2023. She says that “irregular rainfall patterns led to the emergence of more pests, affecting all crops. Even coconut trees suffered from whitefly attacks.”

She observes that farmers have increasingly relied on pesticides and chemical fertilizers, sometimes exceeding the recommended doses to tackle rising pest infestations.

“Farmers often add an extra

milligram to the plant to help crops grow faster,” Asha adds.

Govindraj notes that in Erattayar alone, 685 farmers had to replant their cardamom plants in 2024 owing to pest infestations.

While Karyadil acknowledges that pest infestations, especially African snails, have become an increasingly common phenomenon in cardamom farms, he notes that only a minor population of ill-informed farmers resort to pesticide overuse.

He adds that farmers must shell out Rs 80 per plant for even nematode management. “Pesticide prices have increased so much that farmers cannot afford to use them recklessly.”

In addition to rising costs, prolonged drought conditions and irregular weather patterns, farmers have noticed a reduction in the soil’s water retention capacity.

“The soil can’t retain water after the 2018 floods,” says John. To combat this, cardamom farmers have adopted mulching techniques, using organic materials like straw, hay, and tea leaves around the roots to help retain moisture.

Climate activist Jose Paul Jose, notes that crops like cardamom are the first casualties when it comes to climate change.

“Cardamom cultivation is highly sensitive to micro-climatic conditions and moisture stress. If the plants don’t receive enough rainfall or the required 40-60 per cent shade, the cardamom pods won’t mature,” he says. He adds that changing climate patterns with excess and decline of rainfall are the main causes of pest infestations.

As weather experts predict 2025 to be even hotter with more intense rain spells, Sibi John’s concerns grow. “Cardamom farming won’t survive in the next 10 years if the weather continues to behave erratically,” he says.

The children of Jambur sweat for an education

SHIVANI LAMBA

Jambur (Gujarat): In the heart of Jambur, a village nestled in Gujarat’s Gir forest, Rameshbhai Makwana, principal of the local primary school, toils to keep optimism alive. “We have 140 students, but only three classrooms and six teachers, when we need nine. One teacher often handles two classes at a time,” he says, his exhaustion showing.

Despite these challenges, he remains dedicated to his work; he organises meetings with parents, karate classes under the Rani Lakshmi Bai Yojna, and encourages students to appear for government exams. Yet, as he points out, “Efforts can only go so far when the system itself is broken.”

Iqra Ali (8) walks home along a dusty, unpaved path, her dreams of becoming a Collector shining brightly in her eyes. Her mother, Rizwana Chabi Ali (30), is unsure how far she can support Iqra’s education, as well as that of her other two children. “We can only take her up to the 12th standard,” she says. “The government talks that to us?” she says wearily.

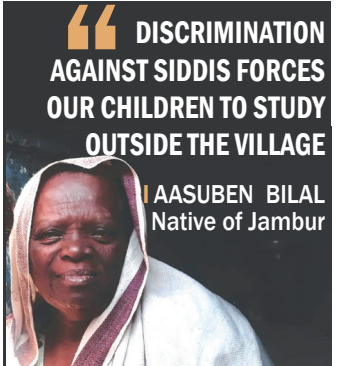
Mohammad, who takes pride in showing visitors around, seemed to sum up the struggles of the entire village: “Ahiya to badhu rakam thi chale” (Everything revolves around money here).

Sarpanch Vimal Patel attempts to paint a rosy picture. “Education is really good here,” he claims, smiling for effect. But his claim crumbles under the scrutiny of villagers like Rizwana and Mohammad. “He doesn’t care about the people or education. He’s cooking it up,” Rizwana asserts.

Namkeen (23), regrets not studying and describes the everyday humiliation she goes through because of her illiteracy. “Mane bus nu patiyu vachvu che, bija ne puchvu



EXCLUDED: Children of Jambur on way to school. | PHOTO: SHIVANI LAMBA



gamtu nathi” (I want to read the bus board by myself, instead of asking others), she crooned, borrowing the lyrics from a folk song. She is firm in her determination to change the narrative for her child.

Jambur’s Siddi community, whose forefathers had migrated from East Africa, is treated as outsiders; they remain on the fringes of development, their lives confined to labour-intensive jobs like brickmaking and construction. While they have preserved their cultural identity through music and dance, the opportunities to advance are few and far between.

Education, a path out of poverty, remains a daunting challenge for the Siddis. The local school does not have classes beyond the 10th grade,

and students who wish to study further must travel to distant towns. There, they are burdened by the cost of travel and education, and also face discrimination due to their colour.

“Ahiya to badhu rakam thi chale,” Mohammad remarks again, crossing the narrow lanes where children were playing barefoot. His words resonate with Ajit Kasam, father of three, who dreams of seeing someone from his community rise to political power. “Only then will our voices be heard,” he says. His son, a science student, struggles to compete with wealthier peers who have access to coaching.

For many, education is like an unattainable dream. Waliya Sikandar (26), a graduate who now works as a labourer,++ says, “it’s not about education alone. Even with a degree, opportunities are scarce.”

Others, like Sufiyan Makvana, a fisheries science student, harbour aspirations despite the odds. “My aim is to achieve something and then lead the others,” he says. His words reflect a quiet determination, a spark of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

As the sun sets over Jambur, casting long shadows over its dusty streets, Mohammad’s refrain lingers in the air: “Ahiya to badhu rakam thi chale.”

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Erratic rainfall in Nepal throws farming out of gear

As crop yields fall, more farmers in Bhojpur district and other rural areas are leaving agriculture and seeking seasonal jobs elsewhere

BIDHYA RAI

Hatuwagadhi, Bhojpur (Nepal): One winter morning last December, Anita Rai (43), carrying a 40 kg sack of rice on her back, walked down from Kattike Bishauni Chowk to her house. During the same month a decade ago, her husband used to carry harvested paddy home from their field. Rai moved three sacks of rice, one after another, over the 200-metre distance from the Chowk.

Rai buys her supplies from Ghodetar, Hatuwagadhi's major local market, from where the sellers transport the rice on tractors and unload them at the chowk, as that's the nearest road access point for many in the village. Rai recalls the time her husband would bring home fresh and organic paddy from their field.

Almost a decade earlier, as a farmer family, the yield from around 1.22 hectares of their farm used to be enough for their daily survival, she recalled. They used to grow paddy, maize, millet, buckwheat, mustard, pulses, beans, peas, and seasonal vegetables. They also raised buffaloes, cows, goats, and chickens for milk, ghee, butter, eggs, and meat. The family would occasionally buy only kitchen essentials — salt, sugar, meat, and small amounts of other grains.

In Ahale, situated in the eastern hills of Nepal in Hatuwagadhi Rural Municipality of Bhojpur district in Koshi province with views of Mt Kanchenjunga, it was a simple life dependent on traditional agriculture. Rai's



AT THE MERCY OF NATURE: The rapid change in rainfall pattern has led to a decline in the food production of every farmer in Hatuwagadhi. | PHOTOS: BIDHYA RAI

family is one of the 60 households in this village.

However, a change in rainfall patterns has wreaked havoc among the lives of Rai and others involved in traditional cultivation here. According to their traditional agricultural calendar, Ahale farmers, including Rai, used to complete paddy plantation by June and would harvest by December. "But rainfall patterns

have shifted over the last decades, especially in the last four to five years," Rai said.

The drought has impacted the monsoon-based crop production cycle. At first, there was no proper rainfall during paddy plantation, which led to a decline in production. Finally, Rai's family left paddy cultivation and their field has become a dense forest.

After some years, the next major

crops, maize and millet, which require less irrigation than paddy, also started getting affected. "New insects and diseases are infecting maize farming and damaging the productivity in terms of quality and quantity," Ramprasad Rai (61), Anita's neighbour, said. It has been becoming a nationwide problem.

The National Climate Change Survey 2022, conducted by the

National Statistics Office, and published in May of last year, reported the drought as the major result of climate change, affecting 65.4 per cent of households across Nepal. Around 54.3 per cent of households reported the emergence of new diseases/insects in their crops. The survey was conducted among 6,508 households in all seven provinces. All the respondents were at least 45 years old and had lived in the survey area for 25 years. The survey shows the majority of respondents, more than 87 per cent of households, have experienced changes in rainfall patterns in each season.

However, farmers have not stopped crop cultivation. Therefore, a four-member family has to buy food for daily survival. "We spend Rs. 1.5 lakh for buying grain items annually," Rai said. As a result of this, her husband Min Rai has had to leave home.

Min goes to Shillong in Meghalaya, India, to work in a coal mine to earn money that he then sends home for household expenses and his children's schooling. As a seasonal migrant worker, he lives in his home for around six months for agricultural work and goes to Shillong for the next six months. His wife buys rice, feeds her two children, aged 11 and 7, sends them to school, and takes all responsibility for daily chores and agricultural work, working harder and longer.

The Rais' example shows how the climate crisis-induced food insecurity is intensifying workload and burden on women.



FARM DISTRESS: Hatuwagadhi resident Anita Rai buys sacks of rice every month for the daily survival of her family.

"There is no single family that has not had a member go to India and the Gulf countries to earn for their family's survival and a better life," Bichari Thapa, ward chairperson of Hatuwagadhi-2, said.

The livelihood in Hatuwagadhi is based on agriculture. According to the 2021 digital village profile of Hatuwagadhi, 72.22 per cent of the total 3,866 households depend on agriculture for their daily survival. But 79.51 per cent of them consume their crop productions within six months, and there is no stock after that.

"Climate change-induced extreme weather incidents bring about a decline in food productivity, making livelihoods more challenging," climate change expert Madhukar Upadhyaya said.

The continuous drought is rising; this is the third year without average winter rainfall throughout the country," he said. The winter rain is ending in the mountain region of Karnali province in western Nepal only and is not reaching eastern Bhojpur Hatuwagadhi, he added.

Nadia farmers on the backfoot

Erratic rainfall and droughts erode livelihoods of villagers

PRATYAY CHAUDHARI

Nadia (West Bengal) :For 65-year-old Naru Biswas, farming has been the main source of income. But, over the years, income from farming has been declining not only for him but also for others in Kaliganj Community Development Block of Nadia district in West Bengal. And, they blame it on the change in rainfall patterns for their loss.

Last year, his entire kharif crop, comprising only jute, yielded half the produce compared to previous years, with a loss of around Rs 8,000-10,000. "Days pass on either with borrowed money or by skipping a meal or even starving," said Biswas who has a worn-out tulsi bead necklace around his neck.

According to the farmers, the land for jute cultivation requires ploughing and tilling (nirani) twice, sometimes thrice.

Often, the farmers have to perform long hours of back-breaking work in the field. Wearing a lungi while working in the field, Naru Biswas had to slouch forward to till the land to remove the weeds.

The most troubling thing for elderly jute farmers nowadays is that for nirani it's difficult for the farmer to perform strenuous labour, and as one needs to get this done within a fixed time, one must hire labourers.

Sometimes the number of labourers required for jute cultivation and harvesting can reach 20. For cutting and water retting of the jute fibre, another 10 labourers are needed, which takes the number to 30.

Retting jute is a fermentation process that separates jute fibres from the non-fibrous woody stem of the jute plant. With daily wages ranging from Rs 300 to 500, the total cost of cultivating one bigha of jute is almost Rs 15,000.

Between October and November 2024, West Bengal witnessed above-average rainfall, due to cyclonic activity and low-pressure systems over the Bay of Bengal. This led to significant excessive rainfall in regions where jute cultivation is prominent. Since jute is harvested around September-October, excess rainfall can cause the submergence of jute plants for an excessive period, resulting in their decomposition.

Aloke Mudi, a seasoned cultivator with nearly four decades of experience shared his struggles with a resigned expression. "One bigha of jute barely yields a profit of Rs 1,000," he lamented.



Aloke Mudi on his way to point out the jute which has withered to an unappealing brown | PHOTOS: PRATYAY C.

Last season, his losses from four bighas of jute cultivation exceeded Rs 40,000. "And then there's paddy," he added with a wry smile, the kind that carries years of disappointment. While narrating his woes, he managed to light a bidi amid gusty winds, clamping it with his teeth.

"Not just drought, excessive rainfall has been wreaking havoc with our crops for quite some time," Mudi explained. The increasing frequency of cyclones has also impacted his mustard crop, compounding his losses. "We can only fold our hands and pray to God for mercy," he added with a nonchalant shrug.

In a telephonic interview, Dr Anupam Paul, an agricultural scientist and former Additional Director of Agriculture under the Directorate of Agriculture for the Government of West Bengal, highlighted the technical challenges faced by farmers.

Erratic rainfall, he noted, often disrupts the retting process critical to jute cultivation. He further explained that for Aman rice, delayed rains lead to delayed harvesting, while sudden downpours during the growing phase can devastate the crop entirely.

Raghunath Das, a clean-shaven man in his fifties, owns four bighas of land. He additionally works as a sharecropper if his health permits. When approached, he was rubbing mustard oil on his torso, a gamcha draped casually over his shoulder. Like others, Das grows a variety of crops, including jute, paddy, rye, and wheat. Yet, his jute harvest last season was halved due to unpredictable rainfall.



“We’re somehow managing, but it is getting tougher...Prices of [crop] may have doubled, but we are still not seeing any profits.”

| MADHUSUDAN SEN, 58

Typically, Das produces four quintals of jute per bigha, but this year, his yield dropped to two. With a loan of Rs 34,000 and a monthly income of Rs 7,000-8,000, he struggles to make ends meet. Since his son, with special needs, cannot ride a bicycle, Das has to spend another Rs 1,000 each month to arrange for his son's commute to school and back, further compounding his woes.

Madhusudan Sen, 58, who owns 15 bighas of land, shared

a similar tale of hardship. "We're somehow managing, but it's getting tougher," he said, his sickle gripped tightly in his hand. A traditional paddy farmer, Sen reflected on how conditions have worsened over the years.

"Back during Jyoti Basu's time, we used to get Rs 1,200 per quintal of paddy. Now it's around Rs 2,400. Prices may have doubled, but we're still not seeing any profits." Rising fertilizer costs and irregular rainfall have driven expenses higher. "The same applies to jute," he added.

Sen, visibly agitated, compared the plight of farmers to that of stray dogs. He worries that he might have to abandon jute farming altogether. "It's the middlemen who make all the money from our misery. They don't care if we survive or not," he said bitterly.

Dr Saon Banerjee, a professor at Bidhan Chandra Krishi Viswavidyalaya, attributed much of the agricultural distress to climate change. "There are two main factors," he explained over the phone. "One is the temperature rise. Summers now see spikes of up to 5°C, which puts crops under significant stress. The second is the break in monsoon patterns," he added, emphasising how these disruptions have become a persistent threat to crop yields.

Nadia's farmers face mounting challenges as erratic rainfall and rising costs erode their livelihoods. Without immediate support, sustainable farming solutions, and fair pricing, these resilient communities risk losing their heritage, leaving agriculture and its stewards in a precarious future.

SHUMAILA FIROZ

Darbhangha (Bihar): It was noon, and the sun glared intensely over the dry landscape in Moro, a small village in Darbhanga district.

Umesh Rai, a man in his mid-fifties was sitting on his modest charpai placing his feet on the cracked earth, which was once fertile and now lay barren. "People's character has changed; the government's attitude has changed, so how could God be left behind? Even He changes the weather according to His own will," he said glaring at the barren land before him.

Rai has been a farmer throughout his life, but years of uncertain weather and faulty policies by the government have changed the land into a yard of unfulfilled promises. "This year the monsoon has not followed its usual pattern; the rain arrived late and left early leaving the paddy field thirsty," he added. The crop yield process got disturbed without an adequate amount of water, so did the cost of production, as the low harvest barely covered the crop production cost.

"Even winter isn't settling in properly, and because of this, the rabi crops, which need a cool climate, are also failing," Rai added. The unseasonal heat had pushed the land into a burnt-out wasteland. Without fodder from their paddy crop, many farmers found it impossible to feed their cattle. "If we can't grow paddy, how will we bring fodder for the livestock?" he said, gesturing towards the skinny cow tied near him.

Farmers like Umesh Rai are not new to hardship, but recently more suffocating challenges have been building up for them. The monsoons are unpredictable, and the government, instead of helping, makes their problems worse. The government's construction of embankments along the river to control the flooding has turned into a nightmare for the farming community.

"Earlier the floodwaters would enter the field and then retreat," an elderly farmer named Narayan explained, gesturing towards the stagnant water covering and destroying his rice field. "Now the water remains stagnant for two or more months. The field that used to be fertile is now transformed into a waterlogged graveyard, destroying the crop and leaving the families in debt. The embankment has also disrupted the flow of the rivers, cutting off fish migration that helps to enrich the soil. With



Moro's land filled with stagnant water and barren soil. | PHOTOS: SHUMAILA FIROZ



Umesh Rai with his wife on their farm.

the floodwaters, the fish used to come, and those fish enriched the soil, but now the entire cycle got disrupted," Narayan added.

Mahesh Yadav, like many others, watched helplessly as his community collapsed under the weight of these challenges. Regions like Darbhanga, Madhubani, and Sitamarhi, once known as the rice bowl for their wealthy, thriving paddy cultivation, have now become hubs for migrant labourers. The farmers, who were once middle class, have now fallen into mere labour. For Moro's farmers, migration is the only way to survive, but it has torn apart families; to fulfil their bare minimum needs, they leave behind

their families and travel to cities searching for construction work or factory work. "Earlier we used to live off our crops, now we have become slaves in our homes," he said, putting his hand on the head.

Even some people who tried another form of agriculture to diversify their economy face unconquerable hurdles. "I planted 800 saplings, hoping to start a small orchard business," Umesh Rai said. "It grew to 15-20 ft, but the floodwater remained stagnant for two to four months and destroyed the plants," he said, his voice breaking.

The air carried the scent of scorched soil mixed with the stagnant odour of water-logging, making a paradoxical scent of scarcity and excess.

The prolonged water-logging caused by the embankment is also causing diseases. Rai pointed to the patch of green algae floating on the stagnant water near his home. "The water turns green," he said. "It breeds mosquitoes and flies, and the people are dying from illnesses." The community is battling not just economic hardship, but also a health crisis.

Rising temperatures are adding another layer of suffering. Blistering heat has dried up the water, and without rain the groundwater level got depleted. It is making irrigation an impossible dream for the low-pocket farmer.

Moro's story reflects the broader struggles of rural India. Umesh Rai, his face marked with years of hardship, murmured: "How long can we keep tolerating it before all this hope turns into despair?"

Cyclones, erosion take a toll on The Sundarbans

Communities in the villages face displacement and unemployment

SANNIDHYA SEN

The Sundarbans (West Bengal): Animesh Murmu sat outside his temporary hut, staring at the muddy embankment that once protected his home. “This is the fourth time in the past year and a half that we’ve had to shift,” the 43-year-old farmer and crab harvester said. “Every time we rebuild, the river comes closer.”

Murmu and his family of five have been forced to move repeatedly as rising water levels and frequent cyclones erode the land they once called home. “First, it was our fields that went under water, then the house,” he said. “There’s no stability here anymore.”

The villages of Shamsher Nagar and Kalitala in The Sundarbans are facing significant challenges due to rising sea levels and frequent cyclones. The Sundarbans region has experienced a sea level rise averaging 3 cm a year over the past two decades, leading to the loss of nearly 12 per cent of its shoreline in the past 40 years, as reported by The Diplomat.

The Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage site straddling the India-Bangladesh border, is bearing the brunt of climate change

For 36-year-old widow Sita Mondal in Kalitala, the devastation has been relentless. “The cyclones took everything — my house, my cattle, even the little land I had for farming,” she said. Now working as a daily labourer in the city, she struggles to feed her children. “The soil is too salty to grow anything anymore,” she added. “We’re losing our roots.”

Eighteen-year-old Mamata Mondal has seen her dreams fade away. “I wanted to study and become a teacher,” she said. “But now I spend my days helping my mother with farming on land that cannot sustain it. Every time we think we’re settled, another cyclone comes.” Her father, a crab harvester, was injured during Cyclone Yaas and can no longer work. “We can’t even afford to think about tomorrow,” she added.

For Biswajit Roy, a fisherman in Shamsher Nagar, the losses keep piling up. “The water is warmer now, and the fish are disappearing,” he said. “Cyclones destroy our nets, and we don’t have the money to buy new ones. I’m thinking of leaving this place, but where will I go?”

Roy’s wife, Anjana, echoed his despair. “The last cyclone destroyed our house. We’ve been living with my brother since then. How long



NATURE’S CARNAGE: Rising waters and erosion threaten roads, a stark sign of climate change in The Sundarbans
PHOTOS: SANNIDHYA SEN

can we depend on others?”

The promises of relief and rehabilitation have done little to help. “After Cyclone Amphan, they came with cameras and notebooks, asking for details of our losses,” Murmu said. “But where is the compensation? Where is the help they promised? We rebuilt our house by borrowing money. Now we’re drowning in debt.”

Roy echoed this frustration. “They talk about big policies and funds for climate change, but

“The cyclones took everything — my house, my cattle, even the little land I had for farming. The soil is too salty to grow anything anymore.”

IGITA MONDAL

what about us? When our nets are destroyed or our boats lost, no one helps. Are we not part of this state?”

Mondal, too, expressed her anger. “The Sundarbans is not Kolkata,” she said. “They care about cities, not about us. We are left to fend for ourselves.”

Dr. Sugata Hazra, Professor and Director of the School of

Oceanographic Studies at Jadavpur University, has been studying these changes for decades. “The Sundarbans has already lost around 210 square kilometres of land over the last few decades. Islands like Lohachara disappeared as early as 1996, and others like Ghoramara and Sagar are nearing extinction,” he said.

Dr. Hazra explained how rising sea levels, higher tidal surges, and more frequent cyclones are accelerating the crisis. “The region’s rivers are widening,



swallowing embankments and homes. People are being displaced repeatedly. This isn’t just a crisis of nature — it’s a human crisis.”

The socio-economic toll is staggering. “When a family loses land, they lose more than their livelihood — they lose their identity and security. Many are forced to migrate to cities, becoming part of

the urban poor. The cycle of poverty and displacement deepens,” he said.

Dr. Hazra also criticised the government’s lack of sustained intervention. “The response to The Sundarbans crisis has been patchy at best. While there is some relief during cyclones, there is no long-term plan for rehabilitation or climate resilience. These communities are being ignored, and left to fight a losing battle on their own,” he said.

Despite the dire situation, local leaders like Shyamol Mondal, the Gram Pradhan of the Kalitala Panchayat, denied the existence of a climate crisis. “We don’t have any problems of climate change here in these areas. We have good cyclone centres that provide shelter to the people and also provide monetary compensation to the people affected by the cyclones,” he said.

Dr. Hazra dismissed such assertions outright. “Denial does not change reality. The Sundarbans is in crisis, and time is running out. Without immediate action these villages will disappear. And with them, an entire way of life,” he said.

For the people of The Sundarbans, survival hinges not only on battling climate change but also on a government they feel has forgotten them. Until meaningful action is taken, families like Murmu’s will remain on the edge — both literally and figuratively.

Dewas farmers have more bad years now

Unstable climate, pest attacks wreak havoc in M.P.

VENI E N

Ratatalai, Dewas (M.P.): As a cold and bleak winter approaches, Meerabai Kamble feels a mix of hope and worry about what lies ahead. Will it bring a good harvest and joy or will there be a crop failure and loss due to unpredictable weather?

Married at the age of 17, Meerabai came to Ratatalai, a village in Dewas district of Madhya Pradesh, and has seen both good and bad years in the past 45 years of her life. More bad years in recent times. “Things have not been good due to unpredictable heavy rains and drought,” she says.

Madhya Pradesh is one of the states that forms the backbone of India’s agriculture but climate change is turning the farming here into an unpredictable gamble. “Climate change is a problem yet to happen; but here, climate itself is a problem,” says Meerabai.

Excessive rain in monsoon ruins kharif crops (June-October) and scarcity of water in summer ruins Zaid crops (March-June). “We cultivate soybean, urad, groundnut etc in the rainy season, but the unstable climate damages crops. Diseases like Peanut clump virus, Early Blight and Leaf Curl of tomato, pest attacks in soybean are some of the problems, and we are helpless,” she says. “The other most painful challenge for us is the long summer. It has become worse. Crops like wheat, pulses don’t grow well because of the intense heat.” The harsh memories of last summer linger on her face as she talks.

The unpredictable weather also impacts the livestock. “During summer water scarcity is very intense and our cattle wander the village searching for water and drink it from wherever they find,” she adds. Meerabai owns 3 cows and 4 goats.

While water scarcity continues, another challenge farmers face is the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Though they can be used to overcome crop failures to an extent, Meerabai and some other farmers do not want to take this route and ruin the quality of the crops. “If we eat crops cultivated using chemical fertilisers, we will get diseases. So what is the point of using



Sagarbai Mulewa plucking spring onions from her field to feed her goats.
PHOTOS: VENI E N

those?” Meerabai uses organic manures and pest-repellents which are made in her farm itself.

Despite the problems relating to seasons and weather, even in a year of good harvest, farmers are not sure of getting a good price for their product. There are farmers who still work for the money lenders for very low wages just to fill their children’s stomachs. Their stories remain the same even when the government changes.

UNSEASONAL RAIN

Sagarbai Mulewa (56), a farmer from Bhikupura village, sits in the field after separating spring onions from the onion bulb. The sharp sting of onion fumes no longer brings tears to her eyes. “We have cried a lot in our lives and now there are no more tear drops inside me,” she says with a bitter smile.

The government has several programmes to support the agriculture sector, but farmers like Sagarbai don’t find it helpful, “Even though the government provides some assistance, it is not enough for us,” she says. “When crops fail, we have to take loans from moneylenders and it is very difficult to repay these loans,” she adds. These problems reflect in the



Farmers cultivating onion at Bhikupura village

With temperatures rising, it’s sweat and tears for Muga silkworm farmers

ABHINANDITA N KASHYAP

Boko, Kamrup (Assam): The revered Muga Silk of Assam, cherished for its golden hue, has been facing an unprecedented threat due to climate change. About 30,000 households in Assam are associated with its production.

Holiram Rabha (57) of Boko, Assam, whose family has been in the trade for generations, while holding a Muga cocoon in his hand, says, “Last year throughout Assam Kotia Muga crops were destroyed because of the increase in temperature. So much blood and sweat has gone to waste.”

Kotia Muga is a variety of Muga Silk that is harvested during Assam’s Kati season (October-November). Muga Silk, exclusive to Assam, depends on very specific temperatures for a quality production. The indigenous Muga silkworm (*Antheraea assamensis*) flourishes in temperatures between 25 and 30 degrees Celsius. However, global warming-led rise in temperatures has been acting as a disruption to this delicate balance.



Vendors packing silkworm cocoons from Boko to deliver to Lakhimpur, Assam; At right, Muga silkmoth under observation in the Regional Sericulture Research Station, Central Silk Board, Boko.
PHOTOS: ABHINANDITA N KASHYAP

Government data states that a total of 167 products were awarded GI tags between April 2023 and March 2024, taking the total number of GI-tagged products in India to 643.

Among India’s GI handicrafts enjoying a high international

demand is Assam’s Muga silk. While the GI tag offers legal protection, there has been a rise in concerns regarding sustainable practices and biodiversity conservation of these products.

Thousands of livelihoods depend on the state’s sericulture

industry, which is grappling with changing weather patterns that has jeopardised the quality of silk and the future of its cultivators.

Rabha, who supports a family of five, struggles with declining sales as rising prices deter buyers. “My eldest daughter is to be married

next year. If I don’t sell enough this season, we’ll have little to eat, let alone afford the wedding,” he says with watery eyes.

“The price of the thread alone will increase up to Rs 7,000-9,000 this year. Muga will only be adorned by the rich,” says Narmohan Das

(62), a silk cultivator and resident of Bijoynagar, Assam.

In response to the erratic weather patterns, cultivators in Boko and Sualkuchi have begun rearing worms earlier than traditional periods to escape heat waves. But this adaptation comes

at a cost. “The quality drops, but it’s better than no production,” says Rabha. “Even the cocoon cost has doubled to Rs 10 per piece, and a full batch could cost up to Rs 50,000.”

Experts confirm a sharp decline in production levels. S.A.S. Rahman, Scientist-D at RSRS Silkboard Boko, explains, “The summers are longer while winters have shrunk. Ideal conditions for breeding of the worm include humidity levels between 82-85%. Adjusting rearing periods is not a sustainable solution.”

Rahman also warns of sterility in male worms when reared during high temperatures, further threatening silk production. “Despite government investments in research, frequent weather changes remain a major hurdle,” he adds.

The two major commercial Muga crops, Jethua (May-June) and Kotia (October-November), continue to decline while Assam’s sericulture industry and the livelihoods it supports face an uncertain future.

Health care as far removed as the tribal hamlets around Athirapally

Coir woes haunt Kerala

Malnutrition lowers their immunity, making the residents more susceptible to diseases

NIVEDITA S

Mukkumbuzha (Athirapally): It has been a week since 65-year-old Mariyamkutty's husband, Kanmani, died. The breadwinner of their eight-member family, Kanmani would have been alive had he received medical attention after he was down with a fever.

The nearest hospital, the Vettilappara Family Health Centre, is 25 km from their little hut on the banks of a reservoir at Mukkumbuzha, Athirapally, in Kerala.

The journey involved travelling through winding roads in the forest where wild elephants often come. Such deaths are not uncommon in this tribal hamlet inhabited by the Kadar tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

"Our schooling was taken care of by him, but now our future is uncertain," says Kanmani's 14-year-old granddaughter Deepa.

Tucked away in the dense forests, not far from the tourist-

packed Athirapally Waterfalls, are 18 settlements inhabited by the Scheduled Tribe communities of Kadars, Malayans, Muthuvan, Mannan and Ulladan. They are mainly agriculturists and gatherers of forest produce.

A major source of income comes from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Despite government interventions, access to health care, nutrition, and hygiene remains distant in these hamlets.

Dr U D Shinil, contracted by the National Health Mission, heads a tribal mobile medical unit and has been visiting each of the tribal settlements for the past 13 years. Their monthly visits provide the community with some relief from fevers and other ailments.

This was how they diagnosed the ailment of Kanmani's daughter-in-law Rojimol, and advised an open-heart surgery.

Kanmani's family is severely anaemic, particularly the women



CARING HANDS: A woman of the Mukkumpuzha tribal colony being checked for anaemia. | PHOTOS: NIVEDITA S

and children. There is a high incidence of anaemia among the tribes due to their lack of access to nutritious food. Their diet comprises monthly rations of rice which they eat with koova (arrowroot) or fish.

"We are not getting much fish in the river these days," says Mariyamkutty. Fish is a vital source of nutrition in their diet.

Dr Shinil prescribes mostly folic acid tablets (iron tablets) and other multivitamins to his patients.

"Though we provide iron supplements, anaemia can only be managed through nutritious food. They barely get two meals a day. Fish is their only source of good nutrition," he says.

"My legs feel very weak when I walk in the forest for work," says Roja, a manual labourer and gatherer, taking a prescription from Dr Shinil. Fatigue is a symptom of anaemia.

Roja has given birth to eight children, two of whom died of

diseases as infants. She had come with her daughter and infant son who had a fever. Her children often fall ill due to a lack of immunity and exposure to the harsh climate.

Officials bring food grains through the Public Distribution System to ration-card holders, as the nearest shop is more than 10 km away.

"Lifestyle diseases too have gone up among the tribals. Many are having high blood pressure and diabetes," says Dr Shinil. He says this is because of the rise of alcoholism within the community.

In Moopan's house, almost everybody has high blood pressure. "We earn Rs. 1,500-2,000 a month from thozhilurappu (MGNREGS) This is hardly enough for us; most of it goes towards our children's education," he says.

Lack of regular income is a major reason for their poor health, according to Junior Health Inspector M M Manoj.

"Agriculture is not a success here. Elephants often come and destroy the crops. Hence, they mainly cultivate rubber and pepper," he says.

The Mannan tribe, mainly agriculturists, living at Thavalakkuzhipara have been doing better in terms of health, according to the team.

Malu Unnikrishnan, an ASHA worker from the hamlet, says, "We inform the people about the doctor's visits. If the cases are severe, we go to the hospital and get medicines for them. We also have a private autorickshaw that ferries patients."

ASHA workers play a major role as frontline workers in these tribal hamlets. Mukkumbuzha, however, has no ASHA worker. There is prevalence of anaemia at Thavalakkuzhiparaas well due to food insecurity.

Women face more health issues. Regressive practices like the use of valayumpura, a hut where menstruating women and women after childbirth are made to live, exacerbate the situation.

Due to poor hygienic conditions in the huts, infections are rampant.

At Anakayam, another tribal hamlet, Mahita Mukesh, 35, had been sitting in the hut for more than a week since the birth of her second child, as her bleeding was continuing.

Manoj warned her to not expose the child to smoke from the fire they light for warmth at night. He says several babies have died due to asphyxiation from the smoke.

Though the youth in these hamlets are demanding better health care facilities, there is a lack of awareness among the tribes about modern medicine.

The health officials say that an overall improvement in health can only be achieved through a concentrated effort by the government to provide a regular source of income to the tribes as well as nutritious food.

Labour shortage hits coir products

HEMANTH B R

Kozhikode: As the proverbial "Land of the Coconuts," Kerala has long had a thriving coconut products industry, with the coir industry being one of the more lucrative and distinctive sectors.

Coir is a much sought-after product used in packaging, flooring, bedding, agriculture, and horticulture. However, in recent times, the industry has been going through a rough patch due to several issues such as low funding, low availability of labour, etc.

For small-scale coir businesses, these problems are particularly challenging; many have gone out of business or are struggling to keep things running. One such enterprise facing this issue is the coir industry in Cherukulam, located in Kozhikode district. Cherukulam is a small village about 12 km from Kozhikode city. The village lies close to the Poonoor river, with the local coir industry based near its banks.

About 50 years ago, K Balakrishnan set up the first coir factory in the area. The business was called the Cherukulam Coir Industry (C.C.I), and it was later sold to its current owner, T. Rameshan, who oversees the work at the workshop.



Rameshan, the owner and manager of the factory. | PHOTO: HEMANTH B R



AROUND THE COUNTRY IN 7 DAYS: This map shows the States from which reports have been filed in this edition of Covering Deprivation.

DESIGN: NIVEDITA S

Neerukonda residents deprived of potable 'neeru'

M RUPA RASAGNA

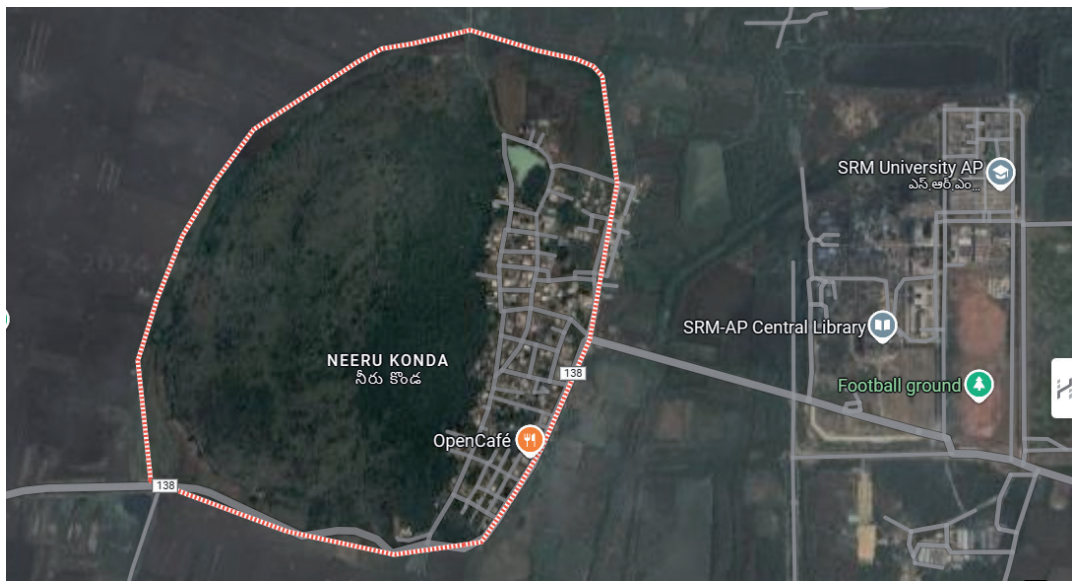
Guntur (A.P.): Water is a basic human right. In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly Resolution acknowledged that safe and clean drinking water, as well as sanitation, are basic human rights. Subsequently, in 2015, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted. The 6th goal in the list of 17 is "Clean water and sanitation," which includes achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030.

However, in 2025, the village of Neerukonda is still grappling with the consequences of contaminated and unsafe water.

Neerukonda village in Mangalagiri mandal, Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, continues to receive water contaminated with high amounts of fluorine from the panchayat. According to the latest report from the National Water Quality Monitoring Programme (NWMP), 25 out of 33 locations in Andhra Pradesh comply with the acceptable fluoride levels. Eight locations, however, do not meet these standards.

According to research done by students of SRM University, AP, groundwater in Neerukonda is contaminated with fluoride due to the geological composition of the region. The presence of fluoride in water is a result of the leaching from surrounding rocks and soil. Muppala Sambhasivarao (66), a resident here, confirmed the presence of fluorine in the water supplied to their houses. "For bathing and other purposes, we use fluoride water only. But water does not flow easily in taps. We have to change the taps every two years," said Sambhasivarao.

At the time of the interview, Sambhasivarao was sitting under the dharna paaka (site of protest), where for five years the villagers had staged a demonstration



An aerial view of Neerukonda

seeking compensation from the State government for the farmlands acquired by the Jagannad Reddy government for the Capital Region Development Authority.

True to the name "Neerukonda" (neeru meaning 'water' and konda meaning 'hill' in Telugu), the village was once known for its abundant water resources.

The water level is the highest during the monsoon season, from June to September, and lowest during the summer season, from March to May.

Residents of the village predominantly depend on groundwater for their domestic needs, and crops grown in the region depend on rainfall.

"Every house has a panchayat water connection, but that is fluoride water," said Nannapaneni Veeraya, former part-time junior-assistant-cum-bill-collector. "Borewells have been built a little far from here, near the hills surrounding the village. For our houses, we get that water but we have to pay separately for drinking

water," said Sambhasivarao, pointing to the hills around the hut.

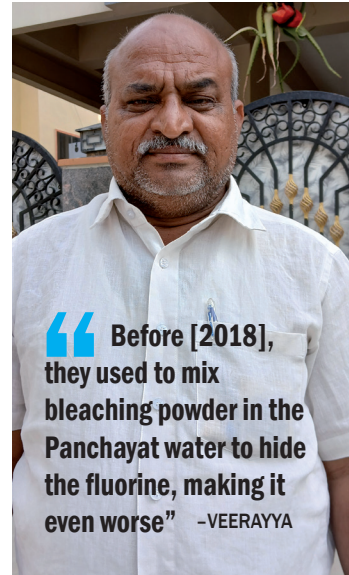
According to the World Health Organization, concentrations above 1.5 milligram per litre carry an increasing risk of serious health issues, including dental fluorosis and skeletal fluorosis. Low levels of fluorine in water can cause dental fluorosis, especially in children. Except for one person who died from skeletal fluorosis, there have been no other serious cases in the village.

Muppavarapu Ramakrishna (52) said that the village gets its drinking water from Venkatapallyam, a nearby village, through the NTR Sujala tank located 100 metres from the dharna paaka.

NTR Sujala Plants were established by the NTR Memorial Trust, a charitable society, in the Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA) regions of the state. These plants managed by Nara Bhuvaneshwari, wife of chief minister Chandrababu Naidu, and N Brahmani, her daughter-in-law,

supply filtered water from the nearby Krishna river to 29 villages that come under the CRDA. Neerukonda is one of those 29 villages.

PHOTO: M. RUPA RASAGNA



“Before [2018], they used to mix bleaching powder in the Panchayat water to hide the fluorine, making it even worse” -VEERAYYA

"Earlier, a water can cost Rs. 2, but now after the government changed, it increased to Rs. 7 a can," said Jonnalagadda Vishnuvardhan Rao. "The tanker we get from outside has a 6,000-litre capacity but the NTR tank in the village is of 5,000 litres, which can fill approximately 250 cans. The trust bears the cost of the tank and water," explained Veeraya.

Additionally, in Neerukonda, two private drinking water facilities use technologies to filter the existing groundwater. "The prices for that differ. If the water can has to be delivered to the doorstep, it costs Rs. 10. If they have to climb a flight of stairs, it is Rs. 20, and the prices increase subsequently. But this water is not as tasty as the Krishna water from the NTR Sujala plant," said Veeraya.

The NTR Sujala water tanker was established seven years ago in Neerukonda. Before that, the village was dependent on the water supplied by the panchayat. "NTR tank came to this village in 2018 only. Before that they used to mix bleaching powder in the panchayat water to hide fluorine, making it even worse," said Veeraya.

In contrast to the lived experiences of the residents in Neerukonda, the Jal Jeevan Mission that supplies piped water to every household shows a different picture regarding the quality of water.

According to sources, after the recent elections that brought the TDP government to power, there have been regular tests of the water supply in Neerukonda. The Rural Water Supply & Sanitation Board is responsible for checking the quality of water in the region.

Nonetheless, residents of the village are awaiting better water facilities in the plots allotted to them under the CRDA. "We might get Krishna water to our plots," said Vishnuvardhan Rao.

Dalit settlement caught in a cycle of poverty

The people living in shanties at Tekal in Kolar district have been deprived of water, electricity and housing for years

S KEERTHIVAS

Tekal (Kolar district): Beneath the Tekal railway station, in Kolar district, tucked away from the outside world, is a stretch that is home to 15 families of the Naik caste, a Scheduled Tribe community. The residents here have been living in the same area for the better part of 60 years and have been outside the purview of society and the government. They live on disputed government land leaving them without access to proper housing, water and electricity facilities. This has also meant that the residents have fallen through the cracks to access government schemes. The area is dotted with makeshift

houses that are covered with blue tarpaulin, encompassed by wooden logs and corrugated metal sheets that serve as doors. These have been the dwellings of 60 people who live here. On a Sunday Morning, the men mill about, while the women carry pitchers filled with water from nearby taps. The taps were recently installed owing to the efforts of Naveen Kumar, a social activist based in Bangalore. Rajamma, the 85-year-old matriarch of the village, says, “I came to this place 60 years ago after I got married. Since then, the living conditions have been the same. We have all been deprived of basic facilities and have been stuck in a vicious circle of poverty and

deprivation.” Lakshmi Soliga, who is one of the more outspoken members of the community, says that “there has been no water facilities in the area for several years. Everyone has to go to the nearby temple, 2 km away, to fetch water for our everyday needs. Even there, we face discrimination due to our caste,” she says. The lack of electricity means the area is engulfed in pitch darkness at night, say residents. The lack of light also makes residents susceptible to snake and scorpion bites, which have claimed some lives over the years. “As the settlement is located on disputed government land, no one is willing to intervene,” says

S.R. Yellapa, the Gram Panchayat President of Tekal. Yellapa points out that government schemes can only be accessed with proper government documentation. “The issuance of Aadhaar cards falls under the purview of the Social Welfare Department, which is beyond our jurisdiction,” he says. “Similarly, the taluk administration, through the tahsildar, is responsible for allocating land to these people and facilitating the construction of houses, which has not been happening due to several administrative hurdles,” Yellapa says.

The lack of documentation poses a great challenge to access government schemes. Without Aadhaar cards, the residents are unable to obtain ration cards, which makes purchasing food difficult. They also complain that they are excluded from government schemes like MGNREGA, which could have otherwise provided them with employment opportunities.

What they do have is Voter ID cards.” During election time, village heads and MLAs visit the area and promise the people houses, electricity and lights, but these all end up being empty promises in the name of getting votes,” says Lakshmi’s son Avinash Soliga, 30. “If we question the elected officials why the promises were not kept, the police come to our area and try to quell our dissent by means of force. This took place last year but we are not going to let this deter us from achieving our goals,” concludes Avinash, with a determined voice.

In the bylanes of the settlement, a group of young children sit on a rock with a slate and chalk in their



MARGINALISED: Rajamma, a resident of the settlement at Tekal, with children of the colony. | PHOTOS: S KEERTHIVAS



ABSYSMAL CONDITIONS: Lack of access to proper housing makes life difficult for the residents of Tekal.

Just 80km from a metro, a village in dire need of basic amenities

Thenpattinam, on the outskirts of Chennai, lags in education, health care

BHARGAVI VISWANATH

Thenpattinam, Kanchipuram (T.N): Anbu J, a young panchayat leader who was appointed after the COVID pandemic, remains ambitious about the development of his village despite the challenges he faces. In the small rural village of Thenpattinam, located 80 km from Chennai in Kanchipuram district, the 2,500 residents face a variety of challenges.

Anbu, who has recently stepped into the leadership role, is tasked with managing the complex issues faced by the community. From water shortages to lack of basic health services, Anbu’s job involves addressing the core needs of the people.

The village of Thenpattinam covers 22,000 square metres and is predominantly home to agricultural labourers. The residents largely depend on farming, with rice and groundnuts being the main crops. However, despite its fertile lands, the village grapples with multiple problems.

Among the most pressing issues is the acute shortage of drinking water. “The water has to be brought from 3 km away,”

Among the most pressing issues facing Anbu’s village is the acute shortage of drinking water.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the village’s 12 lakes are either insufficient or contaminated.

Anbu explains, pointing to the dependency on water sources located far beyond the village’s boundary. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the village’s 12 lakes, which could have served as a natural water resource, are either insufficient or contaminated.

One of the villagers, Indra, a mother of three, says, “I spend hours every day walking to fetch water. It’s tiring, and sometimes,



Anbu, the young panchayat leader, is tasked with huge responsibilities | PHOTO: BHARGAVI VISWANATH

we don’t even get enough for cooking and drinking.” The scarcity of water places a heavy burden on women and children, who are often the ones responsible for collecting it.

Education, too, presents its own set of difficulties. The village does not have a high school, forcing children to travel to neighbouring towns. At present, only a primary

and middle school exists within the village, and for higher secondary education, children must travel to Koovathur, a nearby town. “If we send them to the town they will get a better job,” said Rajalakshmi, whose son passed from Koovathur’s high school and went on to work as a dosa master in a restaurant in the city.

This geographical isolation also extends to health services. The village does not have a hospital or even a basic health centre, leaving the residents reliant on nearby towns for any medical needs. “We don’t go to the hospital unless something serious happens,” said Thambi, a villager. In times of urgency, villagers must travel to Koovathur. Anbu admits that the lack of healthcare facilities is one of the village’s most critical needs.

“Everyone in the village needs urgent care,” Anbu says. The absence of a health centre means that many diseases go untreated, and preventive care is often ignored due to the lack of medical personnel and infrastructure. Villagers like Ramesh express concern for the health of their families: “When my children get sick, I have to take them to Koovathur, which is far. It’s difficult and expensive.”

Agriculture forms the backbone of the village’s economy. The village’s rice and groundnut farmers face challenges not only from natural resource shortages but also from high labour costs. Anbu notes that labour costs have been rising, adding a significant burden to the farmers. “Coolie adhigama kekaranga,” he said, referring to the growing demand for higher wages among labourers. This demand has been increasing in the wake of the government’s 100-day work scheme, which provides labour opportunities for the rural poor but also exacerbates the high cost of agricultural labour.

Despite the numerous challenges, Anbu remains optimistic about the village’s prospects for development. The panchayat, which is primarily responsible for managing water supply, street lighting, and roads, is making strides in improving the basic infrastructure. However, one significant environmental issue remains: the accumulation of plastic waste on the village beach.



Waste strewn in the village neighbourhood | PHOTO: BHARGAVI VISWANATH

A silent struggle for proper health care at Karunilam

Schemes announced by government don’t reach them

ANANYA MAHADEVAN

Chengalpattu (Tamil Nadu): In the stillness of the village of Karunilam, amid the ubiquitous coconut palms and winding roads of Chengalpattu Taluk in Tamil Nadu, stands the Primary Healthcare Centre (PHC), a linchpin for villagers and a monument of negligence. It’s not just another building with whitewashed walls and peeling, withered health posters; it foretells the community’s access to health care.

With a dim kitchen in the PHC, Nurse Revathi hurries around her patients. Sometimes, her hands tremble while dispensing antibiotics, an anti-inflammatory drug, or just words of advice and encouragement. Behind the delivery room’s debris, a broken blood pressure monitor hangs, and no time is left for despair. “This is where we come for everything,” villagers whisper. “We have no other option.”

Karunilam, with its red brick houses and clay-thatched overhangs, presents a picture of the grim reality of development not reaching it. Most villagers are small farmers. Their whole lives are spent out in the fields greeted by delays in rains and unpredictable income, with healthcare generally being a distant dream. The PHC is the only clinic for miles around. Farmer Mariamma remembers walking 3 km with her sick son in her arms. “We waited the whole evening,” she said, trailing off.

Finally, they were told to move to a bigger town. For many, that is impossible. With all its shortcomings, villagers depend on the PHC for some services. Mothers bring their infants and children for vaccination. Aged men lean on sticks as they shuffle into the waiting area; they await relief from the nagging pain in their joints. “When my baby cried from evening to dawn, I came here before the sun was up,” one mother says, holding her child. “Revathi Akka spoke so sweetly to me, gave him something, and said all would be well.”

More than simply being a nurse, Revathi has to wear multiple hats – of a counsellor, at times of a confidante who lends her shoulder to cry on or an administrator who runs the PHC when other staff are not around. She usually starts her shift before dawn and continues late into the night.



The PHC, the lifeline of Karunilam village. | PHOTO: ANANYA MAHADEVAN

The doctor comes in only twice a week, for the most part, she handles the emergency by herself; time and again, she must press on. “It does not have much but it is all we have,” she says softly.

The backbone of rural health comprises a three-tier healthcare system — sub-centres, primary health centres, and community health centres. According to reports, many sub-centres lack clean water, electricity, or toilets.

Even primary health centres

FACING NEGLECT

like Karunilam’s cannot be staffed adequately or equipped sufficiently. Community health centres, which are supposed to function for specialised care, face a shortage of doctors and nurses.

“Sometimes we hear new programmes,” says a farmer named Arul, “but they never reach us.” Such broken promises are strewn across villages like faded posters plastered on the walls of the PHC. Pregnant women give birth unattended by skilled birth attendants.

Children walk around without having received immunisation to prevent easily preventable diseases. Heart attacks and accidents, which could have been managed in urban areas, often lead to death. “I’ve lost people I loved because the hospital is too far away,” said another villager.

For a family on the brink of poverty, healthcare costs are overwhelming. Where neighbouring

Kumar, the social activist, says: “When I was made aware of the situation here, I and a few others came to this area and took videos that highlighted the dire situation faced by these people.”

Kumar says he spoke to the Gram Panchayat of the Tekal village. “After several administrative delays, we got street lights, water, and basic electric facilities two months ago on humanitarian grounds.” The next step, he hopes, is to build pucca houses for the residents.

Sickle cell disease compounds the woes of pregnant tribal women in hamlets in Nilgiris

Maternal health takes a toll due to lack of awareness, infrastructure; sickle cell anaemia has only symptomatic treatment

TARIKA BALAKANNAN

Udhagamandalam (Tamil Nadu): Shanthi K’s pregnant daughter-in-law, Chithra Murugan (19), felt contractions around 4.30 am on January 1. The Kattunayakan tribal family lives at Theppakadu village, home to the oldest elephant camp in Asia. Chitra was to manage her pain until sunrise, when Shanti (50), an illiterate woman, took her to the Accord Adivasi Hospital in Gudalur, about 18 km away. “When we went to Accord, they said the baby was too small. My daughter-in-law’s blood pressure was high, and the delivery doctor was not there. They sent us to Ooty in a 108 van,” she said. Hours and 50 km later, the child was born at 9.45 am on January 2 in the Government Sait Memorial Hospital, Ooty.

Chithra was advised to get a check-up on January 6 and get admitted in Accord hospital on January 8. “We had just gone back to Theppakadu from Ooty. Within two days, she went into labour,” Shanti recalled. It had been four days since then. Chithra has not been discharged yet. Shanti, her son and her daughter were staying in the waiting area outside the hospital, washing and hanging clothes on the railing.

Chithra gets timely food, fruits, eggs and tablets. “They take care of her well. But who takes care of us,” Shanti, a heart patient, said. One meal is Rs 120, one dosa is Rs 25, she muttered.

According to the National Health Survey (19-21), the average out-of-pocket expenditure per delivery in a public health facility was Rs. 3,438.



A LONG WAIT: Outside the Government Sait Hospital, family members accompanying patients stay in the waiting area, wash their clothes and dry them on the railing. | PHOTO: TARIKA BALAKANNAN

Her bigger worry seems to be the way back home. “With this newborn baby, how will we take the bus? My daughter-in-law has just undergone surgery, will she be able to stand?”

The Nilgiris is home to six tribes – Todas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, Irulas and Kattunayakans, other indigenous groups, migrants, and Sri Lankan repatriates. Proper antenatal checkups are essential for the health of the pregnant woman. “From day one, [get] regular checkups at the Government maternity section. All medicines are free, and patients are educated there,” said Dr. Dhamayanthi Krishnan (74).

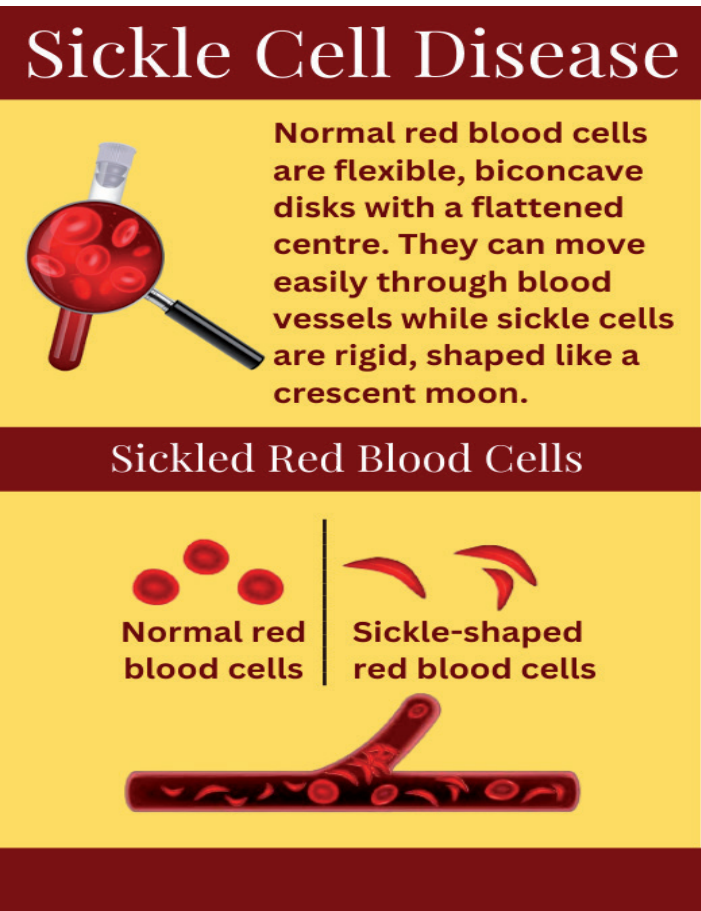
According to the National Family Health Survey (2019-21), in the Nilgiris, 93 per cent of

women had at least four antenatal care visits compared to 89 per cent in 2015-16.

“The tribes in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks are much more backward and their health seeking behaviour is quite poor,” says Dr Roopa K (name changed) (42), researcher in the Ashwini Adivasi Hospital, Gudalur. “The Primary Health Centres (PHCs) were manned by people who are not from their community; they are somewhere from the plains. They don’t understand their cultural ways and are not sensitive enough to their practices,” she explained. Ashwini is tribal owned and 25 per cent of the staff are from the community. The hospital caters to 320 villages in Gudalur,

covering 22,000 people across four tribes – the Paniyas, Mullu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas and the Kattunayakans. “Almost 99 per cent of the deliveries here are institutional now,” Roopa said. However, there is a prevalent genetic disorder called sickle cell disease. “When you have sickle, haemoglobin drops even further. If a pregnant mother has sickle, then it gets very very complicated,” she said.

The sickle cell anemia affects the ‘globin’ part of haemoglobin, gynaecologist Dr Savithri Krishnan (70) explains. “When a child inherits a sickle gene from the mother and the father, the child will get the sickle cell disease. If it inherits only one sickle gene



from either of the parents, then it will get the sickle trait – the child can lead a normal life,” she said. People who have the sickle cell disease usually don’t live for long. They must not be subjected to hypoxia (high altitudes and low oxygen). “When you have sickle, the red blood cells’ (RBC) round shape turns into a sickle shape, blocking blood vessels. Hence the name,” the doctor added.

The disease has no cure, only symptomatic treatments like blood transfusions, which are expensive. A 2017 study in Wayanad and the Western Ghats identified an increased risk of preterm delivery and low birth weight in women with sickle cell disease.

In India, it is believed that sickle cell disease is a tribal disease. “When you actually look at the data, there are an equal number

of non-tribals who have sickle. If you take the map of malaria at one point over the globe, wherever malaria was prevalent, there is sickle,” Roopa said.

Ashwini runs a Sickle Cell Centre with over 300 patients. Similarly, the Nilgiris Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) in Kotagiri runs a sickle cell screening programme. Both Gudalur and Kotagiri are predominantly tribal areas. However, there has been little research on sickle cell disease in non-tribal communities. Despite the presence of sickle cell disease in others like the Chettis and the Badagas, who form the majority population in the Nilgiris, there are no programmes or awareness campaigns to address this issue. Though sickle cell disease has no permanent cure, it can be avoided if individuals with the sickle cell trait do not mate. But the lack of awareness and infrastructure continues to exacerbate the disease’s impact.

Karthika M (27), a Sri Lankan repatriate from Manniyapuram village, had her first daughter at the age of 20 at a PHC in Athiraratty village, about 5 km from her home.

Karthika has had two abortions, both within 45 days. Her next pregnancy was an anomaly baby leading to a surgical abortion at the Government Sait hospital, P Devi, staff nurse, said.

On January 7, 2025, Karthika was four months pregnant. Devi ran through her reports and announced a sickle-thalassemia trait. They are yet to check for a sickle trait in her husband Mathiyazhagan (33). The reports are likely to answer their seven-year wait for a healthy second child.

Thousands evicted for the Ring Road project are trapped in their own homes

ANUSH KUMAR S

Kilimanoor(Thiruvananthapuram): Residential land in 24 villages of Thiruvananthapuram district is to be acquired by the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) for the construction of an outer ring road project, which is yet to commence. Even 18 months after land ownership documents were collected from families living here, not even one family has received the compensation amount. This delay has put thousands of families in uncertainty, with desperation leading to the death by suicide of a 60-year-old man on December 27, 2024.

The Vizhinjam-Navaikulam Outer ring-road is a proposed 78.88km four-lane project connecting the Vizhinjam International Seaport with National Highway 66. Of the 24 villages, 11 are under the 3D notification of the NHAI, which allows construction to begin on the acquired land. A total of 314 hectares of land is to be acquired, which includes around 3,600 houses.

This delay in releasing compensation has led to the suicide of KV Girijakumar from Kilimanoor, Thiruvananthapuram. Following his death, the Ring Road Janakeeya Samara Samithi (action council) marched to the Tahsildar’s office in Kilimanoor demanding answers.



A house in Malayinkeezhu Grama Panchayat numbered by the Competent Authority of Land Acquisition. | PHOTO: ANUSH KUMAR S

“Giri had borrowed some money a year ago for his daughter’s marriage, expecting this compensation. A teacher and an accountant, he had been compelled to take up additional work in a small industry to meet his financial obligations,” said Shibhu Kumar G, the Kilimanoor area convener of the Samara Samithi.

The Janakeeya Samara Samithi was formed six months into the land acquisition process. “We’ve written to everybody from the panchayat member to the Prime Minister. V Muralidharan, former MoS, said that if we voted for him he would solve all these issues. Someone who has done comparatively better was our MP Adoor Prakash, who presented the issue in Parliament,” Shibhu Kumar said.

Along with this delay, a depreciated value system for calculating compensation is something which is not helping the cause of these families. As per the land acquisition guidelines of NHAI, the structures are categorised into A, B or C category based on the quality of construction. The value is based on the Schedule of Rates (SOR), according to the age of the structure. M Salahudin, a resident of Chootayil village in Kilimanoor, said, “Mine is an old house which I had inherited; we spent a lot of money renovating it, and digging a well. Because of its age,



I think we’ll get barely Rs 2,000 per square feet.”

Salahudin’s family has been living in his piece of land, which has now been acquired, for more than 40 years. “We haven’t looked at other options because those who did that are now trapped financially. The tahsildars here advised us to buy new houses, and some people have already given advance amounts to purchase new properties. Now these people don’t have the money to purchase the new house due to delay in release of compensation,” he said.

According to the chairperson of the Samara Samithi, Chandramohan Nair, the land acquisition system is a huge setback for people who have mortgaged their property. “A lot of people have mortgaged these documents for money. The documents will be taken directly from the bank by the authorities. The compensation should be paid to the land owner, not to the bank,” he demanded.

The year-long protest hasn’t received much media attention. The protesters say both the state government and the Centre have ignored them. Shibhu Kumar said Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was reluctant to meet the land owners. “We went to meet the CM and the PWD Minister 5-6 times,

but couldn’t. After we marched to the PWD minister’s residence, he invited us for talks. He told us that he is not even aware of the ring road project.”

PA Mohammed Riyas, Minister for Public Works Department, assured the protesters that he and the Chief Minister would discuss the issue with Union Minister for Road Transport & Highways Nitin Gadkari in Delhi. But nothing has emerged from the meeting, Chandramohan said.

As of now, the land owners have been assured orally that the Thiruvananthapuram Collector would ensure the compensation amount is disbursed before January 31, 2025. “From the Prime Minister to the lower authorities, I have given 106 memorandums till date. I recently mailed Nitin Gadkari, and abused our PM in that. I don’t care if they come and arrest me,” a frustrated Chandramohan said.

The protesters have threatened mass suicides if their demands are not met.

Houses which were acquired, including that of Chandramohan, have been numbered and marking stones have been laid in compounds. “We now feel like prisoners in our homes, all we have is a number,” he said pointing to the walls.

HEMANTH B R

Thiruvambadi (Kozhikode): Twelve years ago, on August 12, 2012, the village of Pullurampara woke up to a deafening rumble as a section of the hill slid down. 78-year-old Theresa M saw water cascading down the mountain. It had rained heavily all night, she recalled.

“As the flow increased, we left our house. The bridge nearby was flooded and eroding,” Theresa, who now lives in Mavumhode near Pullurampara, recalled that day. “The walls of our house collapsed. We were all scared. We survived, but four members of a family nearby were washed away. When we came back, there were large boulders near the house, which had to be removed.”

Even though Theresa was recollecting an incident over a decade ago, her face was filled with fright and sorrow. She is one of the few elderly residents to have witnessed the disaster that damaged several settlements, local infrastructure, and agricultural land. Government data showed that the landslide affected 40 houses, while 60 houses suffered partial damage. Eight lives were lost in the disaster that day.

Though it’s located in the scenic foothills of Vellarimala, the hill village of Anakkampoyil lies in a landslide-prone zone, making it a precarious place for those who call it their home. In the aftermath of the 2012 disaster, survivors faced numerous challenges.

Many who lost their houses and remained in temporary shelters are awaiting rehabilitation and compensation. NGOs stepped in to help rebuild and rehabilitate survivors. One NGO called Centre for Overall Development (COD), a social welfare organisation based in Thamarassery, built a housing colony in Anakkampoyil called

“Santhwanam Nagar.”

Joseph S (65) is a resident of this colony. He, along with his family, have been living in the colony for the last ten years. He spoke of their experience during the disaster: “The day after the landslide, people from our church came to help us. We later went to my sister’s place. The rain continued to pour and there were reports of landslides elsewhere. We thought of heading uphill, but turned back after hearing a loud noise,” he says.

“Soon rescue workers came and allowed us to take shelter in a house on the other side. The next day, we were taken to the parish

hall. We ended up, living in the parish hall for six months. Later, we approached the church fathers and the COD officials. They helped us set up a house here.”

The Santhwanam Nagar colony consists of 11 single-story, two-bedroom houses. Most of the residents here were rehabilitated from the 2012 Pullurampara landslide.

“Compared to our previous home, this one has been quite convenient for us. The church is near and it is easier to send our children to school from here,” says Joseph. For Joseph and his family, Santhwanam Nagar has become their permanent home.



Joseph, a survivor of the 2012 landslide, at his home in Santhwanam Nagar | PHOTO: HEMANTH B R

Period story: caste lines mar spaces for women

Women stay separately when menstruating; caste divides them more

VITHIKAA K

Ekkalnatham, Krishnagiri (T.N.): It's a relatively warm afternoon on the usually cold hilltop that is Ekkalnatham, located 21 km from Krishnagiri district. The narrow, broken and undulated tar road sees an occasional two-wheeler, carrying men heading downhill for their day-wage jobs. The field/forest on either side sees women tending to the vegetable and millet crops. Under the shade of a canopy in one such field sit four women and a couple of children, chattering amongst themselves.

"Every month when we get our periods, we shouldn't stay at home. It has been a condition since the beginning. They've constructed a nice building for us now. We stay there for [the first four days of menstruating]. When that's over, we go to the well (near which they're sitting, away from the settlements), bathe there, then the people at home wash the house and call us in again," says P Meshwa (20), the youngest of the group.

She is seated on a doubled-up blue saree spread out on the grass. The others seated beside her are G Pushpa (30), V Saranya (24), with her five-year-old son, and P Manju (22), with her three-year-old daughter.

"Before [the shelter was built], the area was common porambokku land for the village. We have been using that same spot for generations. At first, it was a shelter made of stone, barely big enough for us to sleep. After that, they built a slightly bigger shelter with cement sheets. Then one Telugu madam from America saw this and wanted to change the system," explains Pushpa.

"Madam was worried about infections, and worms or insects affecting us. She tried to speak to the people, but this is our tradition, it's been like this for generations. The Collector also came and tried to talk. Finally madam gave in and decided to construct a building for us," says Saranya.

The shelter they are referring to is the Sudha Mahilasraya Bhavanam, a brick-and-cement structure which was built and sponsored in 2022 by Saraswathi and Ravishankar Kuruganti, for the menstruating women of Ekkalnatham village, in the Naralapalli panchayat of Krishnagiri block, Tamil Nadu.

Back on the road, K Ragu Ram (34), a resident of the village



IN SOLITUDE: A menstruating woman, Meenatchi, sitting under a tree on a field at Ekkalnatham. | PHOTOS: VITHIKAA K

and street-theatre performer of the local Chinnamma Natakam troupe, is heading downhill with two others on his bike, to arrange for shamiyanas for the upcoming Pongal festivities. He mentions how much of an improvement the shelter is.

"They've finished this building well and provided everything for the women. There is a kitchen there to cook, and vessels are also provided. There's no cooking gas yet, we are yet to add that facility. But there are fans with proper power supply. There are no beds or cots, but the women bring their own bedsheets from home. There are also common-use straw mats kept in the building," says Ragu Ram.

"There is currently no water facility there, they have to go to the well. We are working on getting a connection to the building now. The pipeline has been set-up, but the water supply hasn't been provided yet," he adds.

A Meenatchi (27), standing further down the road, notes that "if there was water supply to the building, we could bathe and cook there. But we don't mind going out. It gives us some way to pass the time and not stay suffocated inside. We go sit under the tree near the

well, chat and relax. We prefer that to being made to stay in one place."

Caste divisions extend here too. "Only for us SC women, our family gives us food from home. For the BC women, their families give them rice and batter, and then they go near the well and make their food and eat there. When mothers get their periods, their children are looked after by those at home," she adds. Meenatchi is a divorcee who owns and manages a small farm with her mother.

The village is spatially divided into three settlements, each

MULTIPLE DIVIDES

inhabited by people from the Backward Classes, the Scheduled Castes, and the Scheduled Tribes, from a lower to higher altitude, respectively.

The Sudha Mahilasraya Bhavanam is located in the lowest settlement, where the Backward Classes community stays.

There is a separate room for the residents of the area, and another for the women from the neighbouring Scheduled Caste settlement.

The Scheduled Tribe community doesn't use the building as they stay further uphill. The path to the uppermost tribal settlement makes access difficult for its residents.

"We find it very difficult to go downhill for anything. The roads are very bad. Even last month, I got hurt and injured my leg when climbing up the slopes. Someone even died a few years ago because of the condition of the roads," says J Papamma (23), a tribal.

The roads leading upto the settlements in the lower altitudes were laid around five years prior, following a series of election boycotts by the residents of Ekkalnatham.

"The laying of these roads is as much as we can realistically expect from the government. They most likely won't do more than this," says forest watcher N Sridhar (45).

"Though it's the ST people who face the worst of it [and get the least access to resources], it's the BC and SC people who get the benefits, even though all the government schemes are based on the tribals' conditions," he adds.

The caste-based spatial divide affects their education as well, as noted by K Anand, 45, the in-charge of the government middle school in the Backward Classes settlement.

"We have a registered strength of 71 students, of which 48 are present. As it is, the students don't come regularly, especially the ST students who come from further away.

Some of them come to the school regularly, but some of them go into the forest on the way here and roam around instead," he says.

"Some of the girl students, when they start menstruating, prefer to not attend classes. But they mostly start only when they're a bit older, so that's not too big a problem in this school," adds N Sumathi, 24, a temporary teacher.

"For any festival, the parents take their children to the town to get new clothes, especially the younger ones. The food given as part of the Midday Meal Scheme is one main reason that parents even send their children to school," says R Malliga, 38, an anganwadi teacher.

D Sivaraman, 42, is a farmer who has moved to Maharajakadai, a village in the foothills of Ekkalnatham, for the sake of his children's education.

"There are facilities here to study until class 8. Teachers come from different places to teach here, but the people here don't have much interest. Even if the children study until class 10, or even class 8, their parents stop their education. We have to change that," he says, as he and his wife Geetha mount his bike.

As they drive downhill on the broken and undulated tar road, dust swirls in the wind from the sand-and-rock path leading uphill.

The nowhere people of Container Road

Oustees still waiting for the promised package

ABHISHEK V

Moolampilly (Ernakulam): Seventeen years after they were evicted from their homes to build a road for the International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), not one of the 316 families has received the entire relief package promised. Some of these families living at Mulavukad, Eloor, Cheranallur, Kadamakkudi, Kadungalloor, Edapally North and South villages, have received part of the compensation package, but many are not able to make use of it.

The Moolampilly package, as it came to be known, is largely forgotten by both the public and the state.

The 17 km NH 966A that connects the ICTT at Vallarpadam with Kalamassery on NH 544, commonly called the Container Road, was built to facilitate easy transport of containers coming to the transshipment terminal. The project started in 2008.

This road was a precondition set by Dubai Port World, which has been operating it since 2011, with a profit-sharing agreement of two-thirds to DP World.

In 2008, police used force in many instances to evict the villagers from their homes. Subsequent protests at Menaka in Kochi witnessed dramatic scenes, attempted immolation, and lathi charges.

Leading figures who took part in the protests include the then Opposition leader Oomen Chandy, former Vice-President Venkiah Naidu, BJP leader Sushma Swaraj, activist-writer Mahashweta Devi and former Supreme Court judge V R Krishna Iyer.

In 2011, Chief Minister Oomen Chandy brought out the Moolampilly Package for rehabilitation. It promised 5-6 cents of land; a single time settlement dubbed 'ponnumvila' (golden price) based on the market price of the land; Rs 5,000 a month as rent until the families were resettled; and a moving fee of Rs 10,000. The Cochin port promised one member from each of the families jobs based on their educational qualifications.

Thuthiyoor, where 118 plots were allotted to the evictees, is a marsh where construction is almost impossible.

The families are paying land tax every year for the land they can't use. The government has taxed the compensation received. Rents seldom came, and not one candidate has been given the promised job.

Praveen Chacko lives in a hostel at Kakkannad and teaches Spoken English online at an IELTS coaching centre. He had been



Indira Nagar at Thuthiyoor, where 118 plots were allotted to the evictees of the Container Road project, is a reclaimed marsh with only a single house constructed so far. | PHOTO: ABHISHEK V

evicted along with his mother from their home on Puthiya Road, Eloor.

After his mother died in 2017, Praveen tried to get the plot his mother had received registered in his name. He was shocked to find that the plot had been allotted in three persons' names.

Praveen spent more than a year and at least a hundred visits to government offices trying to sort out this issue. Now Praveen is being summoned for arbitration along with other equally desperate parties, Praveen says he is somehow able to find time and resources to

17 years after they were evicted from their homes to build the road, not one of the 316 families has received the entire relief package.

sort his matter. Others are not so fortunate.

"Be it Christmas or Vishu, we are at Menaka, protesting. We haven't celebrated or rested since the eviction," says Jobson, son of Joseph Sartho, a construction worker, who lost his house and part of his land parcel.

Joseph was given the title deed for a piece of land in Thuthiyoor, but is not able to locate it. Jobson, 25, is a graduate, and is a trainee with a tyre manufacturer in Kalamassery. His salary of Rs 12,000 is the family's only income as Joseph is not able to work after suffering a stroke. The promised government job for Jobson would have saved the family.

Kabeer V P, who is 54, his two



TABOO ZONE: Sudha Mahilasraya Bhavanam in a Backward Class area.

A dalit village in Tirunelveli gets the last priority in rights and amenities

MOHAMED YUNUSS

Tirunelveli (T.N.): The water rushing out of Anaithalaiyur's taps has a yellow tinge and an unpleasant odour, complained 21-year-old Akash Kannan

It once prompted another resident C Indira to fill a container and march to the Panchayat Office to show the authorities how contaminated the water was. "Sometimes the water is full of worms," she said. Her attempts, though, were of no use.

"They said the problem would be rectified, but no action has been taken yet." For now, the villagers depend on a van that supplies drinking water. "During floods, drinking water is a major issue. With the van unable to reach us and no way for us to leave, we've sometimes stayed without drinking water supply for more than two days," said Mahesh Kumar.

Anaithalaiyur has been waiting

for clean water for at least seven years. "All the other villages in Gangaikondan receive clean water, only we get contaminated water," said 27-year-old resident Nitish Kumar.

One of 11 hamlets under the Gangaikondan village panchayat in Tirunelveli, Anaithalayur, is populated by the Devendra Kula Vellalar community, classified as Scheduled Caste.

Though caste is not openly spoken of as the reason for the poor facilities, residents say they have faced discrimination. "We are still not allowed to walk on the streets where intermediate caste Hindus reside, during temple festivals," said M Iniyan with anger and disappointment.

According to the clerk in the Gangaikondan Panchayat Office, R Kannan, who primarily works in the documentation processes, said that the residents would cut the pipeline and loot water midway,



A view of Anaithalaiyur village in Tirunelveli district, where residents face issues of poor roads, power cuts, and limited access to clean water. | PHOTO: MOHAMED YUNUSS

affecting the flow.

However, the residents denied the allegations and said that the people of Thuraiyur, another

hamlet of Gangaikondan village, are the ones who cut the pipeline.

Ultimately, all the blame game has forced the residents to get

water at a cost of Rs. 10 per can from a van which comes to the village twice a day.

Apart from clean drinking water, the village has poorly made roads, frequent power cuts, and faces apathy from the authorities.

"Even during power cuts, electricity is restored quickly in all other villages in Gangaikondan, but our village is always the last to get it back," said Kumar.

He claims that the Electricity Board (EB) officials often blame the delay on the rain.

"I fail to understand how Thuraiyur, just 2 km away, gets power much sooner than us. At times, the EB officials don't even answer our calls, so we youngsters from the village end up checking the transformers ourselves," he said.

On the roads leading to Anaithalayur, potholes are clearly visible. According to residents,

new roads were laid just a month ago, but even those have been damaged by light rainfall due to poor construction quality. The villagers hope the recent announcements to change the village from Gram Panchayat to Town Panchayat could improve things.

"Just four days ago, they installed streetlights in our area. These steps were taken only after the proposal to convert the village into a Town Panchayat," said Saraswathi, 31, a resident of Anaithalaiyur.

During November last year, the Tamil Nadu government issued the first notification to seek public comments on changing the Gangaikondan village from Gram Panchayat to a Town Panchayat. All 11 hamlets from Gangaikondan village collectively opposed this move and submitted petitions to the Tirunelveli Collector.

"The change would affect

the daily wage labourers. The taxes will rise. We depend on MGNREGA. It helps us a lot," said 47-year-old A Maharajan, a farmer from Keelatheru, a hamlet of Gangaikondan village, 2 km from Anaithalaiyur.

However, residents complained that few people get employed under the MGNREGA.

Indira pointed out that the villagers from Anaithalaiyur only get work two or three days a month under the MGNREGA scheme. She added that the team leaders usually prioritise their neighbours and relatives.

"Since there's no proper last-mile connectivity, we're forced to take an auto, spending Rs 50 each time. With a daily wage of just Rs 250, most of our earnings go toward transportation," she said. "While all the surrounding villages benefit from MGNREGA, why are we the ones always left without a solution?"

THE VISIBLE FACETS



➤ **IN THE RED:** These workers sorting red chillies in Asia's second largest chilli market at Bediya, 50 km from Indore, live in dire conditions. Having come away from their villages in search of work, they earn a paltry Rs 50-100, sorting chillies from 4 am to 5 pm. | PHOTO: AAKRUTI BHAWSAR

➤ **LONG WAY TO HEALTH:** A pregnant woman is being carried in a cloth stretcher from her house at Thuvnapani in Dhule district, Maharashtra, to a health facility at Gurhadpani 6 km away. There is no road access to the village. | PHOTO: KIMAYA BORALKAR



➤ **A LEARNING EXPERIENCE:** Children are being taught in a makeshift anganwadi in the cold winter of Bhojhaul village, Bihar, after most of the houses got washed away in floods in September. | PHOTO: PRIYA KUMARI



➤ **WATER MARCH:** For these Pahariya and Santhal tribal women of Jhiling village in Purulia, West Bengal, trekking downhill to fetch water from 'dnaris' (holes dug in the ground) 5km away is a daily affair. | PHOTO: IPSITA DAS

➤ **BARJORA CHOKES:** Toxic fumes from sponge iron factories in Barjora Block of West Bengal contaminate the air, water resources and agricultural land. Sponge iron is classified as a red-category industry, but several factories have sprung up. Cases of skin diseases and heart ailments are common. | PHOTO: SOUMYA PRADHAN



➤ **PARADISE IN PERIL:** A mountain of garbage is seen in the backdrop of Deepor Beel, a freshwater lake, on the outskirts of Guwahati. Toxic runoff from the Boragaon dumpyard flows into the Beel, a Ramsar Site, polluting the lake and disrupting the livelihoods of those dependent on it. The once pristine lake now emits a strong stench. | PHOTO: ABHINANDITA N KASHYAP



OF THE INVISIBLE

➤ **AT NATURE'S MERCY:** Moments after these fisherfolk of Khejuri in West Bengal spread out small fishes, called Lakshi Chingri, for drying, it began to pour. They incurred a loss of around Rs 10,000, as the catch could only be used as fishmeal to feed poultry. | PHOTO: EVINCE DAS



➤ **GOD WITHOUT A ROOF:** The Delhi Development Authority demolished a 70-year-old temple at Sur Ghat, Wazirabad, on December 12, 2024. Local devotees say no notice was given, and the priest was given just two hours to move the idol and articles in the temple. The demolition has affected the livelihoods of around 300 people. | PHOTO: DEVYANSHI BIHANI

➤ **THE LAST OF THE HERD:** The semi-wild Toda buffalo is an endangered breed native to The Nilgiris hills of Tamil Nadu. Closely associated with the Toda tribe, a pastoral community, the buffaloes are facing a significant threat to its survival mainly due to shrinking grasslands. Current estimates suggest that fewer than 1,500 of these buffaloes remain. | PHOTO: TARIKA BALAKANNAN



➤ **TOXIC PLAYGROUND:** A little girl heads home after playing on the 200-foot-tall Bhalswa landfill in Delhi. She is the daughter of one of the many Bengali migrant workers known as 'bachaikaris' who work as ragpickers and earn a living from the landfill. Their makeshift homes are located right at the bottom of the toxic landfill, and the running sewage water often flows inside their homes during the monsoon season. | PHOTO: DEBANGANA DUTTA



➤ **NO RESPIRE FROM THE COLD:** A family huddles under a tarpaulin tent in freezing cold after their house at Bhojhaul village in Darbhanga district, Bihar, was swept away due to an embankment breach of the Koshi river in September. The flooding that damaged the embankment occurred right after the monsoon ended. | PHOTO: SABINA DEVKOTA



➤ **AT HOME:** Saldyamma Holal, who lives in a shack on the roadside at Belagavi in Karnataka, stitches together pieces of cloth which she will use to cover her dwelling. This 53-year-old homemaker says she may be evicted anytime, and a permanent home is something she can't even dream of. | PHOTO: ANANYA DESHPANDE

➤ **WATER LINE:** Women of Tibligheri in The Sunderbans line up their vessels to fetch water from a tubewell. During the scorching summer, they stand there for hours. If there is a power failure, they may have to wait longer. | PHOTO: SWARNALI DUTTA



Each breath is an ordeal for Nizampur-Nuh villagers

Burning waste and official apathy pose a threat to residents’ lives

DEVYANSHI BIHANI

Nizampur-Nuh (Haryana): Boys of the village attempt to play a game of cricket in a large piece of land, their laughter intermittently broken by fits of coughing. The ball bounces unpredictably on the uneven, debris-laden ground. The spirit of the game persists, but the setting is far from ordinary. The same land is marred by the constant presence of burning industrial waste that spreads a sheet over the village’s 296 houses, a row of modest homes that are rooted just 100 metres from a colossal mound of smoldering industrial waste, with toxic fumes rising into the sky.

Sakunat describes the waste as “khujli ka fibre” that causes severe skin itching for anyone living near the large dump yard in her village. The 35-year-old’s back has scratch marks as the skin constantly itches. She is a resident of Nizampur-Nuh in Haryana’s Mewat district, where the air is thick with an acidic stench as hundreds of tonnes of chemical waste from Bhiwadi in Rajasthan, nearly 90 km away, is burnt here every day. Villagers say the waste is ferried in trolley-tractors from private industries late in the night.

The prolonged exposure to such toxins has caused pulmonary issues among villagers, including children and senior citizens. Ali, who is eight years old, coughs as he says: “It’s always there, this cough, it doesn’t stop.” Eighteen-year-old Sonam scratches her arms as she speaks: “The itching never ends. It is always there, nonstop.”

Yet, for most residents, healthcare remains out of reach.

With limited resources and hospitals as far away as Bhiwadi’s polluting industries, accessing medical care is an ordeal. The residents are forced to keep doors closed and avoid using fans or coolers even in summers, when the heat is sweltering, to keep the noxious air at bay. In winters,



UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD: Boys attempt to play cricket on the fringes of the massive industrial dumpsite. | PHOTO: DEVYANSHI BIHANI

the situation aggravates when the fog traps the smoke, turning the cold air into a stagnant cloud of harmful particles. Residents shrug and say, “Illness is just a part of life for us. We are simple rural folk, how would we know who

“Illness is just a part of life for us. We are simple, rural folk, how would we know who gets sick and why?” | RESIDENTS

gets sick and why?”

Along a narrow village lane, a woman, her nose covered with a yellow dupatta, bathes her buffalo. A few steps away, another woman removes her dupatta as she squats,

but they threatened to dump the waste directly on the villagers if we intervened.”

Approximately 30 km away lie the twin villages of Khorī Khund and Khorī Kalan. Twelve years ago, these villages became the ground zero for illegal trash burning. After residents protested and some even threatened self-immolation, the authorities moved the dumping site to nearby villages. Back in Nizampur Nuh, villagers say the burning of waste happens during the day, too, which prompts the local police to stop by for an inspection, but they take no action.

Sanjeeeda, a 35-year-old woman, suspects the police are taking bribes from industries. “They are shielding the big-shot industrialists and not doing anything about this. When we call them to complain, they just come, act like they’re doing something, but nothing ever changes,” she says in a trembling voice.

Sub Inspector Nikhil Kumar, Khorī Chowki, who is in charge of the area, says, “The pollution issue was addressed 3-4 months ago when the Haryana State Pollution Control Board came and put a stop to it.” When presented with first-hand evidence to the contrary, he replied, “I am not aware of it, but if it is happening, it’s not in my knowledge.” On the other hand, villagers, who claim to see police patrolling often, are left wondering how such an issue could go unnoticed by the authorities. Attempts to confirm the Haryana State Pollution Control Board’s visit have gone unanswered.

The authorities have turned a blind eye to their suffering. The fire brigade extinguishes the flames when called, but the cycle of dumping and burning continues relentlessly, as Irfan living in the nearby village says, “The fire here is of negligence; as long as it isn’t extinguished, the garbage will keep burning – if not here, it will burn somewhere else.”

A double whammy for Khorī Jamalpur

Farmers denied other jobs due to their religious identity

AADITYA KHATWANI

Khorī Jamalpur (Faridabad): “I have ailments related to the heart and the mind. I sold some of my land to pay for treatment; but it did not help,” said Salim Udaan, 55. Besides medical expenses, he had to sell his land to pay for the weddings of his children. He has some land left, but does not have enough to earn a living. “Now we are poor, and just wasting time. I’m hoping God will take me soon.”

Salim is one of many such people in Khorī Jamalpur, a Muslim majority agrarian village in Faridabad, whose plight and desperation are compounded by their religious identity. Several villagers have had to sell their land parcels in the past few years, often at a low price, and seek jobs in the unorganised sector.

They do not earn enough from agriculture anymore, as the input costs are high. “We need thousands of rupees to cultivate a farm,” says Zakir Ali, 54, a large landowner in

the village. To grow crops which sell at good prices, the farmers need to use pesticides and fertilizers. These are causing illnesses in the village. They are in the process of switching to organic fertilizers, but these are more expensive.

Some villagers have opened small shops in the village, selling products ranging from groceries and stationery to tea and snacks, as getting jobs in the formal sector is difficult for them due to their religion. “They see our names and reject us,” says Khurseed Ahmed, who works in the transport sector. He has sold one-third of his land parcel to pay for his children’s education. He has eight boys and two girls, six of whom are in school. The rest are of working age, but do not have a job, and manage the household. They have been unable to find employment as they are denied jobs due to their religion. “Everywhere, our religion is a problem,” he says.

Mumu Khan, 60, has had many different occupations. He has

worked as a truck driver, a casual labourer, and now transports animals. He says many people do not want to buy their land as it is a Muslim majority village. “A woman agreed to buy my land parcel. But the next time she came there was something going on at a nearby Masjid, and she asked me if this is a Muslim area. When I said yes, she said she won’t buy it,” he said. “The woman said she had only one son, and she did not want to trap him here.” The residents say that the problem has worsened since 2014. “Now there is so much hatred,” says Khan.

“I think only 20% of the farmers have land left,” says Zakir. Their farms are split into smaller plots, and each plot can be sold separately. In 2024, Khan sold 1200 gaz (one acre is 4886 gaz) for Rs 20-25 lakh. However, in 2022, he had sold double the area for the same price, much below the normal market value. Some plots in the village are being sold for higher prices, going up to multiple crores an acre. A few plots in the area were being sold for Rs 4 crores per acre, as farmhouses would be made on it. The land is sold to private contractors for construction or to people from the nearby cities such as Delhi, Noida, and Gurgaon, for their personal usage. Often, the villagers are compelled to sell their land for a low price because they need the money urgently, and they have to scale down the price due to their religious identity.

With more and more villagers having to sell their land, the socio-economic structure of the village has undergone a transformation. Agricultural fields are vanishing and farmhouses belonging to people who live in cities are coming up in their place. With each day, the village becomes more unrecognisable for its residents. The villagers still live next to the land they used to own, but cannot use it anymore. “Nobody is happy to sell their land,” says Zakir.



Many villagers in Khorī Jamalpur have put up their farmlands for sale. These sale signs can be seen across the village. | PHOTO: AADITYA KHATWANI

Small businesses near Dhuan Dhar waterfall go under water during rain

Repeated flooding of the Gaur and Temar rivers leaves shopkeepers out of work for four months every year

KAVYA KANT KHARE

Jabalpur (M.P.): Dilip Sen (48) has had a shop selling local fancy items in the Dhuan Dhar market of Bhedaghat for the last 35 years. But it hasn’t all been smooth sailing. “I am unemployed for four months every year during the monsoon until the water level starts to come down. This year my whole shop was submerged under water due to floods,” said Sen.

Bhedaghat, which is 35 km from Jabalpur, has a well-known tourist spot, the Dhuan Dhar waterfall, which attracts an influx of tourists from all over. Due to the tourist footfall, several residents from nearby villages have set up their shops on the footpath near the Dhuan Dhar waterfall, selling local fancy items like accessories, marble handicrafts, artificial jewellery, statues and idols of Hindu gods and goddesses, etc. However, these shops are unauthorised, according to the State government.

“There is no other means of employment for us other than to set up shops here for our livelihood. Even if we have to find work, we have to travel back and forth to Jabalpur every day, as there are no employment opportunities here in Bhedaghat. And the flooding that has been happening for the past six years makes it even more difficult for our business to run smoothly,” said Ram Jhariya (33), who owns a shop on the footpath selling handicrafts made from white marble.

For four months every year, July to October, these shopkeepers are



Ram Jhariya, 33, who runs a small business near the waterfall, incurred a loss of Rs 4 lakh last year due to floods. | PHOTOS: KAVYA KANT KHARE

unemployed as the area gets flooded due to the rising water levels of the Gaur and Temar rivers, which feed the Dhuan Dhar.

“Water coming to Dhuan Dhar directly comes from Bargi Dam, situated 50 km from the waterfall. As the floodgates open in Bargi, officials inform us of the rising water levels in the area, and we quickly evacuate the place. This year, due to heavy rainfall in Gaur and Temar, the water directly reached Dhuan Dhar and flooded the whole area. The dam officials had no knowledge

of this, and neither did we,” said Jhariya.

Along with Sen and Jhariya, there are more than 300 people who lost their shops to the floods in August 2024. The area has become a flood-prone zone since the past six years, and with each monsoon the river water levels are increasing due to heavy rainfall.

When their shops are unable to operate, most of the shopkeepers shift to doing small-scale sculpting of idols of Hindu gods and goddesses made out of

white marble or they survive on the savings accumulated over the months of December and January, which are the peak business season for them.

In 2023, the World Resources Institute (WRI) prepared a report in collaboration with the Madhya Pradesh government to develop a climate action plan for Jabalpur city. It assessed how the city’s climate is characterised by significant year-to-year variability, especially in rainfall. Climate projections show a trend towards higher temperatures

and frequent extremes.

The plan also suggested how climate projections indicate a strengthening of temperature trends, primarily due to increased greenhouse gas emissions, and a trend towards increased rainfall and more frequent extremes.

Dr. R.K. Shrivastava, who is the head of the department of Environmental Science at Science College, Jabalpur, talked about the history of flooding in Dhuan Dhar. “In the last seven years flooding has increased significantly; easily 20-25 mm of rainfall can be recorded in an hour. This is what happened in rivers like Gaur and Temar, which were suddenly flooded due to heavy downpour,” he said.

“Flooding in Dhuan Dhar is related to disturbances and imbalances caused in the water cycle.

Nowadays, most of the monsoon season goes in scanty rainfall, and hardly thrice or twice is there a proper rainfall of the season,” he said.

“Emission of greenhouse gases and the arrival of ultraviolet (UV) rays into the atmosphere cause a sudden increase in temperature. Which leads to excessive and erratic evaporation, which ultimately causes an imbalance in the condensation. In certain locations, this condensation causes a lot of rainfall, while in other locations, it causes very little. In Jabalpur, summer temperatures can easily reach 46 degrees Celsius, which is very high,” said Shrivastava.

The brunt of extreme-weather events, however, is most acutely felt by those whose livelihoods are hit.

“I have taken loans from private

money lenders in order to rebuild my shop, as I have lost everything during the floods. I incurred a loss of Rs 40,000 due to the disaster and was unemployed from July to October,” said Sen.

Jhariya, who has done a PhD in Economics on the marble handicrafts industry, cannot find a job for an assistant professor post in Jabalpur colleges, so he works with his father in their shop.

“I want to teach, but due to lack of opportunities in this place I have to help my father in the business. And the floods make it even worse. On average, every year we incur a loss of around Rs 2 lakhs due to floods. This year, during floods, the water submerged the whole ropeway tower, which is around 110 feet in height,” said Ram.

Panchayat officials, however, feel the shopkeepers are to blame for not heeding government directives to shift their business elsewhere. “There are shops made for them by the government, but still they set up their shops on the footpath situated below the waterfall. Their argument is that there is no business for us on an elevated level. That’s why sometimes we have to close their shops as they come under the encroachment area,” said the Nagar Parishad Upadhyaksh of the Bhedaghat panchayat, Jagdesh Dahiya. “Since they are not registered with the government, we can’t even give them compensation.”

Caught between nature and the practicality of running a business, the shopkeepers near Dhuan Dhar are in a Catch-22 situation.



A view of the Dhuan Dhar waterfall in Bhedaghat, near Jabalpur.

The curious case of the missing school teachers

Purulia's crumbling education system is failing its very own children

IPSITA DAS

Baghmundi, Purulia (West Bengal): Frolicking school children raised hell while playing on the veranda. The cacophony of their voices echoed in the large, dark classrooms. It was school time but the teachers' chairs remained empty. On that day, the head teacher, who also happens to be the only teacher of Teliabhasha Junior High School, was on leave.

According to the Banglar Shiksha portal (West Bengal's education portal), as of January 5, the school has 160 students. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, states that the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) in an upper primary school should be 35:1, which means that for every 35 students, there has to be one teacher.

"I was [posted] at the school in 2011," said head teacher Prasenjit Barik over a phone call. "I have not seen any teacher being [posted] here in the last 14 years."

With about 80 houses, Teliabhasha is a tiny hamlet in the Ajodhya hills. The rocky terrain and narrow roads, make the village inaccessible. The nearest town Jhalda is 35 km away.

According to Niloy Mukhopadhyay, the Chairman of the All Bengal Primary Teachers' Association (ABPTA), Purulia, there are 250 rural 'single' teacher schools in the six circles of Jhalda and Baghmundi blocks.

Since the School Service Commission scam was unmasked in 2022, the teacher recruitment process has stopped. In April 2022, the Calcutta High Court cancelled the recruitment of nearly 26,000 teaching and non-teaching staff. The Supreme Court of India is looking into the case.

After Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011, a serious breach was noticed in the Regional Level Selection Test in 2012. Many lower-ranked candidates were recruited as teachers.

Similar irregularities were observed in the 2016 State Level Selection Test, a recruitment exam for teachers in classes IX to XII.

Upper primary sections were not excluded from the same phenomenon. During the beginning of the recruitment process, cases were filed alleging non-trained teachers being hired. On December 11, 2019, the Calcutta High Court



A LONG WAIT: Dulari Singh, 9, turns back curiously while the rest of her schoolmates wait for classes to begin at the Jhilling Serang Primary School, Baghmundi. | PHOTOS: IPSITA DAS



POWERED BY DREAMS: Sangita Hembram, Class VII, dreams of becoming a nurse.

ordered the cancellation of the merit list.

The Primary Teacher's Eligibility Test (TET) also saw its fair share of legal battles. After being suspended for over five years, the state conducted the exam in December 2022.

Meanwhile, the PTR in schools of rural Purulia has worsened.

In order to keep the school running at Teliabhasha, the local people have stepped forward. The co-educational institute has a boys' hostel. Bablu Murmu, a local resident, is now the warden and a teacher.

In Barik's absence, hostel assistant Suresh Hembram fills in his shoes. On the day of the visit,

Hembram was sitting in a termite-infested, sparsely furnished room and enrolling students for the 2025 session. One side of the floor was scattered with various books sent by the government.

"I teach them as well," said Hembram. "But I am not trained to do so."

To keep the school running some villagers work here on a meagre salary of Rs. 2,000 to 5,000 a month. The school also has tutors. Sanjiv Singh Mura teaches all subjects to classes VIII for only Rs. 2,025 a month.

Barik mentioned that two other teachers who had joined the school alongside him were transferred to other schools citing the school's remote location.

Moreover, the school has certain infrastructural problems. There is no boundary wall. The boys' toilet is practically a tin shed without water connection. The girls don't even have the toilet privilege. The classrooms do not have electricity.

Class VII student Sangita Hembram dreams of becoming a nurse, whereas her classmate Abhinash Tudu wants to become an IPS officer. But the school fails them.

The primary school in Jhilling Serang village faces a similar crisis. The headmaster Mahadev Tudu (58) travels about 90 km on his motorbike from the nearby town of Hura. Classes start at 10:40 a.m. The students wait at the gate but classes can never begin on time.

As they see Tudu's vehicle loaded with white shopping bags carrying that day's mid-day meal ration approach, their eyes start glimmering. After he unlocks the classroom doors, the students file in and take their seats. All standards settle down in one room.

"You need at least three teachers to teach all classes in a primary school," said Tudu.

He said two ad-hoc teachers travel from places like Banduan and Barabazar (farther than Hura). Besides the distance and small salaries, the tough roads contribute to their irregular attendance.

"DPSC (District Primary School Council) and its Chairman have created the scarcity over the last year," said ABPTA Purulia's Chairman.

The Uthsashree portal (a WB government portal through which official teacher transfers take place) has been closed since 2021. "Yet in exchange for money, the DPSC Chairman has been unofficially transferring teachers," said Mukhopadhyay. "The norms and regulations needed for transfers have not been followed."

There are 80 to 90 excess teachers in the primary schools in and around Purulia city. In the schools around the urban areas of Raghunathpur, there are five or six teachers for 30 students.

Subhro Prakash Mondal, a journalist working for Anandabazar Patrika, believes that the teachers don't want to work in villages. "They want their offices closer to their homes. The primary teachers have long been asking for an increment in their daily allowances," he said. Renting a house in a rural setup and raising a family at their pay scale is becoming an uphill task for many of them.

When asked about the unofficial transfers, the Deputy Inspector of School declined to comment.

The lacuna has also increased the workload for the teachers. Apart from teaching, they do clerical jobs like enrolments, distributing school books and supervising mid-day meal schemes.

Ujjal Chattoraj, the head teacher of Dulla-Ardana Junior Basic School smiled and confessed: "I distribute books, dresses and shoes allotted for the students, shop for mid-day meal, ensure that they are fed – basically I run a hotel. I hardly get time to teach."

ABHRADEEP BHATTACHARJEE

Ichamati, East Khasi Hills (Meghalaya): Ashim Das, 71, and Mohan Bhattacharya, 36 (names changed to protect identity), both Bengalis, are neighbours in Deingkain village along the Indo-Bangladesh border in Shella-Bholaganj subdivision of the East Khasi Hills district.

Deingkain is in the Majai region, which has been marked by severe ethnic conflict between the Khasi and non-Khasi community, especially for the past four years. The non-Khasi population alleges a systematic attempt by the dominant Khasi tribe to deny them access to the means to a dignified existence.

Bengali Hindus form a majority in the Majai stretch of villages from Ichamati to nearby Bholaganj.

Das and others who work as agricultural labourers have to pay a monthly tax per-bigha to the Khasi landowners. Says Das, "I have to pay Rs 1,500 per month for every bigha I work, and also a separate sum of Rs 1,000 every year to continue living in my house."

He adds, "My father brought my brother and settled here in 1967, before I was born, and we have the documents to prove it. What's the point of having them anyway? The Khasis invariably take everything from us."

Bhattacharya is a teacher in the Ramakrishna Mission School in nearby Umploh. Neither he nor Das possess a ration card or a Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) job card.

The clash of identity in Ichamati has been marked by intermittent bouts of violence for the past four years. The murder of 35-year-old Khasi Students Union leader Lurshai Hynniewta in 2020 and the murders of two non-tribal labourers in 2024 have been causing widespread distrust and restlessness in both the communities. These were somehow connected to the anti-CAA protests, even though Ichamati and its surrounding areas do not come under the CAA.

Ichamati and Bholaganj are two larger villages connected by a dirt-

and-gravel road, and between them sit smaller hamlets with 50 to 100 households each. These include villages like Deingkain, Kalibari, Dhorombasti, Nayabasti and Chaklabasti.

The local Khasi population tends to perceive the inhabitants of these villages as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. "This is because of an ignorance of history," says Dr Binayak Dutta, a Professor of History at North Eastern Hill University.

He adds, "When the British acquired Sohra in the 19th century, the deal they made with the Syiem transferred three villages that were till then a part of Sylhet to the control of the Khasis. These were

Ichamati is administered under its own Dorbar Shnong.

These serve the same function as the panchayat in mainland Indian villages, and are led by the village headman.

"They came and asked us to hand over our ration cards saying that they would be renewed. Then they burnt them," says Das. The only ration his family receives is the Midday Meal ration given once a year to his youngest daughter by the Ramakrishna Mission School, where she studies. This includes a sack of rice and a sack of dal.

Bhattacharya and Sushen Das, 54, a limestone trader from Ichamati, both trace the destruction of the ration cards to more than twenty years ago, in 2003-2004.

As for MGNREGA, the villagers allege that the scheme has never reached them since its inception in 2005.

In December 2021, the High Court of Meghalaya heard a case filed by a group of Bengali traders from Bholaganj who alleged that the Syiem's office in Sohra was refusing to give non-tribal traders the No Objection Certificates (NOCs) required to obtain new trading licences and renew existing ones ever since the 2020 outbreak of violence.

In Ichamati Bazaar, all the shops formerly belonging to non-tribals lie shuttered.

"When they (non-tribal traders) ask the Sirdar for an NOC, he refuses and sends them to the landowner for the same. When the landowner has been approached, he sends them back to the Sirdar. So, the traders run around in circles," says Bhattacharya.

Sushen Das spent seven months in Tura Jail after he was arrested following the 2020 violence. He alleges that the police had come to the village late at night and picked up over 30 people, including women and teenagers. "They are targeting me because of my relative prosperity and because I try to help my people," he says.

He is one of the few non-tribals to have land in the area. "My land is close by, but I can hardly ever visit it," says Das. "I am afraid for my life whenever I step out of my house."



Ashim Das, 71, displays his father's citizenship document as he poses with his youngest daughter. | PHOTO: ABHRADEEP BHATTACHARJEE

Ichamati, Bholaganj and Pyrduah."

The villages, with the exception of Bholaganj, are part of the Mawlong Sirdarship with headquarters in Mawlong.

The villages under the Sirdarship are marked by administrative neglect. The road has not been improved or paved since it was built in the '80s. The biggest problem for the villagers, however, is the lack of ration and job cards and the denial of trading licenses issued by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC).

Nearby Talab village serves as the headquarters of the Dorbar Shnong (or Village Council) which administers the Majai villages, with Ichamati's exception. It also has the majority of the Khasi population in the area.

Lives of Dhaniakhali weavers woven with misery and uncertainty

The unique weave is facing extinction; the weavers say they cannot sustain it if their income doesn't go up substantially

SOUMILI RAY

Hooghly (West Bengal): "Taahole taant bune ki hobe?," says Swadesh Kumar Das, a 72-year-old handloom weaver hailing from the Somaspur region of the Dhaniakhali village, which loosely translates to, "What are we getting out of weaving as a livelihood?"

Das is a resident of Dhaniakhali village of Hooghly district. Weaving used to be his sole source of income for his family of five until 2021. His son and grandchildren have migrated to other professions due to lack of money out of handweaving.

Dhaniakhali is home to at least 500 handweavers who specialise in weaving the unique Dhaniakhali tant sarees. The Dhaniakhali weave comprises the 'khejur chori', which is a dual-coloured arrangement of weft yarns, woven in a twisted manner across the pallu. The weave can be traced back to the 1930s. However, reportedly there has been a significant dip in the earnings of the weaver community.

"The highest annual income that I have earned in the last nine years is Rs 18,000 and I have to



Handloom weavers Ashish Kumar Kundu (left) and Keshab Dey at work spinning raw threads. | PHOTO: SOUMILI RAY

feed a family of five," says Das. He has been weaving the tant since the last 55 years.

"You will not find this weave anymore after 10 to 15 years down the line. It is no longer

economical at all," he says.

"I am most probably going to be the last weaver of the family," says Sarada Das, Swadesh's daughter-in-law. Her husband stopped weaving during the

pandemic and started working in a shop in Kolkata after the lockdown was lifted.

She says that for many months when she works all day and night due to the high demand

from middlemen. Traditionally called mahajans, the middlemen increase the buying price by a mere Rs 7-10 after every 10 to 15 years.

Villagers had tried protesting against the insufficient prices that they get from selling the saris to the mahajans, but all in vain, Sarada says. "Moreover, going and sitting for protests, takes out time from the day, and as a result our daily income faces a setback."

Swadesh says the root cause of the Dhaniakhali weave eventually becoming endangered is purely lack of money. "We are working tirelessly throughout the day and it fetches a maximum of Rs 200 daily," he adds. The maximum price we get for a sari is not more than Rs 500," Sarada says.

"The deadlines given by the mahajans are never flexible irrespective of weather and health concerns, and if we miss it, we have to incur losses," Sarada added.

Swadesh said that unless and until the weavers' income gets a significant hike, it is almost impossible to save the weave. "Not only do we get an extremely negligible amount of money for all the hard work that

we undertake, but also we have to pay for all the travel expenses to faraway towns of Phulia to purchase the raw threads. The maintenance of the weaving structures also goes from our own pockets, which basically means that at the end of the cycle, we are left with nothing," he says as a tear rolls down his cheeks.

Pradip Kumar Bhar, a 50-year-old handloom weaver experiences a different kind of struggle. The Directorate of Textiles under the government of West Bengal had

The 'khejurchori' is a dual-coloured arrangement of weft yarns, woven in a twisted manner across the pallu.

organised a Weavers Meet in Kolkata in August whereby they had sent letters to invite selected weavers in order to felicitate them and honour them with a prize money of Rs 10,000. Bhar, overjoyed with the invite could not be happier as the fees for his daughter's coaching classes for the rest of the year were

secured. He travelled all the way to Kolkata only to get felicitated on stage and get pictures clicked by media channels.

After the event, he was asked by the officials to leave the venue. It has been almost five months since the incident and still not a rupee of the prize money has been transferred to his bank account. "I called the office of the Directorate of Textiles at Chinusrah a couple of times to which they answered rudely and kept on promising me false dates," Bhar adds.

Bhar is a resident of the same village and weaving the Dhaniakhali tant remains the sole source of income for his family of three, which includes his daughter who is a 12th grade student preparing to sit for NEET 2025.

Since childhood, Bhar has been observing his grandfather and father weave the loom, and that is how he learned the process. "When you go the market to fetch a kilogram of potatoes, it is the seller who sets the price, isn't it? But for us, the mahajans decide the buying price. We are never allowed to quote our saris. That is how helpless the community is growing with each passing day," Bhar says.

Gondur villagers walk miles for a pot of water

Dhule dist. in Maharashtra is facing drought after drought for 10 years

KIMAYA BORALKAR

Gondur, Dhule (Maharashtra): This is a district where drought prevails round the year. With the temperature soaring to 37 degrees Celsius in December, the villages in Dhule district are already reeling under water scarcity.

“Villagers from Gondur have been facing such a situation for the past 10 years. Water and fodder are hard to come by. The farmers and herdsman are hoping that Varunaraja (rain god) will arrive and solve all problems,” said Savita Patil, sarpanch, Gondur panchayat.

Farming in the village that has a population of 3,659 has been scaled down drastically due to water scarcity. Cotton, bajra, jowar, groundnut, maize, and soyabean are the crops grown here. Dairy farming is struggling to survive; fodder is being brought from distant places. The villagers say people can manage to survive, but innocent animals are not able to. They say the fodder they receive is often rotten, and it is difficult to get green fodder.

The villagers said the tanker that supplied water has not been seen for the past 15 days. “During the kharif (monsoon) season, cereals like millet, maize, jowar and pulses are sown in the dry areas. The fodder from cereals and pulses is useful for animals throughout the summer. Due to little rainfall

“I am unable to find a bride. No girl wants to come to this village because of the lack of water, and no girl wants to walk in search of water every day. I am fed up of this situation.”
- Harish Dhangar, 27 | RESIDENT

this year, the expected production of cereals and pulses has not been achieved,” said Rambhau Patil, a farmer.

“Cattle herders in the village are buying fodder from wherever they can, paying higher amounts. Everyone is now waiting for rain. With the level in wells plunging, it is impossible to produce new green fodder. In drought conditions, animals and birds in the forest, besides the farm animals, are affected,” said Ashok Waghode, a resident.

The ground water level has come down, and most of the bore wells have dried up. The village has become totally dependent on water tankers. “There have been fights over water – sometimes over a single pot. Without fodder and water, people had to sell their cattle. Most people had to leave the village to work in nearby states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh,” said Vijaya Patil, a resident of Gondur.



CATCHING THEM YOUNG: (Above) Little girls of Gondur village walk two to three km daily with a handas (water vessel) to collect water from another village; (Right) A mother from Gondur sets out in search of water resources.

PHOTOS: KIMAYA BORALKAR

According to government data, Dhule district has consistently received less than average rainfall required in a drought-prone area. The annual average rainfall here is 584 mm. However, in the last 30 years, it has been even less.

Bhilaji Bansode, a farmer, said, “previously, in my farm I used to produce around 20 quintals of bajra every year. But now due to climate change, I am facing a water shortage. I hardly manage to take 10 to 12 quintals of bajra. I’m struggling to cover the costs of everything like seeds, fertilizers, and other things.”

Villagers from Gondur draw water from a well 2km away and bring it in motorcycles and bullock carts.

Asked if there was a shortage this year, Tukaram Jadhav said, “It is not the case this year; our village always has a shortage. Whether there is a drought or not, by March the wells in our village dry up. Then our only job is to bring water from the wells in the fields.”

Asha Kumbhar, a 31-year-old woman, said, “Every morning I wake up early and walk with three handas (metal vessels to store water) for 3km to bring water from the mostly dried wells during summer. Sometimes, my younger daughter Pushpa also helps me to carry water; we treat it as a precious commodity.

“I am unable to find a bride. No girl wants to come to this village because of the lack of water, and no girl wants to walk in search of water every day. I am fed up of



this situation,” Harshal Dhangar, a 27-year-old, said.

Sarpanch Savita Patil said, “We need to train people for sustainable farming with minimum water and also need to work on constructing some big dams so we can store water. However, the problem is that because of climate change, we are unable to get enough rainwater.”

“Lakhs of rupees is spent every year on water supply through tankers, digging wells and hand pumps. However, neither the

administration nor the government has made any attempt to make a permanent plan to overcome the water shortage,” Anand Baviskar said.

The people of Dhule have not been able to get rid of the evil shadow called drought permanently.

The situation in 2024 has seen no improvement whatsoever. There are about 150 villages where two people of each household are forced to spend their entire day searching for water.

Period huts the bane of women at Madia

Menstruating women kept away from homes

PUNAM D D

Bande, Gadchiroli (Maharashtra): In Bande, Savita Madhukar Lekami (26) is seated on a broken coir-rope bed. Under the roof of her hut, there is a separate mug, a pot of water, and a bowl made of Sal leaves for her food. Inside, no family member can come close to her.

It’s daytime, so she is sitting outside her ‘kurma ghar’ where she has to stay for at least five days, until her menstruation ends. Savita has a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter and a six-month-old son. She has to stay away from them, and the only time she can hold her son is when she needs to breastfeed him. Her night in kurma ghar goes in worry, as thoughts about her children and her fear of snakes don’t let her blink.

“The worst fear I have is of getting bitten by a snake while living inside the kurma ghar as it is really dark and there is no light inside. It also has holes that can allow any insect or reptiles inside.”

Her fear is especially discernible when she recounts the story of her sister, Chaya Shudda Lekami, who died of a snake bite in a kurma ghar in 2007. “She has two children.”

During those five days of her menstrual cycle, Savita is not allowed to step inside her home. “We can’t go inside because they perform puja. The pujari says our deity will get angry if we go inside the house,” she adds.

Gadchiroli is known to be the most backward and Naxal-affected district in Maharashtra. It has lush greenery and many tribes like Gond, Madia, Kolam and Pradhan live here. The Government of India has recognised Madia as the most primitive tribe in the region. They have their own language and traditions. One of the traditions they follow is the kurma ghar.

The Madia tribe believe that having a menstruating woman stay at home will anger their deity.

Each home in the Pandevahi, Bande, Hedri, Surjagadh, and Gatta villages under Etapalli Tehsil in Gadchiroli district has a small hut that is separate from the main home. In some villages, it can be even outside the settlement. This outhouse-like structure is known as a kurma ghar and is especially made for women who are menstruating.

Although this practice is widely prevalent in the region, it is not limited to Etapalli tehsil alone. It can be seen throughout the district, in other tehsils like Aheri, Dhanora, Bhamragadh, as well as districts like Chandrapur. Some places in states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Bastar in Chhattisgarh also follow the same tradition of isolating the woman



Savita Madhukar Lekami (top) resting under the wooden canopy of her ‘kurma ghar’ at Banda village in Gadchiroli district. Payal Rakesh Kavadho’s kurma ghar (above) is away from her house. PHOTOS: PUNAM D.D.

when she is menstruating.

For Payal Rakesh Kavadho (24), a homemaker from Hedri village in Gadchiroli, the kurma ghar is something new she is experiencing as she comes from the Gond community where the practice is not prevalent. Before marriage, she has never stayed in a kurma ghar.

“This is all new to me; after marriage I have to stay inside a kurma ghar,” she says. “It’s scary sleeping inside the small dark room where you know anything

GENDER TABOO

can come crawling inside.”

Payal is sitting on a pile of stones under a wooden canopy in the corner of the compound of her home. She is not allowed to touch anything but the stones she is sitting on.

“Families say women should be inside the kurma ghar each month when they are on padi (periods).” For five days the menstruating women have to stay outside their homes because their families believe that their homes will get polluted if the menstruating woman stay inside.

“I can stay inside the kurma ghar, but I fear for my daughter because when I am inside it she

also comes and sleeps beside me. She is just a year old,” says Payal. “In the district, people from the tribe believe in the kurma ghar practice. Most of the Adivasi people have stopped this practice but the Madia tribe still believes in it strongly.”

Similarly, Bebi Sudhakar Punagti (34), a homemaker from Hedri, speaks about how she hates being inside her kurma ghar, which is a mere thatched hut that can let any insects or reptiles pass inside easily. “I don’t stay inside it in the daytime as I don’t like living inside, but at night I have no options.”

The common fear in the women in all of these villages are snake bites, as they have seen many women dying in the kurma ghar.

Bebi wants a kurma ghar with better amenities, “like the one that the government has built in Gedha.”

A similar initiative can be seen in Bhamragadh district, but that kurma ghar has been left unfinished. Women now have started using sanitary napkins, but the stigma prevails.

Phulvati Dhurvey (47) is an ASHA worker in Khedi village in Dhanora Taluka, who has been working since 2009. “I myself live inside the kurma ghar when I am menstruating because it’s a long tradition and we follow it,” she says.

Education a distant dream for children in remote Mehkar taluk villages

Lack of employment opportunities a constant source of worry for villagers in Buldana district of Maharashtra

UJWAL JAGTAP

Mehkar, Buldana (Maharashtra): Many students and youths in Mehkar taluka are facing serious problems in getting an education and jobs. Many of them are anxious about the uncertainty regarding their future. One of the main problems is finding the right school or college where they can not only get admission but also afford it in terms of educational expenses.

Students from remote villages go to nearby bigger villages for education. Students in those bigger

INACCESSIBLE

villages either study in the local school or mostly aspire to study in schools in the nearest taluka.

Bhavesh Rathod and Amit Jadhav, sons of small farmers, are natives of a small village ‘Pathardi’ located near Janephal. Both are 12th class students who go from Pathardi village to Janephal to attend high school. One of them is pursuing humanities and another is a science student.

Their parents are farmers. After 12th class, they will be able to pursue education further if they have enough money to go to

bigger cities like Amravati. Now they have to travel daily by buses and private vehicles too, to attend schools and colleges which are in Mehkar.

“Every day I travel in overcrowded vehicles. Students like me rarely get a seat to sit in buses or private vehicles. We have become used to it,” said Rathod.

After completing Plus Two, many students struggle to pursue college education.

For instance, Pratik Nikam comes from an agricultural family which owns about 10 acres of land. Though he has the economic means to pursue a course like D. Pharm, he is unsure whether after studying he will be able to open a medical shop or not. “I am not sure I will be able to continue my education after I complete D. Pharm. I can’t say for sure that I will be able to start a medical shop somewhere in my Mehkar taluka. I am the only child of my parents. Because of which I have to help my parents in their agricultural work. So, it is not very easy for me to leave my native village and to go to the bigger towns and cities, and to spend much money on higher education,” says Pratik who is a native of Naygaon Dattapur village in the Mehkar taluka.



School students near Mehkar scramble into a private vehicle to get home after their classes.

PHOTO: UJWAL JAGTAP

Parents of these rural children are worried about the future job opportunities as their children are reluctant to do agricultural work. Given a choice, even the parents

do not want their children to be farmers as it is not beneficial and does not guarantee a minimum standard of life.

Gajanan Wagh is one such

farmer who lives in village Shelgaon, and owns about three acres of farm land.

His farming is completely dependent on the rains. He has no

There is a kind of stagnation in villages because of the lack of investment and the indifference of the government.

option to get an income. “My son is doing B. Com in Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar. He is in his second year of graduation. My son told me that he wanted to join banking classes in the city. My financial constraints will not allow me to support my son’s ambitions. He said that he wanted to go to Hyderabad to pursue post graduation. I am not sure at this point of time whether my son’s dreams will come true,” Wagh said, teary eyed.

“Parents in villages do not have any additional income source other than agriculture. Therefore they find it difficult to support their children’s education financially. There is a kind of stagnation in Maharashtrian villages because of lack of investment and the general indifference of local government agencies towards

people,” explained Eknath Kharat, a member of Gram Panchayat of Shelgaon Deshmukh village in Mehkar.

Another issue relates to girls’ education. Parents who lack education do not want to support their daughter’s education after 10th or 12th class, while they might encourage their sons to go to college. So gender discrimination is also there, said Kharat.

“The existing Zilla Parishad schools in rural areas do not have efficient and trained teachers, and the number of classrooms is not enough to accommodate all children,” said Ram Atkar who used to run a private coaching class at Nilegaon and Palashi villages in Khamgaon taluka.

“There is no good education available in remote villages of Vidarbha region and students are often forced to seek education elsewhere.

Lack of transport and unaffordable state transport buses are a major hurdle for students to go to schools and colleges in nearby towns. So students have to spend a lot of money taking private transport to schools and colleges in nearby towns,” said Atkar, who is a post-graduate in physics, and has a B.Ed degree.

They’re free in the enclaves, but are prisoners to hunger, lack of housing and health care

After the historic exchange of enclaves between India and Bangladesh, the families have little to rejoice over

MD. AKASH

Panchagarh (Bangladesh): Mallika Begum sits in front of a dilapidated tin shed house, preparing vegetables for dinner for herself and her mentally ill husband as the sun sets.

She works in other houses to support her family, and sometimes even as an agricultural labourer. The two-person family goes without food for days if she doesn’t work. They have no home or property and the government-provided housing project is their last hope.

Forty-five-year-old Begum is a resident of Rajmahal village in Sadar Upazila of Panchagarh district. A decade ago, she had no citizenship and was one of those people who lost their citizenship when British rule ended in the sub-continent. She was not allowed to go outside her designated area. Because of this, she couldn’t provide primary education to her daughter, who is now married.

Begum faced problems due to confusion regarding citizenship and because of that she could not get any benefits of citizenship. She had to spend more than three decades in a confined space without a fence under the open sky. She regretfully said, “If we had been citizens of Bangladesh or India from the beginning, my husband would not have gone insane due to lack of medical treatment. I would not have had to marry my daughter off at a young age.”

“Now I can only identify myself as a citizen of Bangladesh but my stomach is still as hungry as before. We, the poor, are victims of deprivation in every way. We can



LIVING ON HOPE: Women displaced by the enclave exchange hope to see a government project that would give them proper houses.
I PHOTO: MD AKASH

participate in elections like a luxury,” he said.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, there were 162 enclaves inside Bangladesh and India, with more than 52,000 inhabitants. The exchange of enclaves came into effect at midnight on July 31, 2015. This ended the 68-year darkness in the lives of 52,000 people who lived in these enclaves. Despite their liberation from the border-territorial blockade, they did not yet taste the true freedom of life.

Most of the people who became

Bangladeshi citizens after the exchange of enclaves within India are still landless. The government has provided them with only one house in the housing project. Despite this, the people of these enclaves have managed to cross the border during the 68-year war, but their lives are still in a state of struggle. They have not changed economically in the last 10 years and are even deprived of basic rights.

Joytun Begum, a 50-year-old resident of Nazirganj village in the now-defunct enclave of Panchagarh

Sadar, lives with her husband and widowed sister. Joytun, who suffers from various diseases including kidney problems and uterine cancer, earns a living by working in other people’s fields.

“Due to lack of money, I still take medicine prescribed by a doctor five years ago. I got a house from the government, but now it is old, and when it rains, water seeps through the tin roof. During the rainy season, the house gets flooded. Because of this, I cannot cook for two to three days and we have to go without food,” she said.

Asked again about the treatment, she said, “I can’t eat properly, what kind of doctor I should see again? There are no good hospitals nearby. I have to go to Dhaka or Rangpur to see a doctor. It costs a lot. The government has only given us the right to vote. It has not given us any opportunity for medical treatment or employment.”

Joytun Begum is not the only enclave resident struggling to survive in the grip of poverty. Another resident of Nazirganj village, Md. Ibrahim Hossain, 37, who has now become a Bangladeshi citizen through enclave



district is facing an acute shortage of medical personnel, with only 37 doctors for a population of over 1.2 million.

“We are trying our best to provide treatment, but the number of doctors is very low. We are trying to establish a medical college here so that people do not have to go to Dhaka or Rangpur for treatment,” he added. While some steps have been taken to address the plight of former enclave residents, many challenges remain.

Panchagarh district deputy commissioner Md. Sabet Ali said that the government has provided some assistance, such as distributing blankets to over 600 families this winter, but more needs to be done. “The government is committed to improving the lives of these citizens,”

he said. “We are working on new plans to restore their basic rights, including employment and poverty alleviation.”

Despite the government’s initiatives, for Mallika Begum, Aminul Islam, and many others, the path ahead in life remains uncertain. They have seen the open air from their prisons, and they hope for better opportunities, and to regain the rights they have been deprived of for so long.

Human-elephant conflict an unending saga

Deforestation, encroachment of animal habitats in Sri Lanka aggravate the issue

LAHIRU FERNANDO

Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka): It was around 7 pm on October 13, 2024, when 52-year-old D. Saliyaratne, his wife and six-year-old daughter left in his bike to see a doctor in Eppawala town in Anuradhapura.

They travelled a few kilometers from their residence until the bike ran into a wild elephant that was standing on the road in the dark. They fled into the jungle, but only the daughter and wife were lucky enough to come out of that jungle alive. Another wild elephant that was in that jungle had taken the life of Saliyaratne.

This was not an isolated incident, but one of many such tragedies taking place in different areas in Anuradhapura district in Sri Lanka.

Mostly, the residents in the Eppawala, Mahailuppalama and Tirappanaya areas, whose main occupation is farming, have to not only manage their fields, but also deal with the wild elephants to protect their lives.

The Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) in these areas, which are located in the dry zone of the country, is growing day by day, thus putting the lives of both humans and elephants in danger.

The authorities, such as the political bodies, the Wildlife Department, police and the other public administration officials, have failed to provide a durable solution to this issue. Even though electric fences have been set up and more are being built covering the affected and vulnerable areas to prevent the wild elephants from entering human settlements, the elephants have found methods to destroy the electric fence and trespass into the villages.

According to Wildlife Conservator of Anuradhapura W.M.K.S. Chandraratne, more than 40 people and 83 wild elephants had died during encounters in the Anuradhapura wildlife zone in 2023.



The carcass of wild tusker ‘Deegha Danthu’ after it died of electrocution at Kalawewa in Anuradhapura.
I PHOTO: THISARA SOMARATHE

More than 700 property damage by the wild elephants was reported in the district in that year.

Over 50 of the 83 elephant deaths had taken place due to electrocution caused by illegal traps or being shot by individuals. Statistics for 2024 were yet to be released.

The HEC is not an issue which can be solved overnight. It needs a win-win situation as both the humans and the wild elephants are helpless and at risk.

Chandrasiri Banda is a 64-year-old Chena cultivation farmer in the Mahailuppallama area. He has been cultivating crops such as maize and some other vegetables for decades as his livelihood. According to him, he has sacrificed his entire life for farming and

cultivation, but always think of giving it up due to the wild elephants that destroy his crops. He said once they start cultivation, they have to spend every single night awake in a small tent on top of a huge tree in his Chena to chase away the wild elephants that come to consume the crops. He said their lives are at risk when elephants come to the fields. “The single elephant is more aggressive and dangerous than a herd,” he said.

Once their crops are destroyed by wild elephants, they cannot obtain a proper income from their fields.

Residents, farmers, children and the elderly people in the above mentioned areas are highly vulnerable and at risk not only when they are out of their houses, but even inside.

The wild elephants can come to the houses looking for food anytime of the day. If there is harvest such as paddy stored in the house, the elephants can smell it and they break the walls of the houses to consume it.

R.M. Katunawathi, 84, of Priyankaragama in Eppawala was attacked and killed by a wild elephant at her home garden in the early morning of November 12 last year.

Lieutenant Commander Jayakody, attached to the Punewa Navy Camp in Medawachchiya, Anuradhapura, was killed by an elephant attack while carrying out some disaster relief-related duties on November 29.

Sixty-two-year-old Mohammed Sadurdeen of Udenipura, Mahailuppallama also lost his life due to an elephant attack on December 11 evening while he was returning from the town.

These are only a few tragic examples that took place in recent months.

While the lives of the humans in the threatened areas are at risk, the wild jumbos are also facing threats to their lives. Even though the authorities have taken initiatives such as erecting electric fences in the affected areas and using firecrackers to scare away the animals, some individuals use illegal methods to kill these animals.

Setting up traps to electrocute the animals, shooting them and use of Hakka Patas (Jaw bombs) are some these methods. A wild tusker known as ‘Deega Danthu 1’ was one of the largest wild tuskiers in Sri Lanka. It was found dead by electrocution in the Kalawewa National Park in November last year.

The wildlife officers had treated wild tusker ‘Agbo’ more than 100 times within 18 months after the jumbo was shot by an individual. Untimely deaths of these wild animals have a direct impact on their population.

As pointed out by wildlife activists, human activities such deforestation, encroachment of animal habitats by humans and urbanisation have intensified the human-elephant encounters in the past few years.

It has been revealed that the main reason for aggravating the human-elephant conflict in Anuradhapura district was the encroachment of main elephant corridors and elephant passes by the humans.

When the elephants are unable to move freely through their usual corridors, elephants tend to attack humans and destroy properties. Therefore, encroachment is the key issue that should be provided with a solution.

Also the authorities should take initiatives to use the new GPS technology to track the movement of wild elephants and thereby save the lives of both humans and elephants, the activists stressed.

Walk for survival



DAILY ROUTINE: Jeetender Kumar from Pandora village in Chhattisgarh walks 6 km every day carrying water for his cattle amidst an acute water scarcity. The nearest water source is 10-12km away. The villagers use a motor to pump water to a spot 3 km from the village.
I PHOTO: SHREYA SINGH

The Rabaris wander on in search of water

Increased groundwater salinity drives the pastoralists in Rajasthan from voluntary migration to permanent displacement

MAYANK SHARMA

Dharuhera (Rewari): Ramesh has had quite a night. He had barely slept through the ride in the overnight bus he had boarded the day before from Bhinwal, Jalore. His task was to watch over a bag of wheat flour which he brought to the industrial wasteland his parents had been staying in. “I can’t be losing on the katta (bag of flour), there’s not much solid food around here,” the nine-year-old boy says as he carefully brings a small bronze vessel filled with water for his father.

His middle-aged father, along with the horde of nomadic pastoralists who have seasonally migrated to Dharuhera, Rewari, has pitched three poles within a matter of minutes to prepare a tarp tent. The family of four would be

spending the chilly night in this tent.

In January, temperatures drop below five degrees Celsius at night in the northern State of Haryana. Soon, their flock of cattle will be guided to the nearly toppling structure within the vast plot which is registered under Sehgal Paper Mill in Dharuhera’s Industrial Block of Alamgirpur.

These structures, held on by decades-old bricks, are surrounded by pools of liquid industrial waste, which was being dumped by nearby factories for years.

The hundred-strong horde of Rabari tribesmen have walked 900 km East from their native Jalore district in Rajasthan, to Rewari in Haryana over a span of two-months looking for clean water resources and fodder for their cattle.

The Rabari, also called the

Raikas are one of the predominant nomadic pastoral tribes of Western Rajasthan. They have traditionally been known to pursue semi-nomadic lifestyles. “Our forefathers grazed camels. We graze cattle but they cannot drink Bhinwal’s saline water. We are only dependent on canal water,” Ramesh’s father tells me.

Generational poverty, landlessness, and climatic factors have led them to switch from camels to smaller livestock such as cattle and sheep, which is relatively easy to move, now that farther distances are required to be covered searching for grazing lands.

“Right now, all I am thinking about is to graze my cattle to make it through the winters,” tells one of the ‘lal pagdi walas’, synonymous with the Rabari tribal men traditionally donning a red turban over an all-white attire. “I have left the children with the elders, left them enough food (resources) to go to school, but to what extent? Not many are buying the milk (produced by the livestock),” says the man, speaking through his bushy moustache. He has no hopes of government policies offering them any breakthrough either.

A Rabari household begins migrating soon after the monsoons, and their path typically spans hundreds of miles. Nomadic pastoralist tribes of Rajasthan have historically used surplus lands, other than the agricultural land parcels in concord to graze their livestock. However, this group of Rabaris, are deprived of grazing land due to the degradation



ENDLESS QUEST: The archetype of a semi-nomadic Rabari tribal household braves the chilly winds in January during a halt in his travel. | PHOTO: MAYANK SHARMA

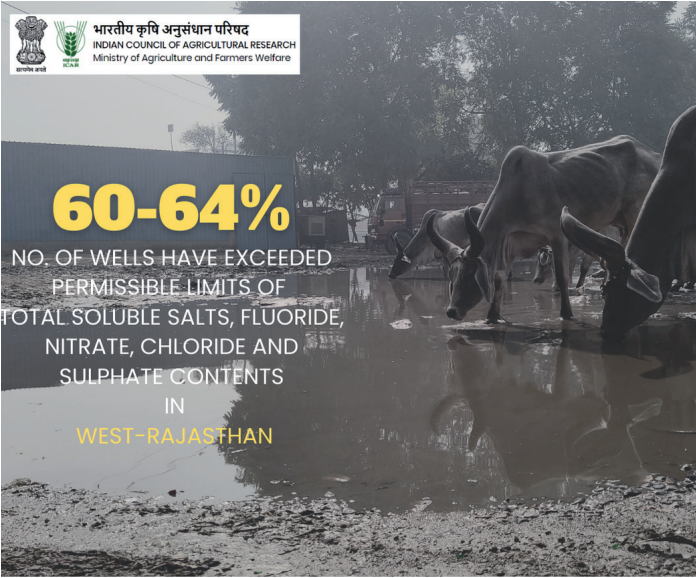
Rajasthan’s Jalore district recorded high sulphate concentrates in ground water and mean changes of up to -18 metres of depletion during 1985-2009.

wandering lifestyle. Any more... top priority should be given to create new settlements where activities like housing, education and creation of the source of income will be started simultaneously.”

The Livestock Census of India, 2011 had already predicted an annual loss of one-tenth to one-fifth of the cattle in individual pastoral flocks of the region for the following decade.

Government Veterinary services, additionally, are rarely availed due to lack of common conviction over the usefulness, and largely the out-migratory distances at which the tribal flocks are situated during different crop cycles.

“I have lost a good portion of my flock to saline water from the wells in Rajasthan and Gujarat, here too water is difficult to find. Maybe we will go to Sonapat or Panipat after the Holi festival (celebratory festival of the Rabi crop cycle in North-India), but definitely are not going back to Jalore,” says Basna Ram as he, for once in hours, stops digging.



of traditional farming lands for maximum utilisation; and increasing salinity and depletion of groundwater reserves.

Changing rainfall patterns have been largely linked to the phenomenon.

As per the 2024 Report on Dynamic Groundwater Resources of Rajasthan, a little over 71% of the state’s reserves were deemed, “over-exploited.” Undocumented village-wells and other sources for livestock consumption too have turned saline and unfit, leaving the tribe’s sole source of livelihood vulnerable to exhaustion, mal-nutrition, and attack from diseases.

“Where are we going to keep our cows? Nobody lets us feed them in agricultural fields. Our grazing fields are filled with tall food crops. If my buffalo can’t enter, what will it eat?” says Basna Ram, while he is fixing up a tent. His daughter feeds him off a bowl of kheer made out of one of their buffalos’ milk produce as he had got plenty of more tents to prepare. The unsold milk would now remain the sole component of the family’s diet for a couple of days.

Elsewhere, an elderly man points out that the Rabaris are currently staying on government land. “We are leaving anyway in

two months. The government has not given us any ration even at home, you think they will come up here and prepare my tent?” The man hurriedly placed his cane down to bring out his Aadhar card from his belongings all packed in cloth potlis in his cart. “How do I get BPL ration (welfare schemes) if I’m always on the move?”

The Renke Commission Report of 2008 did come up with suggestions addressing the issue, “Basic civic amenities be provided to the DNTs living in colonies and clusters... (but) times have changed... where they (nomadic tribes) cannot continue with their

Stories from the margins...



STRIPPED OF HONOUR: Children belonging to the Yerukula tribe bathing in the open as they are prevented from using the public washrooms in the coastal town of Ennore, on the outskirts of Chennai. | PHOTO: MOHAMED SALAHUDEEN B



IN DEEP WATERS: A woman prawn farmer rows back after a day's work in Kadamakkudy, Kerala, with the little catch. Fisherfolk are suffering as the prawn population has dwindled due to climate change. | PHOTO: NEHA RAJIVE



SCARRED WALLS: A home destroyed in Chooralmala, Wayanad, in the landslide in 2004 stands as a testament to the lives scarred by the tragedy | PHOTO: PRIYA BABURAJ



HELPLESS: These illiterate dalit women at Bariyari village in Uttar Pradesh yearn to have their children educated. The village school is badly run, but they cannot afford to send the children to schools elsewhere. | PHOTO: ISHITA BAJPAI



LIFE WITH THE GODS: Sculptor Monish Paul, who gets orders only during special festivals, works and lives in his congested workshop in Kumartuli in North Kolkata. With hardly any demand for idols during the non-festival season, making ends meet during this period is a challenge. | PHOTO: SREEJITA SEN MAJUMDER

These Sal leaf plate makers have little on their plate

With no option, women tribals of Dudhkundi risk their lives in the forest

SANCHALI BARUA

East Singhbhum (Jharkhand): Phool Birhor, 31, has been collecting Sal leaves for six years now. Every four days, Phool, along with other women from her village of Dudhkundi, walk together as a group to collect Sal leaves from the forests. They wake up at the crack of dawn to collect leaves so that they can return before the sun goes down. The Sal leaves they are after have a distinctive look: broad, dark green colour, oval-shaped, pointy tip with veins which are running parallel to one another.

The women walk 10 km to reach the forests up in the mountains, where they first locate the Sal trees. Then, they individually pluck leaves from the trees, bundle them up, and bring them back. They collect 1,000-1,500 leaves before starting their downhill trek home.

“We have to be careful while plucking the leaves or else we might end up touching some poisonous plant,” Phool warned. “To provide for my family, I need to walk this distance.”

Phool’s neighbour, Renu Birhor, 35, says the women feel safer when travelling in a group.

INSECURITY

“The long road to the mountains is mostly empty as there is nothing on either side except valleys and mountains. Danger is always lurking in the forest, so it’s safer to be with others,” said Renu. “There is always the fear of encountering wild animals. Also, if one is not careful, they might end up getting bitten by snakes or other poisonous insects.”

Dudhkundi village, where these women live with their families, falls under East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand in Potka block. People frequently see wild animals in this region, especially tigers and elephants, making it even more important to travel in groups.

For a while now, Dudhkundi’s women have been using Sal leaves to make plates because they are strong and durable. They are ideal for wrapping food as they do not tear easily or let food spill from it. “Not many people know that making a Sal leaf plate is time-consuming. One plate requires at least eight leaves to make it secure enough to be used,” a Sal plate maker, Sunita Birhor, 68 said. “We sew all these leaves together by breaking off splinters from the bamboo and weaving them through the leaves.”

It takes four days to complete the process of making a Sal leaf plate. It begins with collection of the leaves, then making the plates



LEAVES OF LABOUR: Seema Birhor, 65, sitting in the field with the Sal leaf plates she had made set out to dry in the sun. **PHOTOS:** SANCHALI BARUA

by sewing the leaves, followed by drying them under the sun and finally selling them in the market.

The women belong to the Birhor tribe, which has historically been a forest-dependent community. They have hunted or gathered Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) to ensure survival. Over time, people from the community have shifted towards farming and cattle rearing. However, a majority still rely on the forest as their primary source of livelihood.

Apart from making Sal leaf plates, these tribal women collect

wood, fruits, and vegetables from the forests. They either sell them in the market or use them to cook food and feed their own family. The women help their families when not going to the forest. “I have to help my husband out in the fields when I am not going to the forests,” said Phool. “There is no day off for me unless I am very sick.”

Sunita said that in a day, the women can make 200 plates, which they assemble in bundles of 20 plates. “After this, we have to let these plates dry out in the sun

for one whole day. It is only after this we can sell these plates in the local market,” she added. But the distance from Dudhkundi village to the local market is another 10 km with no public transport. “We have to walk all the way to the nearest local market in Potka’s main square to sell our goods,” said Sunita.

Though many of their livelihoods depend on it, the Sal leaf plate trade is an unorganised sector that does not generate enough income to support their families. “In the market, a single Sal leaf plate sells for only Rs 5, and a bundle of these plates does not fetch us more than Rs 100. This is not enough to compensate for the hard work we put into making these plates,” said Mamta Birhor, 29.

Seema Birhor, Mamta’s mother-in-law, said that some of the women would prefer to do safer jobs that are less tiresome.

“For the meagre amount of money which I earn by selling Sal leaf plates, I find the whole work too laborious,” she said. I am already 65 years old, but I must do this work to support my family. My daughter-in-law just had her third baby, so she cannot go to the forest with me.”

Even though the Jharkhand Government has two schemes specifically for the women from the Scheduled Tribes, one a Rs.2 lakh loan to start a rural project and another to learn an industry-relevant skill, the women of Dudhkundi village say they have not benefited from these schemes.

“I want the government to give us a more secure livelihood option and not just empty promises during elections,” said Seema.

Shrinking island, shrinking means

Boatmakers of Majuli struggle to keep trade afloat

ABHINANDITA N KASHYAP

Salmora, Majuli (Assam): The residents of Salmora village located in the southernmost part of the riverine island of Majuli, Assam, have a love-hate relationship with water and the meandering river that envelops their villages.

“It’s obvious that the Brahmaputra can be a blessing as well as a curse, but lately it has been more of a curse,” says Jyoti Prakash Bhuyan (55) a generational boat-maker in Salmora. Bhuyan, who supports a family of four, has seen his profession erode with the island itself.

Government data shows that Majuli is on the verge of extinction due to extreme soil erosion. Starting in June every year, floods ravage the island, leaving devastation in their wake. “Since I can remember, the river has swallowed at least 4 km of the island,” recalls Bhuyan. “I was 10 when I saw my neighbour swept away by the current.”

His wife, Kamini Bhuyan, tending to their two cows, points to the cowshed on a raised platform, “Last year the water came within centimeters of flooding it.” Nine out of 10 households in Salmora own a boat for emergencies during the floods. Researcher Debasish Dey calls Majuli’s boat-building craft a vital “living heritage.”

Salmora, famous for its traditional craft of boat-making and pottery was once a village famous for its trade but now is on the brink of unemployment. A little over 600 families reside in Salmora, half of whom depend on the craft of boat-making to make their ends meet.

These artisans rely on traditional methods for their craft and do not rely on any kind of machinery;

instead traditional tools such as hacksaws, blades, chisels, and rivets are used for the construction.

When Dharmeshwar Bhuyan (52) was just a boy nearly every household in the village had one boat-maker in the family, but now only a few remain. The job that was previously rewarding now fails to sustain their day-to-day lives.

The 1950 earthquake marked a turning point for Majuli, drastically altering its morphology. The quake raised the riverbed by three to four meters with silt, triggering relentless erosion and flooding.

“The river takes so much away from us,” laments Bhuyan. “Our homes are unstable. We have a wonderful community, everyone is

Falling demand, curbs on tree felling, and climate change compound the woes of the boat-makers of Majuli

as helpful as one can be but at the end of the day it’s hard to focus on the brighter side when every year it feels like we are moving closer to a disaster.”

Bhuyan, dressed in a pair of grey trousers and a striped red sweater points to his house built on a raised platform and says how most of the households have a sang ghor to protect and stay dry during the flood season when the river turns against them.

Once spanning 1,250 sq km in the Brahmaputra, Majuli has shrunk to just 483 sq km, its landscape reshaped by decades of erosion.

Tirtha Prasad Saikia, Director

of North-East Affected Area Development Society (NEADS), says the flood-led erosions have taken a toll on their livelihoods as well. “Flood-induced erosion has devastated these communities. With tree felling now restricted by conservation laws, sustaining their craft has become even harder.”

The craft relies on timber from trees like Ajar (*Lagettstroemia speciosa*) and Urium (*Bischofia javanica*), but sourcing the wood has become a financial burden. “We either source timber from Jorhat or Dibrugarh, which raises costs, or bribe forest officials to cut trees locally,” says veteran boat-maker Bipin Chamua (67) who learned the craft at the tender age of 11.

A four-person boat costs around ₹15,000 to make, Chamua explains, but profits are minimal. “Timber alone costs ₹6,000. Oil to coat the boat and prevent rotting costs ₹5,000. Add wages, and there’s barely anything left for my family.”

Economic hardships have driven many to abandon the trade. Dillip Hazarika (45) is currently a resident of Jorhat and works as a salesman in a clothing store. He was born and brought up in Salmora and his father is a generational boat-maker. “I couldn’t make ends meet while supporting a family of five, including a son with medical needs,” he says.

Experts agree that climate change has compounded the struggles of Majuli’s boat-makers.

“Already vulnerable communities are now under greater pressure,” says Saikia. “Tree-felling regulations, reduced demand for boats, and a changing ecosystem are forcing families to seek alternative livelihoods, leaving this centuries-old craft behind.”



Boats are traditionally a part of the lives of the residents at Salmora village in Majuli. Fishing from wetlands within the island is one such reason **PHOTO:** ABHINANDITA N KASHYAP

It’s silent discrimination that dalits in Uttarakhand face

JANAKI PANDE

Tehri Garhwal (Uttarakhand): In Uttarakhand’s Henvul valley, the serene silence of the mountainous terrain hides the persisting invisible caste discrimination. A gathering of students from the Kasturba Gandhi girl’s boarding school, as well as social activists, legal volunteers, and teachers chooses to break that silence.

A 51-year-old social activist, Anita Sharma, stands before a crowd of eager listeners, as a banner behind her reads, ‘Dalit literature and the state of dalits in the present context: A discussion’. She recalls an instance where she defied the caste norms at a cultural festival. When asked to sit at the back where ‘people like her’ sat, she refused.

She recounts, “I went and sat in front with the others. I said what can the Gods do? Kill me? At least we’ll find out what happens when the rules are broken!” She pauses, letting her words sink into

the crowd, then smiles, “Nothing happened,” and as her smile fades, she adds, “but those are our struggles. People say things have changed, but maybe only 10%. We can’t call that a change.”

Dr. Siddharth Ramu, journalist and author, in his introduction to ‘Himalaya Dalit Hai’, a poetry collection on dalit struggles, writes, “In every village there is an enormous wall of caste which stands between the sawarn, upper caste, and the dalit, lower caste.”

Yet, some believe that caste discrimination is a thing of the past. “Those who say it still exists, will say so, but I have neither seen nor done anything,” says Kamal Singh Aswal, former Pradhan of Basui. Many agree that things are better now.

However, the word ‘better’ by itself hardly means anything. Conversations with people hint at an uneasy coexistence instead. Further up the winding mountain roads, in a village called Fakot, Gita Negi, a 30-year-old housewife

says, “They know it,” she adds with a resigned smile, “they won’t come into our kitchens.” A few kilometres away, in Bhinnu, Beena Devi, a 41-year-old dalit mushroom farmer, admits, “It’s not that bad, from our side we just don’t go to them.”

The discrimination doesn’t spare the young generation either. Ayushi Negi, a 14-year-old schoolgirl, recalls a dalit boy in her class who was made to sit at the back of the class, where people would not talk to him or share their lunch with him. “But now that doesn’t happen anymore,” she says, and when asked why, she hesitantly admits, “He is no longer in our school.”

Yet, despite trying to avoid the upper castes, dalits still become victims of abuse and violence. Phool



Sushila Devi, carrying flour back to her house, asserts that she keeps away from the upper caste people of her village **PHOTO:** JANAKI PANDE

Das Daundiya, a 62-year-old dalit para legal volunteer at the District Legal Authority, recounts how even after raping a dalit girl and being sentenced to a 10-year imprisonment, an upper caste man was set free within two years. Frustrated, he admits, “The entire village came together to get him out of jail.” There are many such instances where justice is no longer confined to the legal machinery. An exasperated Sharma exclaims, “What kind of justice is this? They won’t eat the food touched by a dalit, but they will rape them!”

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics reveal a 35% increase in reported crimes against Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities in Uttarakhand between 2019 and 2021. However, even when crimes

are reported, justice does not ensue.

Voicing struggles that often go unheard, Mohan Mukht, a poet for dalit rights from Pithoragarh, says that ideals of revolution reached the upper castes who had no need for it, but were never allowed to percolate down to the hardworking, backward, dalit communities. Adding poetic flair to the stark truth, Mukht writes, addressing the upper castes, “Kranti tumhari samajh ki, aur meri zaroorat.” Revolution was your understanding, and my need.

Reforms do reach some villages, often starting with basic necessities like water. About 60km north of Dehradun, in the village of Jaunpur, Thatyud, the dalit settlements had no water connectivity until recently, recalls Aranya Ranjan, a 41-year-old social activist. “The women had bald spots like mine on their heads,” he explains, from having to carry water to and fro, uphill and downhill, from a hand pump tucked 3 km into the jungle.

After pipes and tanks were

finally installed, Ranjan fondly remembers getting daily calls from one of the villagers. While returning with his mules every evening, he would put the phone close to the sound of lapping waters and say, “Listen, the water is still flowing.”

The life of dalits in Uttarakhand is full of such small victories and persisting challenges. What might appear to be peace on the surface is simply a division that has solidified and grown stagnant. The dalits realise that the easier solution is to stay away from the places and people where they face insult.

However, the ‘us and them’ still punctuates conversations about caste. A smiling Devi, looking at her mushroom bags, brushes aside the caste divide in Uttarakhand and explains that she would rather just keep to herself. She says, “Unse panga nahi lena, unke moo nahi lagana.” She doesn’t want to create conflict, and yet conflict persists.

Tribals in M.P. village choke under a blanket of flyash

Ethanol factory spews black soot on Mawasi hamlet in Dadin

DRISHTI JAIN

Dadin, Majhgawan (M.P.): “We cannot see the face of a person sitting in front of us,” 40-year-old Janaklali Mawasi says as she points to the courtyard of her half-clay-made house. The courtyard was where her friends used to gather after completing their daily chores to sit together and chat. But now it lies abandoned.

Thick, dense ash particles float in the air, making visibility very poor. Once a hub of community life, courtyards now lie deserted in the village of Dadin, and fields, once fertile, are covered in fine black soot that taints everything it touches. Industrialisation has transformed life here, but not for the better.

Dadin, located 7km from Majhgawan block, in Madhya Pradesh’s Satna District, was six months ago populated by the Mawasi tribe. It is a few kilometres from the newly established Indo Nuclear Energy Pvt. Ltd, an ethanol-producing plant approved by the Government of India.

Janaklali and her neighbour Uma Mawasi (25), both farmers, have found that their morning routines have changed in the last few months. “The first thing I do now in the morning is to pick up a wooden broom and clean the courtyard,” Uma says. She then picks off all the dried clothes from the line only to wash them again.

“We used to pluck Chana bhaji (chickpea) from the field and eat it with salt without even washing it, but we cannot do it anymore,” says Janaklali. “We don’t feel like eating it because wherever we look, there is ash all over the crop and soil,” she says. The women say they cannot afford to buy vegetables from the market. Their income doesn’t allow it which makes the vegetables they grow in their backyard all the more valuable. That combined with the ration from the PDS shops somehow sees them through the month.

Villagers claim that the ethanol plant owners promised to give them concrete houses nearby in Patni



GREY LIVES: (Clockwise, from top) Two-year-old Preeti crawls in her courtyard with flies around her; the fly ash settles on the chana and mustard crops on the field of Uma; Janakali Mawasi shows fly ash settled on her crops.

PHOTOS: DRISHTI JAIN

village, 6 km away. While initially this seemed like a lucrative offer since many did not benefit from the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Janaklali and Uma say moving to Patni would mean living further away from their farms, their children and their livestock. “It is difficult for us to travel from there to do farming every day. We can’t leave our children and cows behind alone. We irrigate fields adjacent to our houses,” says Janaklali, as Uma nods.

A few houses away, two-year old Preeti, wearing only two pieces of clothing — a striped sweater with a snug monkey cap pulled tightly over her head — crawls from the courtyard to the door as she cries loudly. Her mother picks her up and swats the ash-covered flies from

Waste from the plant has even contaminated the village’s only water source

her body. “The number of flies has increased since the factory started,” says Heeralaal Mawasi, 27, who passes by the house.

Mawasi says the villagers have complained about the fly ash emissions from the plant’s boiler. Last year, protests by the villagers forced the company to shut down for three days. But it started up soon after. “The ash from the plant’s boiler goes into the eyes; it hurts for

4-5 hours. They promised us a free medical facility, but it has been shut for months,” he says.

Waste from the plant has even contaminated the village’s water source, a well located a kilometre outside the village on which the entire village depends. “The factory people get packaged water bottles from Majhgawan. They should send it to us as well. We poor people suffer, since the whole panchayat struggles to find water in summers,” says Mawasi.

Uma says she frequently gets blisters on her hands from using the water.

Block Medical Officer, Rupesh Soni says villagers have complained about symptoms like itching but there has not been a spurt in the same type of cases. “Though the water is contaminated, we cannot say that skin allergy and respiratory illnesses are because of the plant,” he says. Though the villagers have complained to the Chief Minister, the District Magistrate, and the Collector about the water contamination, no action has been taken to address the problems. “But if the water is left untreated, it has the potential to cause severe skin and respiratory infections,” says Soni.

Over at the plant, General Manager Om Prakash Singh denies all the allegations of toxic pollutants settling on the crops. “We use ash to make bricks promoted by the government, so when it is loaded in the truck, it can fly and settle,” he says, casually. “But why does nobody question the boiler of the Birla cement plant set up in Maihar?” he asks about a city 85 km away, where three employees have lost their lives since the company was set up. He says that the plant he manages is monitored by people sitting in Delhi and has been cleared by 12 departments.

Though the company recently constructed an ash pond near the factory, villagers complain that the water mixes with the stream of water used in irrigation, affecting the quality of the soil. As the villagers navigate their ash covered lives, they hope that one day, their grievances will be heard.

Goa’s famed brew under the weather

Erratic weather patterns threaten feni production

ANUSREE K C

Chandor (South Goa): Goa’s age old traditions are facing the fury of nature. Unpredictable and erratic weather patterns have wreaked havoc with cashew cultivation, causing the yield to drop and threatening the future of feni and urrak - emblems of Goan culture and tradition.

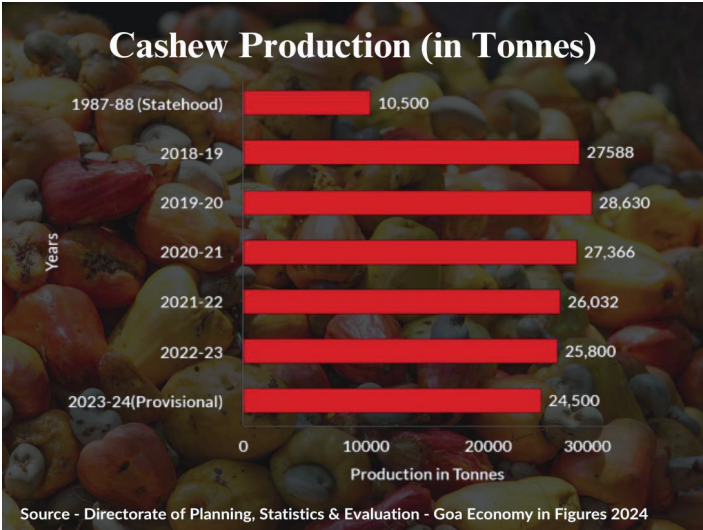
The availability of cashew apples decides the quantity of feni that can be attained during the season from March to May. Last year, many cashew processing units were shut down amid a decrease in production and stiff competition.

Feni and urrak are drinks that have been part of Goa’s tradition for the past 400 years; it became the first alcoholic beverage to be granted the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2009, the first product from Goan soil to obtain the status.

A small farmer in his late 60s from Quepem taluka in South Goa, who wished to remain anonymous, said he did not find it economical to harvest cashew, citing the low prices that urrak fetched him in the local market last season. He said the prices were dependent on the season and the brand. “The only way harvesting cashews can continue is if we get a good price for the nuts,” he sighed. The Cashew Farmers Association reported last year that around 10,000 to 12,000 tonnes of cashew is imported to the state every year, making it difficult for the local farmers to fetch a good price for their produce.

Rajesh DaCosta, Zonal Agricultural Officer South, said prolonged and unseasonal showers delay the flowering season, causing the cultivation to fluctuate. “We receive a lot of complaints from farmers who are facing problems due to the climate change. They are compensated under the state scheme Shetkari Adhar Nidhi,” he said.

“We procure cashew apples from farmers of Sanguelim. The produce has gone down in the past few years due to various factors, climatic change being a



major one,” said Solomon Diniz, happens, if we don’t have a shower the flowers will dry and fall off. Managing Director of Adinco Distilleries at Chandor village in Salcete Taluka. The distillery has been in the family for four generations. Sharin Furtado,

Cold stretches of night are now interrupted by warm ones, which disrupt the fruiting patterns

District Agriculture Officer South, said a small variation in the temperature results in the drying of pollen grains. “Dew in early mornings has a harmful effect on cashew crops. It invites pests and causes diseases, causing the nut yield to fall by 50%. There is a heavy incidence of tea mosquito bug and thrips pests on cashew crop.”

Smita Patil, who owns N.V Eco-farm at Kirlapal Dabal village, where cashew apples are cultivated and feni is being produced for decades, is unhappy with the produce. “Cashew production depends on the winter and the rain.

If it is not cold enough, flowering doesn’t happen. Once the flowering You need the shocks of cold and then the rain for the flowering to be good,” she says.

Ashok Malkarnekar of Goa Heritage Distillery, Karmane, South Goa, also owns a plantation near Dudhsagar. Cashew has been cultivated here for two generations. He says the cold stretches of night are now interrupted by warm ones, which disrupt the fruiting patterns. “The production has been average. Earlier we had continuous stretches of cold nights in December, January, February. That has changed.”

Furtado says cashew plants are prone to pest attacks. In the past few years, the attack of tea mosquito bugs has been on a rise. “Usually, the crops are sprayed with neem oil every week. Smoke treatment is another method to reduce pest attack,” he said.

Even though the cashew production in the state has taken a hit, the makers of feni and urrak are optimistic about the future of the drinks. “Of late, a few passionate people have marketed the brand feni, and it is getting back on the shelves,” said Diniz.

While the market conditions for production of feni seems favourable and optimistic, the future of the cashew plantations and farmers in Goa is uncertain.

Witch-hunters target vulnerable women as police look the other way

Promulgation of Prevention of Witch Practices Act in Bihar has not helped curb the evil; poor enforcement blamed

SABINA DEVKOTA

Gaya (Bihar): December 8, 2024. Around 11 am. Fifty-year-old Shyamsundari Devi was basking in the mild winter sun of Rampur village in Gaya district. Suddenly, out of the blue, appeared seven of her relatives, and without warning one of them grabbed her hair, while others choked her and started dragging her out, hurling accusations of being a dayan (witch) who is causing illnesses in their children.

“They punched my head twice and kicked my body for an hour. I eventually blacked out, and was unconscious for two hours,” Shyamsundari said, recalling the horror of that morning. The mob’s uncontrolled rage would have killed her, had not her husband, Nagendra, shielded her with his body and dragged her back into the house.

A sick and ailing Shyamsundari was attacked two months ago, when a local child died of snakebite.

According to local people, the practice of labelling women as “dayan” and beating them is prevalent in many villages in rural Bihar.

It all started two years ago when a nephew’s mother died of polio. “They used to point at me and say: ‘wo dekh! dayan aa gayi (look! the dayan has come), aapan ko nahi khatihai, hamarake kha hae (this dayan doesn’t kill her own blood, but ate ours).” Shyamsundari recounted how they used to call bhagats (exorcists/witch doctors) time and again to perform dewas



HAUNTED AND HUNTED: Shyamsundari Devi, a native of Rampur village in Gaya district sharing her experiences after being accused of dayan. PHOTO : SABINA DEVKOTA

puja (local ritual) to prove that she was a dayan.

Similar horror was faced by Sonakanti Devi, 36, of Manda gram panchayat in Gaya. On April 26, after a relative’s son died in a road accident in the early hours, the grieving family lashed out at her. They attacked her, and her own nephews punched her young daughter on the chest and threatened to rape her, accusing her of being a dayan’s daughter and ‘eating up’ their own.

Both Shyamsundari and Sonakanti finally had to take recourse to the law. They filed a

complaint with the local police. The response often is not encouraging.

When Shyamsundari’s family went to police to complain, the police were swayed by the mukhiya, and instead of conducting a rigorous investigation they merely inspected and left without taking any concrete action. “Police have no value in this village,” said Shyamsundari, smiling helplessly.

Sonakanti and her daughter were waylaid and attacked when they were going to the police station to lodge a complaint. They were attacked by a mob of 17 relatives who pelted stones at them. “They

eventually dragged us back to the house, beating us all the way,” she said.

They ended up locking themselves inside their own home while the mob kept waiting at the door. Then she called the police, but when they arrived, the mob had stormed into her house, threatening to kill them in front of the police.

“The police tried mediating but couldn’t control the situation,” she recounted. Though an FIR was registered and a few attackers were detained, they were soon released.

Later, the village panchayat arranged a meeting and forced

her to visit a bhagat for a ritual to ‘determine’ whether she was a dayan or not - a process she had already undergone three times before. This time, however, she refused.

Despite Bihar being the first state to criminalise witch-hunting with the Prevention of Witch Practices Act, 1999, it still has not been able to minimise the witchcraft-related crimes. Instead, the inability to legally hold the perpetrators accountable is fostering its expansion in villages.

“Though we have a law, there is no implementation at all,” said Ajay Kumar Jaiswal, lawyer and secretary of ASHA Foundation, Jharkhand, who played an instrumental role in formulating the anti-witchcraft law in India.

According to him, the nature

of the crime makes it difficult to enforce the law effectively. “The entire dayan pratha, thrives because it is not the act of single culprit but a collective conspiracy,” he explained.

Police investigations often rely on mukhiya and sarpanch for information, further complicating matters. “However, we try not to fall under their influence,” said Pooja Dhobi, head of the women’s cell in Gaya.

However, it has been found that in most such cases, victims do not file complaints out of fear. A 2024 survey by Nirantar Trust, a Delhi based NGO, among 145 survivors across 118 villages in Bihar, found that 69 per cent of victims never file complaints due to stigma. Among the 45 women who did file complaints, no action was taken in 28 cases. The study also revealed that 69 out of 81

Mukhiya had no knowledge of the anti-witchcraft laws. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, more than 2,500 women have been killed in India in the name of witchcraft since 2000.

Though such accusations seem to stem from sudden deaths or health problems in the village, most victims attribute the root cause to jealousy.

Both Shyamsundari and Sonakanti believe this to be true. “Ever since I built the two-storey pucca house in 2022, the jealousy escalated into blame-game,” Sonakanti said. “Had we not claimed our one-acre hereditary land, this would never have happened,” said Shyamsundari, accusing her nephew’s family of illegally transferring land in mortgage.

Education is not always effective. In most of the cases, literacy has nothing to do with it, said Jaiswal.

According to him, this is why even panchayat members who win over a male candidate are accused of dayan. In 2012, a member of Kenjari Panchayat of Khagaria district in Bihar was dubbed a dayan and her nose was chopped.

After all, who profits out of this? This reveals the socio psychological dimensions of this system, said Shankar Kumar, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University. “It’s a way to suppress marginalised women, often who are poor and weak.” According to him, Dayan pratha is a folk, patriarchal, intergenerational, rural and myth-based system that helps vested groups exercise power.

