

THE WORD

COVERING



DEPRIVATION

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Fishing under the gun is 'a daily risk' for them

Fishermen in Rameswaram say they have no other option

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Fishermen of Rameswaram and their families wish they could turn their backs on the profession that endangers their lives on a daily basis. Apart from natural causes, the threat of being shot, killed or detained by the Sri Lankan Navy still looms large on the 3,500 fishermen families.

Till date, 3,000 fishermen have been caught, beaten up or shot by the Sri Lankan Navy. India and Sri Lanka are 18 nautical miles apart. Indian fishermen get only nine nautical miles to fish. As a result they allegedly stray into Sri Lankan waters. The increase in the number of boats has led to more competition for the catch.

Says Sekhar Pandiyan, 55, who survived a Sri Lankan Navy attack: "It is better to die... living a physically disabled life is a punishment."

On January 11, 2008, he went into the sea with his two brothers and son. His son had accompanied him for the first time. Even while he was telling his son about the direction from which the Sri Lankan Navy could approach them, his boat was shot at.

His brother, who could speak English, told the personnel that Sekhar had been shot. The Navy cut their net ("as they always do"), and told them to get back.

When a person dies in Sri



COLLISION COURSE: Fishermen at Rameswaram jetty try to steady an incoming trawler | MANTHRA KOLIYER

Lankan Navy firing, his family gets Rs 5 lakhs as compensation. Survivors get financial assistance of Rs 50,000 to Rs 1 lakh from the government. But their medical expenses are much more.

"The people around you start treating you like trash once you are rendered incapable," says Sekhar. "When we were in debt, I was asked to send my wife to a brothel and my son to beg," he adds.

Worse is the fate of fishermen detained by the Sri Lankan Navy. Stalin, Sekhar's son, says, "The Fishermen's Association gives around Rs 100 a day to the family, depending on how many days he

has been kept in prison."

He was caught twice. "Fifty-five days in prison. My family was left to survive on its own. It is only after we come back that we apply for the allowance that the government provides (Rs 250 a day). Our boats rot on the Sri Lankan coast," he adds.

The BJP has promised that it will give boats to people whose boats had been seized by the Sri Lankan navy. But fishermen have been asked to invest Rs 50 lakhs initially.

Talking about the ties between the Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen, Sesuraja, head of the Fishermen's Association, says,

"The relationship dates back ages."

The fishermen of Tamil Nadu practised fishing in a peaceful manner. They bonded like "Uncle-Nephew" with the Sri Lankans, sharing the wealth of the sea, food and produce. They maintained peaceful relations till the Sri Lankan civil war broke out in 1983, he claims.

The Indian fishermen were accused of helping the Tamil militants fighting the Sri Lankan Government.

From 1988-1997, "we were caught and tied to trees. The Sri Lankan Navy would take the fish, prawns and let us go. Arrest was rare," says Sesuraja.

Now when a fisherman is caught for the first time, his fingerprints are taken and he is imprisoned for three months. The second time it is two years, and the third time five years.

The Rameswaram fishermen were also accused of using trawlers and taking the entire aqua life from the Sri Lankan waters. (Trawling is banned in Sri Lanka).

Fishermen here say they have no other option, as their ancestral job is on the verge of a breakdown.

"Vidyalay noki kanneerodu kaathirukum meenavargal (teary eyed fishermen waiting for brighter mornings). My children will never learn that the sea is a beautiful place. They've only heard stories of pain and agony," says Raja.

SWACHH BHARAT?



A toilet in Alagiri village of Tamil Nadu's Dharmapuri district, built under the Centre's flagship programme Swachh Bharat Mission to achieve an open defecation free India by 2019. Since October 2014, nearly Rs 48,000 crores has been spent to build over 10 crore private toilets, covering more than 6 lakh villages. The government claims that India is now 100 per cent open defecation free. But recent visits by students of the Asian College of Journalism to several villages showed that many residents still do not have a toilet and have to travel long distances to defecate in the open. Those who do have a toilet do not use it because of bad odour, lack of water supply and other reasons. Detailed reports in the inside pages. | JASMIN NIHALANI

15 years on, Tharangambadi yet to recover from tsunami

ABHINAV CHAKRABORTY

Tharangambadi: Samuel Thomas remembers arriving in Tharangambadi on December 28, 2004 - only two days after the tsunami hit the coastal district of Nagapattinam. Over 400 people lost their lives in the town alone, most of them women and children.

"At first, the government needed people to bury the bodies. So, they sought help from NGOs all over. I was in Trichy then, so I was the one of the first to get here," the 51-year-old, who works for the non-profit HOPE Foundation, said.

Tharangambadi, known as the erstwhile Danish colony of Tranquebar, attracted the attention of many global non-profits after the ill-fated morning of December 26 when the tsunami struck. Both the Central and State governments were swift in delivering financial compensation to the victims. Even



Women at a basket weaving unit in Tharangambadi

the Danish government has since then invested in the town's restoration.

Fifteen years later, only a handful of the NGOs that had set up camp here remain. Veronica Raphael (64), who runs a non-profit called Rural Organisation for Social Action (ROSA), felt the relief measures by the global non-profits at the time had failed to bring real change in people's lives.

Raphael felt the money from both the government as well as the non-profits had not been used effectively to address problems like alcoholism plaguing the fisher community.

Vairam, the mother of a fisherman, said alcoholism was more like a tradition passed on from generation to generation.

"You fish in the morning, then drink in the evening. No one has a problem when business is good. But when they spend the same amount on alcohol even in bad times, it puts pressure on women," she added.

Thomas believed that despite the efforts of the government, NGOs and fishermen associations, their rehabilitation was far from over.

"Our work won't be complete till we get rid of alcoholism and domestic violence. Women need to be empowered. It will take at least another decade," he said.

No country for dead men

Bodies buried on the roadside in Kamalapuram Pirivu

NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: Residents of the Kamalapuram Pirivu area in the district are deprived of access to a proper burial ground. They buried 16 of their dead in 2019 alone, all of them on the side of a road.

"We have written many times to the government (for a burial ground) over the past 16 years but have not received any response," said Muthammal, a 46-year-old sanitation worker who helps clean the Kamalapuram village.

Kamalapuram is where the upper caste people stay, situated right next to Kamalapuram Pirivu.

Kamalapuram Pirivu is home to 200 families of the Hindu Sakaliyar community, a Scheduled Caste, and most members work as labourers or sanitation workers.

Muthammal and her colleagues earn Rs. 68 for every day they work, as against Rs. 403 proposed by the Chief Labour Commissioner's Order that was to

"The government ignores us because we are an oppressed caste."
- Muthammal, sanitation worker

come into effect on October 1, 2019.

Even their old salary has not been paid for the past three months, said Muthammal. When she and other workers approached the Nilakottai Union Office to voice their concern, they were told that the government had not allocated the funds yet, she added.

Katturaja, husband of the newly elected Panchayat Union President Pounduthal said, "These people don't work enough for the illegal proposed amount, they usually

slack off."

Muthammal said, "The Kamalapuram village gets immediate response when people over there send petitions. They have good electricity, water and roads. We have none of that."

"The government ignores us because we belong to an oppressed caste," she added.

The residents alleged that the Village Administrative Officer (VAO) asked them to provide land for a graveyard.

"We live under extreme poverty and most of us do not even have our own houses. From where can we provide land for the construction of the graveyard?" said Sammiyammal (37), a resident of the area.

Pandi.K, VAO of the area said, "The government is trying its best to get a burial ground for the people of Kamalapuram Pirivu but it isn't the first priority now. The government has to clear the illegal squatters from the area first."

Women 'face harassment' in Dindigul textile mills

SHREYA HARIDAS

Dindigul: Dindigul's textile industries are slowly replacing agriculture as the main occupation in the district. Eighty per cent of the workers are women, and 60 per cent of them are youngsters. This job sounds like a "safe job" for women, but it's not.

The mills work 24/7 with workers taking up 8 hour shifts. Kasturi says she is made to work for 12 hours, or till the employees come for the next shift.

"I am a B.Com degree holder, but my parents don't allow me to take other jobs thinking this is the safest place for me to work. They don't know about the sexual harassment that we face and I don't want to make them sad," says Kasturi.

One of her friends stopped coming to the factory after she was sexually harassed by a supervisor.

There is no Internal Complaints Committee in the factories as

required by the Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act. There is no female supervisor, even though most employees are females. Cameras installed in the rooms are only used to penalise the workers if found taking a break or lagging in work.

The workers say they are given only a 20-minute toilet-cum-food break for every eight hour shift. For 100 women, there are five dirty toilets. No chairs are provided in the working rooms and the women are fined if they show up late after break. The women don't get time to change sanitary napkins during periods.

The women are given some pills when they complain of stomach pain. The workers feel relieved as soon as they have it. But the women say they miss their periods for two to three months after having the pills. The impact of the pills on the women's periods was found when a journalist sent one for testing.



Women battle long working hours, lack of menstrual hygiene and sexual harassment | SHREYA HARIDAS

S Dhanalakshmi, 30, says she could not conceive after marriage and the doctors found out that it was due to her work-pattern.

However, it is said to be worse for the workers in the mill hostels.

Girls aging from 18 to 20 years are brought from very deprived villages like Shanarpattai and

Anjukulipatti and made to stay in hostels. These girls say they are sometimes forced to do even all three shifts.

They are paid as low as Rs 220 a day, and the money is given directly to their parents who visit their daughters once a month. The parent-daughter conversations are

also overseen by a warden. The hostellers are taken out by a van once or twice in a month for buying essentials from shops predetermined by the factory.

Kasturi, a member of the all-women Tamilnadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), says that her peers are discouraged from joining the unions.

"The industries say they give PF to the workers, but there is a discrepancy between what is shown in the passbook and what is owed to the workers," says Thivya, TTCU State President.

TTCU tried to be vocal about the workers' problems through radio shows like Gram Vani, but had to stop it as the workers were penalised by the mills' management.

"The women tolerate all the harassment as they have to sustain the family... 40-50 per cent of the men's income is not given to the family...most of it is spent on alcohol," she adds.

River linkage well behind schedule

PRIYADA K S

Thoothukudi: Eleven of the eighteen months set by the AIADMK government is over and the process of linking the Thamirabarani, the Karumeniyar and the Nambiyar is nowhere near completion. The work on the 73 km flood carrier channel started in 2009 under the DMK government.

"The channel will help irrigate 50,000 acres of land in Thoothukudi as the people here are now dependent on rain water," said S. P Ganeshan, a farmer from Arasoor village.

The work is divided into four phases. The channel works for the first and second phases have been completed. Ninety per cent of the check dam building in the third phase is over, but the channel work is yet to be completed.

For the last phase, a revenue

survey which has to be conducted before land acquisition has not begun.

"The farmers now get an average yield of 30 bags of paddy, which converts to 60 kg rice each. With better irrigation, it can go up to 60 bags," said Subrahmanian, a farmer involved in project activities.

Farmers spend around Rs 25,000 per acre and the rate for a bag of paddy varies from Rs 1200 to Rs 1400. Many of them have taken up other cash crops and horticulture to sustain their livelihood.

Once the channel supply starts, their dependence on animal husbandry and cash crops will be reduced.

"The ground water level in the areas has reduced drastically and sea water intrusion makes the water in the wells salty. Salt water is bad for the crops, which in turn leads to reduction in yield," said Ganeshan.



Agriculture no longer preferred livelihood

Villagers move towards cities and other professions because of crop failure, drought and debt

ABHIJIT PAUL & MEGHNA.M

Dharmapuri: Agriculture is fast losing out as a choice of profession, as people look for alternative livelihoods because of the uncertainties associated with agriculture.

Villagers at Ramakondahalli said that inadequate rainfall, price hike of daily commodities, unavailability of access to the lands and loss from farming are some of the issues that deter them from taking up agriculture.

Coming from an agricultural background, Asaithambi (31) is a first generation power loom saree weaver from his family and in Ramakondahalli, there are two more households that run power

looms.

Asaithambi's family has two acre land at their native place and mainly, his father grew paddy there. But Asaithambi did not want to join as he believed that saree weaving will be more productive and fruitful for his household.

"Agriculture has left nothing for us as we have to wait for three months to get the invested money with a marginal benefit. Moreover, the market rates we get during harvestation are quite low and unsatisfactory," said Asaithambi's father.

"But producing two or three sarees per day can give around Rs. 700, better than relying on agriculture. But this machine costs Rs. 3 lakhs and I have got the amount from chit-system, which is



Sathish with his paddy harvest for the season | RIZVI SAIF

a boon and a curse at the same time," Asaithambi concluded.

Their cash driven occupation indicates the uncertainty in agriculture. Asaithambi had got this idea of saree weaving business from one of his relatives who worked in a factory of Salem. The weavers here are not vocationally trained but have worked in factories for a couple of years to learn the skill.

Dr. B. S. Sumalatha of Central University of Tamil Nadu said that uncertainty of agrarian economy tends to change the mindset of the next generation farmers to pursue various other fields other than agriculture.

People in Ramakondahalli, a village of some 6000 villagers, mostly grow paddy and ragi.

"We have no other options than getting into this occupation as it has been years, the government could not provide us lands to develop sustainable farming. Hence, we are completely dependent on selling ornaments and other fancy items," said Satya (27), who sells toys and imitation jewellery at temples around her village, Pachinampatti.

Pachanampatti is a village of people belonging to Scheduled Castes, or the lowest of the low, who typically do not even have lands.

The people here look forward to the Thiruvizha (festival), which is when Satya's business goes up. On those days, she can make as much as Rs. 500 per day.

In Malaiyur village of Dharmapuri, most of the men go to

nearby big towns like Hosur or cities like Coimbatore and Bangalore to work as daily wage labourers.

Lakshmi (30) has three children and her husband works as a daily wage labourer in Hosur. To run her household, like many other families in the village, she nurtures flower plants and it is a source of financial support.

"Mostly the women in our village work in this field and it has been an integral part of our livelihood. The flowers consume less water and we get the water from Panchayat tap water lines mainly, but the irregularity of water often becomes a problem," she said.

"Our village is not developing as you can see, people are roaming

around here and there because they have actually nothing to do. We have no lands here for agriculture as the government has taken no initiative for us," said Muniamma (52), of Pethampatti village.

Some 25 or 30 women work in a matchbox factory in Dharmapuri town and they earn RS. 200 to Rs. 250 per day, depending on how much boxes they can pack daily.

In villages like Doddampatti, the second generations of farmers have all moved out.

"We have educated our sons and daughters. They have now settled abroad and are earning fairly good Today, my crops might fail but I can rely on the fact that my children are making steady income which I can fall back on," said M.Sivan, a farmer.

An Island of Opposition

-SASHWATA SAHA

Pennagaram: Most of the problems of Pethampatti, a village under the Pennagaram taluk stem from the fact that the local panchayat representative and the panchayat president are from two diametrically opposed political parties.

The representative is an AIADMK man while the president is from the DMK. The two parties have been warring since 1972.

A panchayat is a third tier of government in rural India.

K. Nagarajan, a local resident said, "This village does not have any farmers. It is because none of us, here, own any land. All the fields surrounding the village are owned by people from Paruvathanahalli and Kongarpalayam."

"Our land was taken away from us, a few years ago," he added. "We have been fighting in court for a few years. We are generational DMK voters but this election we voted for AIADMK. Now, we are in more trouble."

Pethampatti is a predominantly Scheduled Caste village, which according to local primary school teacher, N. Kalimandi is why their concerns are overlooked by the local panchayat.

"This is not the first time we have been treated badly," he said, "In 2011, the panchayat closed down the local high school. They said that there were not enough students. Yet the school in Kongarpalayam (a predominantly higher caste village) had even fewer students but they are still running."

B. Senguttan, Pethampatti's panchayat representative came to power on January 6, this year. He is a former government employee of influence and multiple villagers have said that he, unlike other candidates, did not distribute money to influence voters.

The DMK administration has begun extending an existing highway near the village which is supposed to connect Pethampatti's larger neighbour, Paruvathanahalli to Pennagaram.

However, the road construction has proven to be an inconvenience to the residents of Pethampatti.

"The road (construction) blocks our path to the cemetery. Now, we have to carry our dead for four more kilometres," said S. Narasimhan, the local ration shop owner.

"Our customs say that the dead can only be carried by members of the family or very close friends. The cemetery is three kilometres away from the village but now we have to walk seven kilometres in total," he added.

The Panchayat President's office confirmed the construction of the road and said that it would be an economic boon for Paruvathanahalli but declined to comment on the caste based allegations.

"Not that the newly elected man is any better," said Narasimhan, "Only yesterday, he threw a feast for all those who voted for him. I don't know he knew who voted for whom."

MGNREGS starved of funds here

MEGHNA.M

Dharmapuri: The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been starved of funds for over a year causing agricultural labourers who rely heavily on this in their off season to remain unemployed.

Vanitha.S enrolled for the first time in the MGNREGS in October 2019 only after marriage.

"I worked for 10 days before they asked us all to go home as there was no more work for us to do," she said.

The common work that everybody gets to do in Dharmapuri district is desilting the reservoirs in the nearby areas.

The very next day a JCB was brought in to finish the rest of the work. When the villagers of Doddampatti enquired their panchayat about this, they were told that there was no funds to carry on with this

scheme.

Many like Vanitha depend on this scheme to feed their children and run their household and have since not been given any work.

But unlike her they were paid for the work done. She has been awaiting payment for the 10 days work that she has done.

The MGNREGS ensures employment for 100 days in every financial year to adult members of any rural household willing to do public unskilled manual work at the statutory minimum wage for Rs 375 per day.

However, Malaiyur, a hill top village, had been given work as recent as two weeks involving the cleaning of their nearby reservoir. However, more work on that has been stopped due to the local body elections that were conducted recently.

"We were told that once the results were announced new work

will be allotted to us," said Latchmi.M who had utilised the scheme for the past 10 years. "Since we are a hilltop village there is no real job opportunity here. The nearest one is 13 km away in the town, Papparpatti and the reservoir we are asked to clean is just 1 km away. Being under this scheme has ensured an ease of access for us."

From Malaiyur a total of 150 people are enrolled under this scheme and are put into rotations in batches of 10-15 people every two weeks. "We are paid on a daily basis and are informed if we have work the next day and we are paid about Rs 100 to Rs 200," she adds.

However, it is a different story for the people of Nochikuttai, a village in Sitheri that is 30 km from Dharmapuri and lacks access to the town and district.



STRIVING TO SURVIVE

Threshing: This ragi comprises the only crop that survived in Sundari Raju's one acre farm in Malaiyur | SASHWATA SAHA

Let women study but what about jobs?

RIZVI SAIF

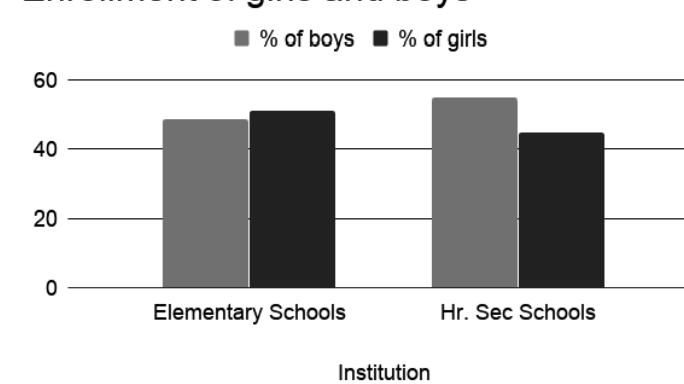
Dharmapuri: With a six-month-old baby in her arms and a two-year-old son who keeps getting into mischief, 21-year-old Kasturi has her hands full.

Adjusting her oversized churidar that keeps falling off her bony shoulder, Kasturi said she stopped education after twelfth standard as her parents decided to marry her off. There are a lot of women like Kasturi, people who live their lives according to societal demands.

Early marriage is rampant in India, especially in rural areas. "People here believe that a woman will be safe if she is with a man," said P. Nithya, who runs a non-profit organisation for the prevention of child marriages. She added that the rate of child marriages might have decreased over the years but it has not yet completely stopped.

Rajeshwary Thangaraj, a government school teacher said,

Enrollment of girls and boys



Graph showing enrollment percentage of girls and boys in elementary and higher secondary schools. RIZVI SAIF

"Girls in our school have more enthusiasm to study than boys. Some get into college as well but very few end up working because they get into married life."

Teaching and nursing are the professions that women are allowed to pursue here. "We can study as much as we want but we

are not supposed to go outside for jobs," said Nithya.

Most of the villages in Dharmapuri have primary and middle schools but accessibility to higher secondary schools remains tough. In fact data from the district statistical handbook shows that the number of girls enrolled in

elementary schools is more than the number of boys. But in Higher Secondary Schools, the percentage of girls decreases.

S. Shanmugam, a government school teacher in Malaiyur said, "I joined here in 2012 and since then only two girls have gone to college from our school." He added that children in hilly villages like Malaiyur lose interest in studies after a point of time. They get accustomed to the village lifestyle and goes for cattle rearing and other daily wage jobs, he said.

Although the government has put forward schemes like Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, which aims to educate all children giving special focus to girls, in the age group of 6 and 14, the implementation is not effective.

The certainty of higher education is meagre. D. Shekar, teacher of Dhasarahalli Panchayat Union Middle School said, "There are very less job opportunities here. It is more difficult for girls."

DIY equipment for cleaners

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Dasarahalli: Maiol's eyes watered. Her mouth tightly covered with a black cloth and grasping a stick with her bare hands, she pushes the plastic bottles, leaves and other things deeper into the fire.

Sakthi, her friend and colleague, looked away and started to sweep along the road, she collected the plastic bottles and hay, dumped it in one of the six green dustbins in her cart.

Maiol and Sakthi and many others like them haven't been paid in the last four months.

Maiol picked up the can and the traditional hand cart and dumped it, again, in the fire.

Sakthi and Maiol, cleaners in the Dasarahalli panchayat, are best friends travelling together every day from their home in Bodinaickenpatti.

"We have been working together for the last three years," said Sakthi. But the cleaners are given no protective equipment, only the brooms they sweep with.

Devaivam (36) a waste collector said that equipment was given to them in the initial years. The masks and the gloves are torn now and were not replaced.

Maiol complained of cough and occasional chest pain due to smoke. "Though I have not visited a doctor yet," said Maiol.

Chapter VIII of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013 states that every local authority should provide for doorstep garbage collectors and other employees, appropriate technological equipment for cleaning which includes gloves, mask and tricycle.(explain)

"I use the bell, to notify my arrival. The people, then rush to handover their wastes to me," Sakthi said.

"For the last four months, the cleaners had not been paid their salary of Rs. 2,900," said Maiol.

All the cleaners said that the payment was delayed due to State Civic Poll. "We have been bugging our supervisor for months now, but no action has been taken," said Devaivam.

Maiol (35), mother of two girls and a son, said, "My husband is a coolie, my daughters are in college. Money is important to us."

According to the cleaners, no job other than coolie and cleaners was available. If the government gave us cow for rearing, we would leave this job, they added.

Maiol said, "We have complained multiple times and they have asked us to wait till the next *thalamai* (sarpanch) is elected."



Piece of cloth used as mask | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Housing policy lags in implementation

SASHWATA SAHA

Dharmapuri: Residents from villages across the Dharmapuri district have complained about the mismanagement and faulty implementation of various government housing schemes.

The schemes are the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), the Tamil Nadu Village Habitation Improvement Scheme (TNVHIS) and the Chief Minister Solar Powered Green House Scheme (CMSPGHS).

Villagers who subscribed to the programmes have said that they have either not received the subsidy amount yet or the subsidy has not been passed on to them by the banks. They say the amount of money given by the government is not remotely enough to build a house.

In the Ramakondahalli village under the Pennagaram taluk, M. Sukumar, a 31-year-old junior engineer said, "We subscribed to the TNVHIS scheme when my father started renovating our house in 2015."

"It is over four years now and we are yet to see even a paisa that was promised by the government.

We also subscribed to the CMSPGHS, last year but no government official has come to check our solar panel and pay us our subsidised amount."

While Sukumar and his family are comparably well off and do not require the assistance, there are others such as R. Sekar, a 40-year-old farmer from Poochur village who have been affected more.

"The amount that the state government provides is nothing," he said, "One can barely buy cement and other building materials with the money let alone build a house. And still, I have yet to receive half of the promised amount. It has been over five years since I have built my house."

The branch manager of the Tamil Nadu Grama Bank in Manjarahalli refused to comment about the schemes were being implemented properly without any hitch.

B. Mani, the 57-year-old Panchayat representative of Manjarahalli said, "The PMAY scheme has helped thirty people in our village to set up their own houses. So, I would say that it is a pretty effective scheme. However, it is a bureaucratic process and needs some time to implement."

An insight into Dharmapuri through Alagiri Nagar

Education and lack of job opportunities result in women being married early and men taking up daily wage labour in Harur taluk's Alagiri Nagar. – Etipatti, Alagiri Nagar and Pudhu Alagiri Nagar

TEAM DHARMAPURI

Alagiri Nagar: Alagiri Nagar, a collection of three villages flanked by the Pudhu (Tamil for new) Alagiri Nagar and Etipatti has some 300 houses. The river Cauvery, which flows through Dharmapuri district is the only evidence of 'Ala' (Tamil for wave) in the area. There is no sea nearby.

Initially there was just the one village Etipatti. But that soon became too populated and hence, the government gave land near the highway for the residents to shift, which became Pudhu Alagiri Nagar. However, since the land belongs to the government, the residents do not have the right to the land they built their house on.

Dhoulmani.D, local resident, said that she moved to the New Alagiri Nagar as a young bride about 25 years ago. "My family lives back in Etipatti. It was just my husband and

I who decided to move here."

The barren ground near the temple, in the middle of the village, lights up during the Kovil (Temple) festival. The two-week-long festival's grand nature comes out in the flavourful food and the colourful clothes of the villagers. People pray to their main deity, Viraiyamma and dance to Thappattam music.

Education here revolves around its primary government school. The school has classes from 1 to 6 and has 39 students, of whom 15 are girls. It employs two teachers, Rameshwari and Maheswari. The former teaches Classes 1, 2 and 3 while the latter teaches Classes 4 and 5.

M. Jyoti, one of the students' mothers said, "Some of us send our kids to a different school in Etipatti, one kilometre away. It's because our children have grown up knowing the two teachers and



An illustrated look into life in rural India | SASHWATA SAHA

often, they don't listen to their teachers. Unfamiliar faces make them more disciplined."

The villages are separated by agricultural fields growing sweet

potato, millets and maize belonging to the villagers from Etipatti. The New Alagiri Nagar is neatly arranged with houses facing each other and wood-fired stoves for

cooking in the yard. The sewage from the houses join a drain running by the yard to a river nearby.

Much of the agriculture in Alagiri Nagar is rain-fed and the only surface water the village gets is for drinking. The water they get is from a panchayat line that they receive every 15 days with no timing announced prior.

D.Dhoman said that it has only been a month since they have received water before as there was a no water. The ground water now has turned salty causing them to use it only for washing vessels.

In years when the rainfall is scanty and the production is low and hence most people feel the need to hold second jobs to supplement their incomes.

"Once a week, my mother along with her friends walk 2 hours to the nearest forest. She collects firewood," says Vairanila, an

undergraduate student pursuing Mathematics.

Her mother and aunt work as daily wage labour in the fields nearby. The women have to work multiple jobs in order to make their ends meet. Some have tried their hand at tailoring and also have sewing machines in their homes.

Some of them have cows which they use for milk production and also serves as an extra income earning upto Rs 360 for a litre.

Thambidaran. S (33) owns an acre of land and grows cotton, one kilo of which fetches him Rs. 45. He sells his crop to the Kooturavu society in Harur.

"Low rainfall has resulted in crop failure, year after year. Now, I work both on my field and as a coolie," said Thambidaran.

It is (harvest festival) Pongal time and sugarcane harvest is the prime agricultural labour. The men cut the crop, for which they receive

full sleeved shirts for protection against scythes, while the women tie it and carry it to the shed.

Many of them work now in sugarcane harvesting as there is a demand for the crop for the festival Pongal.

While the women get paid Rs.150 an for every tonne, the men get paid Rs.250 for the same tonne.

All 300 houses in the village have a toilet but residents still prefer to defecate out in the open.

Many do not have access to medication as there is no medical store serving their needs.

For every medical need they need to visit the private hospitals in Harur.

The nearest Primary Health Centre is 4 kilometres away and the nurse who is part of the Village Health Nurse Scheme comes to visit once every month and to make records of the pregnant ladies in the village.



- Oh hey, can you ask Lord Indra to turn the taps on?
- But... I am Dalit.

A DRY SOLUTION

As droughts continue to hit Dharmapuri year after year the farmers have either resorted to migration or to futile prayers | SASHWATA SAHA

School by the cliff

RIZVI SAIF

Malaiyur: The new building of Panchayat Union Middle School Malaiyur, built two years back to relieve the pressure on the old, worn-out one, remains unused.

Teachers say, the new one is built right next to a steep drop in the hill, which they are afraid, maybe dangerous for the children.

Some two kilometres from the new building is the old school with just four classes for 100 students between classes one and eight.

Mariyappan, the English teacher of the school said, "We are scared for the safety of our children so we have not yet started functioning the new school. Its like there's a suicide point right behind the school."

Built on a mountain top, the new building has no boundary wall separating it from the steep slope of the mountain.

With three classes, this building was supposed to solve the space constraints of the old school by relocating students of standard sixth, seventh and eighth.

Malaiyur is a hill village situated some 10 km from the Pennagaram Taluk of Dharmapuri. Although a small village in terms of population, it covers around 20 kms.

A year ago, the teachers had

asked the government for a boundary wall to ensure safety but they have not yet responded, said Mariyappan.

The staff has now decided to take matters into their own hands and build a wall for the school. "We are planning to shift students of standard sixth, seventh and eighth to the new building for the next academic year," Mariyappan said. He hopes that since the local body elections are over, their problems will be addressed more strongly.

He said that he couldn't interfere much as he was not from the village. The school was built after clearing forest land in that area. The government allotted funds but no one came to inspect the spot. The locals of the area insisted on building the school there.

The Dharmapuri Education Department refused to comment on the issue.

The old school made of two small, single-storey structures, one of which has three classrooms and the other is a small thatched room. There is a large area surrounding the two structures which is used as playground by the children.

"We could have built the school nearby but the children needed the playground. We tried making demands but none was taken into account," said Mariyappan.



Sadiya and Pawan's home is a van filled with utensils, decoration and clothes | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Travelling couple on a dance tour

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Sajjalahalli: "Sadiya, Sadiya," the villagers called out.

The village in Pappapatteti, a village dancer called Sadiya, travelled from village to village plying her trade.

She dances for village men and youngsters who gather in tight circles around her as she danced.

The scrawny figure that looked closer to her teens than her professed 22-years and came out from behind a mini-truck, popularly called a tempo in these parts.

She came out, her oversized pink gown flapping behind her like a butterfly's wings. The off-white dupatta she had wrapped around her neck seemed oddly out of place, given her child-like face.

Big, blue bangles that almost seemed to fall off from her child-like wrists completed the image.

She looked like a teenager wearing her mother's bangles.

"I am Sadiya," she nodded in confirmation shifting her two-year-old baby from one arm to another.

Sadiya comes from a family of

dancers. "I like dancing because that is what I have learnt since childhood," she said. She dances from 7 in the evening, to the beats of Tamil movie songs.

For each performance, they collect around Rs. 3000, said Pawan Raj, Sadiya's 24-year old husband who drives her around and organises the shows. There is typically, one show a day, and Sadiya and Pawan move around between villages.

"Some days, there is no performance. Thus no money," said Raj.

Sadiya has been dancing since she was a kid.

"When I was young, my parents were not that aware. They made me drop out from school in Class-9," says Sadiya.

Sadiya and her husband have planned to leave their baby with her grandparents in Chennai, once she turns 5-years old.

"She will be educated, unlike her parents. I won't let her become like me," said Sadiya.

Sadiya and Pawan travel every day to a new village in a tempo, which she says is like her home.

Politics playing on Swachh Bharat toilets

JASMIN NIHALANI

Dharmapuri: Toilets in Dharmapuri are becoming unlikely battlegrounds for politics.

At first glance, the paintings of leaves, sometimes a comb, rising sun, mangoes look like they are there to beautify the otherwise drab walls. On closer inspection, it turns out that they are actually political party symbols.

"Why should we use a toilet, when we can go outside," says Rajalakshmi (26), a house-wife and mother of a one-year-old girl in Dharmapuri's Alagiri village.

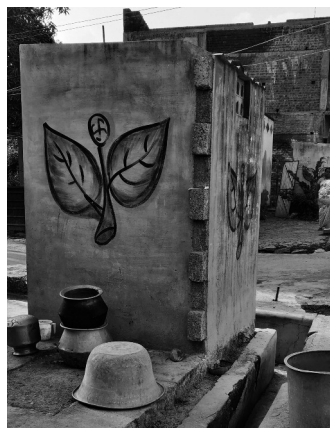
Rajalakshmi's view shows what is wrong with the Swachh Bharat Mission. The scheme was launched with much fanfare in 2014 to make India open defecation free and get

more households to use toilets. Since then however, the mission has met with a lot of criticism for not achieving its stated goals.

The toilet in Alagiri is an example. On paper, however, Dharmapuri district is open defecation free. According to the Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin report, 1.75 lakh households without toilet were identified in 2014. By 2019, all those houses were given toilets. A further 1.23 lakh households that came up in that time were given toilets as well.

What that number hides is the number of people actually using the toilets.

Defecating out in the open is a 'fun activity' for the two women, which they do with their friends. Keertika, who lives in Erode, says



AIADMK symbol on a toilet | JASMIN NIHALANI

that she uses a toilet there but when she comes back to her native place, she would much rather defecate in the open because the practice is

culturally instilled in her.

The fields where they defecate is divided into two halves; one side is used by the males while the other half is used by females. However, during the rainy season and at night, they prefer using the toilet. The women also say that the toilets were just built by the government and nobody came to give them instructions.

But the truth about toilets and defecation is that there are as many stories as people you ask. More than 75 kms away from Dharmapuri, in Nochikuttai village of Sitheri hills, residents do not use toilets because they consider cleaning them shameful. Around five years ago, residents recall, that a person from the government had come to inform them about the

benefits of using toilets. Today, they still prefer going outside than defecating in the toilets.

Some, like Nadiya, a 27-year-old from Sellamudi village, who says she would prefer using a toilet if only she had one. Only five households in Sellamudi village have toilets.

Here there are specific timings for women to defecate. In the mornings they have to go at 6 or in before 6 in the evening. If they have to go sometime in between, they are forced to go somewhere far away.

B. Mani, president of Manjarahalli panchayat, which has jurisdiction over Sellamudi says there are as many as 15 toilets but residents don't like using them because they emit a foul smell.

"Private clinics might look shiny but they are also very expensive"

SASHWATA SAHA

Pennagaram: Healthcare in Dharmapuri has been one of the major concerns raised by several villagers in various taluks.

One of the major concerns is that the Primary Health Centers (PHC) and the Sub Centers (SC) are too far off from the villages and that in times of emergency, it is almost impossible to get the patient from the village to the health centre due to a lack of ambulance service.

Other concerns include the lack of expert personnel, especially qualified nurses and proper medicine at the PHCs and SCs.

It was also implied that the natal

care provided by the government bodies is subpar to that of the private clinics.

Dr. K. Uma, a Medical Officer at the Pennagaram Primary Health Center and the first woman to hold the post in the area, went on to clarify some of the issues. Edited excerpts follow.

What do you consider an 'emergency case'?

In these parts, emergencies usually are child deliveries. Many people seem to be distrustful of hospitals in general but they all agree that hospitals are more reliable for natal care than any local midwife.

Is it true that there is no

ambulance service to ferry patients to and from the hospital?

It's untrue. We use an app called, Pick Me. When a user registers on the app, they are given a unique identity, which they can use to call in an ambulance to their location. However, the locals tend to avoid using it especially before deliveries because customs dictate that nobody but a family member touch a pregnant woman before childbirth. We also have a programme to take patients back home in ambulances. That one is far more popular. Still, the number of



Dr. K. Uma is the first female MO in Pennagaram | SASHWATA SAHA

vehicles to patients is low.

Do you have access to standard medical care equipment?

Yes, we are equipped to deal with the cases that come our way. We have a fully functioning delivery room and our wards and other facilities such as toilets are hygienic. At a personal cost, we had mosquito netting installed on all of the windows. Me and the Chief Medical Officer also pay for the drinking water supply that we get here. We also have a dispensary stocked with

medicines which we supply to the SCs that fall under our domain on a weekly basis.

How do you track your patients?

We maintain a thorough register in which we note down the patients' details such as their contact number, their address, the last time they came to the PHC and when they are scheduled for their follow up check.

How do you ensure that they come in for their follow up checks?

Every village has a nurse who has a copy of that village's patient records. She is also equipped with a dispensary which contains all the

emergency medicines she might need. If a patient does not turn up for their follow-up then the nurse calls on them to ensure that they turn up to the PHC.

Do you think that PHC care is any less than private clinics?

No, of course not. Private clinics might look shiny but they are also very expensive. Additionally, most of them are located in the city which means that the villagers have to travel far to reach them and they tend to feel awkward in the environment and end up not disclosing their problems. PHCs are free but we care for them just the same, if not more. But the misconception still festers.

Libraries for name-sake

Lack of infrastructure and funding hinders libraries in Dharmapuri

SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

Dharmapuri: Hunting for a book, Nitish probed through all the eight racks of the local library in Doddampatti village.

Not finding the English book he was looking for, Nitish picks up a Tamil book instead.

Nitish is a class 4 student, whose favourite subject is English. "I don't like going to the library, nowadays. They do not have any book in English," said Nitish.

The village library at Doddampatti in Harur has 9, 828 books. All are in Tamil. "General studies, novels, literature are some of the sections here. The books here are also accessed by the older population for leisure read," said Librarian Arumugam, a resident of Harur.

A graduate in Science, Arumugam said, "The library was built under Central government's Samagra Siksha Scheme and donations.

The scheme entails funding to panchayat for building and maintenance of educational infrastructure.

The goal was to make books available for both children and



The panchayat library in Doddampatti | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

adults." The increasing cost of library membership, the cost of getting to a library are serving to make whatever libraries that exist inaccessible to people here, far away from district headquarters in Dharmapuri.

"The price of the membership card has risen from Rs. 25 to Rs. 30 last year," he added.

Under a membership card, the villagers can borrow books and have access to the four newspapers in Tamil and English, the librarian explained.

"People from villages like Mobiripatti, Achalvaddi, Pethappampatti, Nachinampatti, Pachanampatty, Nambipatti, Kola-

gampatti and Valaithottam, come here to collect books," Arumugam said. Confirms to the distance as an issue for other villages, Librarian Shanguman, who works at the Malaiyur primary school in Pappareddipatti near Pennagaram said, "We only have one rack for books, rest we keep it locked in iron almirahs with locks."

The library at Malaiyur hill village unlike Doddampatti can only be accessed by students of the school.

Shanguman said that the books come as stock from Pennagaram; most of it is damaged and not replaced. "Being the only hill village under this panchayat, our demands

get ignored," he added.

The library here does not maintain a logistic system of the 500 Tamil books collection.

"Sometimes books go missing, sometimes it is submitted back torn," he said.

For another hill village of Sitheri in Pappireddipatti, the library was non-functional for last four years, said a resident.

On Jan 6, the village elected its first tribal woman, Govindama as the head of the panchayat.

"Under ex-president Aleaginsin the village library was always closed, but the newly elected President Govindama has promised to give funds to the village library," said Sendhil Kumar, a resident here.

Following a 10 k.m. trail from Sitheri, lies Nochikuttai village which only has a bus service twice a day.

The village doesn't have a library and the distance to the panchayat village makes accessibility difficult.

Susheela, the newly elected head of Ramakondahalli said that she will build a library for her village.

In popularity stakes, govt. schools trail pvt.

RIZVI SAIF

Dharmapuri: The Panchayat Union Middle School (PUMS), Pancharahalli in Pennagaram, recently shifted from Tamil medium to English medium to tackle the flow of students to private schools. Usha Nandhini, a teacher at the school said, "Our strength is falling because private schools are attracting more students. People feel they offer better English (education)."

The dissatisfaction with government schools has been increasing in villages despite the low cost associated with them. 10-year-old Aravindhan M. was moved to a private school for better quality education as soon as his father could afford it.

J. Janani, a B.A. English graduate who studied in E.R.K. Higher Secondary School, which is a private school, said, "Language is taught by good teachers in private schools and they are more clean and disciplined."

Comparing the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) of Dharmapuri for the last two years, the

enrolment percentage of children into private schools has increased from 28.7 per cent in 2016 to 40 per cent in 2018.

Despite government initiatives such as free bicycles and laptops for children and provision for mid-day meals, the government schools have failed to keep up with the private ones, according to experts.

Tamil Nadu State head for Pratham Education Foundation, Oliver B. said, "Private schools have better efficiency in appointment of teachers. The teacher ratio is much lesser in government schools." The

“Private schools have better efficiency in appointment of teachers. The teacher ratio is much lesser in government schools - Oliver B.

government delay the appointment of faculty so the posts remain vacant. The proportion of number of teachers to students varies, leading to poor quality education.

"Replacement of teachers who go on maternity leaves is also not ensured," he said. Oliver added that the learning outcome is poor for both government and private schools which indicates inefficient teaching methodology that aims at 100 percent pass and not at quality education. PUMS Malaiyur has four teachers for all 100 students.

M.Mariyappan, English teacher at the school said that the students are often given free time as the faculty may not be available.

Lack of facilities and poor maintenance of buildings has also tainted the image of government schools further. D. Shekar, a teacher at the Dhasarahalli PUMS said, "No water purifiers have been installed here and the water supply is also not steady."

The Education officer in charge of Dharmapuri declined to comment.

Potters' wheel slowing down

MEGHNA.M

Ramakondahalli: Govind Raju limps around as he starts moulding clay for making his pots. He uses his deft hands to mould diya covers.

Housed in a remote corner of the village, he is the only potter to be found here in a radius of 20 km. "I sell my pots only in this village and in this vicinity. With my ailment I cannot go around the Pennagaram Taluk or the town to sell my wares," said the 65-year-old.

However, it has become hard for him to obtain the river sand that is required to make clay for his profession.

The restriction imposed on sand mining has proved to be an obstacle for this potter.

They were imposed in 2018 in an effort by the Tamil Nadu Government to curb illegal sand mining which is rampant all over the state. Sand is mined extensively for construction of buildings and it is in high demand which has led to illegal mining of it. But the effect of imposing restrictions has had an adverse effect on another livelihood. Pottery.

"My profession is not that profitable. That is why you will find most of us migrating to cities in pursuit of a well paying job," he said.

The Cauvery River flows right behind their village. Govind used to collect his sand from there until recently when he was ordered to go to the nearest police station for permission.

Every morning he is out at 6 a.m. and takes periodical breaks to make sure that he does not exert much pressure on his back and knee.

"It is no longer easy to obtain river sand which I use to make clay and my pots. Because of the sand mafia they have asked us to obtain permission to take the river sand. I cannot visit so many government offices and wait long hours just to make a living," he continued.

Govind is a generational potter. "My father taught me this profession when I was 8 years old. It was lucrative then."

But at the age of 15 he decided he wanted to do something else and left home. Obtaining a job as a construction worker in Coimbatore, he worked for three years before injuring his knee.

"I hurt my knee very badly when I worked as a construction worker. I have visited numerous doctors in Salem, Dharmapuri, and Chennai but nobody could treat it and give me a permanent cure," he said.

Kalvi, his wife takes care of poultry and provides a second income for the family, making a meager income of about Rs.350 per month. After his injury, Govind turned to pottery to eke out a living.

"This is all I know. What else will I do?"

Farmers depend on informal banking

ABHIJIT PAUL

Paruvathanahalli: Many farmers are not eligible to get the loans from banking system. They are mostly dependent on the informal banking system or chit-system.

The usual rates are higher than the bank but avoiding lots of technicality and paper works, farmers, who are in need of cash on immediate basis, keep faith on this credit system.

Paruvathanahalli village of Pennagaram taluk can be observed as a positive side of the agricultural interest. However, various factors for a sustainable agricultural economy depends on sufficient rainfall, good price of crops, flow of cash and benefits from the invested capital.

Saktivel (56) from Balacode village, in the process of harvesting aman (one of the varieties of paddy) with six other men and women workers. A thresher which was running with the power of a tractor's engine was removing the seeds from the stalks and husks.

Rajendran (52), who owns a thresher and a tractor and also 10 acres of land said "Most of the farmers are dependent on the informal credit system as they cannot fulfill the criteria of being eligible to get the loan amount. And also, it is easier to get money from that informal system."

Saktivel said that the credit cost of Rs. 100 in that system varies from Rs. 2 to Rs. 5. "Suppose I have taken Rs. 10, 000 from that credit system, I have to pay Rs. 2400 per month as the rate of interest is around 24%."

"Manual labour is unsustainable in the agricultural land if it's compared to mechanical process. In complete machine based labour, the workers get Rs. 1000, obviously depending on the quantity of the crops. But if it completely runs manually, the payment goes doubled," he concluded.

K. Sathish (38) said that machine works harms the economy, leading to a dip in the daily wage labourer's income.

From planting the saplings to harvesting, it takes almost three months. With adequate rainfall, 0.3 acres of land can produce almost 1200 kg. Rice grain and the market rate what they get is Rs. 22 to Rs. 30 per kg.

But there are expenditures also for ploughing, tractor costs Rs. 1000. Two times of fertilizer costs Rs. 2000, transportation and thresher's fare costs Rs. 1000 each. For harvesting, they have to spend Rs. 1000. So, in total, from that amount of rice, they can earn Rs. 27, 500. But, in many of the cases, it has been found that the farmer could not bear the burden and ends up being bankrupt.

Anganwadis affected by absenteeism

Seasonal migration, a reason for kids' irregular attendance

ABHIJIT PAUL

Dharmapuri: The anganwadi at Nochikuttai village of Pappireddipatti taluk here has 15 children registered but only nine come regularly, said Illavarasi (43).

The teacher who has worked at the anganwadi in Nochikuttai for some 10 years, said that the reason is that the kids drop out because their parents are seasonal migrants. The parents often take their young children with them.

An anganwadi is a type of rural child care institution which plays a vital role for a child's nutritional growth.

To combat malnutrition among children, who belong to the age group of 0 to 6, Indian government in 1975 took this initiative.

According to Sathya C., Superintendent of Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Dharmapuri, there are some 1333 anganwadis in the eight subdivisions of the district. Each anganwadi caters to several villages.

Absenteeism has become a major issue in several villages of Dharmapuri as the number of children who attend class has fallen for reasons like seasonal migration, children come to anganwadi only to get free meals.

Chetti, a five year old boy waiting for his free meal to be



(Left to right) Teacher Illavarasi and Tamilselvi | ABHIJIT PAUL

served said, "I love to have food here only but I prefer to roam around in the fields."

Nochikuttai is a village on a hill in Tamil Nadu's Dharmapuri. The road connecting Nochikuttai to the seat of local government in Sitheri, goes nowhere else. Two buses- one each in the morning and evening- are the only form of public transportation.

The Nochikuttai anganwadi has it worse because of its location is close to houses means the students can sneak away home after eating.

Tamilselvi (55), who has been working here for the last 30 years, said, "In the morning, we have to

go and bring the children from their homes at 8 a.m. We have to repeat again at 12 p.m. and bring them back as the children lose interest and leave."

Out of 40 students, only eight to ten students go regularly at Bodanaickenpatti village anganwadi of Harur taluk.

There is no 'Ayah' helper to cook the food or to take care of the children. The teacher has to prepare meals for the students.

Sanjeevan (40), one of the guardians said that lack of interest is one of the reasons that the children stay away from anganwadi.

Sekharan (42), headmaster of Dasarahalli primary school said that the lack of education is blocking the path students' education and nutrition.

18 students were shifted from the anganwadi to primary school as the anganwadi was under construction, he added.

In the hilly village of Pappireddipatti taluk, the anganwadi was closed. The primary school teacher said that the anganwadi teacher and 'ayah' had gone to celebrate the appointment of a female panchayat head.

ICDS personnel Taramani in Chennai said that there are certain problems to bring the children on a regular basis at anganwadi.

Regular monitoring is a must for centres to keep a close eye on the drawbacks for improvement.

Though, Jayamani (48), teacher of Doddampatti anganwadi has different experience.

She said that out of 25 registered students 23 students come regularly. The children are fond of reading and drawing.

"Education is an important factor in terms of development of a child," she added.

Jayamani said that every alternative week the anganwadi tries arranging parent-teacher meeting. They exchange ideas and conduct discussions on child development.

Remote from all the necessities

JASMIN NIHALANI

Nochikuttai: Most of the men in Nochikuttai of Pappireddipatti taluk have left the village and majority of the houses are locked.

The only sign of human settlement is the commotion from a nearby school where children are queuing up for their daily sambar, rice and egg. Situated 25 kms up on the Kalrayan hills, Nochikuttai is inhabited by the scheduled tribes. Nearly 9 kms from Sitheri, the head of the local government, it is the only village accessible by road. Rest of the 61 villages that come under Sitheri panchayat do not have roads.

Only about half of India's habitations were connected to a road in 2014. This figure increased to 91 percent by January 2019 according to the data provided in the parliament.

H.Chinnaponnu (40) sits outside her house. For about six months a year this is her only job. With two milch cows to tend to, she cannot other work while her husband works as a labourer in coffee and tea plantations and pays her a visit once every two-three months.

It has been 10 years since the men have abandoned farms here, to look for alternate jobs. The women were left behind. Failing rains and increasing cost of living drove them out.

Chinnaponnu, like other women, was left with her one-acre farm where she now grows sweet potatoes and travels 35 kms away to the nearest town Harur to sell them. She takes the only bus that comes to the village at 8 in the morning and tries to come back by afternoon. Since there is no other bus service from Sitheri to Nochikuttai, she prefers walking the distance than staying there.

Besides a transport facility, Nochikuttai also lacks a proper hospital. Doctors visit a makeshift hospital once a week while nurses come and go. In case a patient needs to reach Sitheri, an ambulance is at their service provided they wait for 2-3 hours. Chinnaponnu says this itself causes 4-5 deaths each year in the village.

Despite all the hardships, Chinnaponnu prefers to stay in the same village where she was brought up. She is accustomed to the way of living and the pleasant weather here.

ITS ALL ABOUT TAMARIND HERE...

JASMIN NIHALANI

Sajjalahalli: It is harvest time for tamarind cultivators. Heaps of harvested tamarind can be found all around the village, in empty plots, on side streets even.

In one of the lanes women are beating the pod to remove the seeds. A few meters away, some women are making 'tamarind cakes' by pasting the sticky husks in layers which would later be sold outside as blocks.

At a distance, a farmer, at some distance, is feeding the tamarind fruit into a machine which was removing the hard-outer shells.

Sajjalahalli, in Papparapatti, is all about tamarind now. Some years back the village grew paddy and sugarcane but the declining water table necessitated a shift to a crop that was less water intensive. And Sajjalahalli chose tamarind. And nearly half the village is dependent on tamarind in some form or the other now.

Tamarind is used widely in Indian cuisine. India is also one of the largest producers of tamarind with a production of nearly 1.7 lakh tonnes a year according to the Spice Board of India under the union ministry of commerce and industry.

Tamil Nadu is India's largest producer, cultivating approximately 48,000 tonnes a year. However, the prices of the spice have crashed this year too, despite a bumper harvest.

But, even tamarind cultivation is now leaving a sour taste in the mouth of farmers like Kaveri.

G.Kaveri (67), says the price of tamarind was Rs 150 for a kilo last year but this year it has dropped to Rs. 80.



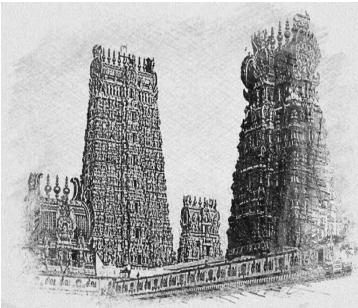
A daily wage labourer sticking tamarind husks to a ring | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA



(Top) A worker in the tamarind workshops | SRISHTI LAKHOTIA

(Bottom) A heap of ripe tamarind | JASMIN NIHALANI





Jallikattu, matter of pride

NEIL CORNELIUS

Alanganallur: “We don’t fight bulls in the arena, we hug them and hold on to them for as long as we can. That is why the sport is called ‘yaeru thazhuvuthal’ (hugging the bull). If there is any harm inflicted, it would rather be on us than the bulls,” says Vinoth.N (34), a jallikattu veteran who is renowned as one of the best in the business.

Vinoth is a writer in the Alanganallur police department and raises 13 jallikattu bulls with his father. His bulls are yet to lose a game.

Vinoth says the bulls are treated like children and allowed to do whatever they want throughout the year. “Their only work is in the ‘vadivaasal’ (jallikattu arena.) They are not made to do any other work,” he says “I feel happier when one of our bulls wins than when I win,” he adds.

There are three types of jallikattu - Vadi, Vadam and Veli Verrattu. In Vadi, only one person tries to tame the bull. No one else



Vinoth with his son and bull Pulikutti | NEIL CORNELIUS

is allowed to jump on the bull. In Vadam, up to 9 persons can try and tame the bull. In Veli Verrattu, the bull is set free on an open field and any number of people can try and tame it. If a man is able to hold on to the bull for a certain distance, he wins and if the bull is able to avoid getting caught or is able to escape the field, it wins.

Asked about PETA’s allegations of animal cruelty in jallikattu such

as intoxicating the bull, Vinoth says: “logically speaking, a bull would perform better if it is not inebriated. So the claim is counter intuitive.” He adds that if a bull is injured, the owner is the one who has to nurse it back to health. “There is no scope for cruelty towards the bulls”.

Vinoth’s father, Navaneethan. S (58), is the president of the Madurai District Jallikattu Association.

Navaneethan says the jallikattu bull is not from a specific breed. It could belong to any of the breeds, which include the Mala Madu, Puli Kolam, Naatu Madu and the famous Kangayam.

“This is the bull that made us famous. He’s won over 40 games.” says Navaneethan, pointing to a five-and-a-half feet tall, white bull named Puli Kutti (Tiger Cub.) Puli Kutti has allegedly killed two people during jallikattu.

Apart from raising bulls and taming them, Vinoth and Navaneethan also conduct free classes in which they teach people how to tame bulls for jallikattu. “We need to teach them how to play without hurting the bull or hurting themselves.”

Asked about the prize,Vinoth says: “I spend Rs. 30,000 a month on the bulls alone. I also have to spend to take them to the event. The prize money might only be Rs. 10,000 or a bicycle, but to me it’s better than buying an Audi. This is something we do out of passion and for pride, not for money.”

In a woman panchayat, husband takes the call

SHREYA HARIDAS & SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Jamburduraikottai: Pounthai-Katturaja, the newly elected village panchayat president, is set to remain the village chief only on paper. Why? Because her husband is the de-facto president. “I do not know what [schemes] are to be implemented in Jambuduraikottai,”she says, hesitantly looking at her husband who is seated on the president’s chair. Jamburduraikottai saw a local election after 10 long years.

Pounthai(32) won the elections conducted on December 31. Katturaja, who has flourishing businesses in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, promised a fund of Rs 25 lakhs from his own money for various projects, to escape the waiting time for receiving funds from the government. The election posters had the pictures of both Pounthai



Katturaja on the Panchayat President's seat with his wife Pounthai Katturaja | SHREYA HARIDAS

and Katturaja. Muthammal G (47), a sanitation worker from Kamalapuram, was another candidate who stood for the seat reserved for women. “I contested as an independent candidate with autorickshaw as my symbol. Unfortunately, I lost by 700 votes. Even if I had won, I would have given the chair to my husband.” The other candidates were Selvi A (54) and Vijaya C (50), who too said their husbands

would have functioned on their behalf, had they won. Pandiammal (37), a villager, responds. “I don’t care if a man holds the seat. I just want someone to take the responsibility for the work to be done.” “How can a woman go to the office and do field work, especially when it involves the responsibilities of a panchayat president,” asked A.M. Benedict, the husband of a ward member.

School fights against all odds

CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kilakkuchettipatti: Despite the poor transport, uncooperative parents, distracted students, and the elephant menace, the Kilakkuchettipatti Government High School situated in the Palani Hills runs effectively.

“Two years ago, a wild elephant was spotted just a few metres from the school building. For precautionary measures, we immediately shifted all the students to the first floor,” recalls Paulraj (50), a science teacher who also teaches English as the post is temporarily vacant.

Headmaster Suresh (42) is hopeful that the compound wall construction will start soon, as the funds have been allotted.

In summer, the teachers go around the hamlets of Palani Hills, convincing the parents to send their children to school. “In the plains, parents shift to other towns for their children’s education, whereas, in the hills, there is no awareness on education. Studies are not a priority, earning is,” laments Paulraj.

Despite regular circulars and notices, the parents “refuse” to attend the parent-teacher meet. “If they come here for the meet, they



Kilakkuchettipatti Govt High School | CHARUDATT PRABHU

lose a day’s wage,” says Suresh. “The children aged 13-14 take advantage of their parents’ absence, and get addicted to alcohol,” he adds.

“Today the strength of the school is 51. It was above 60 in June. The reasons for the dip are poor transportation facilities and family conditions,” says Kumaresan (52), Mathematics teacher. Shivpalan (15) of class 10, for instance, lives in the interior, some 15 kilometres away. If he misses the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation bus, he has to wait for an hour for another bus. “He is irregular to school,” says Kumaresan.

The teachers, too, have to travel long distances to reach school. All the eight faculty members, including the headmaster, come from the plains. The State government pays Rs. 7500 as ‘Hill Allowance’ to every teacher. “We

meet at Sempatti junction, which is 40 kilometres away, and come in one car,” says Paulraj.

Student guides

For the students of class 6, 7 and 8, who walk alone through the jungles, the government has introduced “student guides”, who escort them to school and back home. The criterion: the guide’s child should be part of the group. The student guides should also make alternative arrangements if they are likely to be absent. “No student walks to school without the guide. We have two guides, and each one of them has the responsibility of five students,” says Kumaresan.

“We are planning to arrange a car from the next academic year for the students coming from the interiors. If we do that, irrespective of the weather, they can attend school,” says Suresh.

An uphill task

CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kilakkuchettipatti: For a student, going to school is normal but for Hariprasad (13), who lives in the Palani hills, it is no less than an adventure.

The Class 8 student of the Kilakkuchettipatti Govt High School walks alone for half-an-hour to school and back every day through the woods which are home to Indian gaurs, wild elephants and boars.

“I start around 8 in the morning and reach school by 8:30. After school, I start at 5 p.m. and reach home by 5:30,” says Hariprasad, who stays with his mother and grandmother.

“Till last year, my mother would accompany me but now I commute alone.”

Apart from books, uniforms, bags and stationery items, the government provides raincoats and jackets to students - for them to stay protected from the extreme weather conditions in the hills. “I have to walk irrespective of

the weather, and I use the coats,” says Hariprasad.

The young boy doesn’t complain. “No problem,” he says, even if going to school means carrying a bulky school bag. But he is not particularly fond of the mid-day meal served in the school. “They serve food every day but I don’t like it. It is tasteless.”

His friends travel by the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) buses or their parents drop them at school. Hariprasad, however, prefers walking.

“The bus service is available every hour from my hamlet. If I have to take the bus, I will have to wake up very early. In the evening, it will be dark by the time I reach home.” His mother works as a daily wage in the coffee plantation.

Asked what he aspires to become, Hariprasad says with a smile: “Police, because they shoot the culprits.”



Hariprasad | CHARUDATT PRABHU

Water, a worry for Nilakottai villagers

SHREYA HARIDAS

Dindigul: Nilakottai residents buy drinking water priced at Rs 5 a pot from water tankers that visit the villages with 1,000 to 2,000 litres of water every 10 days. For other household purposes like bathing and agriculture, the residents are forced to use salty borewell water.

Nilakottai, an agrarian block in Dindigul, has been facing acute water shortage for five years. The Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 is used by the panchayat to determine the amount of water to be distributed to each village.

Due to less rainfall and indiscriminate use of groundwater by mineral water and RO (Reverse Osmosis) water industries, the groundwater table has seen a sharp fall. The economy has also been affected, with farmers moving away from agriculture or switching from grapes to less water intensive crops like flowers and broad beans.

Pandiammal, a resident of Kamalapuram village in Nilakkottai says, “The families can’t manage with the water they get from the tankers. How much water can one store in their house for 10 days? We have requested the people who regularly buy the RO water from companies to stop the practice that is sucking up all our water. We don’t have any rivers here.”

The Panchayat-arranged tankers, carrying water from Athoor dam and Kamarajar dam, are the villagers’ only source of drinking water. For household purposes, the villagers have collectively built a common tank for borewell water. “The borewell water seems okay for the first few days, but later it develops a strange colour and taste,” says Lakshmi from Perumal Koil Patti village.

Duraichamy, a grapes farmer in Perumal Koil Patti, is anxious about his children’s future. “I don’t have money to send them to good schools... for getting jobs, we have to give bribes ... their only go is farming... but if the water table decreases like this, there will be no water for agriculture. Even if they want to switch to animal husbandry, we wouldn’t have water to maintain the cattle.”

O’chatram farmers peeved

SHREYA SAMTANI
SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Oddanchatram: The irony of being a producer but unable to fix prices, marks the lives of Indian farmers. “We know how deceitful the system is but what to do? We farmers don’t have even a collective to support us,” says Muthuswamy (54), an onion farmer.

“They [shop owners] take 10 per cent commission per kg. If it is Rs. 100, they take Rs. 10 from us,” says Suresh Kumar (35), a cash crop farmer in the Oddanchatram market. “We still have to sell it here because the customers take at least one month to pay us while the shop owners give the money

immediately in the form of cash.” The farmers’ produce goes to different areas to get sold. “We can produce only 10 to 20 kg while the customers’ demand is 100 to 200 kg. If we do not sell it here, we are at a loss.”

“I come here to buy vegetables for Kerala’s shops,” says Rasa (50), a buyer from Dindigul. “Shopkeepers fix the price. What can the customer do? The farmer is the one working hard here,” says Subramani (41), a lorry driver who helps in market-related logistics. “The bidding of vegetables is done as per the quality.”

“There is a sangam (a management group) that decides the price of the vegetables. It doesn’t listen

to the public,” says Gobind (44), who provides parking tokens for lorries.

Kumar makes Rs. 30,000 a month. He borrows money from moneylenders as he does not trust banks. “If I am unable to pay them back, all my hard earned property would go in vain. In order to take Rs. 1 lakh, I have to pay Rs. 20,000, which is a lot of money for a marginal farmer like me. Even if I return the money before maturity, they charge me interest.”

In the market, onion is auctioned till 10 a.m. Other vegetables are sold till 6 p.m. The last vegetable to be sold, green chilli, is soaked in water during day and sold at night, says Subramani.

Tribes selling facilities for exigencies

NEIL CORNELIUS
ANJALY RAJ

Dindigul: People of Kadaiyamalai, a predominantly Pulayar village in the lower Palani hills, give away LPG cooking gas cylinders that the government gives them for free to people from upper castes and use firewood instead.

The Pulayars, a Scheduled Caste which was once a Scheduled Tribe, are afraid of using gas cylinders. Priyammal of the village says they don’t use gas cylinders out of fear. They have seen television reports of gas cylinders bursting. Others say the misconception has been there for a long



Women of Kadaiyamalai | ANJALY RAJ

time and the elders simply don’t allow them to use gas cylinders.

The Pulayars of Kadaiyamalai give away their cylinders to the higher castes like Pillai, Chettiar and Mukkulathor. The beneficiaries also include Other Backward

Classes (OBC). They have been taking gas cylinders by exploiting the fear of the villagers.

A similar practice prevails among the Paliyar Tribes of the Thangamma Porumbu settlement at the Palani Hills. There are only

thirteen houses in the settlement allotted by the government with the promise of a patta three years ago.

The people are awaiting their Scheduled Tribe (ST) certification and have not been given their ration cards yet. Due to this, they buy the free rice provided through the PDS from local farmers, who have ration cards, at Rs.8 a Kg. “I sometimes pay up to Rs.200 for a 15kg bag of rice.

“Only if the government grants us a patta can we apply for ration cards and also avail ourselves of other government schemes and facilities,” says Chitra.S (26), a resident of Thangamma Porumbu.

Swachh Bharat Mission- Gramin in Madurai: toilets built, but not used

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Madurai: “Rural India is 99 per cent open defecation free. Toilets have been provided to over 60 crore people in 60 months,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi said recently. But the ground reality paints a contrary picture where according to the Block Development Office at Dindigul 48.4% villagers in K.C.Patti still lack toilets in their homes.

“I have to walk 2 km early in the morning even at this old age,” says Rassamma (80), who practices open defecation in the village of Perumal Koil Patti. Sandhira (58), another resident, says: “My husband has strictly said no to a toilet in the house because of the

bad odour. At times, I feel like having a toilet inside because of all the walking. During periods, it gets difficult for women but the thought of a toilet with all the impurities in the house is worse.”

Malika (49) says, “We have the structure of a toilet but there is no water supply. So I use the toilet as a storeroom where I keep some of my utensils. I go to the nearby forest to defecate,” says the resident of Kadaiyamalai, an SC village. There are around 78 houses in this area under the Indira Awas Yojana, out of which only 54 houses were given subsidy to build toilets.

A small hamlet comprising 13 houses of the Paliyar tribe residing in Thangamma porumbu,

where the tribals were relocated to a government land, is yet to get a toilet facility. “It has been two years since the government promised toilets,” says Chitra (26).

“Our biggest issue is the sewage. There is no proper drainage system. Till last month, the entire waste was being burned, until Swachh Bharat cleaners came and collected it for the first time. I wish we had some awareness campaign happening. We defecate on the roadside,” says Jeevitha (27) of K.C. Patti.

Pothumani (33) of Kamalapuram says: “The government has built us toilets but has not provided us with a septic tank or proper water supply.” Fathima (48) from the same village, says: “During



Vessels in an unused toilet | SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

periods, it is very difficult. We store the waste for three days and then burn it in the open. We have a public toilet here but it is in ruins because of lack of water supply.” Jaya Mary (73) has a different story to tell. “I was given only Rs 2000 instead of Rs 12,000

[sanctioned for building a toilet] and the rest of the amount was taken by the agent herself. I never received it.”

Anaiyamma (60) from Perumal Kovil Patti stays with her son. “Our house does not have a toilet. So, we went to the panchayat office to get a toilet installed. But we were told that since we were from the outskirts, we could not have a toilet built.”

According to Krishnan, the Block Development Officer, at Dindigul: “The first instalment of Rs 2,735 and the second of Rs 9,265 have to be borne by the individuals. The amount is reimbursed within 2 or 3 days if photo proof is produced of the basement and completed stage.”

Krishnan adds that funding from the government goes directly to the beneficiaries through the district and block level but there are no trust or agents involved in this process. The beneficiaries are found from the SECC survey 2011, which is then verified by the Zonal Officer and the Deputy Block Development Officer.

The data states that there are 12,107 toilets in Dindigul district which consists of 14 blocks. Perumal Kovil Patti, according to the data, has been covered to a large extent with toilets built for 338 households. 205 households already have toilets out of 737 households. K.C Patti has a total household of 1,209 with 431 toilets built under the scheme and

689 already having toilets. In Kamalapuram, the data says in the 516 households, 206 toilets were built under the scheme and 307 already had toilets.

Bharani Lakshmi (33), Swachhta Prerak of A.Vellodu Panchayat says: “ We conduct awareness drives in villages through street plays and dramas and also supervise the maintenance of public toilets and make sure that people do not defecate in the open.”

“The success of our efforts is through the children in palvadis or anganwadis and schools. They aid in implementing ODF. They go back to their parents and pester them until a toilet is built in their house.”

6

Organised Pulayars in Adalur village fight for lost Scheduled Tribe status

NEIL CORNELIUS

Adalur: People of the Pulayar Tribe in Adalur, a hill station in the district, have lived in the region, now part of reserved forests, for centuries. They live off the forest produce and try to give back more than they take.

The tribe had its own form of government even before the British came," says P. Thuraiaraj (64), a labourer from Sembadiiothu. "There are 12 hills which were part of the Pulayar Tribe's government - from Thonimalai to Munnar." The tribes were further split into sub-tribes called 'kootam.' "The leaders of the kootams constitute the council, a sort of govern-



P. Thuraiaraj (right) with his friend. | NEIL CORNELIUS

ment." The chief of the Kosavam Kootam is the 'Thalaimalai Thagappan'. The hierarchy of each kootam is pre-determined but the power does not lie totally in the hands of the Thalaimalai Thagappan; rather the decisions are democratic.

The slots in the councils and leadership posts of some kootams are reserved for women who are treated as equals. "There were a total of 47 kootams, of which 36 exist now," says Thuraiaraj, the 'Naduimalai Periyavar' - a member of the council and chief of the 'Kovam Kootam.'

The Pulayars are recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution. In 1979, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi allocated jobs in the Railways, as trackmen and gangmen, to people belonging to the ST, who had completed at least Class 5. This gave them government jobs and education. According to Thorairaj, the angry upper caste people used their influence

and money to prove that the Pulayars were actually related to the Cheramars of Kerala, a Scheduled Caste.

In 1984, the ST status of the Pulayars was revoked, making them ineligible for the government quota of jobs. As a result, the youth of the Pulayar community now work as farm labourers even though some are graduates. "Though we retain the features necessary for STs, we have been stripped of our status," says Nagapandi (35), a resident of Sembadiiothu.

The people sent petitions to the Centre, which responded in 2017, asking Tamil Nadu to look into the issue. The State is yet to act.

Farmers' voices against Neutrino

SHREYA SAMTANI, SHREYA HARIDAS AND SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Theni: Sixty-five-year old Muthulikamu from T. Pudukkottai recalls a protest led by MDMK Chief Vaiko in 2018, against the setting up of India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO), which inspires him till date.

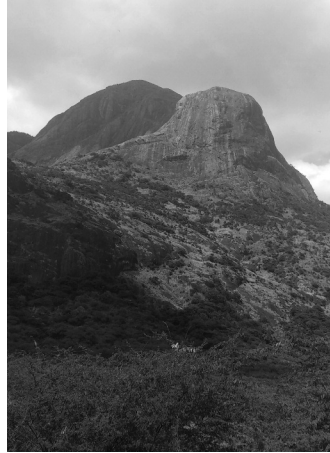
Muthulikamu, a farmer, is afraid of losing his livelihood. Neutrinos are electrically neutral subatomic particles. Studying neutrinos will help researchers gain knowledge of the Sun, universe formation theories and nuclear non-proliferation. Immediate economic benefits of the study include improvement in telecom and internet services, and spotting of oil and mineral deposits on Earth. The only other countries with facilities to study neutrinos are Italy and France.

The location for the Observatory is in the Bodi West Hills region of Theni. INO requires a mountain like the West Bodi hills, since they provide the preferred girth of 1 km to filter away charged particles from the sun's rays. Also, the experiments need to be

conducted underground to avoid cosmic ray interference, for which the hills have to be drilled. "Rock tests and excavations would result in spreading of dust and debris in the surrounding regions. It would also lead to desertification. There are five villages adjacent to this mountain, and the villagers may get respiratory and other diseases," said Ilamaram M (59), a coconut farmer who holds a B. Sc in Chemistry.

The major concerns regarding the project are the ecological imbalance and decline in biodiversity. This area had been marked as very sensitive in the Kasturirangan Report on the Western Ghats. The five surrounding villages will be affected by dust due to drilling and may cause respiratory diseases. Moreover, the villagers will lose their agricultural land, up to 30 acres, to the facility. This would, in turn, lower the water table. The scientists have kept mum on where to dump the debris after burrowing the tunnel. The villagers fear it will be dumped in the premises itself.

The hill is also of religious importance to the villagers. It hosts their tribal God. "Ambarappar



The West Bodi Hills site selected for the INO

| SHREYA SAMTANI

Malai is where our God resides and we would protect him even at the cost of our lives," said Muniyamma, a resident of T. Pudukkottai.

Ilamaram M has done extensive research on the proposed INO through internet sources. He was even invited by a Youtube channel to hold a debate with physicists. He is of the opinion that the true effect of the project has not been disclosed to the villagers - the im-

mediate recipients of its adverse effects.

He says: "On paper, there is only one research taking place while on the ground another research is going on without anyone's knowledge - the research being conducted along with Fermilab in the U.S. It is about dark matter energy. The lab is conducting the study in a 5-tonne detector in the U.S. But it wants to develop a 100-tonne detector which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has not cleared. It is looking forward to doing that in India. This proposal was approved by the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR)," he claimed.

"This facility was built after SACON (Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History) cleared the project, saying the construction of the facility would not disrupt the ecology," said scientist S. Venkateswaran. "The Modi government has come up with a new notification, saying that public opinion on a government project is not a necessity. This is not right. We do not get any benefits from this project," says Ilamaram.

MADURAI

Pulayar & Palayar children paint contrasting pictures

SHREYA SAMTANI

Adalur: The laughter of children playing in the hills of Kadaiyamalai paints a different picture from that of a shy child held in her mother's arm in Thangamma Pombu. Their lives, too, are a picture in contrast.

The children of the Pulaiyar tribe study in the four-year old Anganwadi in Pandrimalai which has around 20 to 22 students. Here, in K.C. Patti, English is taught in schools from class 1 to 8. Children are provided food, milk, egg, vegetable, and fruits. Supaiya (47) is the father of three - Sathiya (21) who studied Home Nursing from Kerala, Satti, (16) studying in Class 9, and Shanthi (16), who suffers from kidney and heart problems.

Shanthi's problems were detected five years ago. Supaiya says she got ill due to rains. Her right kidney has been removed and the left is not functioning properly. She underwent treatment for heart too. While she was in Class 3, she



Pulayar tribe children | SHREYA SAMTANI

was afflicted by malaria frequently. She used to get fever whenever she stayed in closed premises. Because of her health, she left school at a very early age. Every month, her father takes her for full body checkup. "We will not get her married as no one will agree to marry her," says Supaiya. Dr Raj Kumar, who runs the Christian Federation Primary Health Centre (CF PHC), is treating her.

In the Pulaiyar tribe, there are more male children than female children. Parents prefer boys, but they don't abort female children

because of the presence of the 'Pillai Thatchi Koil' (pregnant woman temple) here. Children also help in work once they turn 12.

The effects of modernisation can be felt in the names of children and senior citizens. The younger generation has modern names due to the influence of TV. For instance, the name of Tangawali's grandson is Suhit. Mothers here breastfeed their children till they turn two-and-a-half.

The other tribe is that of Palayars, who were originally cave-dwellers. There are 13 families which account for a population of 60 to 70 people. Only 13 students among them have an ST certificate. Of these 13, one is a girl, who is the pride of the tribe. She is encouraged to attend school daily.

Palayar children are malnourished and their families do not have ration cards. For medical emergencies, they have to go down the hill to reach the government hospital.

Water crisis, a serious threat

SHREYA SAMTANI AND SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Perumal Koil Patti: The yield has been decreasing and water crisis has been a constant companion of the 45-year-old grape farmer Doraichami for five years. The reason for water shortage is the shortage in rainfall and non-availability of rainwater and groundwater.

"Grapes are dependent on rainwater and underground water. If rainfall fails, groundwater level also falls. This 7-acre of land depends on rain alone," says an official of the Gandhigram trust, which has adopted the Perumal Koil Patti village.

The only source of water for the 1000 residents in P.K. Patti is a single well filled with water from

tankers. The villagers use it for drinking, irrigation and cattle rearing. When there is a complete absence of rainfall, they go hunting for work in other areas.

Doraichami recounts how, two years ago, the villagers encountered a severe drought as a result of which the villagers had to purchase drinking water at Rs 5 per pot. "Everything was going fine for us till five years ago. I used to get a profit of Rs 1 lakh a year but that is not the case now. The reason is climate change - the increase in temperature and lack of rainfall," says Doraichami. He cultivates jasmine for four months and black grapes for the rest of the year. The season for jasmine ends in February after which grapes are cultivated.

Black grapes are cultivated in his land with a yield of 2 tonnes and a

maximum profit of Rs 50 a kg. He sells his produce directly in the Dindigul market.

The cost involved is immense, including pesticides that are sprayed every three days. During the installation of drip irrigation system, he was asked to lay pipes worth Rs 30,000 by the Agriculture Office which has a 40% subsidy on micro irrigation systems for farmers. But Doraichami claims that he was turned down by the agriculture department. He has not received any subsidy on fertilizers either.

During the off-season, his alternate means of livelihood is cattle rearing. The family meets its ends by milking cows and selling it for Rs. 24 per litre. His wife Seethalakshmi (40) picks flowers and does wedding in the fields. His mother also helps him.

Incomplete houses under CM scheme

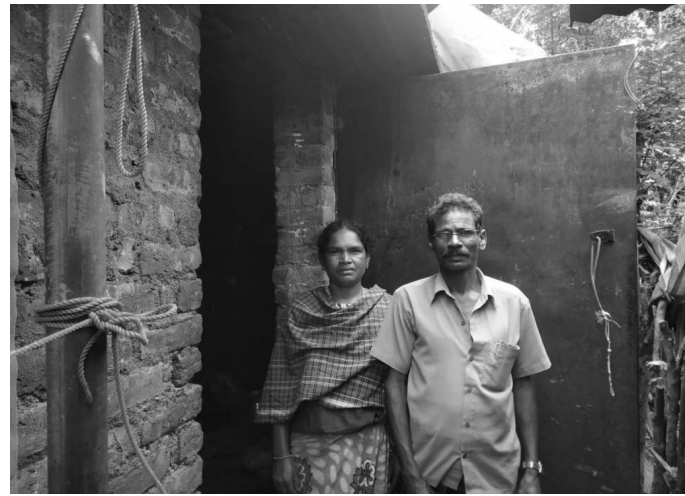
CHARUDATT PRABHU

Kadaiyamalai: Despite being the beneficiaries of the Chief Minister's Solar Powered Green House Scheme (CMSPGHS), a family in the Kadaiyamalai hamlet of Palani Hills lives in an unfinished house.

"We were eligible for the housing scheme but the Kupmalpatti panchayat, after building half of the house, recorded that the entire amount allotted for the building—Rs.2.10 lakhs—had been spent. In reality, it went to the officials and the builders," claimed Mallika (49).

The eligibility criteria for the housing scheme are: the beneficiaries should not own a house elsewhere; they should not have benefited from earlier housing schemes; they should be residents of the village; and they should own the land, which is below 300 sq ft.

Mallika's husband, Marudayya (53), said: "Like all beneficiaries, we spent Rs. 25,000 to lay the foundation for a complete house. I have no idea how much the panchayat spent on building this [incomplete] structure. I don't even have the documents."



Mallika and her husband Marudayya at their unfinished house

A total of 8 members live in the house, which is a room of 160 sq.ft., enclosed with brick walls, covered with a concrete ceiling. It has rough flooring. There are no toilets, not do the residents have water taps in the house. "For water, we use public taps, and for toilet, we head to the jungle," said Marudayya, who works as a waterman in the village.

The family members have

knocked the panchayat's door many times. "The only reply we get from the office is that, the allocated amount has been spent on our house," said Marudayya. "I even bribed the panchayat members Rs. 25,000, but nothing changed," he lamented.

The hamlet has 60 houses, of which 20 have been built under the Chief Minister's Solar Powered Green House Scheme

(CMSPGHS). Fifteen others have been built under the Union government's Indira Awaas Yojana, which is now Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana. "The rest of the 25 houses were built when Kamaraj was the Chief Minister," said Palraj (63), an old resident of the hamlet.

"It has been over 10 years now. I don't think the panchayat members will complete my house. We will have to live with what we have," he said.

"I once bribed Rs. 25,000 to Gram Panchayat members (of Kupmalpatti), still it is what it is" Marudayya.

There is everything but water



CHARUDATT PRABHU

ANJALY RAJ

Oddanchattram: In the far-most stretches of Dindigul, village Puliymarthukotai is ideal on paper. It has toilets under the Swachh Bharat

scheme and houses under the Amma housing scheme. But it is deprived of water.

Lakshmi, 50, said her house was built eight years ago under the Amma housing scheme, equipped with solar panels and a television. Almost all houses in the village have been built under the scheme and are open-defecation free under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. But the villagers are still dependent on rainwater for their daily needs.

Puliymarthukotai lost groundwater years ago and has been a drought-ridden region since.

"Cauvery is supposed to feed us," said S. Mari Murthi, a resident. He explained that the village was connected to the Cauvery underground pipelines but, with depleting water levels, it has become hard for the village to survive.

Villagers look up to their recently elected leader, Thanga Raja, with high hopes. Lakshmi said she did not worry about the water crisis in the village any more as Thanga Raja had promised to look in to it.

"Good news to us is good rainfall," 45-year-old Murthi said. The villagers work in their farms on small crops like maize, millet and sunflower but are mostly dependent on the 100-days work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme.

When the villagers experience a dry spell, they move to cities for a month or two. "We go to places where we can get daily labour and water," he said.

"The solution to our misery is Thanga Raja," Murthi said, knowing well that the villagers are giving themselves false hopes.

Jallipatti says 'No' to quarry

SHREYA HARIDAS

Jambuduraikottai: P. Katturaja, husband of the new panchayat president of Jambuduraikottai, who governs by proxy is strongly opposed to setting up a quarry in Jallipatti village for constructing a national highway.

Jallipatti was quarried from 2006 to 2011 for laying NH-7 which passes by the village. The rocks from the quarry were crushed for M-sand and B-sand which were used for the road. The quarry was closed down after the NH was completed.

A.M. Benedict, a villager and close aide of the panchayat president, says the quarrying had affected the ground water table adversely. If it were to be permit-



The Jallipatti quarry used in 2006-11. | SHREYA HARIDAS

ted again, it would lead to landslides and a dusty atmosphere that will affect agriculture and lower the water table.

"We don't want history to repeat. The use of dynamite in the quarries will affect the buildings. Some may even cave in. Last time, a church in the locality was destroyed due to the dynamite."

The proposed NH passes through the agriculture lands. This will push the farmers, who will benefit in no way from the NH, into further poverty, Benedict says. "The villagers will carry out a protest under the president's leadership if anyone forces us to give way for the quarry," he add, speaking for the farmers.

NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: "No one taught us how to play our instruments. It was passed down to us from our forefathers," said Kathavan.K (65) who had just finished playing the 'Kuzhal' for three straight hours at a funeral in Sembadiiothu in the Palani Hills. Kathavan is a well respected member of the Pulayar society.

"There are two main types of instruments they use; The Kuzhal and the Melam," said Kathavan. The Kuzhal is a foot-long flute-like instrument made from wood with holes.

The mouth of the instrument consists of a reed made of the 'koomai' bird's feather. The player blows into this to create sound. It

sounds similar to nadhaswaram.

The Melam is a drum-like percussion instrument which has two playing surfaces (one on either side.) The larger surface of the Melam is made from Buffalo skin and the smaller surface is made from goat skin.

"We have different beats and tones for different occasions. In earlier days people used to find out what an occasion was just by listening to the music," said Kumar.B, another Kuzhal player. Cibe Chakravarthy, a journalist who works with the tribes, explained the myths behind these instruments. The crow pheasant's songs were sung in different rhythms at different times. Ancient Pulayar men beat rocks with twigs to mimic the rhythm of the bird and



Local musicians tuning the music instruments | CHARUDATT PRABHU

later Melam was born.

The conception of the Kuzhal has its own story. In ancient times a woman quarrelling with her husband, left for her mother's house in the middle of the night. She travelled through woods which were

known to have bandits and robbers. With the company of a hill mynah, a bird known to mimic any sound it hears, she made it safely to the other side by making the mynah mimic a crowd. In an effort to replicate the sound, the villagers made the Kuzhal.

This form of tribal music is on the brink of extinction as none of the younger generations have learnt to play the instruments. "We made our children study so that they would not be oppressed when they grew up. Little did we know that they would forget our own culture when they gained exposure to other cultures. But it is all alright if they can have a better future," said Paulraj (55) one of the last remaining Melam players in Sembadiiothu.

MADURAI

7

GST eats up meagre earnings of this silk weaver

ANJALI RAJ

Kamalapuram: Anandi Seger, 38, works 12 hours a day at the weaving machine, making silk threads into a beautiful silk saree, only to get Rs 500 for it. It takes three days for Anandi to weave one saree.

"With the implementation of GST, my salary has been reduced by Rs 2,000," says Anandi. She earns Rs 9,000 a month. Before GST, her monthly earning was more than Rs 11,000. Anandi delivers the woven sarees to an agency. She is barred from selling the sarees on her own.

Anandi quit her education at the age of eight after completing her fourth grade, to learn weaving. She started helping her family by weaving professionally at the age of 12 and has been weaving since.

Anandi's is the sole weaver family in the village. She gets the raw material from Sowrastra Nagar, Dindigul, and sends her final product to States like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, etc, through her agent.

"The weaving machine cost me Rs. 70,000, I paid it from my pocket," she says, explaining how hard it has become for her family to weave with low earnings.

Even after the huge setback received by the implementation of GST, Anandi's spirit has not been broken. "Weaving is not just my profession, it's what my life is meant to be, and I will pass it down further."



Anandi at her home with her newly woven silk saree and the weaving machine-| ANJALI RAJ

PHC for neglected

SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

KC Patti: "India needs not hospitals but primary health care centres that can provide holistic care," says Mary Ramaswamy, an obstetrician who has been working in the Christian Fellowship Primary Health Centre at K. C Patti for 10 years. Mary is the wife of Rajkumar Ramaswamy, founder of CFPHC.

In a PHC, patients are screened for problems at an initial stage and, most importantly, a follow-up is possible unlike in a hospital. The CFPHC was founded 20 years ago for the tribals and people from the lower socio-economic strata.

Mental health is a major concern in this area because of alcoholism and drug abuse. The PHC provides counselling sessions and educates people.

The hospital staff visit the villages thrice a week. Village level health workers, 15 of them, have been trained by Dr. Rajkumar. They are as good as junior doctors and act as a bridge between the PHC and the villages, including tribal hamlets. They are trained to give appropriate first aid and treat fevers that last up to three days.

"Infant Mortality Rate has decreased tremendously. Last year, only five children died in 80 deliveries." The nurse staff of the CF Hospital proudly said.

"Since most of the villagers work in the plantations,

peripheral neuropathy, an occupational disease that you get when you work with fertilizers and pesticides, is prevalent among workers in the plantations. We don't have many epidemics here, but there was an epidemic of chikungunya five months ago," says Dr. Mary.

Dr. Thomas George, general physician, says: "We also monitor the sexual health of the villagers. We conduct sex education classes in schools and surrounding villages. The villagers have welcomed it with both hands without any protests."

"Another major issue among these tribals is children having anaemia because of poor nutrition. Ration shops only give rice for free and not pulses and vegetables. We have recommended iron tablets and millets for them, especially for the pregnant women."

The PHC doesn't have facilities for scanning etc, but they willingly refer the patients who need these services to the nearby hospitals.

The PHC is funded from a minimal consultation fee of Rs. 100. A major part of the finances is sourced from Dr. Rajkumar, the founder. He works for two or three months in Australia so that the PHC can function properly. Dr. Mary admits that the salary given to the staff is low due to lack of funding. "We charge only a minimal fee from the tribals, like Rs 100."

Female Senior Citizens of Jambuduraikottai neglected by the Govt

SHREYA HARIDAS

Jambuduraikottai: Basic facilities like ration, widow pension and toilet are denied to the female senior citizens of Jambuduraikottai in Dindigul. In spite of having an Aadhar card, the women usually have to live at the mercy of their neighbours.

Vellaiyamma (70) and Rajamma (70) from Kamalapuram village work for Rs 170 per day under MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) which provides 100 day job for daily wages. They are building Vellaiyamma's son's toilet, but she is

not sure if she'll get the money.

These Tobi women (Scheduled Tribe) do not know agriculture and are entirely dependent on MGNREGS for their livelihood. Eventhough both are widows, they don't get the widow pension of Rs 1000 per month. Rajamma has an Aadhar card, but is denied ration since she has no ration card. Her children, who are settled elsewhere, refuse to support her.

The services denied are not uniform throughout Jambuduraikottai. Kalamman Koil Theruvu hosts Chandra (58) and Rasamma (80) who have no job at all and are solely dependent on the widow pension. Their children



Vellaiyamma and Rajamma building toilets under MGNREGS | SHREYA HARIDAS

don't support them. They also have Aadhar cards, but don't receive ration since they have no ration cards. These women, who are Christians, live at the mercy of

their neighbours, who sometimes give them food. They apply vicks on their knees to get cured of arthritis and have to walk a kilometre to the field nearby to do

their business.

Anaiyamma (65) from Perumal Koil Petti who also practices open defecation has not got a job under MGNREGS. She goes to her son's field for job. Her husband has no health to go for field work. She is a Hindu, and is completely dependent on her son, whose agriculture is dwindling due to low rainfall.

Eager to get their yearly saree gift from the Village Administration Office (VAO), Anaiyamma (70), Lekshmi (65), Malayi (70) and Alakuponn (70), all from the Gounder caste, wait at the office from early morning, two hours before the office opens. Even among them, there is an irregular pattern

and what they are denied. Some were widows, assigned to widow pension, but denied MGNREGS jobs since they receive the pension. Some receive ration, some don't.

Kanakamma (70) who resides in an aluminium shed just behind the VAO can't go to work because she can't walk properly, and doesn't receive any pension since her drunkard husband, who does no job, is alive. She depends on the rationed rice only, since all other commodities like oil, pulses etc the ration shop are priced. She sweeps the ration shop for rice which is spilt on the floor and

lives on porridge throughout the month. She has no money to buy vegetables, whose prices are surging up. Another appalling way where the women's money is drained is at the water tanker, where drinking water is priced at Rs 5 per pot.

The Jambuduraikottai Panchayat has responded that they have not been told of any problem faced by old-age women. The Panchayat was headless for almost eight years. Pounthai Katturaja, who has been elected as the new Panchayat President in the local elections last week, said he will do whatever was necessary to better the condition of the women.

Drug abuse: the deadly killer of Pulayar tribe

ANJALI RAJ

Adalur: Ponnu Thaaai, 69, broke down while staring at the picture of his only grandson who was a drug addict. Prem Kumar was just 16 when he died.

Kadaiyamalai, a village of the Pulaya community, has been struggling with weed and alcohol abuse for years. A few years ago, the women of the village went on a three-day strike in Adalur, agitating against the government owned liquor shops. Citing domestic violence and its effect on family life, the women of Kadaiyamalai said in unison that alcohol made their men violent. Periyamma says laughing: "After consuming alcohol, they beat us up, and then, some of us beat them back!"

Recalling the memories of Prem, Ponnu Thaaai said he developed the habit of drinking liquor at an early age after returning to the village from Shanarpatti, where he used to study. Prem was only in Class 9 when he started smoking weed. He died because of heart conditions in 2014, leaving the entire family of Thaaai childless. "Access to weed is easy, even for children, as they can climb the hills where weeds are easily found," said Thaaai.

"Smoking is very common at an early age in this village," said Priyammal, who lost her 18 year old younger brother four years ago. The villagers suspect that it was due to weed overdose, though they don't have a doctor's backing for it. Her brother, Sokkarpanadi, who had a hole in his heart, star-

ted smoking weed in the 4th grade. The situation became grave with the increased intake of tobacco and alcohol.

"It's very easy for children to climb up the hills and get the weed, no can restrict them." Priyammal said the village had seen three deaths so far due to drug abuse, all children. But still, no one has stopped drinking and smoking. "We cannot do anything. What rules can we make? Even if we do, no one obeys," said Subbiah, a middle-aged man of Kadaiyamalai.

Mary Ramaswami, a local doctor working with Alandur Health Centre, says: "We can only encourage them to quit. We counsel them to make them realise that smoking is bad which most of the addicts already know."

Beans farming no longer pays farmers

SHREYA SAMTANI
SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

Dindigul: With GST levied on pesticides and fertilizers, and increasing taxes in the vegetable market, the expenses of beans farmers in K. C. Patti, Dindigul, have spiked twice - up to Rs. 40,000.

Maintenance of the field requires fertilizers for which the farmers get no subsidy. Pesticides are used thrice a week which amounts to the high production cost of Rs 10,000 a week.

Amber Selvaraj (50) is a samsari (a contract farmer) with three to four acres of land which he himself manages. He has been growing flat beans for 10 years now. Earlier, he used to cultivate chow chow.

For a year, the contract amount for an acre is Rs. 30,000. Preparing the land, including the added expenditure of solar fencing



Amber Selvaraj in his farm | SUSMITHA ANN THOMAS

because of the menace caused by bison, amounts to Rs 3 lakh. His profit depends on the market. During a normal season, it is Rs. 40 a kg, sometimes a maximum of Rs. 80, and sometimes as low as



Avarakkal plant | FILE PHOTO

Rs. 10. Even if it is just Rs. 8, he harvests all the beans. But below that amount, it is not possible to break even at all.

For one acre of land, he requires a minimum of 6-10 people. Women

are paid a wage of Rs. 200 while men get Rs. 350. The daily wage difference is because "men do more physical work, women do only weeding." The beans season is from January to October.

In January, the farmers start sowing the seeds. After 120 days, they start germinating and are ready for harvest by October. The general climate for beans is sunny.

In December 2019, Selvaraj suffered a loss of Rs. 50,000 due to heavy rains. The beans were affected by halo blight (a disease caused by bacteria resulting in brown spots on leaves and pods) and the market rate decreased.

Selvaraj is very particular when it comes to using pesticides. He uses only cow dung for land preparation. He makes use of the organic fertilizer, Biozyme granule seaweed gel while using negligible amount of inorganic fertilizer. He also practices drip irrigation technique to save water.

Winter retreat for M.P. migrant workers

CHARUDUTT PRABHU

Kadaiyamalai: They have blended so well with the Tamil society that unless you check their documents, you will not believe that they belong to Madhya Pradesh.

They are temporary migrants from different parts of Madhya Pradesh — mainly Ujjain — who, during winter, come to this part of Tamil Nadu to sell warm clothes. They head back to their native place for the rest of the year.

Bahadur Singh (40) of Derkheda says: "We are a group of 15-20 men. We sell sweaters, jackets, and blankets in three districts - Theni, Dindigul, and Madurai - from November to February every year. There is a good demand for our products."



Rahul Nayak on the left and Bahadur Singh on the right in Kadaiyamalai. | CHARUDUTT PRABHU

The group travels on second-hand two-wheelers. The rider ties the woolen wear to his front and back.

Rahul Nayak (19) of Ujjain says: "From 4 a.m. to 8 p.m., we

are on our bikes. We travel 60 to 70 kilometres a day."

"A jacket or a blanket costs anything between Rs 400 and Rs. 800. A person earns around Rs.4000 in a day, of which at least Rs.1000 is spent on food, rent, petrol and other expenses," says Rahul.

He adds that the prices in the hills vary. But the locals don't mind.

"I like the quality, and am okay if they charge an extra Rs.50 since they have to ride through the hills to sell the clothes," says a resident.

A good breakfast or lunch is a luxury. "We don't have the time. We begin our day with a cup of tea and some snacks. It is only when we return from the day's

work that we prepare food," says Bahadur.

Bahadur and others buy the stock wholesale by paying an advance to a company in Ludhiana, which transports it to Salem. "From Salem, we pick up the goods and store them in a warehouse in Palani," says Rahul.

What if they cannot sell the entire stock? Says Nayak: "We send the remaining stock to Ludhiana and get back our money."

"Earlier, I had a problem speaking Tamil but now I am comfortable," says young Rahul who, after his schooling, started doing the job.

Pappu Rai (27) of Shajapur says in jest, "the locals are generally nice to us but bargain hard when they are drunk."

Kill elephants or us: villagers

SHREYA HARIDAS

Adalur: Four persons and two were injured in elephant attacks in 2019 at Adalur, part of the Lower Palani Hills. The elephant menace here has been at its peak for five years now.

Villagers attribute the elephant menace to the low rainfall in the area for the past five years. "Plantain farming is the major occupation here. Plantain stems are rich in water. So they are the favourite for the elephants," says D.N. Bhupati, who cultivates coffee, plantains, chow chow and orange. Recently, his relative in the village was attacked by a wild bison.

"Bisons are manageable, though. If we make noise or protect our farms with solar fences, they don't

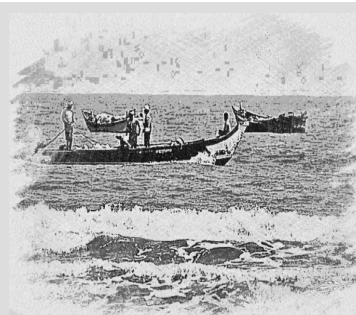
destroy our crops," Bhupati says. Elephants cannot be managed since they come mostly in groups, destroy the fences and enter the farms.

The Pillamar tribes in the Lower Palanai Hills are the most affected by the human-elephant conflict. They are more developed compared to the Pulaiyars and Palaiyars, who are hunter-gatherers and daily-wage labourers. Pillamars have been carrying out agriculture for 200 years now. They are dependent on the place as they know no other job. The victims of the attacks were promised compensation in the form of money or job by the Forest Department, but nothing has been done.

"Kill the elephants or kill us," the Pillamars say. "For creating

solar fences, we need to take a loan of at least Rs 3,00,000 from the bank. But the elephants destroy them. We want the Forest Department to lay the solar fences for us and maintain them if they want to protect the elephants. Or just shoot the elephants and control their population like they do with kangaroos in Australia."

Bhupati wonders what the Forest Department is doing with all the funds meant for conserving the elephants and maintaining their corridor. He and his tribe are planning to propose to the Department that they together conserve the elephants and keep them in the forest, by letting the Pillamars sow plantains in the forest for the elephants. This may prevent them from coming to villages, he says.



A cultural print is fading

Traditional Kalamkari struggling to survive in its own home

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Pedana: In an era where Kalamkari artisans are looking for paying jobs, R. Kiran Kumar has already begun teaching his schoolgoing daughters the block wood art.

Hailing from a weavers' family, the 46-year-old finds immense joy as children learn Kalamkari. Even though he gets paid only 300 a day, he takes pride in doing this work. Kiran has set up a table at his house and given his children natural dyes and teak wood blocks.

First, grey cloth is soaked in groundwater and naturally bleached. It is soaked in myrobalan leaves overnight so that the dye can set in properly. Then the cloth is treated in water boiling in a copper vessel along with roots and flowers to add colour.

Next, wood blocks are dipped in natural dyes made from alum and other organic substances. Block-makers develop designs inspired by temple works and Persian patterns. This process is 23 days long.

Kiran has been working at Le Coromandel Kalamkari Studio here for five years. The owner of the studio, Pitchuka Srinivas carry



R. Kiran Kumar making a blanket using natural dyes at Le Coromandel Kalamkari Studio |

MAHIMA MANIAR

forwards his grandfather Pitchuka Veera Subbaiah's tradition which he introduced back in the 1970s. One of his biggest partners is Mary Mulcahy, a New York-based designer, and owner of Les Indiennes. Srinivas's children P.Varun and P.Uma Devi - both science graduates are currently working with him in the studio.

Pedana is well-known for hand-block Kalamkari. "Today a large number of Kalamkari products we see in the market are mostly screen-printed with chemical colours

including those that you find in Lepakshi Handicrafts Emporium and Fabindia" said Mr.Srinivas.

While Lepakshi is an Andhra Pradesh government undertaking, Fabindia is India's largest private platform known for traditional products.

He claims that he is the only one left in Pedana who still follows all traditional methods, despite facing competition from screen printing. The migration of artisans to cities has been alarmingly high in the past couple of years.

"Without proper support from the government we can't do more to sustain the art," says P.Varun.

Srinivas believes that Kalamkari is better appreciated by foreigners and underappreciated by Indians. "Not only have we got customized requests from customers in Japan, Kenya and Australia but around two years ago two students from the Netherlands had come here to learn the art of Kalamkari," said Uma Devi. The students satyed for six months and went back to display the art in a museum in Amsterdam.

"We constantly keep undermining our culture," said Srinivas. Two years ago, his brother, who fought for the GI tag for Kalamkari, succumbed to screen printing. "There really isn't a lot of money in this but this is an art. And when I do the art right, I am happy," he said.

As it has become difficult day by day to differentiate between original and fake Kalamkari, the studio struggles to survive. One doesn't know when groundwater will dry up and how long block wood Kalamkari will survive in its own birthplace, says Srinivas.



Handloom workers have to sit for prolonged hours, straining their backs |

MAHIMA MANIAR

Threats loom over weavers

ARNABJIT SUR

Kappaladoddi: Inside houses of the Weavers' Colony here, the trademark *maggam* (single loom) weaving, popular for its intricate designs, is proof of a conscious attempt at upholding the decades-old art form.

However, health problems, coupled with low income and modernisation, have caused concern among veteran weavers over viability of the labour-intensive trade.

Srinivasan Rao, who has been working on a self-made handloom machine in his one-room house, says wages for every saree woven are inadequate, not to mention rejection of the product for defect. "In spite of me straining myself for hours, rejects pile up due to small discrepancies," he said.

"Weak eyesight becomes one of the major casualties while using handlooms as immense concentration is required to handle these delicate strings of cotton throughout

the day," Rao added.

According to Rao, who takes three days to weave a saree, every part of the body needs to be 'active' and 'functioning' for successfully weaving cloth.

Producing distinctive cotton sarees mixed with nylon, he gets Rs. 2,000 for 5 pieces depending on quality. "There has been no wage increase which further adds to the problems weavers face in continuing the craft," he added.

Rao's neighbour, P. Ramana, along with his wife, produces colourful churms and sarees. For the couple, low prices are a perennial problem. While a churni is sold for Rs. 300, a saree costs between Rs. 600 and 700. Moreover, "the machine cost around Rs. 80,000 since we have included various designs for weaving cloth but the returns are unsatisfactory," says Ramana.

As for government aid to handloom weavers, it has been a far cry. The previous Telugu Desam Party (TDP) government remained

non-committal on its promise of loan waivers, with only Rs 2.5 crore granted out of a total allocation of Rs. 111 crore. "No additional government benefits are provided and only sale of woven products sustains our livelihood," he said.

Meanwhile, the influx of powerloom machines hastens the decline of hand-woven cloth as they enable large scale efficient production.

Rao said weavers like him were not trained in using power looms, which are expensive but require less labour. "Who will employ a middle-aged unskilled worker like me in a power loom manufacturing unit?" he asked.

S. Ramesh Babu, Assistant Professor at the Gudlavallu Engineering College, said the Le Coromandel Kalamkari workshop used powerloom products for uniformity and mass production. "One of the largest Kalamkari workshops at Pedana also uses machine-made cloth," he added.

SCREEN PRINTING TAKES OVER

MAHIMA MANIAR

Kappaladoddi: The Kalamkari art has lost its authenticity due to cost effective and profitable screen printing.

Eight employees work on a large black slab, pushing a squeegee (a rubber blade attached to a frame) to and fro to produce the design on a saree. The whole process can produce up to 70-

80 sarees a day, which are sold for Rs. 400 each, says owner Meghanathan (50).

The technique involves digitally creating designs on a large rectangular frame. Ink is pressed through a stencilled mesh screen to create a design. The chemical colours are imported from Mumbai. The screens are manufactured in Chirala in Prakasam district.

Screen printing produces both fine and coarse designs, and can be replicated multiple times, unlike in block printing. The design is transferred through the woven mesh. The villagers prefer chemical dyes over natural dyes, as they are more easily available. However, the use of chemical dyes has polluted the Krishna river, thus affecting marine life.

Caustic soda, when added to water to de-starch white yarn, causes rashes and burns on skin. "The accumulated waste water from the dripping cloth leaks through a pipe and seeps into the soil, affecting the environment," said P. Ramakrishna and R. Nagaraja. While dyeing yarn, they do not wear gloves as they are habituated to the work.

Eagerness to keep learning



T. N. Rao with students

MAHIMA MANIAR

Nachugunta: It's a cackle with delight all over the Mandal Parishad Pradhama Unnata Pathshala, a primary municipal school, on this island. There are 23 boys and 32 girls in Standards I to V under the care of two teachers, one of them headmaster T. Nageswar Rao.

The children are regularly provided midday meals and are given uniforms every year, one set provided by the government and another by the Rural Relief and Development Foundation (RRDF). This organisation partners with ASSIST, a non-governmental organisation working for poor and marginalised communities in rural areas of Andhra Pradesh, in funding the school.

There are four washrooms and a water tank. While the teachers said the responsibility of cleaning the washroom was theirs, some students alleged that Standard V pupils were sometimes asked to sweep the toilets and floors.

N. Roja, a volunteer in the village who takes part in government initiatives, says her two children going to this school don't use the toilets, which are "unkempt" and the water "unclean." They still willingly go regularly despite it lacking water facility and electricity.

One of the reasons being seasonal hostels, introduced in 2013 in a high school at Avani-gadda, where children go after finishing primary school.

Seasonal hostels, which provides food thrice a day, brings children, most of them from backward classes, into mainstream education, says Nageswar Rao, who has been working here for seven years. It frees them from child labour.

Either drought or dirty water

SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: People here have to travel to Maripalam twice a day to get a 10-litre water can for Rs. 16. Cool water cans cost Rs. 30. "We prefer walking 1.5 kilometres twice a day to drinking salty groundwater," says K.Lakshminarayan (32), a fisherman.

This tells the tale of water quality. All waterbodies here fall under 'C' category, the least grade for drinking water sources. In fact, none of the rivers in the entire State has 'A' or 'B' quality status, as per samples collected by the Andhra Pradesh Pollution Control Board.

Water labelled as 'C' category contains higher pH value, lower dissolved oxygen, higher biochemical oxygen demand, human faeces leading to higher count of E. coli bacteria and more turbidity due to higher total dissolved solids. It requires conventional treatment followed by disinfection to make it potable and safe for human use.

A journalist, who works for Telugu daily *Andhra Jyothi*, says ponds at Nagayalanka receive water from the Krishna Eastern Canal system comprising the Eluru canal, the Ryves canal and the Bandar canal. All three flow through

pH is a measure of how acidic/basic water is. In general, water with a pH lower than 7 is considered acidic, and with a pH greater than 7 is considered basic. The normal range for pH in surface water systems is 6.5-8.5, and for groundwater systems it is between 6 and 8.5.

Vjayawada and wastes from meat shops and open defecation cause pollution.

Ironically, villagers are complaining of the same polluted sources drying up during summer, affecting their lives. People have to either use bore water which has become salty over the years or buy water from nearby water plants.

As a result, people get affected with various diarrhoeal diseases. The nearest government hospital gives just basic medication. They have to either travel 20 km to the nearest speciality hospital at Avani-gadda or go all the way to Machilipatnam, if the condition is critical.

According to Jayaraj Yeddana-palli, executive secretary of a Vijayawada-based NGO, ALERT, salinity of water has increased from 3 to 15 per cent now. For fishermen, the problem is hunger, not being able to go fishing during drought. Net weavers do not get fresh orders and majority of the farmers are unable to cultivate their crops.

Over the years, several people died either not being able to acquire basic amenities or have committed suicide fearing the consequences. However, CM Jagannathan Reddy compensated Rs. 10,000 to every household after the drought last summer. Earlier, the amount used to be Rs. 4,000.



K. Veer Raghavalu (60), a fisherman at Nachugunta, takes two days to make his own nets. The process involves knitting meshes from nylon threads, but he does not sell these. "The work strains my eyes and I cannot sit for more than two hours at a stretch," he said. "Due to my heart problem, doctors have asked me not to go fishing," he added. But three women of his family catch prawns and fish and sell them in the local market to support the family. |

MAHIMA MANIAR

SREYA DEB

Kappaladoddi: This village in Krishna district greets visitors with a burst of colours and the click-clack sound of wood scraping against metal.

At Kappaladoddi, also known as the Weavers' Colony of Machilipatnam, nearly every house has a room dedicated to a handloom machine.

Handloom weavers dot the narrow streets, and carpenters are building handloom machines in their balconies. These skilled workers have been residents of Kappaladoddi for almost two generations.

Balla Sambayya, 53, helps in making handlooms, while his son does most of the work. "We use vepa or sal wood," he says, "We get orders only from Pedana."

As most families have had handlooms in their homes for many years now, the demand has shrunk with majority of the orders coming

in from new businesses.

He makes the structure and does not incorporate any designs into the machine. He sells his product at Rs. 8000-9000, which is lower than the price of a complete loom. If a weaver builds his own machine, it might cost around Rs. 25,000. A better quality machine, complete with design plates, would be available at Rs.80,000.

A few streets away, the Jhansi Kalamkari Factory is situated where raw strands of cotton are dyed in a workshop. The dye contains caustic soda which is harmful to the skin. Two men, Lakshminarayan Rao (30) and Jayaraju (35) have been 'boilers' for five years, and look unperturbed by the hazard of skin burns. It takes them more than one hour to complete the dyeing process on one piece of cloth for which they get a daily wage of Rs. 500.

Simultaneously, another workshop is busy making teakwood blocks, carving intricate designs

and drying them in the sun, to be used for printing Kalamkari designs.

Pitambar, staff head at the dyeing workshop, says that most orders within India are for fabrics with chemical dyes, whereas fabrics exported abroad are treated with natural dyes.

Raw cotton, once bleached or dyed, is spun into thread. Old women spin multicoloured spools of thread, which are fed into handloom machines for weaving. Some weavers produce sarees, to be sent to the market for Rs. 300-400 per piece. Other fabrics are sent to the Kalamkari stores nearby, where they are put into a production line, for block or screen printing.

Much of the business run by small independent families is affiliated to the Aruna Sri Sarees office known as the 'Society' which for many years has supported the weavers' culture here.

Providing training and even giving away a few machines, the Society is one of their biggest buyers, followed by wholesalers from Rajasthan, Kolkata and nearby Gun-tur, Vijayawada and Hyderabad.

A recluse spinning her own life

SREYA DEB

Kappaladoddi: Sitting under the scorching sun in her porch, she spins the wheel with a seasoned hand and rusty tools, and makes spool after spool of thread. But Balla Chendikamma, living in this village near Pedana, does not know how old she is: "80 something."

Chendikamma says the *maggu* (weaving machine) in her house stopped spinning the day her husband died two years ago. Till then they used to weave together. Now, she has resigned herself to spinning spools of thread from cotton strands, and she sells them at Rs. 10 per spool. Her handloom machine sits rusting in one of the two rooms of her mud house, coated with dust.

She flicks a switch and the unused yellow bulb flickers, illuminating thick cobwebs around the machine.

After an accident six months ago, the woman has not been able to even pedal the machine. Her

muscle got infected, and she had to get surgery and skin grafting done.

She lifts her saree to show an unexpected patch of pink skin on her thigh. "They removed the skin from there and put it here," she says, pointing to her foot wrapped crudely in an old bandage. Six months on, her foot still has not healed. Her ankle is swollen, and patches of scarring tissue are visible.

Adding to her woes, Chendikamma is living alone, her barely furnished house sandwiched between two others. Her three children and grandchildren are living far away. One of her sons has moved to Hyderabad, and two grand-



Ploughing a lonely furrow, Chendikamma has been working in her house |

SREYA DEB

Only her daughter visits with her children every Sankranti, to celebrate the festival for three days.

Does she miss the days when she used to work with her husband? Dearly. "He taught me how to weave," says the woman as her voice trembles slightly. Even though her parents were weavers, she learnt the ropes only after her marriage.

Now, Chendikamma doesn't need her job. Spinning spools of thread - 10-12 a day, brings her very little money but she cannot imagine sitting idle all day.

As she cannot walk steadily, neighbours help her with her chores outside of the house. "That's all I do all day," she says, "I spin thread, I eat, and I spin thread again." The house next to her's belongs to her son, and she has rented it out for Rs. 1000 a month.

Elderly citizens who are the only remaining weavers in their families are entitled to a loan. After her husband's death, she was given Rs. 20,000 under a scheme which promised Rs. 25,000. That was the last she heard of it.

Chendikamma is living a frugal life, vastly different than when she worked so hard to provide for her children. But she holds no grudge against them for distancing themselves from her.

She doesn't have the heart to sell her rusty relic, the ageing weaving machine.

Govt. blind to farmers' woes

Their life has "become an endless cycle of taking and repaying loans"

SAYANTAN GUHA

Krishna: Sitting at a distance, M. Venkatesh Rao, looks at his 21-year-old son ploughing his leased two-acre land at Gollapalem. It's been two months, yet Venkatesh Rao has not received his payments from the government for procurement of his yield in the *Kharif* season.

Like every farmer, Rao puts in his money, realised from the earlier season, in the next one. But late payments have made him take loans from a local lender at a high rate.

The latest National Crime Records Bureau report of 2018 suggested that the State recorded 6.4 per cent of the farmer suicides in the country. Rao said, "under the current government, the situation has worsened and we are helpless."

In November, the Government revised the rate for PPT 5204 paddy, which is of a superior quality and requires higher investment, compared to that for MTU 1061, which is an inferior variety entailing low investment. Not only is this unfair on the grounds of va-



Farmers packing bags of a season's yield | SAYANTAN GUHA

rying investments but the move has also killed any demand for the inferior variety.

Talking about crop loans, M. Venkateshwar, a farmer at Seetharamapuram, said, "I went to Krishna District Cooperative Bank, to Indian Bank, to Allahabad Bank but none gave me loans, as the land I cultivate is leased. I have asked the owner several times to help me out, but he hasn't."

J. Venkatesh Rao, who has taken

three acres on lease, echoes similar problems. The owner has been refusing to give the original documents necessary for sanction of a loan. There are seven farmers who have leased parts of the land from this owner and all of them are in similar straits.

"Against every acre of land, the Cooperative Bank gives a loan of Rs 30,000 and the owner avails himself of it," said Venkatesh Rao. The PM-KISAN scheme, intro-

duced in December 2018, has selectively aided farmers. Many have complained about not receiving the promised Rs 6000 per annum (in three regular instalments).

M. Ashok Kumar, who owns 5 acres at Seetharamapuram, is yet to receive a single instalment. Moreover, the scheme, while covering every land-owner irrespective of the size of the holdings, doesn't benefit tenant farmers. Those who lease the land are the ones cultivating the land, yet they are left out of the scheme.

In paddy cultivation, landowners with the help of government schemes, loans and subsidies, make a profit. But, Kumar said, tenant farmers are the worst hit. He gave an estimate of how much a farmer invests and earns from an acre.

The cost of a 75 kg bag of paddy is fixed at Rs 1,250 by the government. From one acre, the yield is approximately 30 bags. According to Kumar, it means a profit of Rs. 7,350 for six months of toil.

But on leased land, a farmer has to pay the landowner 10 bags of paddy and hence rather than profiting they suffer a loss of around Rs.

5000. So, to break even, the tenant farmers have to cut down on labour charges and employ their family members.

In 2019, due to untimely rains in November, the farmers suffered heavy losses in yield. Yet they paid the promised bags to owners.

K. Sivasankar Prasad, who owns around 1.5 acres at Sirivellapalem, said that at that point the government had promised to affected farmers help but nothing was given so far.

Machilipatnam and nearby regions face regular cyclones which heavily affect crops. At the State level, the farmers in unison have alleged indifference on the part of the YSR government towards agrarian problems.

Unavailability of crop loans has forced most farmers to pledge family gold or property to local moneylenders. G. Ranga Rao, of Kanuru, said, "A farmer's life has become an endless cycle of taking and repaying loans. We have no money to send our children to school. And without any education and skills, they also get trapped in this vicious cycle."

Tenant farmers lament ruling

ARNABJIT SUR

Krishna: The Andhra Pradesh Crop Cultivators Rights Act, passed in November last, has dealt a severe blow to tenants in the district.

The law enables tenants to avail themselves of government subsidies or loans and compensation for crop damage if they get permission from landowners to get the benefits. This provision didn't exist earlier.

"It was the same case previously where landowners deprived us of registration documents required to apply for crop loans and incentives," said T. Venkateshwar.

It depends on an agreement between the two, but mostly it is the landowners who get the larger slice of the pie. "All power is concentrated in the hands of landowners, who avail themselves of all the benefits," Rao, a farmer from Seetharamapuram said.

Earlier, a Loan Eligibility Card (LEC), which didn't require written consent from landowners, was issued to farmers to apply for agricultural schemes. Now, a Crop Cultivator Rights Card (CCRC) will allow the cultivators to take loans easily.

Farmers, however, say the nexus between landowners and banks has left them high and dry. "I have applied for the LEC several times but the landowner rejects the request by holding up our documents and con- vining with the banks," said 27-year-old Madas Fidisa Rao, a farmer in Gollapalem.

"Since landlords demand bags of produce under a lease agreement, crop loans will provide a security net in instances of bad yield or climate."

G. Mohan Raju, while ploughing a rented one-acre field, said, "All the government benefits demarca-

ted for us go to the landowners, despite workers making frequent appeals".

"Farmers are threatened if they try to protest as the landowner increases the quota of bags acquired from the yield," he added.

Some unaware of the Act said the system of landowners cornering loans has been normal for several years.

"Malik (Owner) sets an agreement before we work as to how much yield would be procured by him and the quantity that would be sold by us; so we are bound to follow suit, lest we lose our jobs," said M. Naidu, supervising a group of farmers on another paddy field.

Two years ago, S. Subbarao, a farmer in Tapasipudi, applied for a loan of Rs. 50,000 for a 2-acre land, however, bank officials, citing lack of documents, rejected his application. Similarly, G Ranga Rao of Kanuru village sought Rs. 30,000 for a one-acre land and his application is yet to see the light of day.

Rent documents such as Kheti paper or Land Registration Certificates are held by landowners, leaving them without any supporting material.

However, there are few landowners who provide monetary assistance to help cultivators get government benefits.

"While most of the landowners have vested interests, we have never faced any issues in applying for loans," said B. Chenniah, a farmer in Sirivellapalem.

"All the facilities are provided as per the lease agreement arrived at in the beginning with the farmers," said M. Ramadasu of Golapalem, who owns a 3-acre farm.

"Who would take the enormous burden if farmers fail to comply with the loan obligations due to bad yield?" Ramadasu asked.

Where to defecate? In the open: locals

SAYANTAN GUHA
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: It is a collective decision by villagers of Lankevanidibba, an island two hours from here; to defecate in the open.

The residents have to walk one and a half hours every day to reach the barren land patches which are waterlogged now owing to recent rains.

Even the Panchayat President doesn't have a toilet in his compound. Only a lone Registered Medical Practitioner (RMP) doctor's house has this facility.

Most villagers go to the chosen place once a day and defecate around their houses owing to the distance they have to travel just to answer nature's call. "We go there around 6 a.m. everyday," said Kumari (25) sitting with her daughter. The difficulties increase during winter when infants and elderly people find the early morning trek painful.

The government didn't invest in public toilets across the village, forget providing the statutory money for toilets in houses. "The local politicians don't pay attention to Lan-

kevanidibba at all," fumed S. Mahalakshmi (34), a fisher woman.

Meanwhile, in Nagayalanka, some locals have received Rs. 15,000 under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, to build toilets in their compounds. N. Dassariyya (44), of the fisherman colony, said, "I received funding for my toilet in 2018 and I have seen most of my neighbours also receiving the amount." But the claim is far from the ground reality.

N. Suresh (35), residing in the same colony, said, "I have seen people in the village getting funds, but our turn never came." He said the officials turned him away on every occasion, saying his name was yet to be registered for funds.

Suresh and his family now use a public toilet – the only one in the village – five minutes from their house.

K. Lakshman Rao (52), a farmer here, says, "Authorities are saying that we are ineligible for the funds. But these are just excuses for denying us our rights."

True, the public toilet is 100 metres from his compound, but it is the "unfair distribution of funds" that bothers Rao.

Challapalli sets a clean benchmark

MAHIMA MANIAR

Challapalli: When citizens themselves take up sanitation and cleanliness, it adds to the beauty of this village, near Machilipatnam.

Thanks to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Swachh Challapalli was inaugurated here on November 12, 2014. Its aims to include cleanliness, developing greenery, beautification of walls and tiles while campaigning against single-use plastic. Converting open drainage into an underground facility is another motto.

"Teaching and preaching does not help. Time, money and energy should be invested in society and the future generation," says Dr. Basara Rama Krishna Prasad, managing trustee of the the Manakosam Manam Trust who cleans the roads along with his wife and 30-40 volunteers.

In five years, 7,000-8,000 plants and 20,000 flower plants have been planted. Any effort made by residents is, however, credited to the secretary of the Gram Panchayat.

In April 29, 2017, the State government declared Challapalli an Open-Defecation Free (ODF) zone. It gave each household an allowance of Rs. 15,000 to construct toilets. Dr. Prasad and his team were able to construct 55 toilets at Gudem, which is an SC colony. All 4,950 households now have a toilet.

At Challapalli, where the soil is loose, the washrooms have to be constructed deeper. So Dr. Prasad and other volunteers, who work every morning from 4 to 6, met the additional expense. Three public toilets have also been constructed.

For beautification of the village, the trust, established on January 1, 2015, spends Rs. 3 lakhs a month.

A solid waste processing centre has been created at the garbage disposal site where waste is composted and sanitary napkins are incinerated organically.

Dr. Prasad also proposed that there be no raised platform between drains and roads to enable easy passage of sewage, adding that bins should be mounted on a pedestal and not on the ground to prevent littering.

Narasimha Rao (54), a telecom technician, who has been volunteering since the '100th day' that the Swachh Bharat campaign began, says he has been cleaning roads every day for the past five years. "In the beginning I cleaned the roads twice a week. "It is important to first keep our homes clean and then keep the roads clean," he added even as he was on his way to Avanigadda.

Farmers prevail, corridor laid to rest

ARNABJIT SUR
SAYANTAN GUHA

Krishna: For almost 15 years a Masula Sea Port had been on the table, first proposed by the then Chief Minister, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, in 2000s, before being dropped, says Narasimha Rao, a resident of Tapasipudi, a village 10 km from here.

The Telugu Desam Party-led State government in 2018 dropped a 2016 proposal to acquire 12,341 acres of private land for building an Industrial Corridor (IC) and the deep sea port.

The development project was slated to cover 33,177 acres across 29 villages in Krishna district but farmers were wary of parting with their agricultural land.

But, Narasimha Rao believes, "the project would have created job opportunities since the farmers are

facing problems growing paddy due to a lack of water supply. They should've given their farming land."

No, says a 55-year-old paddy farmer from Kothapudi, K Durga Rao, "Where will we go from here since this is what our families have been doing for ages? Our lives will have no value if we do not cultivate."

Almost every farmer in the village echoes similar concerns. K. Ravindran says, "We didn't go to school, nor could we send our children. There is no particular skill we have acquired except farming. The project might have brought jobs but how do we work there?"

According to the villagers, the panchayat notification of the authorities wanting to acquire 30,000 acres for the project was unacceptable to the villagers as it would include most of their landholdings.

Officials from the Machilipatnam Urban Development Authority (MUDA) allegedly tried to persuade the villagers into giving away their land.

P. Ramana, a 35-year-old farmer, said, "My father has been paralysed for the last five years and I had to regularly take him to the government hospital 10 km away. Where were these officials when I needed government support?"

However, as compensation, the administration offered three times the price of land to the displaced, half of the amount payable first and the rest after the registration of documents, Ravindran said. Some persons claimed they got Rs. 25 lakh for 1 acre.

The displaced villagers, according to the proposal, were also allocated 2-room flats along the Manginapudi Beach for relinquishing their land earmarked for the

project.

In April 2017, farmers of Tapasipudi and neighbouring villages staged a dharna against what they said was a blatant attempt to snatch away their land.

Pamu M., a farmer of Kothapudi, said, "The peaceful protest by a group of farmers was soon disrupted by a big posse of police personnel, who arrested them."

"The current regime was under pressure from the farming community to withdraw the 'atrocious order' for fear of losing its vote bank." This, he added, was one of the reasons for withdrawal of the initiative.

For some, the industrial project remains a far-fetched dream offering numerous financial benefits that they currently lack, while others see it as a ploy by the government to capture their land and render them unemployed.

Loans fine, but are women on track?

AMRUTHA KOSURU
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: Women are struggling to become financially independent despite DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) being in existence here for the past 15 years.

DWCRA was launched in 1982-83 in 50 districts to involve poor women in economic activities. The problem, however, is members having to form a group of 10 to 20 women to get loans sanctioned. DWCRA doesn't allow individual registrations. Under this scheme, each mandal receives Rs. 30 to 40 lakhs per month which is divided among the villages. On average, each village receives Rs 3 to 4 lakhs which is further divided amongst 10 or more DWCRA groups.

L. Sindhu (25), a DWCRA member since 2016, got Rs. 15,000 for a year. She invested the money in

breeding crabs which she sold to market vendors, gaining a profit of just Rs. 2,000 for the entire year. Loans are sanctioned depending on

the group's seniority for six months or a year, with the upper limit increased from Rs. 8 lakhs to Rs. 10 lakhs now.

G. Nageswaramma (45), a DWCRA member for the past 10 years, recently received her highest ever amount, Rs. 75,000 which got exhausted in paying tuition fees for her children. Nageswaramma, also the village officer, said, "This scheme is good but it only develops what is already here instead of enabling us to try something new. Providing loans is not equal to providing education or employment."

On penalty for delayed repayment, Sindhu says that it depends on the contract which everyone signs before claiming the loan. In her

group, a monthly penalty of Rs. 100 is levied after a waiver for the first month.

Under normal circumstances, loans are to be paid back at 12 per cent interest. Almost everyone is prompt in a bid to get the next loan sanctioned and also because the amounts are quite negligible, according to Sindhu, who aspires to own a clothing store some day. People allegedly run out of the money in a week.

As for a Community Development Fund, under which the government allots each group Rs.5 lakhs, it is said, the people, despite having the

“ Providing loans is not equal to providing education or employment

Why do the dirty on women who keep your village clean?

ARNABJIT SUR

Nagayalanka: A group of 20 women sweepers at Nagayalanka in Krishna district have been toiling without salaries for the past nine months, with the panchayat, allegedly, leaving them in the lurch. For them it has been an anxious wait with no other financial support.

Yella Nagudram, 48, along with three co-workers who are attending the inauguration of a Cage Culture Demonstration Unit here, works from 6.30 a.m. to 12 noon to ensure that every nook and corner of the village remains clean for a salary of Rs. 300 per day. "Not once in the 15 years since we started working have we received our salary on the first of every month," Nagudram says.

As a way out, the women have

found work at a local cage fish cultivation facility every Sunday for the past three months. Their job – catching fish – fetches them Rs. 250 a month.

However, Dasura Venkateshwara (35) says the family doesn't run without borrowing money from moneylenders. With two school-going daughters and a husband who works at the same unit, Dasura complains about lack of payment from the municipality. "Despite our hardwork towards keeping the village clean, daily sweepers remain underappreciated," she says, adding that the popular Clean India Mission of the Central Government "comes at the cost of their wages."

The moneylenders charge an interest at between 5 and 10 per cent for Rs. 10,000. "They double the interest if we don't pay up on

time," says Dasura, who has a debt of Rs. 20,000.

Rubbing salt into the women's wounds, she says, "the earnings from the cage cultivation unit go directly to our spouses and deprives us earning a salary."

Recurrent dharnas outside the Panchayat office have resulted in a severe backlash. "Our supervisors make us do double shifts if we protest against them," says Amma Garu, 52.

"Since we skipped work to attend today's event, Rs.300 has been cut from our salaries," jokes Garu.

The three women complained about unavailability of job opportunities for people on the lower rungs of society. "This is the only job that we have learnt to do, and due to lack of skill training, will have to continue to do so," Amma



The group of unpaid sweepers |

ARNABJIT SUR

Garu says.

The workers say they are not granted leave of absence on health grounds, and an appeal to higher officials is the only alternative.

Continuing with the litany of complaints, Nagudram says that unlike the *safai karamcharis*, their work is much more than collecting waste and throwing it in one corner

of the street. "But even these *karamcharis* skip the area around our houses as they think that they don't need to clean it," she says.

"If people like us are deprived of incomes, how would the city remain clean for tourists to visit the place?" Garu sums up the point.

The Village Panchayat Office has cited lack of funds to pay the salaries. "Due to financial issues and lack of funds, we couldn't pay up salaries to the workers for several months," said a Secretary, who wished to remain anonymous.

He added that the body would start payment from this month as it had begun collecting taxes.

"We expect to get our much-needed salaries anytime soon but media attention should be increased to highlight our plight," Nagudram concludes.

Fishermen sink or swim

Middlemen, meagre wages, and menacing weeds prove trouble

SREYA DEB

Nagayalanka: The fishermen of Diviseema, a coastal village here, live a life bound by the ebb and flow of the Krishna river. Their income depends on the yield the waters will bring. The morning of January 3 saw them all huddled under a shelter a few feet away from the river, with their nets and equipment, waiting for the rain to stop.

Kanna Raghavan (32), earns a daily wage of Rs. 200-500. This is not enough to sustain his family, for whom he is the sole breadwinner, he says. Most of the fishermen are suffering similar day-to-day problems.

Balaraju (30) says the fishermen are dependent mostly on money-lenders and boat owners in the village. Worse, they are at the mercy of middlemen who handle all affairs on behalf of the owners. Regardless of how much time the fishermen spend navigating the waters, they are always paid by the catch. Thus, they sometimes end up earning as little as Rs. 10, Balaraju says.

Besides poor wages, this job has its fair share of dangers. Fishing in the ocean has obvious risks — the



Boats moored on the Diviseema riverside as fishermen-prepape for their work I SREYA DEB

boats are not sturdy enough to withstand extremely harsh weather. Even with a motorboat, it takes much longer to return to the shore. In still waters where weeds grow the fishermen often have to dive

nearly eight feet into the water to pull the anchor free of any weeds that it may have gotten tangled with, says Raghavan.

Diving and resurfacing takes a minimum of three minutes, during

which they have to hold their breath. Those who dive and fish are paid double. They are provided no oxygen tanks or safety equipment. Nor do the fishermen wear the life vests that they are given, simply because, they say, they can all swim and hence do not see the need for it. Raghavan often takes up this job, to make ends meet.

Their catch most often consists of the pulasa, meva, and fingerlings too. When they're lucky and they manage a sizeable catch, or if they catch a goraka fish, they are allowed to take some of it back home. They wait eagerly to catch the goraka, as it is a weighty fish and sells for around Rs. 1000 per kg.

For all their unfavourable working conditions, fishermen have their own leisure activities. For the past five years they have been holding an annual boat race here during Sankranti. Every boat is rowed by four or five people, and the prize money is divided amongst all the winners. The prize money for the top three winners is Rs. 25,000, Rs. 15,000 and Rs. 10,000.

The events were organised by the Telugu Desam Party, the fishermen say they aren't sure if the races will happen this time around as the YSRC Party is in power now.

Poor treatment of Gopalamitras

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Nagayalanka: Gopalamitras (friends of cattle/Artificial Insemination workers) in this village haven't been receiving their salaries since February 2018 despite their fulfilling their duties.

According to the Andhra Pradesh Livestock Development Agency (APLDA), the Gopala Mitra Scheme was launched in April 2000, after a demo in 1999 was a huge success. Educated unemployed rural youth are being trained for 4 months in AI as Gopalamitras. At present, 2,636 Gopalamitras are covering 2-3 villages a day offering AI services on farmers' doorsteps.

B.Nancharayya, one of the six gopalamitras in the Nagayalanka mandal says, "We receive the equipment required for AI on time which is every 45 days, but not our salary". The equipment is supplied by the government but gopalamitras pay for it. A large container, liquid nitrogen, frozen semen and an instrument to insert semen in the cattle are provided. Each bottle of semen costs Rs. 40.

The gopalamitras take Rs. 70 for AI from the cattle owner. They have to pay Rs. 40 to the government for each AI they perform and can keep Rs. 30. When the scheme began, they were paid an honorarium of Rs. 2,000 a month. This increased to Rs. 3,500 during Y.S.Rajasekhara Reddy's rule in 2005. Almost nine years after that, the then Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu announced a hike in the honorarium in November, 2018.

The monthly sustenance allowance was Rs. 6,400 after the hike. However, in February 2019, not only did they stop getting the increased honorarium of Rs. 6,400 but the APLDA website now says the monthly allowance is only Rs. 3,500. The government will provide a Gopalamitra's family with 50,000 if he dies in harness.

B.Anjaneyulu, another gopalamitra, says, "No one talks or asks about the hiked salary anymore. It is a dream that lasted only for two months," he says, "I am sure there are very few who know that this profession exists", he laughs.

The Chief Veterinarian of the Nagayalanka Veterinary Hospital, Dr. M.D.Shafi, says now it has become increasingly difficult for the workers to make ends meet as the number of cattle in the mandal has been declining. He believes that the decline in cattle is due to increasing milk and food prices. According to him, each AI worker is able to artificially inseminate only about 100 head of cattle in two months in three or four villages put together.

"We know that farmers will suffer if their cattle are not inseminated. The dairy industry will fall. It will just get worse," Nancharayya said. He added that his condition is relatively good as he can depend on his family finances. Nevertheless, he has taken micro-finance loans for his children's education.

They begin their day at 7 a.m. and it does not end until evening. They also offer first aid and vaccination services. These men work without any medical reimbursement or insurance cover.

Marooned for healthcare

SAYANTAN GUHA

Nagayalanka: At Lankevanidibba, an island two hours from here, there is only one RMP (Registered Medical Practitioner) doctor for around 250 people — with no other medical staff, centres or facilities.

The RMP is their only hope of treatment for fever or wounds. For better aid, the locals journey for two hours to Nagayalanka, by crossing a river on two stretches, and an arduous road travel.

K. Ratnam (69), says, "Most people who live here are illiterate. They believe the RMP doctor to be a government doctor." He charges money keeping in mind the financial conditions of the patients. But, he is present between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. and after 6 o'clock in the evening.

For surgeries or serious ailments, even a visit to the Government General Hospital at Nagayalanka is not enough. The patient needs to be taken to the government hospital in Machilipatnam or Avanigadda, both 4-5 hours away.

Natives say, in two incidents last year, two patients died while crossing the river in a boat. The bodies were disposed of in the water. Such incidents were frequent earlier. Since ferry services stop after 6 pm, in case of emergencies after nightfall, they wait for the RMP, or hope and pray that the patient survive till sunrise.

S. Rangamma, who travelled to Avanigadda for her delivery a year ago, said, "Even pregnant women have to travel all the way to or the city by ferry. The path is not safe for expectant mothers."

Floods recede, villagers' woes remain

Local fishing and agriculture activities halted for four months

SAYANTAN GUHA
SRINJOY SANYAL

Nagayalanka: The August floods resulted in villages here remaining waterlogged till November, thus damaging property and disrupting livelihoods. The government not providing adequate financial support has worsened the situation, it is alleged.

Heavy rains upstream and huge inflows of water into the Krishna River on August 13 resulted in water entering low-lying areas in the district, leaving hundreds of acres of farm land under a sheet of water. The water, waist-high inside people's homes, did, however, recede in a week but normal activities were not restored. The river banks and agricultural land were submerged till the end of November.

Residents of damaged houses — some of these makeshift ones — and people dependent on fishing and agriculture felt desolate as their incomes came to a standstill for four months. The fishermen were the worst affected as they couldn't go fishing owing to the increased water levels and their nets were washed away. Also, most of the fish, bred under the National Fisheries Development Board funded



N.Suresh and his family have rebuilt their house without any government aid, post-flood I SAYANTAN GUHA

"Cage Culture" in the area, escaped.

What made the people cry foul was the government not providing them any compensation. It did give 50 percent of the amount required for reconstructing houses, but nothing for losses they incurred after getting marooned, resulting in fishing and agriculture coming to a halt.

The only thing the villagers were happy about was that all 20 families had been shifted to the nearby government high school here, where they were served water and

three meals a day. N.Suresh (35), a residing in the fisherman colony, said, "Our only relief was that the food we were served was really tasty."

At Lankevanidibba, a small island village two hours from here, people had to take refuge in a government-constructed cyclone shelter as water had entered their houses.

Usually, the residents make two ferry trips to reach the nearest public medical centre at Nagayalanka, due to a lack of medical help on the island. During the floods, all

ferry/boat services were called off, thus cutting off all links with the adjoining mandals and villages.

(Diviseema consists of three mandals — Avanigadda, Koduru and Nagayalanka. Nagayalanka consists of 46 villages including Lankevanidibba.)

The islanders, however, did stack up supplies as they got prior warning about the floods. During that period, they also received rations like rice, vegetables and some pulses but were insufficient for the entire population, the people said in unison.

N. Nageshwar Rao, a fisherman on the island, said, "Most of us are concerned with catching prawns and fish." He complained that the government did not provide any support or compensation for the damage that we suffered.

ASSIST, an NGO, has taken up the initiative to provide housing to the 298 flood victims in Avanigadda and Nagayalanka. The work is in progress and 26 houses have already been built.

Aquaculture ensures easy trade for the Yenadi tribe

MAHIMA MANIAR

Nagayalanka: The backwaters of the Krishna have become a hub of cage cultivation, with the Yenadi tribe and fisherfolk here practising aquaculture successfully for a decade now.

Each cage, costing around Rs. 3 lakh, is utilised for food culture and fingerling rearing. The Central Government, along with the National Fisheries Development Board (NFDB), is providing financial assistance for the project through the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) under the SC and ST sub-plan. It's the first of its kind in brackish water captive fish rearing said T. Raghu Sekhar, a fisherman here.

The project helps in artificially cultivating some of the abandoned fish breeds, restoring aquaculture and the dying mangrove cover, and, in turn, providing economic opportunities to the landless Yenadi community, said Sekhar. "The 24 cages here primarily culture the Asian sea bass, the orange-spotted grouper and the Indian pompano, which are sold at Rs. 350 per kg."

The process helps extract Omega-3, which is known to be good for health, and thereby arrest the decline in fish population owing to overexploitation, Sekhar added.

However, as cage cultivation is a seasonal occupation, the fisherfolk and tribal men catch crabs and rats for farmers during monsoons. "We are trying to help the Yenadi community in catching crabs with traps. The traps can be laid at different places, and the crabs, They are called Scylla serrata, and weigh 100-200 gms, can be collected the next day," said Jayaraj Yeddanapalli, executive secretary of ALERT, a non-governmental organization.

The oppressed Yenadi tribes, 98 per cent of whom are landless, eke out a living by fishing, catching

crabs from mangroves, trapping rats on agricultural land, working as security men in fish tanks and helping to harvest paddy and pluck chillies during the agricultural season.

According to Yeddanapalli, The State Government, however, has recently recognised them on a par with the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) to make available the 90% subsidy for the government schemes.

However, the land purchase schemes involve a 25 per cent loan component. Moreover, the Yenadis restrict themselves to mangroves and creeks with the increase of aqua farms.

Thus, it is a challenge to help them get fishers' bio metric cards and fishing licences. "Conferring community forest resource rights with integrated aqua farming in mangroves will also help to bail them out of poverty," Yeddanapalli added.

At 51, woman travels 51 km to keep up with Kuchipudi

AMRUTHA KOSURU

Kuchipudi: Amid the dwindling patronage for the famous dance form and steady tilt towards western culture, a 51-year-old woman, is pursuing a two year masters programme at Sri Siddendhra Yogi Kuchipudi Kala Peetham here.

A. Eeshwari, who hails from Vijayawada, travels to Kuchipudi, 51 km every day to continue with her tryst with the dance, which she first learnt when she was 16. "Initially I was afraid. But my teachers were the ones to encourage me; they told me dance has nothing to do with age." Now in the second year of Masters in Performing Arts, Eeshwari learnt two of the four parts of Kuchipudi dance.

The four parts are *Vachika* — speaking, *Aahaarya* — costumes, *Aangika* — movements & Body postures and *Satvika Abhinayam* or expressions.

Eeswari aims to master the other two arts and teach others. She particularly wants to master *Satvika Abhinayam*.

It is in this village the Kuchipudi dance originated more than 3000 years ago. It was first introduced by

Siddendra Yogi. It is said that every family here has a dance performer. Initially, only male dancers would perform both as men and women.

This is the only village which has been named after a dance form. Kuchipudi is one of the eleven classic dance forms that originated in Krishna District.

For all the distinction, the tradition and the dance form are gradually fading. Sri Siddendhra Yogi Kuchipudi Kala Peetham produced famous dancers like Shobha Naidu and Yamini Reddy.

Now there are only 120 students.

Dr. Yesewarapa Srinivas Rao, one of the senior teachers, says many parents dissuade their children from learning this art as it is time consuming. "Nowadays children remain in the school for more than 12 hours. With a curriculum like that, it is impossible for them to make time for other activities", he says.

Earlier, the school produced many Muslim dancers like Kai-

lasha Begum from Ongole and Mohammad Khalid from Hyderabad. "Art has nothing to do with religion, caste, creed or colour. In the past, we have had students from other countries as students here", says Dr. Srinivas.

Although all subjects — both practical and theory — mostly pertain to dance, the master's course has "Computer Applications" as a compulsory subject. "This subject was introduced recently to catch up with urbanisation. It is also helpful for someone like me who never knew how to handle a computer. Now I can manage", says Eeshwari.

Most of the students who graduate from here set up their own dance schools. Eeshwari too aspires to do the same. As her son has settled in Canada, she will move there very soon. "To teach an art that is so pure and Indian to a foreigner is something I am looking forward to," she says, "perhaps I can also teach my grandchildren. It will be worth it even if I teach one more person before I die".



AMRUTHA KOSURU

Kakarlamudi: Toddy tappers in this village, covered with their 10-15 kg protection suit and carrying pots tied to both ends of a stick, can be seen walking towards palm trees in the afternoon.

They collect toddy twice a day (in the morning and evening.) They wear a three-part harness, one each for the feet, waist and to hold onto the tree. The one around the waist — *paya* — has a hook on the back to carry pots up the tree, and a sickle to cut the sap hanging from it. A bigger belt — *moku* — is wrapped on the *paya*.

Sri Ramulu (40), the youngest toddy tapper at Kakarlamudi, is agile as he makes his way up with the equipment. He points to the harness by his feet, and says "Gudi is the most important of all. If it isn't proper, one will fall". He has been tapping toddy since he was 16, having learnt it from his father and elder brother.

He returns to the trees after three days to bring the toddy-filled pots down. He sells half a litre of toddy for Rs. 10. This routine is followed from January to June, irrespective of weather. For Shivaratri, the toddy tapper climbs at least 10 trees a day as toddy is in demand during the time.



Sri Ramulu makes his fourth climb of the day | SREYA DEB

"I work a labourer even now from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. The meagre amount I get from toddy is not enough," Sri Ramulu laments. He said that had he not been a *Gouda* (belonging to OBC), he wouldn't have been a toddy tapper. "This is my *Kula Vrutthi* (job particular to a

caste). I couldn't escape from it because I have no education." There are very few toddy tappers left now as they have shifted to other jobs.

M. Sambasiva Rao (52), owns 0.5 acres of land. He still works as a tapper and on other's farms. "I am the only working member in my fa-

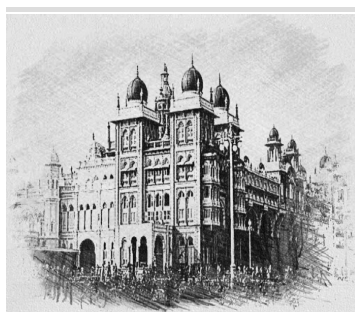
mily. After buying land I thought, things will be better but our money has gone to medical expenses." Five years ago, Sambasiva had to undergo an operation that cost him a fortune. Pointing at the healing stitches on his stomach, he says, "I have been collecting toddy for over 36 years, not even once has the government tried to support our livelihood or our medical needs."

Kayathengada Swami fell from a tree while collecting toddy eight years ago and suffered a spinal injury. It cost him almost a lakh for an operation. He is now unemployed, and his wife the sole breadwinner of the family.

"All that the government gave me was a certificate that legitimizes my spinal injury", he said. Since then, he has never gotten any aid whatsoever.

All toddy tappers here hate the only profession they know, as it doesn't pay enough. Their only exposure to the outside world are visits to the Machilipatnam government hospital.

Suffering acute pain in the back, Sri Ramulu says he is averse to his children taking up this occupation. He wishes them a better life. As the sun sets, a pale shadow of the tall tree falls on him as he laughs and says, "We will be the last generation of toddy tappers here."



MYSURU

JANUARY 17, 2020

11

PHCs abandoned in Kote

Many care centres in H.D. Kote are understaffed and dysfunctional

SAMEER KULKARNI

H.D. Kote: In September last year, the long abandoned Primary Health Centre (PHC) at Annur in H.D. Kote taluk was cleaned up and the pregnant women in the area were informed. However, none of the soon-to-be mothers turned up. They claimed the hospital was haunted.

The health centre, which is supposed to be open 24/7, was abandoned four years ago after the only in-house sister, Seethamma, died. Now, overgrown with wild bushes, empty alcohol packs, cigarette butts, and playing cards lie scattered in the "reception" area, visible through the broken windows.

According to people in the locality, sister Seethamma took care of the pregnant women, the infants and their needs. Once she was gone, the doctor stopped coming in, and with that, the people stopped too.

"If we got sick then we would go to this very hospital but now we have to go all the way to Henur, which is a bus ride away. It is very inconvenient," said Devu, an agricultural labourer, who lives near to the PHC.

For most people, the PHC remains a haunted place. "We had cleaned it," said Sudha, an Anganwadi teacher in neighbouring Bheemanahalli, "but all the women thought it was haunted... we had to go through the meeting here, in the Anganwadi."

The Primary Health Centre in Kenchanhalli shares a similar story. Three years ago, a sister



An abandoned PHC at Beemanahalli | SAMEER KULKARNI

named Philomena, who was housed in the PHC, was transferred to Mysuru and ever since the care centre remains closed.

The heavily under-staffed PHC lacks the basic requirements for medical care. However, as for infrastructure, the building is intact; there is a pump for water supply and uninterrupted electricity connection. But there are no patients, or doctors.

According to Sannaswamy, who lives near the PHC, it is a waste of government money. "There are no medicines or injections. We do not benefit from this. For every little thing we have to go as far as H.D. Kote, which is an hour away," he said.

People who are willing to travel have to endure the poor quality of roads. Rekha K S, an Accredited Social Health Activist, or ASHA worker, in the village, conducts regular check-ups for pregnant women and infants but the medi-

cine has to be sourced from the PHC in N Begur, which is 20 minutes away.

Due to the poor condition of roads, the ambulances are also reluctant to come, said Rekha. There are three ambulances - in Anthar-santhi, H.D. Kote and Sargur, all 30-60 minutes away. "They are not enough and they take about two hours to come. The drivers say that the road is not good," she said.

Mahesh, a grocery store owner, said "In the past 50 years nothing has changed in this village. The roads are terrible. If they just improve the roads then it will pave way for all kinds of development."

In N Begur, the Primary Health Centre looks bright, shining white on a Sunday afternoon, like a model of a hospital than an actual one. The new building was constructed a year ago next to the dilapidated old PHC. However, one

attendant and a few sisters run the PHC.

Mahadeva M, Health Assistant, or the "attendant," manages everything, from opening the doors in the morning to prescribing medicine to the out-patients. In addition, Machamma, a senior nurse, and one junior sister work in the hospital.

The PHC, in addition to three sub-centres, is expected to cover around 13,000 people spread across 25 villages. There is only one doctor, Dr.Venkatesh, who visits two times a week. However, according to some villagers, he is not regular.

The centre does not have a staff nurse, woman doctor, and a pharmacist and some medicines are not available.

According to Mahadeva, Diclofenac, an anti-inflammatory drug used to manage pain, is out of stock since six months and "not a single injection has been received from the government."

The PHC does not have a laboratory for conducting tests.

Machamma, who conducts weekly sessions about menstrual awareness and hygiene for teenage girls, said that the PHC is supposed to be equipped for deliveries. "There is no lady doctor or a senior nurse. We have to send patients to Sargur for everything," she added.

According to Dr Raja, a doctor in Hampapura, the hospital has nothing. "There is nobody in the hospital and no proper facilities, if Mahadeva is on leave, there is nobody to even open the door," he added.

TRIBAL WOES

Anaemia rampant among women

GOKUL G K

H.D. Kote: More than 60 per cent of all the tribal children in H.D. Kote are born anaemic, reveal studies by the University of Mysuru.

According to the sample survey conducted by the university, the prevalence of anaemia is the most among the Soliga tribe, where 91.4 per cent children have the condition. Out of this, 9.9 per cent children were detected with severe anaemia and 74.3 per cent were detected with moderate anaemia.

The prevalence of anaemia among children belonging to the Jenu Kuruba, a major tribe in Karnataka, is 77 per cent. Out of this 15 per cent are severely anaemic.

Anaemia is a condition in which the body lacks enough healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen to the tissues.

Shyamdhara, a tribal child belonging to the JenuKuruba community in the H.D. Kote Taluk, was born with severe anaemia.

His mother, an agricultural labourer, didn't have the time and money to take care of the nutritional needs of her growing foetus.

Anaemia during pregnancy is especially a concern because it is associated with low birth weight, premature birth, and maternal mortality.

"Many tribal women don't get enough nutrition while they are pregnant," said E Thameem, a doctor at the Primary Health Centre in D B Kuppe, a village on the fringes of the Nagarhole National Park in H.D. Kote close to Karna-

"I didn't have enough money to give good nutrition to my children; some days we all go to sleep, hungry," said Sandhya

taka's border with Kerala.

Sometimes, the PHCs and the ASHA workers (Accredited Social Health Activists) are unable to identify all the pregnant women, thus they wouldn't get treated.

"This is because many, especially the tribals living inside the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, are reluctant in admitting pregnancy," said Thameem.

Many of these tribals have poor prenatal care, resulting in the starvation of the foetus.

Almost all the children in Balle - a tribal settlement inside the Nagarhole National Park - are born anaemic.

Sandhya, a tribal woman from Balle, was 22 when she gave birth to her third anaemic child.

With very poor prenatal nutrition, the infant mortality rate in the area is substantially high, said Yamuna, a doctor working at the Vivekananda Memorial Health Centre in Sargur, a taluk head-quarter in Mysuru.

The most common type of anaemia is iron-deficiency anaemia or ferropenic, where a lack of iron in the body leads to a reduction in the number of red blood cells.

This is because of the lack of food containing iron in diet, like green leafy vegetables and lentils, during the first trimester of pregnancy.

In India, iron supplements such as IFA (Iron Folic Acid) tablets are given for free to pregnant women, through PHs and Government hospitals.

However, identifying these pregnant women among tribals is still a challenge.

"We have managed to give IFA tablets to most of the women in D. B. Kuppe," said Thameem.

According to him, there is a decline in maternal anaemia in the D B Kuppe village.

However, D B Kuppe does not have many tribals. The identification is relatively difficult in smaller tribal majority hamlets.

"Most of them don't even realise that they are pregnant until late into the first trimester," said Yamuna.

Another common form of anaemia which is very prevalent among the tribals is 'sickle celled anaemia,' a genetic disorder of the blood caused by inherited abnormal haemoglobin.

"Unlike the other forms of anaemia, sickle celled anaemia cannot be treated with nutrition supplements," said Thameem.

It requires expensive treatments such as hematopoietic stem cell transplantation.

The transplantation of multipotent hematopoietic stem cells, usually derived from bone marrow, peripheral blood, or umbilical cord blood, which could cost upto Rs 7 lakhs.

ASHA workers are on strike

SAMEER KULKARNI

Kenchanahalli: On January 3, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) from across Karnataka went on an indefinite strike in Bengaluru. Their demands included a fixed monthly salary of Rs 12,000 and payment of the incentives that had been due for over 15 months.

Rekha K S, an ASHA worker from Kenchanhalli, was one among the 46,000 protestors who walked until the Freedom Park from the city railway station. After the government failed to meet the demands, she, along with others, stopped working altogether.

Back in her village, she has been the only reliable source of health care.

After the Primary Health Centre closed, without the doctor, Rekha has been solely taking care of the people. "After sister Philomena was transferred to Mysuru there has been no sister at the PHC, the doctor comes once in a while," she said. She sources medicines, from the nearby PHC in N Begur. It is her responsibility to call for

weekly meetings with the pregnant women and inform them about their medical and nutritional requirements. She also makes sure all the infants in the area are vaccinated.

A fortnight ago, she made attempts to revive the nearby PHC. "There was a lock on the gate and the door, we had to break those locks, get new locks, get the place cleaned up so that it can be useful," she said.

However, Rekha's attempts have not borne any fruit. The PHC remains locked and unused. "If we had our own sisters and doctors then it will be convenient but there has been no response from the government."

The ASHA workers receive incentives for their service, for instance, taking pregnant women for delivery days ahead of the date. But they have not received their payments for over a year now. They get, according to Rekha, Rs 3,500 a month, without a pay raise for over five years.

"We save mothers and children here," she said, "nobody offers us even a cup of tea."

Swachh Bharat - a myth?

ARCHITA RAGHU

H.D. Kote: Mysuru district was declared as Open Defecation Free by the Government in 2016. According to the Swachh Bharat Gramin Mission 2018-19 report, Karnataka is 99.60 per cent Open Defecation Free (ODF). However, several villages in Mysore district have a different story to tell.

In Bheemanahalli village in H.D. Kote taluk, most residents have functioning toilets outside their houses. They were given Rs 12,000 to build a toilet and very few houses have toilets inside their houses.

"We have a toilet inside our house because we saved to build it," Usha (50) said.

However, deeper inside the village is an area built by people employed under the MGNREGS scheme. These yellow houses, constructed in 2018, do not have toilets.

Pavithra (33) a resident of this area said that they defecate on the banks of the lake nearby. The women usually go very early in the morning in groups.

The lake is two kilometres away and another lake is five kilometres away. The younger

children of the area who cannot constantly be taken to the lake or forest defecate on the streets, said Jothi (20).

"Another problem is that tigers and elephants are also there in the forest when we go so we all mostly go in the mornings," Pavithra said. She added that it is unsafe to go to the forests due to this and people often ask officials to build toilets in the village.

According to K N Manjunath, Development Officer, Bheemanahalli, "People have been defecating in the open for a long time. It takes time for people to change, especially old people."

"There are 5-6 homes that are exceptions but overall the area is 100 percent open defecation free," he said. "Usually, people go out [to defecate] in groups if some of the people stop coming then the others feel bad, that is how the change can happen," he added.

"If nobody is coming with them then they are forced to change," Manjunath said.

In Balle and D.B. Kuppe, the tribal settlements do not have toilets and have not heard of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan Mission (SBAM). The people defecate near the lake or in the surrounding forest area. Gauri, a Jenu Kuruba woman, said that she has asked the forest department several times about constructing a toilet but nothing has happened so far.

In Balle, the tribals go to the forest to defecate and they prefer to go in groups based on age and gender.

However, in D.B. Kuppe, most houses have toilets. Kadeja (48) said that the officials in her area provided Rs 12,000 to construct a toilet. "But that's not enough. You need at least Rs 1 lakh to build a functioning toilet," she added. Depending on the caste some families were given Rs. 15,000 to build a toilet.

Gendathur and Brahmagiri have toilets built by the local NGO Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement. None of the villagers here have heard of the SBAM. Houses on one side of Brahmagiri have toilets while some in Elisikettahadi on the other side don't. In the flood-hit area of Macchur, several houses do not have toilets. The houses destroyed by the floods have not been fully repaired.

Menstrual 'unhygiene'

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: The majority of women living in villages in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysuru do not follow hygienic methods during menstruation. Many do not use sanitary napkins since they cannot afford to buy a packet.

Many young women still use a piece of cloth during their menstrual cycle which they wash and reuse. They dry the cloth inside their rooms as they are embarrassed to dry it outside. The cloth should be dried under direct sunlight which is considered to be a natural sanitizer and more hygienic.

Thayamma from Bheemanahalli Haddi says that, "We do not use sanitary napkins during our cycle because one packet cost Rs 30 and we cannot afford to buy one every month. We use cloth instead. The cloth cannot be dried out in the sun because we do not want the men to see it."

There are no toilets at Bheemanahalli Haddi which makes it even more difficult for the women during the time. Many girls have been prone to infections because of the unhygienic methods.

The situation is similar in Balle, a tribal village in the Nagarhole

National Park where the women use dry leaves and cloth instead of sanitary napkins. The people living in the village belong to the Jenu Kuruba tribe.

"The women of our tribe do not go inside the house for 12 days during our cycle. We have to cook and sleep outside the house. Since we do not have any toilets, we go to the forest and dispose the used leaves and cloth there," said Shanta, a villager.

Many girls quit studies after they get their periods because of the lack of toilet facilities at school and also because they are embarrassed to study in the same class with boys. The parents also force the girls to get married.

"My parents forced me to stop going to school and got me married soon after I got my menstrual cycle. They said it is not safe for a girl to study in the same class with boys anymore," said Pavithra, resident of Kenchanahalli.

The women in these villages have not received any awareness classes regarding the hygienic use of sanitary napkins.

The Menstrual Hygiene Scheme, by the Ministry of health and hygiene has apparently not been implemented in any of these villages.

Fighting taboos with street plays

TANISHKA SODHI

D.B. Kuppe: In D.B. Kuppe village where alcoholism and child marriages are rampant, awareness about these issues is raised through street plays organised by school children.

Teachers in the Government Higher Primary School in the village, which is located in H.D. Kote, say that although the dropout rate has decreased, children are still forced sometimes to quit school due to the heavy alcoholism that persists in their households, and the pressure on girls to get married early.

Street plays called *jatta* take place once a year highlighting the various issues that affect the community such as child marriage, alcoholism and protection of forests.

The students, after rehearsing for a few weeks under the guidance of their teachers, go to different localities in the village and



Children playing at the Government Higher Primary School in D.B. Kuppe | GOKUL G K

perform the street play. It is as much to raise awareness among the students as it is to raise awareness among their parents and locals.

According to Naveen Aradhya, a primary school teacher, a lot of the children are brought up by single mothers. Heavy alcoholism

and poor food habits of the men contribute to the high widow rate in D.B. Kuppe.

"After class 10th, a lot of the students get married - more girls than boys," said Aradhya. "The girls are not allowed to go to college; they don't have the freedom."

Dr. E Thameem, the sole doctor in the Primary Health Centre in the village, said that most of the men in the village were addicted to alcohol.

"Since this is a remote area, there aren't any rehabilitation facilities," he said.

Women come in sometimes

with wounds that are traced back to domestic violence under the influence of alcohol, said the doctor. "They don't tell us where the injuries are from, but we figure it out. Every day, we see at least one or two drunk patients in the clinic too," said Dr. Thameem.

Child marriage which leads to early child birth also results in problems such as premature babies and death of infants, besides causing a negative effect on the mothers, mentally, according to Dr. Thameem.

According to the school teachers, the kids are often influenced by those drinking alcohol.

"We try to encourage them to talk to us about issues at home," said Aradhya.

"The street plays help raise awareness, but it will take another five to ten years for the positive effects to show," she added.

Drunk and violent

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: Men consuming alcohol and beating up women and children is a common sight in several villages in H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru.

D.B. Kuppe village is situated near the Kerala-Karnataka border. Both men and women from this village go for coolie work to Mananthavadi and Bavalli in Kerala to earn their living.

The men spend their money at the toddy shop situated on the bank of the Kabini River where the people take the boat from D.B. Kuppe to Pulpally in Kerala. This spot is crowded with men who are drunk, making it uncomfortable and unsafe for the women and children who take the boat to the Kerala side and back.

Lakshmi (28) from the Jenu Kuruba tribe, who lives in a settlement in the village, says that the men spend all the money they get from work to buy alcohol. They come back home drunk and beat up women and children.

The school in the village is located quite close to the toddy shop. There are a large number of students dropping out from school and getting addicted to alcohol.

Lakshmi says that the women of the village gathered in front of the toddy shop to protest against this. They protested for three days but there was no action taken. "The police do not come to our village to solve our problems," she said.

The situation is similar in Bheemanahalli Haddi where the men are addicted to alcohol.

"My husband is an alcoholic. He does not bring a single penny to the house. I have to go for coolie work in order to run the family," says Thayamma, a resident.

The men buy 90 ml sachets of whiskey or some other tipple from places like Sargur. Some buy them in bulk at Rs 30 a sachet and sell them for a profit of Rs 10. Empty and crushed sachets can be seen strewn around under trees and along main roads in several villages in H.D. Kote.

Man v/s Wild: conflict continues

Despite official efforts, H.D. Kote remains a hotspot for wild animal attacks

ARCHITA RAGHU

Kenchanahalli: Man-elephant conflict continues to affect H.D. Kote farmers

Farmers in Kenchanahalli village are demanding that the Government constructs a solar-powered electric fence to prevent wild animals from invading their fields, which border the forest.

"We want a solar powered electric fence to keep out elephants which destroy our crops," said Srinivas (40), who grows ragi, banana and horsegram.

Srinivas points to a large trench dug by the Forest Department on the boundary between his fields and the forest to keep elephants, wild boars and deer away.

"But now even with the trench, elephants have found a way to come in and destroy our crops," he said, pointing to the spot where he said the elephants had climbed in and out of the trench to get into his fields.

The elephants from the nearby forest had carved out a path in the trench and made their way to the ragi and banana crops.

"The Forest Department is not giving us compensation after the elephants destroy everything so as to ensure that we do not build that electric fence," Srinivas alleged.

The Supreme Court has directed to remove electric fences and barbed wires in critical elephant corridors of the State. The Karna-



A forest official stands next to Ramagowda's cow, killed by the tiger. | FILE PHOTO

taka Forest Department has said that it would conduct a survey, identify the areas with the electric fences and instruct its officers to remove them.

The villagers burst crackers, bang vessels, shout and make other loud noises to drive away elephants.

Lingaraj (40) who cultivates sugarcane and chia seeds in Basapura, said, "Last season, I didn't make any profit because of the elephants. I spent Rs. 80,000 in total and got back that much only."

Jayamma (34) said that these elephants also affect her children when they're on the way to school

and they can't study as the wild animals roam outside their houses.

When the elephants come, the residents usually call the forest ranger who comes to help. "But they don't do much and we get little compensation or none at all after the animals destroy our crops and houses," said Jayamma.

According to a Government order, Rs. 7,000 is a must be given in cases of elephants destroying any properties and a maximum Rs. 1 lakh in the cases of wild animals destroying crops, provided the destruction is not on encroached land. In cases of human loss, Rs. 5 lakh is to be given as compensation.

TANISHKA SODHI

Kalasuru: It was 63-year-old farmer Ramagowda's jacket layer that he says protected him from being killed by a tiger five years ago in Kalasuru, a village in H.D. Kote taluk.

This was not the first tiger attack in the village, and locals doubt it will be the last. Despite efforts from villagers and forest officials, Kalasuru has continued to be a hotspot for tiger-man conflicts over the years.

Ramagowda may have escaped death, but the injuries he suffered in the attack have left him crippled.

His 28-year-old son Jayakumar said, "There should be some sort of protection in the village. My father was on his way back from the farm (a kilometre away from the forest) when the tiger tried to grab his neck but couldn't get a grip."

The family spent Rs 1 lakh on treatment, out of which Rs 15,000-20,000 was given in compensation by the government. The cattle, too, was killed by the tiger a month ago.

Preventive methods such as keeping dog bones as a bait to trap the tiger and tracking the animal's pattern are used.

"More methods should be taken, as it is our lives at stake," said Jayakumar.

He believes that officials should follow research studies

on tiger attacks and take better preventive measures.

Six months ago, a tiger was caught by the forest officials. The tigers usually come out at night, which is why villagers are scared of sending their kids out late.

According to Marigowda, the forest official who guards the area, villagers leave their animals in the forest land despite being told not to, and then claim that tigers attacked their animals. He said that there was also a night patrol group to keep track of the animal.

"They keep lying about the death of their animals. We are living near the forest, how can we call this trouble?" he asked, continuing, "The villagers lay false claims to get money from the government."

Solar-powered wires that can give an electric shock are laid around the forest by the officials to prevent tigers from entering farm lands. However, the animal manages to jump across it anyway.

Some of the villagers are demanding that fences be built around their farms, too.

Eighty-year-old Dhodamma was sleeping in her farm when a tiger attacked her a few years ago.

She suffered head injuries and despite the ordeal, she still frequents the farm. It is, after all, her livelihood.

No electricity despite dam

SUKRITI VATS

Murband: Residents of Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk of Mysuru district endure rampant electricity cuts even though they were promised a steady 24-hour supply when the Kabini dam was built in 1974. They belong to the successive generations of people displaced during the dam's construction.

"My grandfather's land was taken 50 years ago for the construction of the Kabini dam," said Fayaz Pashar, who has been running a grocery shop in the village several years now on land rented from the mosque nearby.

Pashar said that his grandparents, who were farmers before, were promised land for cultivation and electricity as compensation for the displacement, but received neither.

"We were ruined at that time, but over the years things have become better. Though electricity problem still persists causing us a lot of inconvenience."

Murband village, which lies about 10 km away from the Kabini dam near Beechanahally village of H.D. Kote, has a sizable population of Muslims. Spread across 55 hectares, the Kabini dam forced migration of many villagers to other areas.

Abdul Wahab, another shopkeeper, complained that the dam has not been helpful for them

at all despite the Karnataka Government claim on its website that it would cater to the needs of around 22 villages and 14 hamlets, with water and electricity.

"On a usual day, the electricity is available only for a fixed time - from 9 a.m. to 12 noon and 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. In between, we suffer from the burning heat with no fans," said Wahab. He also said that during rains it's even worse as they don't get electricity even for those fixed hours.

Thirteen-year-old Mohammed Sohail, who studies in a neighborhood school, said that the street lights had not been working since their installation recently. "It's dangerous to go out in the village at night because one can't see anything and can be hunted by wild animals that sometimes roam around in the village."

A former panchayat member Mehruisa, who can afford to have a refrigerator, has been told by the government to not buy any high-voltage electronic device because it can cause a power outage leading to a blackout for the whole village.

"In 1974, they had promised us land and electricity. We got the land owned by the Panchayat, for which we have to pay an annual rent of approx. 2,000 rupees," said Mehruisa.

She also said that the much-awaited 24-hour electricity is yet to come.

Panchayat official claims fund misallocation for flood relief

SAMEER KULKARNI

H.D. Kote: Several people affected by the heavy rain and floods last August in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysuru district have either not received the relief funds or the funds have been misallocated by a team of officials.

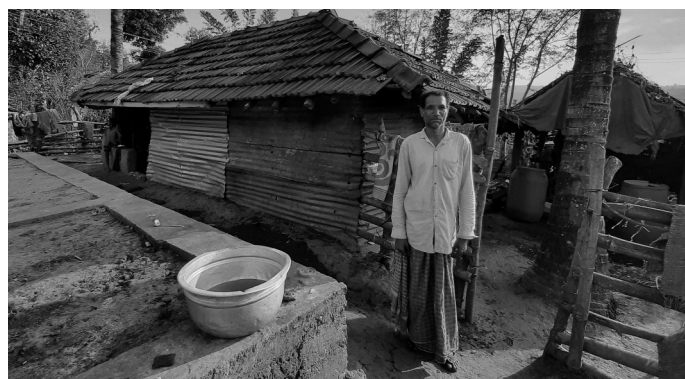
A C Tirupati, Gram Panchayat Chairman, at D.B. Kuppe village, said that the team consisting of a Village Officer, an engineer and other officials who are responsible for assessing the damage caused by floods in August had failed to visit the affected areas. He also said that the grading system - A for full damage, B for medium level damage and C for minimum damage - based on which the compensation is decided, was done arbitrarily.

The region faced heavy rainfall in the first week of August last year which resulted in flooding from the backwaters of the Kabini river. The houses on the river bank along villages and hamlets like D. B. Kuppe, Anemala, Hosur, Thimmaiahahalli, Macchur, and others were damaged.

Due to the remoteness of the villages which are situated deep in the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, Tirupati said that the team of the officials who were assigned to grade the damage never came.

After the government announced the relief funds, the affected people had only three days to reach the Panchayat office with their documents.

In the three-day window, according to the list obtained from the Panchayat office, 281 people filed for compensation. However, for various reasons like lack of documents or remoteness of their villages and the tribals, over 800 people reached the office later. They have not received funds as of January, six months after the floods.



Venktegowda, whose home was damaged during the August floods. | SAMEER KULKARNI

Tirupati also alleged corruption at various levels before the fund reaches the affected people.

Among the worst hit during the last August floods in H.D. Kote were the tribals living along the backwaters of the river Kabini in Hulmutlu near D.B. Kuppe.

Residing deep in the forests, the tribals are constantly in tussle with government departments to save their homes and livelihoods. Now, very few have managed to rehabilitate themselves after the floods ravaged their property.

People in Hulmutlu are predominantly tribal and have been living there for generations. However, the Forest Department wants the tribal people of Hulmutlu to move out from the forest, but has not offered them land elsewhere, the tribals say.

Venktegowda, whose home was damaged, has not received flood relief. "We want to get out of here but we need land but they [Forest Department] do not have any place to give us," he added.

The villagers do not benefit from the housing schemes either, as several of them do not possess documents claiming the ownership of the land or the house. Most people own property on lease.

Tirupati said that the panchayat has helped tribals build houses,

bypassing Forest Department's rules. "When they come and question us, we say the tribals built them themselves"

The geography of the village makes the houses susceptible to floods. It is flanked by thick forest on one side and the backwaters of the river on the other. "When the rains are heavy, the streams from the forests flow downwards towards the river and on the other side, the Kabini dam prevents the water from flowing outwards and this leads to floods. We are stuck in between," Venktegowda explained.

Mahadeva, one of the affected people, has managed to build pathways for the water to flow. "We have no other option but to repair the homes ourselves. The government does very little. But many people from the cities have donated clothes during the disaster," he said.

Heavy rainfall was also followed by thunderstorms and strong winds. Venktegowda pointed towards the headless coconut tree and said that the top portion of the tree had fallen through his roof on one of those windy nights.

As the tribals continue the fight for their rights, natural calamities and climate change makes the situation more troubling.

Honeyed dreams of Adi tribes

ARCHITA RAGHU

"Give us proper housing and toilets," says Shantha (35), a member of the Jenu Kuruba tribe inside the Balle settlement of Nagarhole Forest. "The government does not give us anything because we are in the forest," she added.

Inside Balle, the Jenu Kuruba tribes live in mud houses with thatched roofs and wooden doors. The children here scribble their thoughts and homework on the mud walls of these houses. The word "Indira" has been scrawled in Kannada on one, another has addition and subtraction sums. Shanta's house has drawings of different men. They speak Kannada - the local language - but also have their own language.

In a few days, Shantha, along with the other working members of her tribe, will take buses to the Kodagu region to work as daily

wage labourers. They will work through January and February in Madikeri at coffee plantations and earn around Rs 200 to Rs 300 a day. During the honey season, the male Jenu Kurubas climb up trees with large honey combs and carefully collect honey. They sell one kilogram of honey for Rs 300 at the D.B. Kuppe market.

"We all sell at least fifteen bottles a day. The only problem is that bees bite us a lot and the skin swells; but we don't put any medicine, the swelling goes down within a day or two," she says.

Despite this, they earn enough money for only two meals a day. These two meals consist of rice from the ration shop nearby along with sambar and other dals, ragi. Shantha gets to eat her favourite meal only once a year, during Gowri Habbu, a festival that celebrates the Hindu goddess Parvati in September. "We get sweet potato from the forest, boil it and eat it like that, it tastes so good," she laughs.

The tribals sleep outside in the open. It is only during the rainy season they sleep inside these mud houses.

During the nights, certain people in the village are designated watchers for the animals. Elephants come and destroy the houses at times too. Kali points to a house that has been reduced to rubble after an elephant entered the settlement two weeks ago. They are slowly rebuilding it. "They came here and shot Rajkumar's film Gandhada Gudi but we also want TV sets, radios and all and we have asked but nobody is giving it," she says.

Lakshmi (28) in another Jenu Kuruba village at D B Kuppe echoes similar thoughts. "The Forest Department does not give us any facilities and asks us to leave this area," she says. Here, the women use forest produce to make brooms. Sticks and branches are gathered from the forest floors. They sell one bundle of brooms for Rs 50.

Rain's rage ruins roads

SUKRITI VATS

A road roller makes its way on a narrow mud path to lay a concrete road in Brahmagiri village of H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru district. This path, filled with gravel, is the first to be turned into a cemented road since the tribals from the Nagarhole forest were relocated here ten years ago.

"Due to lack of proper roads and drainage system, there used to be floods during heavy rainfall with water seeping into the huts and damaging the property and cattle," said BM Kalan, a tribal who works as an agricultural labourer.

Kalan said that the villagers had collectively asked MLA Anil Kumar to build a road three months ago after which the construction had started.

Sivana, a mason from the sam-



A Gravel road in Brahmagiri | SUKRITI VATS

village, said that after the rain the roads would become unusable and vehicles would get bogged in the mud. "The vehicles that would sell grain and vegetables became infrequent, leaving us without required commodities most days."

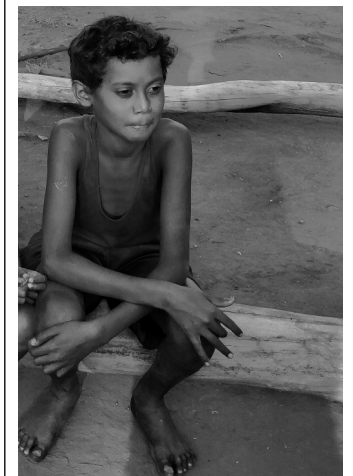
However, villagers at Brahmagiri were lucky to have their voi-

ces heard, which is not the case in many other villages of H.D. Kote. Gendathur village, bordering the forest areas, continues to have cracked roads that become slushy during the monsoon and water-logged.

"The nearest hospital is very far away, it takes more than an hour for the ambulance to come during an emergency. There have been cases in the past where pregnant women have died, due to unavailability of transportation, and subsequently, access to medical facilities," said Lakshmi, a resident of the village.

Atheeq Ahmed, who drives a cab, said that the only good hospital available in the area was 30 km away in Sargur. "I sometimes carry locals from villages to the hospital there. During the rain, the slush makes it hard for me to drive."

'I want a govt job like my father'



Manju | MARIAH DINS

The Balle tribal village, home for many Jenu Kurubas in H.D. Kote taluk in Mysuru, is not a child-friendly place. With a fear of wild animals like tigers and elephants lurking in the surrounding forests and invading the village late in the night.

Manju, who goes to school in Hunsur, said that on his way to school, he encounters elephants crossing the road, and sometimes, they even try attacking them.

"Elephants and leopards come to our village all the time. We burst fire crackers and make loud noises to chase them away," says Manju.

The children have to burn firewood and sit around it in the evening to study, as there is no electricity.

Manju, who likes school, aspires to have a government job like his father who is a forest watcher. His mother, Shantha, goes for a daily wage job at Kodagu.

"A boy from our village finished his education and applied for a job. He did not get it and now goes for bee keeping. I'm not sure why they're not giving us jobs, people are educated here, they should get jobs," says Shantha.

An accident changed his life, Azmat continues to fight for what is right

TANISHKA SODHI

Murband: Azmat Ullah speaks openly about the fateful day that snatched away his independence a year and a half ago, but he doesn't need to.

The scars all over his body are grim reminders of the day when a jeep crashed into the motorcycle he was riding.

Azmat pulls up the sleeve of his off-white tee shirt. "There is a rod in my



Azmat Ullah | TANISHKA SODHI

arm right here. As many as 27 people from my village donated blood for me after the accident," he remarks.

"What can we do?" he asks, sitting on a porch outside his house in Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk. He lives here with his parents, wife, brother and two kids. His crutch lies besides him, an indispensable part of his life now.

A social worker, 35-year-old Azmat spent most of his adult years helping people get their basic necessities. He

was on his way back from getting a villager his ration card when he met with the accident that left him crippled. Standing in the shade of the thatched roof on the other side of the house, his wife lays out the irony of how he lost his leg getting a man the security of a ration card, but is still unable to have his own card made.

"My father doesn't fall under the BPL category and neither do we," says Azmat, who has so far spent 16.5 lakh

rupees on operations after his accident. "Each time I go to get my ration card made, they send me back. They require documents for proof that I am independent of my father," he says. His family is currently trying to put together money for another operation that he is scheduled to have soon.

Azmat speaks of his plans of going in a few days again to the food inspector to try and get his ration card made, the third time in seven years. He worriedly

speaks about taking care of his brother, who is mentally disabled. Not unfamiliar with politics, Azmat helped his mother get elected as a panchayat member of Murband village, a post she currently holds. At the age of 24, Azmat was the president of the Minority Community of H.D. Kote. He doesn't consider the social work that he does is important, "I'm just making sure that the public is getting what the government is giving," he says.

Tales of resistance

Stitching one dream at a time

TANISHKA SODHI

H.D. Kote: Every time she walks into the forest to collect firewood, Kamla is reminded of her old school there, which she attended until class three.

Now, 50 years later, she lives in a hut in the Gendathur village in H.D. Kote, her 9 to 5 job feeding all the seven members of her household. Kamla's parents were moved out of the forest when she was a child. Her walks to collect firewood are now the only time she visits her old home.

Kamla's story is similar to that of many women living in H.D. Kote taluk, Mysore district. Stricken by tragedy—often caused by suicide of alcoholic husbands—the single women in this taluk are defying all odds to emerge as the breadwinners of their families.

Abandoned by her husband 14 years ago, Kamla had no choice but to find a way to support her family. The Rs 10,000 she earns a month is not enough to feed her daughter and her five kids, but they pull along, somehow.

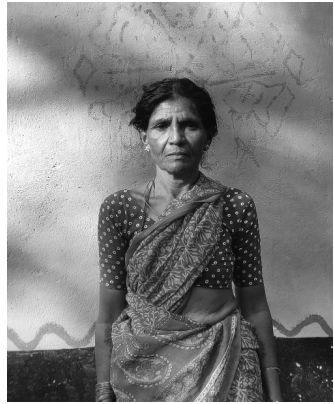
"There's not enough kerosene to burn the lamp for the kids to study at night," said Kamla, who had to resort to taking electricity from nearby electric poles.

For 28-year-old Bindoo from N. Begur village, being an ASHA worker is only part of daily struggle.

Along with her family, she used to weave baskets using forest produce and sell them. Now, they are not allowed anywhere near the forest.

"Life has become tough since we are not allowed to make our baskets," she said.

The rest of her family members are daily wage workers—for them,



Kamala and Bindoo are among the women of H.D. Kote who defy all odds despite hardships | TANISHKA SODHI



no employment is permanent. With a fixed job and a salary of Rs 3,500 a month, Bindoo provides much of the support required.

Electricity in this village is irregular and the households receive water only once a week.

"Officials came and enquired about the state of toilets but never came back to build any," she said.

Bindoo's family was moved from the forest 25 years ago. To ensure that they stay away from the forest, the forest department provided them with gas too.

Her husband committed suicide a few years into their marriage, and her father regularly consumes alcohol.

Bindoo's daily life involves dealing with pregnant women and providing medicines and checkups to children and women.

She heard of this job through a friend, and received training for the same in Mysore, four years ago.

Manjula is only 40, but the tragedies in N. Begur have toughened her. Forcibly married off to an older man at the age of thirteen, Manjula's married life was a series

of unfortunate events.

Her husband passed away when she was fifteen and in those two years, they had two children.

"I was cheated into this marriage. He had a drinking problem and was cheating on me with another woman," she said.

In 1998, Manjula became part of the Swami Vivekananda organisation that provided her, along with 39 other women, with skill training.

She learned to make products like chikki and organic jaggery out of ragi. The organisation helps her market her produce directly, without any middleman involved.

Earlier, she would weave baskets. However now, the forest department has stopped them from accessing the forest, snatching them of their livelihood.

It is with money she earned from selling chikki and jaggery that she raised her two children. When her son, who studies in class 10th, met with an accident recently, she arranged Rs. 3 lakh for his treatment after a lot of borrowing and arranging.

SUKRITI VATS

N.Begur: On a scorching hot afternoon, 29-year old Savita sits in a small printing shop at the junction of the main roads in N. Begur village of H.D. Kote taluk, Mysore district.

Without even a fan to give her relief, Savita breaks out in a sweat, sitting under coloured paper flags that adorn her shop.

Savita is the only educated, English-speaking woman in N. Begur, who runs a shop. "I was the lucky one. Generally, women back in my village Matakare were forced to marry after completing school," she said half-smiling.

Savita, now a resident of N. Begur village, first came here 13 years ago after marrying a technician Rudra Kumar. She is the only woman in her village, who has been to college. Graduating with a business management degree, she was offered an accountant job in Matakare.



Savita in her printing shop at N. Begur | SUKRITI VATS

"I didn't take it because I was in love at that time. But I put it to use later after coming here by opening my own printing shop," she said.

"My father is illiterate himself, but he wanted all his children to be educated and get respectable jobs," she said.

Winning a scholarship at the age of ten, she was sent to an English-medium school in Chamrajanagar, 200 km away from her village.

She then enrolled herself in the Maharani College in Mysore to

pursue BBM.

Likewise, in N. Begur, Savita has turned out to be quite an entrepreneur selling all kinds of ornaments and hair accessories for the women in the village and doing well for her family. "I do part-time tailoring also, which I learned in skill development classes offered by NGOs in our district," she added. According to Savita, her desire to work with NGOs began from there and this made her join Foundation for Educational Inno-

ventions in Asia (Fedina). In her role as the sponsorship coordinator, she helped with the rehabilitation of children who would drop out from their school.

"Apart from focusing on tribal education and community development, I organized camps for children involving cultural and sports activities," said Savita.

However, due to time constraints she had to leave Fedina, where she volunteered for almost three years. Nevertheless, Savita soon plans to join another NGO called Shri Kshetra Dharmasthala Rural Development (SKDRDP).

Savita, wishes to work with their women empowerment wing called Sevaprathindhi to teach young women life skills that can help them find employment.

"Not everyone is lucky like me. That's why, I want to help empower girl children by persuading their parents to not marry them off early and let them study, and even go to college, if possible."

Dreaming big from a small village

GOKUL GK & ARCHITA RAGHU

Murband: Anitha from Murband village in H.D. Kote taluk is very different from most girls in her area. So is her father who, unlike most parents in the area, has supported his daughter's dreams.

Anitha is the first girl from Murband to pursue Civil Engineering at the Mysore University. The 19 year-old said "I chose engineering because of my father."

Her dream is to either pursue journalism or write the IAS exam. During her holidays, she helps her mother around the house. Her father is a farmer and grows cotton, ragi, and maize.

"But he does not let me help out in the farms, they want me to study," she said.

Anitha studied in a school at Kenchanahalli village. "Buses didn't come here so every day, I would walk to school one kilometre away," she said. When she went to Mysore to study, culture shock and homesickness hit but that soon subsided and she began loving the city.

"Mysore is the proper place to study," she said and her determination to study other subjects like journalism persists.

"My problem is the English language but I'm learning and will continue to learn," she said.

"We need to encourage students to keep studying," she said. When asked if anybody was pressuring her to discontinue college, she says there have been people from her area who have asked her why she hasn't gotten married yet. "But I don't listen. I know exactly what I want

to do and I will," she said. In her free time, Anitha loves to read novels and listen to Kannada folk music.

"No matter what, I will definitely accomplish my dream," she smiled.

Many of the girls from Murband are married off immediately after the tenth standard. Some of my very brilliant friends were married off just because their parents could not afford their education," she said.

She feels that many students from the area are not getting enough opportunities to learn.



19-year old Anitha

Lack of teachers in H.D. Kote

GOKUL GK

H.D. Kote: Primary schools in H.D. Kote are facing a shortage of teachers for the past ten years. There are over 40 single teacher schools in the taluk, today.

In the Government primary school at Kalasur, H.D. Kote, one teacher who is also the principal of the school is teaching 26 children and managing official matters of the school.

Ravindran (46), the principal cum teacher, has been managing the school, all by himself, for more than five years. Even though the school recently got a guest teacher, Sushmita (23), the faculty is struggling to run the school.

The primary school has students from first standard to the sixth. First to third-grade kids are taught together in a single classroom. Fourth and fifth standard students are in a separate building, nearby.

"The principal has to travel frequently to the city for official purposes, and there is no one to teach one set of students," said Sushmita.

Whenever a parent comes to school to enquire about their kid's studies or a plumber comes to fix the school pipe, the teacher has to leave the students and attend to it.

"How can I complete the portions in time?" asks Sushmita.

Sushmita has to teach all the subjects including English and Kannada. "It's extra pressure on me," she adds.

For more than 30 high schools in the 398 villages in the H.D. Kote



Female students of a single teacher school during their extra-curricular activities | GOKUL GK

taluk, there are only five English language teachers.

According to S Sundar, Block Education Officer of the Taluk, many students now prefer English medium schools. "We are not able to provide seats to all of them because of a shortage in English teachers," he said.

This year, 30 students were admitted to one of the English medium schools through a lottery system.

"Many teachers don't prefer the H.D. Kote as it's a rural locality," said Sandhya, a mother of two primary school children.

Even as teachers' counselling is being held at the Department of Public Instruction, the number of teachers opting for transfers out of H.D. Kote taluk is high, compared to other taluks.

According to an assessment carried out by the NGO, DEED (De-

velopment through Education), 15 to 20 per cent of students have evinced interest in English medium schools.

Even the anganwadi in the Taluk face a shortage of staff. Rekha, an anganwadi teacher is managing two centres- one in Kalasur and one in Kenchanahalli. She has to travel to Kenchanahalli and back every day. "It's hard to keep up with the timings," she said.

Most of the schools don't have teachers for arts or even sports.

"There are many children who are interested in cricket, but they are not getting proper training," said Sushmita.

However, in a school in the Bidanahalli village in the Taluk, there are six teachers for 135 students. That is 22 pupils for every teacher. This is better than the national average of 24 pupils for every teacher.

Rise in dropouts, parental pressure

MARIAH DINS

H.D. Kote: The number of students dropping out from schools in several villages in H.D. Kote Taluk in Mysore district is rising mainly due to parental pressure and lack of transportation facilities.

In Murband village, Rakaiya Bhanu (18) said that, her parents forced her to drop out from school after standard 10. She had secured admission for standard 11 at Government High School, H.D. Kote. But her parents wanted her to stop studying and get married.

Nagina (21), another resident of Murband village, said, "In my family girls do not go to school and get educated. I am the only one to pass standard 10. After I dropped out from school my parents got me married and now my child is one year old. I have four sisters who are not being sent to school instead they are being taught how to do household chores."

Even the boys are unable to study further because their parents don't have the money.

Sadiq Pasha (22) and Siddique Pasha (18) are two brothers from Murband village who stopped going to school due to poverty in their family. Sadiq left school after standard 10 and Siddique left school after standard 6. Their father is an alcoholic and does not go to work. This forced the two brothers to stop studies and work in farms to support their family.

"If we go to school our house will not run. Even if we want to study we cannot," said Sadiq.

Sarojini (38) from Udbur village said that her son wanted to become a teacher but could not study because she and her husband could not afford to pay the fees.

She said that the panchayat only helped well-to-do people.

There are other problems affecting the children's education.

The children here cannot go to school because there is no transportation available from Udbur to Machhur, the nearest school.

There has been no electricity supply in the area after the electric post with the supply wires fell down in last year's flood. After 6 pm, wild elephants start coming to the village and therefore the children cannot sit and study outside.

Sumaiya (20) quit studies after standard 8 because the road condition in the village was worse and she had to travel 6 kilometers to catch a bus.

Priyanka (26) from N. Begur village said that she was forced to stop her studies the day she got her menstrual cycle. She studied till standard 8.

Lakshmi from D.B. Kuppe says that the female children do not go to school for five days when they are on their menstrual cycle. Also there are some who drop out because their parents do not approve of sending their daughters once they start menstruating.

A house built with sweat and mud



Bhagya single-handedly building a house to live in out of bamboo in Nagarhole forests | GOKUL GK

Labour over life

MARIAH DINS

Bheemanahalli Haadi: Ten year old Suchitra sat on her doorstep watching other kids of her age playing catch with a ball on the street. Trying not to make much of a conversation with the others, she slowly gets up and goes back into the house to finish her chores.

Suchitra, from Bheemanahalli Haadi, stopped going to school when she was in second standard. She has been going to work with her parents in the tobacco field nearby for daily wage for the past one year. She gets paid Rs 200 per day.

"Ammma said don't go to school from tomorrow," says Suchitra with a look of grief on her face.

Her eyes went up looking at the villagers surrounding her, to the question if she liked going to school. Very quietly she said "yes".

Suchitra is not the only child who has been forced by parents to quit going to school and go to work. There are many others of her age in a similar situation.

Manjunath, Panchayat Development Officer, said that, "Every year 5 to 10 students drop out from school and go to work in fields. They get Rs 200 to Rs 500 per day including lunch. Therefore the parents do not show any interest in sending their children to school."

Manjunath added that even though the officials tried to convince the parents to send their chil-

dren back to school, only a few of them agreed. For the rest of them it was more money and that was important.

"The main reason why the community and parents force the children to go work and bring money home is because of poverty. There are people who cannot eat three meals a day. In such cases children are forced to quit school and earn for the family," said Manjunath.

Thayamma, a resident of that village, said "Who will bring us money if they go to school? We will get Rs 300 or Rs 200 extra if they go to work. With that we can fill our stomach everyday. We cannot afford to send these kids to school."

According to Manjunath, the nearest school is two kilometres away from Bheemanahalli Haadi. The government is providing all facilities including breakfast, mid-day meals, two types of flavoured milk (chocolate and pista) and a basic school kit.



10-year-old Suchitra yearns to study | MARIAH DINS

A fun school in Gendathur

GOKUL GK

Gendathur: A government primary school in a tribal hamlet in Mysore district of Karnataka is focused on the holistic development of its students through, art, sports, and nutrition.

The school situated in the Gendathur tribal hamlet in the H.D. Kote taluk was established in 1981 as a lower primary school.

Apart from providing knowledge, it looks at the overall physical and mental development of the students. With the help of some NGOs and an annual government fund of just Rs 25000, the school authorities manage to feed the children and nurture their artistic talent.

According to S Gokul, a teacher,

the students are given a "nutritious mid-day meal." They are also given milk, five days a week through a programme called 'ksheerabagya.' Of the five days, they get cardamom and chocolate flavoured milk on four days.

All the students belong to the Bedar tribal community, an indigenous Kannadiga community. The school has 151 students with 75 boys and 76 girls. The teachers arrange an annual art expo, where the students display their painting and models ranging from a simple house to a three feet PSLV rocket.

"Sometimes we would have to help them with these projects but most of them are done solely by the students," said Gokul.

English, Hindi and Kannada are

taught along with maths and science. "We are now finding it very hard to find Hindi teachers," said P Prakash, another teacher in the school.

The school arranges regular parent-teacher meeting.

"The teachers inform us about everything happening in the school," said Radha Devi, a mother of two school going children. But even with all these reforms, many teachers complain that the students don't end up in higher education.

"Most of them will get married after completing SSLC, some of them will go as agriculture labourers," said Gokul.

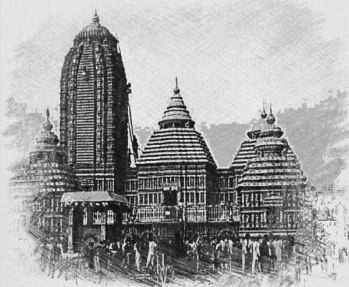
However, most students were interested in pursuing higher education and becoming professionals

like doctors and lawyers. "I want to become a police officer," said Manoj, a student of the sixth standard. Teachers like Gokul and Prakash are of the opinion that there should be a strong campaign against child marriage, which is a major reason why students do not pursue higher education. "The former principal of the school was an active social worker and spread awareness regarding child marriage," said Jyothi an ex-student of the school who was married at 16. Five children—three girls and two boys—from the village have gotten admission into different colleges, last year.

"School is not boring, it's always fun with games and activities," said Sneha, a student.



A PSLV rocket model by students | GOKUL GK



Swachh Bharat a far cry

Toilets few and far between

New house, no loo

SHRIJA GANGULY

Brahmagiri/Satyabadi: With toilets constructed here and there, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has failed to make a mark in Fani-affected villages in these blocks that have to battle discrimination, harassment, and financial burden.

Three months after Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared rural India open defecation-free, villagers of Biswanathpur continue to ease themselves in the open.

Baidyanath Sahu said, "We have never had toilets. Even before Fani. People did come along with our sarpanch and took our names and signatures. We were told that toilets will be built. Nothing happened after that."

Even a non-governmental organization working with the villagers, SWAD, has not carried out any programme of awareness of the Swachh Bharat Mission, says he. Kamala, a mother of three, said, "Even if we did have toilets, who would maintain them? It is tough for us to even afford two square meals a day, let alone a toilet."

At Gola village, the problem is harassment. A group of women burst into laughter on hearing a giggling Mamuni, who, while drawing water, said: "Once my friends and I were defecating on a nearby field when a man came from behind and hit me in the back. Before we could even react, he and his friend fled on their bikes."



No toilet, only construction materials |SHRIJA GANGULY

Incidentally, the land used by the villagers for relieving themselves belongs to Khandaayats – a local equivalent of Kshatriyas of Siyaara. This has become a bone of contention between them and the Harijan village.

Sebakpur and Pandhapokhari, on the contrary, have structures of toilets built within the compounds of their house. With a better financial standing as carpenters and with a compensation by way of cement, sand and bricks worth Rs 12,000, villagers of Sebakpur built toilets and septic tanks. But there's a catch – water supply.

Jagannatha Maharana, 63, said: "Now that we have begun building new houses we can't afford to spend on water supply. The septic tanks that they [government] built for us are so small that they tend to overflow at times. We have to clean it all ourselves. What is the use of having toilets if we have to clean our own excreta twice? We would

rather go out in the open."

Most of the toilets are either unused or used by two households that pool in money for water supply. Government toilets can be distinguished by asbestos roofs and a pair of glasses painted on their walls.

At Pandhapokhari, dependent on fishing and related business, Subhasini complained of unaffordability and lack of water supply. "They just built toilets for the sake of building them. [They] did not even ask us where we would like to have it; whether or not we have enough space. We need space for building our new houses and these [two] toilets stand in the way. Moreover, our houses will stink. No one wants that. They could have just given us cash."

As for menstrual health, women at Biswanathpur use cloth. The concept of using a sanitary napkin is still foreign, apart from being unaffordable for most.

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Pipili: Delays and irregularities in disbursement of funds for the construction of pucca homes and toilets in Ward 7 here undercut Prime Minister Narendra Modi's dream of the country being open defecation-free.

Households that completed constructing homes funded under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, have not received their last instalment.

This even as the ward is yet to be surveyed or sanctioned toilet grants under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

Ruksana Biwi (30), a beneficiary of the housing scheme who finished the construction on Sahi Masjid Road two months ago, says Rs 40,000 is still to be released to her, an amount with which she planned to fund a toilet with functional water supply.

"We received no separate funds for toilets under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, so we were waiting for the money to build the same."

Another woman in the neighbourhood, Amina Biwi (60), said the Rs 20,000 due to her after she completed her house was still not paid. Nor does she have a toilet, and like several other women facing her plight in the ward, resort to defecation on a field near a canal one kilometre away.

"We get teased and harassed by the people who live near the field. It is unfair and disgusting that there are people here who have multiple toilets and storeys in their homes



Canal? No, it's a defecation spot |ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

while we have to relieve ourselves in the open." Both women said they were tired of repeated requests made to their ward member, who kept assuring them money would come soon. Being a beneficiary of one Centrally sponsored scheme (housing) whilst being excluded from the other, has resulted in a loss of dignity for women of the largely Muslim-dominated neighbourhood.

Areas demarcated for construction of toilets in homes lie empty or have incomplete structures. For months, there has been no sign of functional drainage pipes and latrines being put in place.

Penury forces girls to drop out; pads mostly out of reach

MEGHA MALLICK

Brahmagiri: Subhasmita Bhoi, 18, of Mangala Sahi village dropped out two years ago after completing Standard X because her family does not have the means for her to continue her studies.

At Talamala, Parvati Sau, for the same reason, has been staying home after passing Standard X examination last year though she is keen on pursuing her studies.

These are common stories heard in poverty-hit families in this block.

Parvati's mother, Ranjalata says, "We do not have enough money to feed ourselves, where will we get money for education?" Eight months after Fani ravage, the family has not received a single penny from the government to rebuild its houses, she complains.

Puja Ghatia, 16, of the same village has ended her school career to take care of her younger siblings. She does all household work as well.

None of these girls are engaged in any paying work, such as sewing or tailoring. Arun, one of Puja's neighbours, says, "There is no work other than farming in this village. You cannot find any other livelihood options. What will the girl do?"

Let alone barriers to education, these girls are putting up with problems of personal hygiene.

At Mangala Sahi, women are not using sanitary pads during



Fani-damaged toilets |MEGHA MALLICK

menstruation. After the cyclone, some NGOs and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers distributed sanitary napkins, two packets per household. But, the residents say, these were not enough. They reverted to using cloth when these were exhausted. A use-and-wash cycle has become the order of the day, for lack of any further supply of sanitary napkins, the women say.

Next, open defecation. As the cyclone damaged toilets, built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the village is back to the age-old practice. Some people have created plastic shacks for women to use. No new toilet has been built.

Dilapidated toilets are a common sight across Fani-hit villages.

Kids sing and dance to beat trauma

Anganwadi becomes child family shelter to help children post Fani



Putting behind Fani memories, children have a happy time here.

|SHRUTI SUNDAR RAY

AATREYEE DHAR

Krushnaprasad: A building at Arakhakuda village here reverberates with nursery rhymes recited in Odia by 47 children. It's a typical anganwadi curriculum, except that the classes are held in a Child Family Shelter (CFS).

It's a transitional arrangement meant to build resilience in and support the well-being of children post-cyclone Fani through activities such as playing, drawing, painting and story-telling designed in harmony with the local milieu. This space is provided by the Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), an NGO working to improve the lives of the tribal, rural and urban poor in Orissa.

CFS facilitators, drawn from local communities and appointed by CYSD, are provided training in child psychology to engage children in creative activities to help reduce their trauma. "The CFS training course will operate for three-four months from January," says Bipin Kumar Behera, who is a resident of the village.

At Arakhakuda, those playing the role of teachers are anganwadi workers Jayanti and Rulilakshmi Behera, and CFS facilitator Mili Behera.

Students aged 3-5 display physical and motor skills enthusiastically, doing acts asked of them by their teachers such as physical education exercises, walking like an old woman, ploughing a field like a farmer,

churning curd and grinding batter for pitha (a type of rice cake made in Odhisha) like the womenfolk do in their families.

Five-year-old Ankita Behera, who attends the sessions daily, says, "Dancing is my favourite activity". Unlike most of the boys in the class, Sairam Behera prefers listening to pronunciation of alphabets in Odia to playing bat-and-ball games.

It's not just about following preschool teaching practices. The anganwadi lunch for the children includes plain rice and dal as per the weekly midday meal calendar. The menus vary between rice-dal and rice with either a mixed vegetable or egg curry depending on the day of the week. Breakfast comprises biscuits, roasted moong

dal and sphere-shaped sweets made of almonds and puffed rice.

One problem at the CFS: With no proper toilet in the area, children defecate on the open ground in front of the building. "When the children want to take a leak, they raise their hands. Either another teacher or I accompany the children with a bucket of water to the ground," says Jayanti Behera.

According to the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), an anganwadi worker is trained in nutrition and immunization, providing supplementary health care to adolescent girls and pregnant women. While the anganwadi workers are paid Rs 7,500, the CFS facilitators get Rs 4,000 every month from CYSD.

Boatmen turn fishermen but earnings poor

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Krushnaprasad: Nandu Kumar Malik is giving the final touches of repair to his motorboat when a whiff of wind blows sawdust on this face. "Never an off-season for strong air to blow onto one's face in Odisha." The 25-year-old drops his tools.

It is, however, an off-season for both tourism and fishing in the State. Nandu from Mirzapur, and others like him - from the villages adjoining the Chilika Lake - depend on the Mirzapur Dolphin Centre for employment. A day there would involve a trip taking tourists to areas with dolphins, which would be at least 8 hours of sailing. After the cyclone hit the State in April/May last year, their means of earning Rs 150 a day crashed to a sudden halt, as boats were fully damaged, the lake turned salty, killing fishing prospects, and tourist inflow saw a significant decline.

"We were left with nothing after Fani," Nandu says, pointing to a pile of damaged boats in the area. "With no form of compensation for our boat, we are struggling to pay back Rs 50,000 that some of us arranged as a collateral-free loan from the Government. I have, therefore, been forced to turn to full-time fishing from a part-timer."

Incidentally, the little money they did get (Rs 10,000) in a combo of Fani relief for boats and houses, was deposited in bank accounts that are now 'blocked' at the behest of the District Collector of Puri on account of alleged irregularities by ward members and block officials. The Collector, Balwant Singh, said there was no policy or scheme currently underway to address the slump in fish selling post-Fani.

Brothers Gandarbha and Hemakanta Malik from Parbatipur echo the magnitude of these issues. "Even during peak season, we would get a maximum of only five trips a month individually. Now even that is gone after Fani," says 35-year-old Gandarbha. His elder sibling adds that income from fishing is irregular even now, 8 months after the cyclone, and is just Rs. 5000 a month, not enough for diesel and boat maintenance cost. All three fishermen said that their catch is sold only to businessmen (Mahajanias), who sell it in markets.

FALLEN PIECES KEEP NIGHTMARE ALIVE

Fani-broken infrastructure across villages, awaiting repair funds



Damaged electricity poles right outside the Panasapada electricity office in the Brahmagiri block

Picture by Shrija Ganguly



A huge tree that crashed, bringing a school down with it in the village of Palanka

Picture by Abhimanyu Hazarika



A tubewell still out of action in the village of Talamala

Picture by Kanishka Birat

Painter gets Rs 2 lakh from a foreign art-enthusiast fan

KANISHKA BIRAT

Raghurajpur: Fifty-year-old Gangadhar Maharona had sent photos of his toilet and portions of his broken house, damaged during the Fani cyclone, to his friend Dhundya Saheb in London over Whatsapp. He immediately received an amount of Rs 2 lakhs directly into his bank account.

Maharona is a renowned national awardee pattachitra painter who has been into this art

form for the last 30 years. It is because of painters like him that Raghurajpur is known as a heritage village in Odisha.

Saheb is a former client of Maharona and business man residing in London. They came in contact with each other when Maharona had gone to the UK in 2001, and in 2003 at an art exhibition organised by the Indian Embassy in London. Since then, Saheb has been regularly ordering pattachitra paintings from

Maharona. He donated the amount out of loyalty.

Maharona also got Rs. 10,000 for the same reason from another former client of his, 'Sooraj Singh', from Chennai.

Maharona has been working for KAARU, a New Delhi based architectural firm, for the last 20 years. He has been bringing glory not only to Odisha but also to the whole country. In an art exhibition in Thimphu, on behalf of India, 'Jeevan Chakra' made by him was

gifted to the then Queen of Bhutan in 2007.

Maharona is disappointed with the Government of India as he feels his guild is left to fend for itself in the end.

After some years he won't be able to teach classes due to old age. Thus, he won't be having any source of livelihood.

His family would only be left to survive on his savings alone, putting at risk his financial and familial stability post 'retirement'.

Stay put or face eviction

Landlords have warned Fani-hit villagers against building pukka houses

SHRIJA GANGULY

Puri : Landlords at Biswanathpur in Puri district have allegedly discouraged villagers from making pukka houses for themselves after Fani ravage, as a pre-condition for their continuing to stay on the owners' land.

This adds to the misery in the Satyabadi block, where the workforce of agricultural workers and construction labourers has been left unemployed. Although officials claim that all affected people have been compensated, people in the SC village say they have received nothing more than Rs 3,000, a "pittance" that is not enough to buy cement, sand and bricks for building new houses.

At Biswanathpur, with 150-160 households, the villagers are living in makeshift shelters, made of tarpaulin and plastics, right next to their ruined houses.

Due to surge of water and heavy rainfall that led to inundation, the new houses now stand on elevations of mud, supported by



Villagers trying to rebuild their houses after Fani | SHRIJA GANGULY

barks of coconut trees that fell during the cyclone.

However, the land on which these structures are put up belongs to a well known man in Puri and is managed by a relative. The land is not leased out to the villagers; hence, they do not have to pay rent.

After Fani, they were asked to leave the place on the grounds that there was nothing left there for them. However, upon insistence, the landlord let them stay there on condition that no proper houses be

built. There seven people share the same space as do their cattle and livestock.

The villagers say that in the absence of government efforts to clear agricultural land of fallen trees, they were forced to work as masons and daily wage labourers in other towns and villages.

Baidyanath Sahu, 70, said, "We don't have the money to afford two square meals. Where do you think we will be able to afford bricks, cement, and sand for our houses

from?"

No different is the situation at Gola that comes under the Panaspadha Gram Panchayat. Worse, unlike other villages, it does not have even a cyclone shelter. The nearest shelter is located in the next village, Khandaayat- the local equivalent of Kshatriyas- populated by Siyaara, who allegedly did not acknowledge the Harijan population at Gola.

During Fani these villagers sought shelter at a nearby uninhabited building. Asharani, member of a Self-Help Group, said, "After the cyclone subsided, most of the women and children stayed here for days on end," pointing to an elevated platform which, it seemed, could not accommodate more than 15 people.

"We did not receive anything from the Government. Only people with a roof did. We had nothing to show as evidence of a roof (here, a pukka house). People have built tents with plastics and bamboo sticks," she told a team of Visiting reporters. In contrast, at Sebakpur,

a village of carpenters, two km from Dahikia, people own pukka houses made of cement and bricks, to government specifications..

But Meena Maharana, wife of a carpenter, said, "Our coconut cover is lost. Whatever we have, we use it for our personal use. Earlier, selling coconuts in the market would fetch us Rs 1,000 in three months. Now, even that income is gone. We have used the dried leaves of the fallen trees to cover our houses." Most of the asbestos roofs were either blown away by Fani or were drilled by the heavy rains. The houses now stand covered with tarpaulin, as they cannot afford a new roof.

The Panaspadha Electricity Office was destroyed in Fani due to strong winds. While new poles are installed, officials are waiting for the water to dry up to avoid accidents. District Collector, Balwant Singh said, "We lost three people during electricity restoration." Consequently, all the nine villages draw power from the Sunamui station, leading to frequent cuts in power.

One size-fits-all policy in schools

Post Fani, no power, no toilets

MEGHA MALLICK

Rayapur: Nineteen students of classes 1-3 study in the same room at the Government Primary School of this village. Eleven other students in the school, in Standards IV and V, have separate classes.

Pratima Rani Jena, one of the three teachers of the school, says it is a big challenge to teach all five subjects—Odia, English, Maths, Science and Environmental Sciences—to all 19 students together. To Prabhat Kumar Jena, another teacher, this doesn't matter. He cites the Odisha government's education policy stipulating a student-teacher ratio of 25:1 even if the children are from different classes.

For the students also, there is a problem: learning all five subjects at one go. The teacher needs to make adjustments. Also, all

teachers need to teach all subjects as the government policy says that no separate teachers will be posted for different subjects up to Standard VIII.

As for infrastructure, electricity has not yet been restored in the school since Fani happened in May last year.

Nor has any toilet been built in the place of the ones destroyed by the cyclone, and the students have to resort to open defecation, behind the school building. Mercifully, there is one toilet for the physically handicapped.

The teachers say the School Improvement Grant Committee has been informed of the problems but no step has been taken.

Schools which have classes from 1-5 have received Rs 10,000 for repairs. But no separate investigations have been conducted to look into the state of physical infrastructure of the school.

Eight months on, discrimination dogs relief efforts

Caste divisions also play havoc in Satyabadi village

ARKATAPA BASU

Satyabadi: Fani knew no caste barriers when it struck every villager at Bidadharpur in this block. But caste counts for restoration and relief, allege people.

The village itself is segregated along caste lines. Brahmins are very few, living in clusters of pukka houses, while. Bhois, belonging to a Scheduled Caste, are in kutcha dwellings made of mud, plastic and thatched roof on the outskirts of the village. Pradhans, a dominant OBC group, live in their own area in semi-pukka houses where a couple of rooms have concrete roof.

After the cyclone, almost every household was given a compensation of Rs 3000, 50 kg of rice and one sheet of tarpaulin. However, the money allotted under the State Disaster Response Force and the National Disaster Response Force for fully or severely damaged houses went to households which did not suffer severe damage.

"When we asked for it [compensation], we were told that money has stopped coming," says Lily Bhoi, whose family lost its livelihood. It was practising mushroom farming but after Fani cultivation of this crop has not been possible as the plant needs cooler temperature. Trees which provided a shade for mushroom farming were destroyed because of Fani.

Lily's husband, a coconut tree climber, has been robbed of his source of income. Adding to his distress, a Rs 11,000 compensation given by the government for destruction of coconut trees allegedly went to the Pradhan household, which owned a tree, and not to him. "If a 60-metre coconut tree falls, we will obviously feel the pain," says Lily.

Bhois are employed by Pradhans, who individually owned 1-2 acres of land, raising wheat, mushroom and coconut. However, after Fani, both sections are plagued by unemployment. The



SC area in Bidadharpur recovering from Fani | ARKATAPA BASU

Bhois more so due to inaccessibility to entitlements.

Basnatamani Nayek, 70, a Pradhan, points to his roof made of asbestos, plastic and cloth. "The [original] roof started quivering violently and broke when Fani came. The roof of the toilet built by the government was [also] blown away."

Asked about the number of toilets built by the government under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,

Maagi Bhoi, Lily's sister-in-law, said only some houses in the village had the facility. Maggi said the sarpanch had taken all their names but when the list of beneficiaries of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan was published, many households were left out. Some of them use toilets that are built in other households.

Others defecate in the open. "The fields are always open, anyone can go anytime," she said with a laugh.

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Brahmagiri: Are you a supporter of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is dominating panchayat committees in this area? If yes, it is no surprise if you have been short-changed in disbursement of benefits and relief from the State government ruled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), say locals.

Subhash Chandra Jere (36), a BJP functionary for wards at and around Balanga village, told this reporter that he and several other farmers were excluded from the lists of beneficiaries. "Farmers here have not even received money under the PM-Kisan scheme. Only those who wear the party [BJD] affiliation on their sleeves stand a chance of making it to the lists. Not people like us who their workers know as not having voted for them."

These concerns were reflected when our team visited the house of 57-year-old Basant Pattnaik, who

was a coconut seller before Fani felled the trees on his yard. "There is definitely a political motive behind providing relief. I did not get anything despite our losing our family's only source of livelihood. The entire 1.5 acres of land on my yard was affected. Here only those who do politics get their due."

He added that his brother, Prashant Pattnaik (60), who was in government service, has been unable to get his family's name back on the ration card list owing to party differences.

In neighbouring Brahmagiri, villages under the panchayat complained of inconsistent rehabilitation for damage to houses. Prasanna Kumary Ray (49) alleged that only 10% of those who were actually affected received compensation for broken houses. "We fill the required forms and send the names to the sarpanch, and, where needed, to block officials as well. But to no avail. The surveyor they send took notes

but only those close to the ruling party in the State got houses."

Jere said the partisan treatment began during the campaign for the 2017 local body elections. "Mutton and booze were supplied to villagers to influence votes; those who did not take them were noted and, accordingly, we discovered our exclusion from the beneficiary lists, scheme after scheme."

Apart from Fani relief money, many in these villages are entitled to a house under the Awas Yojana, ration and Rs 6000 per year under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan scheme, all of whose implementation has been hit for partisan reasons, say locals. The elections to the local bodies and gram panchayats in the State were last held in February 2017, in which the BJP, from a negligible vote share earlier, emerged as the second largest party behind the BJD and well ahead of the Indian National Congress. Out of the 846 Zilla Parishad seats, the BJP won 297 up from 36 earlier.

FANI ROCKED THE BOAT



Balabhadrapur: Over 150 boats were destroyed in the village of Balabhadrapur when Cyclone Fani hit Puri on May 3, 2019. Even after eight months, debris can be seen strewn along the banks of Chilika. Severely damaged boats, stray bamboos and uprooted trees are a common sight. Efforts to rebuild the lives of the once thriving fishing communities can also be seen simultaneously. At right, a half finished boat is supported by bamboos in order to facilitate drive nails on its underside. A few feet away (below), salt encrusted nets have been put to dry. Once they are dry, salt is beaten out and they are used again.

| ARKATAPA BASU



Will Chilika fishing be the same again?

AATREYEE DHAR
ARKATAPA BASU

Krushnaprasad: Is fishing in the Fani-hit Chilika lake fading into nostalgia? A genuine fear among fishermen at nearby Satapada Bhoisahi village with 85 families in the Brahmagiri block.

As fishing activities suffered a setback with most of the boats and fishing equipment damaged by Fani, the fisherfolk recollect the times when their livelihood depended on the Chilika which had a healthy ecosystem with large fishery resources. Among five different types of traditional nets, barrier net (Khanda) is the most dominant practice here.

Khanda is made up of a long leader line with fish catching traps kept at fixed intervals. These traps are made up of High Density Polythene (HDP) nets called 'box nets'. Different mesh size nets are used to make traps depending on the target species.

AATREYEE DHAR
MEGHA MALLICK

Biswanathpur: On the pyol outside a thatched roof hut, Sanju Bhoi (40) showed a rope she made out of dried coconut husk. She is one among her family members engaged in this deft skill for supplementing livelihood at Biswanathpur village in the Mangalsahi block. In fact, she made a demo, converting coarse fibres into a fairly strong rope.

However, this source of income has dried up in the wake of Fani. As coconut trees were felled in their thousands, women in the village are buying over 100 pieces of ripe coconut husk for Rs 200 from a godown nearby.



Traditional methods of catching fish | AATREYEE DHAR

Sarat Chandra Bhoi (49), who hopes to resume fishing after his boats are repaired, says, "We take the boats early in the morning and set up the barrier nets in shallow areas of the Chilika. The next day, we go back to the location and find fish, prawns and crabs caught in the Khanda." Once caught in the box net, the target species cannot escape as the mesh size is small.

Before Fani struck, Sarat's catch

included tiger prawns, khainga (silver mullet fish) and kanda (cat-fish). In the nearby Balugaon market, khainga fetched him as much as Rs 100-Rs 150 per kg and tiger prawns Rs 600 per kg. He earned over Rs 500 Rs 1500 a day before the ingress of salt water, a consequence of Fani.

Among women in the village, the fishing practice was different. Chandrakalakandi, 50, gets off her

boat in shallow waters, bends down as she walks and picks fish by her hand and puts them in a wicker basket tied around her waist. The women also clean and dry the catch and sell it in nearby 'haata' (market).

Coming back to the uncertain present, Sarat hasn't received compensation for his damaged boat from the State government much like the rest of the fisherfolk whose applications have been "forgotten". Like everyone in the village, Sarat got only 50 kg rice, Rs 3000 and a polythene sheet.

Though the fishermen feel abandoned by the government, they won't abandon their damaged nets. The villagers are using them to strengthen damaged structures. The asbestos roof Sabir Khan's house (32) had flown off during Fani. His kutcha house is now covered with the tarpaulin given by the government. To prevent the sheet from being blown off by again, he used worn-out nets and a tree branch as a cushion.

From husk to rope, a deft job

For making one rope, four pieces of coconut husk are required. The husks are dried, then soaked in water for one or two days until they turn black and pulpy. This is beaten with a mallet to separate the fibres which are rolled into a rope.

The women take around 3 hours to make one rope. Depending on the requirement, they roll 1-3 ropes a day.

"Businessmen come to collect the ropes after 5 days of processing. They pay around Rs 20 per rope

and sell it to a coconut-based factory in the Sakhipgopal area," says Basanti Bhoi (30), a resident.

But Sanju had no luck with Fani relief. Unlike the rest of her community, she couldn't get a Rs 95,000-compensation announced by the State Government for completely damaged houses. "Going to the block office and repeatedly asking for my entitlement didn't work."

Brahmins own the land in these villages, and the 'lower caste' people pluck coconuts. Sarath Bhoi, 52, says he climbs at least 20 trees every day and is paid Rs 250-300. Not being aware of government concessions, he has to pay Rs.24000 a year for his son's technical diploma course.



Three ropes a day for Sanju Bhoi | MEGHA MALLICK

A tribal way of life



TANISHKA SODHI

Balle: Deprived of basic amenities, everyday life is a struggle for the tribals living in the hamlets of Nagarhole forest in H.D. Kote. Some have been provided with Aadhar cards, but still live in *kaccha* houses with no electricity. Food is cooked by burning firewood collected from the forest. Bathrooms are small spaces with cloth wrapped around wooden sticks (right). There is the threat of being attacked by wild animals. The houses may be covered with dirt, but there still exists the tradition of removing footwear outside before entering.



Child love marriages is the new radical change

SAMEER KULKARNI

Balle: The elders in Balle hamlet inside the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve had gathered under one roof. Ammu, 15, and Ganesh, 19, had returned from their weeklong escapade in the forest. They had eloped after falling in love and now, they had come back to talk marriage with their parents.

If a girl from the tribal hamlet even goes across the road to another village, she is considered married off, said Shivaraj, Ganesh's older brother, who stood outside the hut.

In between loud arguments, Ganesh came out,

"There is no money among families here. They cannot afford to take the boy and the girl to wedding halls, invite people and feed them and celebrate. So the girls run away with the boys into the forest. It is an escape for them." - Shivaraj

visibly disappointed, and aggressively walked towards the forest. "You think you have become a man now!" the older brother yelled, his voice echoing in the silence of the woods.

The boy's parents had rejected Ammu saying she is too young.

Balle has about 30-40 landless households with people who do agricultural labour for a living. The hamlet is untouched by any sign of modernity, with no electricity, roads, or pakka houses. The only sign of these people moving with the times are the empty 90ml whiskey sachets scattered here and there.

However, a ten-minute walk uphill, there is a primary school where the children can study up to sixth grade. But for further studies, they have to travel outside the reserve.

However, most girls stop studying after their sixth grade and keep themselves engaged in domestic work.

According to Shivaraj, after the girls finish their schooling, they do some menial work like cooking and washing vessels. They meet some boy and fall in love.

"There is no money among families here. They cannot afford to take the boy and the girl to wedding halls, invite people and feed them and celebrate. So the girls run away with the boys into the forest. It is an escape for them," he said.

What happens when they go into the forests? The couple's friend, who also goes by the name Ganesh, said some of their friends in the area already know about the "plan". These people supply food, clothes, and other necessities discreetly without the parents' knowledge.

"They know their way around the forest," he added.

What happens when they come back?

Shivaraj said that generally girls are too young to get married, so the boy's parents refuse to accept them. "Once they are in love, they are stubborn, so they part ways with their family and start one of their own," he said.

The couples get married despite the opposition from their families, but often they have to fend for themselves without support from the elders.

The newly-wed couples also have challenges like housing and getting a ration card, which gives them access to food and other facilities from the government.

"It is difficult to get a ration card once you are married," said Shivaraj, who is newly married. While child marriage was the norm for several generations, child love marriages are the standard now.

Caught between a well and a pond

Poor quality of water blamed for stomach ulcers, skin diseases

SHRIJA GANGULY

Puri: Lack of Primary Health Centres (PHCs) and hospitals in villages in Puri district here has resulted in incorrect diagnosis of skin diseases among individuals, thereby, affecting their employment prospects.

In Gola, 16 people have suffered from stomach ulcers so far and the villagers blame it on the quality of water from the only well located in the village.

In Sebakpur village, people draw water from a bore well, both for consumption and other uses. Cases of skin diseases emerged after Fani led to stagnation of saline water that seeped into the ground.

Consequently, water is boiled before consumption.

Meena Maharana, a carpenter's

wife from Sebakpur, said, "While boiling water and even afterwards, a layer of white gets formed on top. It is due to high levels of salt and iron content in water."

Sanket is 14 years old and has not been going to school for the last two months now. His mother explained, "He faces a lot of embarrassment due to the itching and the irritation on his skin. His friends made fun of him."

Sanket's entire family suffered from a skin disease right after Fani. Unaware of the disease, they used certain ointments as prescribed by volunteers who had set up a medical camp. All of them were given the same ointment to use. While it worked for the others, the situation worsened for Sanket who developed rashes all over his body.

His mother said, "He can hardly



Sanket's hand | SHRIJA GANGULY

step out of the house during the day. It is still better in winters. We are worried for the summers and monsoon when the rashes would get worse. Moreover, we have stopped bathing with water from the bore well. Instead, we go to the nearby pond. Although the water is saline, it is the only alternative we are left with."

The water from the pond, according to Sanket's mother, has not improved her son's condition. The ointments are their only resort, despite being unaffordable.

Their only access to medical treatment is either through the medical camps set up by Sham Hospital in Bhubaneswar or through Girija Medicine Store in the next village, Dahikia.

Twenty-one-year-old Arjun's state is worse as his skin ailment has left him unemployed due to his frequent breathing and digestion issues.

Apart from health, nutrition levels remain relatively low among the villagers who can buy only the poor quality kontal rice sold at ration shops at Rs 2 a kg. The good quality usuna rice costs Rs 30 a kg. Puri Collector Balwant Singh

said, "Fifty kilograms of rice and a cash compensation of Rs 3000 were distributed to each affected family."

The only ration shop in the area provides 5 kilograms of rice per member in a family per month. However, the rice gets over by the first half of the month. They have to buy rice from elsewhere for a higher price.

Bhabanimoni, a 42-year-old villager from Biswanathpur has five stomachs to feed and only one pair of working hands which belong to her husband who is working as a mason in nearby villages.

She said, "There are times when we cannot afford three square meals a day. To compensate for a filling dinner, we eat atta with water and sugar for lunch."

Kudavars victims of caste stereotype

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: Ravi dreamt of becoming a fritter-seller to earn a living. Setting his bajji stall along the main road outside Kuyanvadi village where he lived, he earned a decent income to sustain his family. His prosperity was, however, shortlived.

When the word spread that Ravi belonged to the Kudavar caste (SC), people stopped buying from him. His business came to an abrupt halt. He tried moving his cart farther but his caste caught up with him.

People would ask him, "Why do you Kudavars do our work? Do you ever see us going into the gutters, sweeping or beating the drum as you do?"

Despite the government banning manual scavenging in 1998, the community that was engaged in the profession earlier still faces discrimination. Jobs such as those of typists or clerks for which the Kudavars are eligible on the basis of reservation are given to the OBC candidates on the sly. As the upper castes say they cannot stand to have a Kudavar work with them as equals, they are given only sweeper jobs.

R. Rajamanickam, an activist working for the sweepers, says, "Even though manual scavenging is gone, the Kudavars are confined to cleaning and sweeping." He claims that despite protests and complaints to the government, nothing has been done.

"Even in self-help groups, Kudavar women make sanitary pads or bleaching powder," he says, adding that even though the activity itself is banned, the upper castes can only think of them as sweepers and cleaners.



Ravi's Fritter stall | VALLARI SANZGIRI

In municipal offices, most of the sweepers are Kudavars.

"Sweepers from OBCs are assigned desk jobs," claims Rajamanickam.

When officers of the National Commission of Sanitation Workers come for inspection, the sweepers are trained to answer them and are not allowed to speak to them directly.

Many of them are employed on a contract-basis and get a measly Rs. 6500, that too only by the 28th of every month. Money is deducted from their salaries, presumably for health benefits, which they do not get.

"Even in rape cases, an FIR is not registered by the police unless people come to the streets," says Rajamanickam.

Abused and driven to a corner, a villager converted to Islam. However, when he entered a barber's shop, the barber refused to cut his hair as he knew of his caste.

The villagers thus resort to hiding their identity, like Ravi has done. He has leased a small hotel near his house. He has appointed a Muslim to pretend to own the place.

For this, he pays the man Rs. 1,500 per day. Ravi stands outside his shop, serving, cleaning and sweeping, fearing the day someone will find out that he is the real owner of the shop.

For fishermen, there's a catch in the coal jetty

RITUPARNA PALIT

Thoothukudi: Romil, 51, who has been fishing in the waters of the Bay of Bengal since the age of 16 and catching sardines for a good return from the Alanthalai market, now returns home empty-handed on most days.

"They are feasting on our lives," sighed Romil, pointing to coal jetty work on the Kallamozhi coast, around 5 km from Udangudi.

The captive project, stretching up to eight nautical miles was proposed as the most economical way to ferry coal to the Supercritical Thermal Power Project, Udangudi Stage I. ITD Cementation India Limited, that won the contract, started work in September 2018.

The Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation stated in a report that the coal jetty worth Rs 1902.87 crores would directly employ 550 persons. The thermal power plant is expected to improve power availability in the state, TANGEDCO mentioned.

The Hindu reported a human chain protest by 300 women on the Alanthalai coast and around 350 boats picketed the construction area at Kallamozhi. Several protests followed in vain.

Danabalan Fernandez, Village Committee head, said, "Fishing is the only occupation for our entire village of 650 families. There is no other source of income."

Romil, who earned around Rs 1000, sometimes even Rs 5000 per day, now struggles to make Rs 500.



Fishermen forced to hire tractors | RITUPARNA PALIT

He said, "Earlier, travelling anywhere between one and 15 kms into the sea assured us of a good catch. We are now forced to travel up to 30 km to look for a catch and end up spending more on fuel. We, however, can't cross the jetty."

Furthermore, noise and water pollution from drilling work have harmed the seabed. The fish's nesting grounds now lie broken and are getting covered in concrete, said Rev. Fr. M. Jayakumar, head

priest at the Alanthalai Sacred Heart Church.

The Alanthalai fishermen who have practised only net fishing for centuries, might have to start looking for other techniques like hook fishing. Their nets often get torn after getting stuck under the jetty due to high current.

"We are paid a minimal compensation for our torn nets, but repairing nets or getting new ones within a short time isn't easy," Romil said, adding, "When huge ships restrict us from moving this deep into the sea, the fear of small boats running into them looms large."

The coal jetty construction has also worsened coastal erosion. Sea water has intruded into the village, turning shores steeper.

Standing up for the tribal school students

PHURPA LHAMO

Vellore: When classes end in the Government Tribal Residential Middle School (GTRMS) at Jamuna Marathur in the Jawadhu Hills, Vellore, students stack their books in a corner. They then sweep the floor, walk barefoot in the room and lay their sheets for a goodnight's sleep. When dawn breaks, the sheets go away and notebooks return.

This routine continues today for about 420 tribal students coming from nearby villages to the school.

In GTRMS, the classroom doors have pictures of Ambedkar, Marx, and Thiruvalluvar.

When the school was first instituted in 2014, Mahalakshmi, a teacher, visited individual homes of the community encouraging the parents to enrol their children.

"Before the school was built, Mahalakshmi gathered students and taught them under trees," said V Jaya Balan, a teacher.

When GTRMS started, the school had less than 50 students. The school now has about 420 students.

"We personally visit the families and convince them to have their child admitted in the school. Of about five students, four would listen," he added.

Lack of interest in education and financial constraints are the major reasons for students dropping out.

The school occasionally organises campaigns, and takes the students for a sports meet.

Jaya Balan said that folk dance unique to the tribal community is taught in the school.

"Kabaddi is popular in the school. More than academic

education, we try to see the student's requirement," he said.

To keep these events going in the school, the teachers seek funds through an official Facebook page.

Students of the school come from villages upto 40 km away. The Tamil Nadu government scheme to subsidise bus fares for the students doesn't reach the community.

"That is why some of our students are forced to stay in the school," Balan said.

"I had to ask for money from my parents because I wasn't being paid.

I also needed to invest in school materials such as books for the students," he said.

Jaya Balan alleged the proprietor had misused school funds. He had complained to the chief district education officer of Vellore against the proprietor.

"The parents were supportive of my decision. Parents of all the 30 students came out to support me when the proprietor threatened me," Balan said.

Today, he is paid Rs 10,000 for working at the GTRMS through sponsors of the school.



Jaya Balan along with his students | PHURPA LHAMO

Teaching kids the moves

Chess helps concentration, says ex-Grandmaster

SRINJOY SANYAL

Machilipatnam: Chess is not just a two-player strategy board game or a hobby. "It helps improve concentration, maintain calm and gain some extra energy," says former Grandmaster N.Sridhar, who wants to spread this message through his chess academy in this town.

The 44-year-old said his parents and acquaintances failed to realise the underlying virtues of playing the game. Learning from experience, Sridhar has trained his children in a certain way, so much so that his son can now play blindfolded. His grades kept improving, along with a growing urge to play the game amid examination preparations.

"Cricket and football have much more viewership than chess," regrets Sridhar. What works against chess is that neither the government nor any private firm is willing to invest in it. "Worse is the lack of patience and awareness among the youth today," says Sridhar.

Though muscular dystrophy, with which he was born, cut short his playing career, Sridhar boasts the highest Elo rating of 1400. His undiminished love for the game has now transformed him into a professional coach.

In the Pooja Chess Academy, which he set up in his house at Srinivas Nagar Colony in 2016, enrolment is waxing and waning over the years. There are six internationally rated players among the current crop of 15.

While the normal course is four



The former Grandmaster at his academy | SRINJOY SANYAL

days per week, the rated players come for practice every day.

Asked about the daily schedule, Sridhar says he makes his students solve six to eight puzzles of various levels, before making them practise the three formats—Rapid, Blitz and Classical. He plays with the rated players for five minutes every day, while letting the others play among themselves before correcting their mistakes. The former Andhra Pradesh champion conducts three digital classes every month for students to watch clippings of some of the greats of the game.

Sridhar, an admirer of Viswanathan Anand, wants his students to accomplish what he wanted to but was left hard done by. Apart from collecting newspaper clippings of

his students' achievements, he is on a WhatsApp group where he keeps a meticulous check on his students and keeps them abreast of upcoming events.

"Whenever they go for tournaments, I follow their performances on chessresults.com and discuss entire games including mistakes they might have had committed," says Sridhar, smiling. Students' achievements enhance his satisfaction.

At the same time, Sridhar complains of children attending coaching for "time-pass". "Game is game. Study is study. The former assists the latter." This is what he tries to make parents, who want their children to miss [chess] classes during exams, understand.

"Last summer, I had a total of 45-50 students divided into three batches. But I was left with only 15 by the end of the summer vacation," he said. Feeling like the "king" on a chess board, powerful but can't move around much, Sridhar's only dream is to see the number of chess players in Machilipatnam surge from four at the time he was playing to at least 10 times now.

If he were to have administrative and political powers, Sridhar would make chess compulsory in schools all over the country and encourage children to play the game at least for 30 minutes every day.

As if endorsing his view, certain schools in Chennai have introduced chess. The city has produced the world's fourth and second-youngest Grandmasters in Gukesh D and R Praggnanandhaa.

A fading tradition in Chinnalapatti



NEIL CORNELIUS

Dindigul: Chinnalapatti is a village in Dindigul renowned for its lustrous sarees, called poor man's silk. Weaving Chinnalapatti sarees was once a lucrative of businesses. Nowadays with the introduction of new material like Kora silk, the industry has taken a big hit.

Sulochana, 64, (right) is a saree weaver from Chinnalapatti.

The saree weavers of Chinnalapatti are all past their fifties and are the last generation of workers. No one from the next generation has learnt the trade from them.

Weaving Chinnalapatti Sarees might very soon become an extinct art and business.



Students at the Arakhakuda village school run by the Odisha Government | AATREYEE DHAR

Struggling to keep up with standards

AATREYEE DHAR

Krushnaprasad: Lack of teachers and inadequate space plague the government-run school in Arakhakuda village struggling to live up to the minimum standards of a public education system.

The Arakhakuda U.G.U.P. School acquired a cyclone shelter beside a playground to start teaching for the ninth and tenth standard last year. Before that, the villagers sent their kids to schools located in other villages at least 3 km away.

The government sends in a part-time teacher to attend to the combined two classes. Yet, his presence is unreliable, leaving the school committee to choose volunteers from unemployed teachers in the village to help children complete their education till the tenth standard.

Balram Behera is one such educator who fills in for the guest faculty and takes private coaching classes for students in the evening.

As opposed to the 35:1 pupil-teacher ratio under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, the school has one teacher for 120 students.

"The school has to do with 12 teachers for 620 students from first to tenth standard for now, which is cumbersome when there are over 10 subjects to teach in each class," says 56-year-old Chakrapani Behera, who is the headmaster.

Kanhaacharan Behera, who teaches Science, Maths, English and Oriya to students of seventh and eighth standards, says the dropout rate is around 50 per cent.

He adds, "Out of 49 students who enrolled for the matriculation exam in 2019, only 32 students

filled the forms." Most of the boys drop out when they reach tenth grade to work as fishermen whereas the girls end up outsourcing boys in overall performance.

Mama Behera, who studies in the seventh standard aspires to be a teacher after completing her education.

The school turns into a space for Balram's private coaching classes as dusk closes in. Waiting for the power to be back, he explains how he runs his coaching centre.

Initially, the fundamentals of the students are strengthened until the fifth standard. If their basics are clear, they are taught from the sixth standard according to the books recommended by the State government. He prepares the smarter students for the government-sponsored scholarship programmes such as the Pathani Samanta Mathematics Talent Scholarship Scheme and the Navodaya Vidyalaya Scholarship.

Pathani Samanta Mathematics Talent Scholarship Scheme identifies meritorious students from government schools and provides scholarship to the qualifying students for their further studies.

On the other hand, the Navodaya Vidyalaya Scholarship funds the qualifying student in the fifth standard till he completes his 12th standard in the Navodaya Uchha Vidyalaya.

Balram says one of his girl students qualifying for the Navodaya Scholarship was forbidden by her parents from pursuing further education in Konark.

"For the parents here, their daughters staying at home is more important than her career", he explains.

ANJALY RAJ & CHARUDATT PRABHU

Dindigul: Once a booming lock industry hub, Dindigul no longer enjoys that status but it is still called the 'Lock City'.

First, the blacksmiths of Aligarh and Rajapalayam copied Dindigul locks and sold them at a lesser price. Then the machine-made locks ensured the famous handmade Dindigul lock market dwindled.

Today, four retired employees work in the tin-roofed workshop at the Lock Workers Industrial Co-operative Society.

"Some three decades back, this place [workshop] used to buzz with 50-60 employees," said Nigitan (62), who is a third-generation lock-maker.

"If we [retired employees] sit at home, the lock making art will become extinct," he added. His children, he said, "are into other professions, and little do they know about making locks."

To revive this market, Venkatachalam, the in-charge of the factory said, "If the State



Nigitan and bespectacled Karpanna still at it | CHARUDATT PRABHU



Government says they will only use Dindigul locks for all their purposes, our factories will get back their glory."

The society once regularly used to receive orders from temples, banks, dams, Government offices, and the department of Railways. "Last year," Nigitan said, "the Public Welfare Department gave orders for 857 locks but due to lack of workforce, we couldn't meet the deadline."

"There was a time when in and around Dindigul, there used to be hundreds of lock-making units in villages. That is because the resources were easily available," he observed.

Nigitan said, "The machine-made locks are irreversible. If the key is lost, one has to break the lock. Whereas in handmade locks, one can break it open for repair, and we still issue a new key."

Graduates but no jobs

APOORVA SUDHAKAR

Thillaiyadi: Every other household in Thillaiyadi in Nagapattinam district has one problem in common – unemployment among educated youth.

Selvanazhagi, a B.Com graduate, works an eight-hour shift at the Jio manufacturing unit in Chennai for Rs. 10,000 a month. Her job is to check the quality of mobile phones. "There are many graduates here who work for low salaries or do no work at all. The village has no job opportunities related to our area of study," she says.

Indeed, most graduates in Thillaiyadi end up as agricultural labourers or masons. Some migrate to neighbouring States or Gulf countries and do the same job for a better pay.

Unemployment here is not just about the government. There is a social pattern in the village. Women, many of whom studied nursing, worked for a few years and stopped working after they got married. They turned to agriculture labour or stayed at home. Women get Rs 200 a day for farm labour while men get between Rs 400 and Rs 500.

Sophia Rani, Selvanazhagi's neighbour, studied teacher training and is now a home-maker. She says, "We cannot move in search of jobs because we look after our children. Even if there are jobs, the salaries aren't enough. Some schools hire teachers for Rs. 2500-3000 a month."

In some families, men do not go to work. The woman runs the family on her farm labour income, money from MNREGS and loans. "The educated do not get suitable jobs. There are those who earn just enough to drink. If we don't give them money to buy fish to eat with their drink, they beat us up," says Sagila, a farm labourer.

"There are no companies in the vicinity. One company can provide jobs for at least 50-100 people. We voted for our MLA because we were promised jobs. I guess all the votes went in vain," she adds.

But young boys do not seem to understand the gravity of the problem. Prabhu, from Kattuchery's Samathuvapuram, a diploma holder, jokes about not having jobs. He says, "We are VIPs. *Vela illa pasangal* (We are jobless). It is a jolly world out here anyway."

His sister disagrees, "One cannot always rely on parents to provide for their children. This colony alone has around 20 unemployed youth and their parents struggle to make ends meet."

"Our problems do not end with getting a job and saving money. We have to marry our girls off for which we need to give the groom's family gold, money and everything to start a household," she adds.

G. Usharani, Principal of the Panchayat Union Middle School, says, "The young boys here live in a comfort zone. They are too used to this culture and do not want to go out to cities in search of jobs."



Ajay Behara not catching much in the Chilika lake | ARKATAPA BASU

Fani made it worse for them

ARKATAPA BASU

Puri: Decreased catch and inadequate relief compensation has affected fishing communities.

Ajay Behara, 36, of Arakhakuda village in Puri, has just come off the boat from an unsuccessful fishing trip.

On his way to wash off the sweat and the salt from the day's work, he said that the number of fish has decreased by almost 5 times over the last few years.

It is even worse after Cyclone Fani hit the district of Puri on May 3, 2019.

"Earlier, we used to get about Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 in a season but after Fani, we hardly manage to get Rs 5,000 to Rs 6,000," Behara said.

A study conducted by Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in 2014, predicted that the catch will drop by 40 percent in the tropics despite an

initial spike due to increase in temperature in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

Due to Arakhakuda's proximity to the Chilika lake and the sea, fishermen go to both the places for fishing.

Chilika is preferred during the night as the water is calmer whereas the fishermen go to the sea in the morning for salt water fish.

Behara's boat was partially damaged during Fani for which he got a compensation of Rs 4,100. However, this was not enough to repair his boat.

He had to spend approximately Rs 30,000 to Rs 40,000 to repair his boat properly.

In Balabhadrapur village of the Satyabadi Gram Panchayat, fishermen face similar problems.

Paresh Kumar Jally, 34, is the spokesperson of Chilika Matsyajibi Mahasangh which is an association for the fishermen of Chilika.

"We make locks of steel and copper. There are ones with and without casting. There are a variety of locks we make," said Venkatachalam.

Karpanna (69), has been working in the lock-factory for over four decades and barely manages to earn Rs 4000 a month.

"Our work depends on the orders we get. We, at least, make two locks a day. For each, we earn Rs 50," said Karpanna.

Nigitan added, "For making the locks we get material from Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, and other materials from Madurai district. We don't make keys here. The keys come from Aligarh, and each key is unique."

"It is good if the customers give orders; that is rare. Otherwise, the government is our only customer, even if the orders are less in number," said Nigitan.

"Due to the dust, the workers have suffered from tuberculosis in the past, and respiratory diseases," said Venkatachalam.

"The chances of a hand getting injured is high. If we get distracted for a second, we can get injured," said Nigitan.

According to him, the funding that was allotted by organisations like the World Bank for fishing communities was distributed to all Fani-affected areas equally by the government.

Each household in the fishing community got Rs 2,600 for repairing fully-damaged fishing nets, whereas the actual cost of repairing amounts to Rs 3,000.

According to the government each household is given Rs 9,600 for replacing fully-damaged boats. However, it takes Rs 1.5 lakhs to repair a damaged boat and around Rs 3 to Rs 4 lakhs to build a new boat from scratch.

Puri Collector Balwant Singh said, "The relief against damage is usually allotted less money but if a household is a beneficiary then they can avail themselves of government schemes to get fishing nets and boats at a subsidised rate of 50 percent."

From worn out cloth to masterpiece

The art of Pattachitra, believed to be as old as the Jagannath Temple, is practised by 150 households

SHRIJA GANGULY

Raghuburajpur: The walls of houses at Raghuburajpur have come straight out of the shastras. With intricate images of Vishnu's Dashavatar, and the life of Lord Jagannath painted all over, the villagers speak of the Mahabharata with as much passion as you or I talk about Marvel or Game of Thrones today.

This is the heritage of pattachitra which had its origins in Puri. Master Craftsman and State Handicrafts and Merit Awardee back in 1998, Kulu Charan Mohapatra states with pride, "Kabi (poet), Pandit (Teacher or Priest), and Kalaakaar (artist) produce and manufacture art. The poet composes, the priest preaches, and the artist gives it shape."

His g--uru Jagannath Mohapatra had won a competition for the best pattachitra design that was held among artists from Puri, Raghuburajpur, and Talasahi.

Kelu Charan is assisted by his wife and kids, all of whom are trained artisans as well.

Kelu Charan's wife, Umalakanti Bariki, (45) has been producing pattachitra works for 30 years now. Not suffering the conventional fate of married women, she is recognized for her contribution and not treated as another mouth to be fed.

She said, "Daughters are taught the art as well. But they can continue doing it after marriage only if their husbands' families sustain themselves on the same art form."

Kelu Charan has an idiomatic reference to his "unfortunate" guru, who has three married daughters and no son: 'deep tale andhaara', meaning, 'the lamp that enlightens lives in darkness.'

Pattachitra is now practised by 150 households at Raghuburajpur, whereas earlier, the art was confined to occasions of marriage



Umalakanti Bariki one of the many female artists of Raghuburajpur | SHRIJA GANGULY

and thread ceremony.

The art is believed to be as old as the Jagannath temple. There is a collective effort to create three

different pattachitra pieces for the three lords during *sahamujatra*—or the duration of absence of the idols from the main temple. These come

as a replacement. This time precedes Rath Yatra, the main festival of the State. The artisans working on these pattachitra pieces have to be ritually pure while working—wear new clothes; menstruating artisans cannot touch the work.

In terms of sale, Pattachitra artists get (and prefer) foreign customers for the simple reason of affordable business.

"My last work sold for 300 Euros or Rs 27,000. We do not prefer going to exhibitions anymore. Initially, transportation, accommodation and food were paid for. Now, we are made to pay the rent for the shops as well. The cheaper ones get sold but hardly cover the losses. Carrying the expensive ones means extra expenditure," Kulu Charan says.

The prices vary according to the intricacies, and not the size, of a pattachitra.

Natural colours extracted from

sea shells, stones, oil lamps and liquid from wood apple trees are used, instead of synthetic colours. Crushed tamarind seed mixed with water coats the cloth, thereby, averting its being destroyed by moth or spillage of water. Usually worn out sarees and tassar cloth pieces are used to make patta.

This village comprises terajati or thirteen non-Brahmins sub castes—Tanti, Pradhan, Patra, Baniaghar, Nayak, Seol or toddy tappers, Maachhakeuto or fishermen, Choorakeuto or the ones who clean husk off the wheat, and Chitrakaar, to name a few.

Consequently, the designs reflect upon the occupations with fish designs dominating the market.

Since Fani struck the village, there has been a decline in patronage by foreign customers. With Government assistance being scanty, the artisans now seek to engage directly with their customers abroad.

Little land, low margins in Harijan village

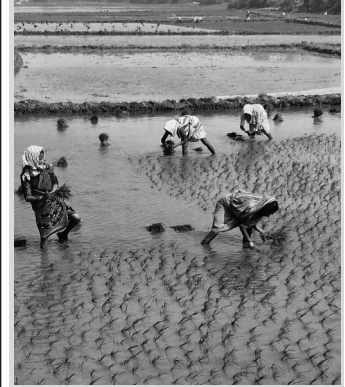
ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Krushnaprasad: Even as the Centre is trying to get the State Government to improve its local agriculture marketing efforts using the E-Nam platform to sell produce online, lack of registration has meant rice farmers of predominantly SC villages in this panchayat stick to agriculture just for subsistence. The rice farmers have small landholdings.

"Large family size and low margins, from selling the little quantity remaining after personal consumption, discourage people from relying on farming as an occupation," said Ganesh Sahu, 27, a vegetable seller, who gets his stock from nearby Puri town.

Ishwar Palai (50), a rice farmer, said, "We get Rs. 1500 a quintal from the Odisha State Agricultural Marketing Board. The money does not suffice and we have to take loans to meet our other expenses, because the 10,000 rupees we get under the Kalia scheme [for farmer welfare] is spent on machinery and fertilizers."

A social worker and member of the NGO, Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD), Manoj Malik, said that historically SC farmers had owned small holdings and in Odisha were never familiar with commercial agriculture of any kind. "Fragmented landholdings and lack of support systems in terms of local government proactively with agriculture marketeers or boards mean the rice farmers here literally eat what they sow."



Farmers at work | ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA

Carving out a future

ARKATAPA BASU

Raghuburajpur: In the vibrant village of Raghuburajpur, 10 km from Puri, the traditional art of wood and stone carving is dying a slow death. Of the 300 artisan families, only 10-15 practise carving. The rest are engaged in Pattachitra and other art forms like chariot making.

Chandrashekhar Swain, 56, has been in this craft for the past 38 years. He sits in the courtyard of his house, carving a piece of white cedar with a gunitagi (flat-headed iron instrument) to make a rendition of the Jagannath temple. "Interest in learning the craft has increased over the past few years but the younger generation does not have the same dedication. They don't want to work so hard."

Women are likely to pursue Pattachitra more than wood or stone carving. Working with stone and wood causes blisters, callus and cuts which might hurt their marital prospects. Even if one is inclined towards the craft, managing the household and continuing with car-

ving becomes difficult after marriage, according to villagers.

Swain himself got interested in stone carving during his childhood. As a young boy, he would see people buying stone and wood carvings and thought it would give



Chandrashekhar Swain | ARKATAPA BASU

him, a better livelihood than his becoming a farmer like his forefathers.

The smallest stone carvings cost Rs 300, while one of his biggest and most intricate pieces costs around Rs 3.5 lakhs. Swain has stopped making bigger statues as they are difficult to sell. A four-

quintal Ganesh idol worth Rs 3 lakh has been lying in his courtyard for the past seven years. He has spent 2 years making it.

Moreover, stone carving has affected his eyesight. At workshops and training courses that his guild members and he attend, protective glasses are provided. "Before these glasses were given," he says, "stone dust from cutting and polishing the stone hit eyes."

During Fani, some of his stone sculptures broke after a piece of asbestos crashed into them. A section of the boundary wall crumbled down.

Swain's family received a compensation of Rs 85,000 under the State Disaster Response Fund. However their bank account got blocked before he could withdraw any money.

Commenting on the relatively small number of wood and stone craftsmen at Raghuburajpur, Swain says, "Konark and Puri temples could not have been built without craftsmen like us. If we are not supported, then how will monuments or temples be made later?"

When Modi took tradition to Paris

MEGHA MALLICK

Raghuburajpur: Recognition by the Indian Prime Minister was all that was needed to bring this man's brilliant work into the limelight. Bhaskar Mahapatra became a star overnight when Narendra Modi gifted his French counterpart with a Pattachitra painted by this artist.

Mahapatra says, "Pattachitra has been a tradition in our family since the days of my great-grandfather. The chitrakar community of Maharana and Mahapatra created this art form. The lore of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra is depicted in most of these paintings. Natural colours, derived from conch shells and stones from the sea, are used."

For the past 10-15 years, he has been painting scenes from the Ramayan, the Mahabharat and Krishnaleela on Tussar sarees. The 'Tree of Life' painting that was gifted to the French Prime Minister was in the likeness of the topmost structure of the Jagannath temple. Figures of the gods were drawn in the middle.



Bhaskar Mahapatra displays his artwork | SHWETA DUBEY

How the gift reached France is another story. Mahapatra narrates, "I have many German customers. One of them asked him to paint a picture for him, without payment. I agreed to give it as a gift, and painting what came to be called the Tree of Life."

This picture was then sent to Delhi for an exhibition, for which he received Rs.25000 in cash. It was then displayed in an exhibition in France, where Modi chose it as a gift for the French Prime Minis-

ter, in 2015.

Mahapatra has many students working under him. It takes at least four years to complete the course, upon which he gives certificates.

He has his wife and four daughters, one of whom paints on glass bottles and earrings.

"When I start painting, I don't think that I have to finish it within a given time. I will paint at a stretch, or at times, I will leave a whole day without painting. It all depends on my mood."

Is this heritage village losing glorious canopy?

MEGHA MALLICK
SHRIJA GANGULY

Pipli: The heritage village of Pipli, located between Bhubaneswar and Puri, did not wait for Fani to see an economic slump, as a result of which the daily income of artisans has dropped from Rs 30,000 to Rs 2,000.

Ironically, one of the reasons for the slowdown is the national popularity gained by local artisans. The construction of a bypass, connecting Bhubaneswar and Puri, also meant diverting customer traffic, say locals. Earlier, Pipli was on this route but now one has to drive back from Puri on a different route altogether to reach the village.

S.K. Aashik, an artisan here, says "Our participation in handicrafts exhibitions across the country undoubtedly made for cultural cohesion. Consequently, a lot of artisans brought handicrafts from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, and West

Bengal to sell them in our local market at higher prices."

Competition has increased over time. While there were just 10-15 shops earlier, now around 50 shops are selling the same product. The establishment of state handloom and handicrafts stores in other parts of the country has also led to a drop in customer footfall at Pipli.

Forget business prospects for a while. The artisan community here is renowned for its appliqué, which is about putting together cloth cutouts to produce tapestries with images of Gods (mainly Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra) stitched on them. Dating back to almost four centuries, appliques are made in two ways. The traditional appliqué is made entirely by hand. Newer styles have laces sewn on the raw material using machines.

Canopies are the costliest product, says Zaheer Khan, a 30-year-old appliqué maker who was initiated into the art when he was



Appliqué works at Zaheer Khan's shop | MEGHA MALLICK

10. The cost of a canopy, used in big programmes, ranges from Rs 20,000 to Rs 50,000.

"When ministers come here, as did Naveen Patnaik [Odisha Chief Minister], there is some festival, we make umbrellas and canopies with appliqué and sell them, says

Khan.

Alongside men, 15-20 women, work for him. Their salaries range from Rs 5,000 to Rs 12,000, depending on the quality of the product they make.

Most tourists come during the winter vacation from Mumbai,

Goa, Rajasthan and also America. They prefer lamps and other handicrafts with an image of Lord Jagannath sewn on them.

During Dol Purnima or Holi, a canopy was made for Lord Jagannath using appliqué. This was how it was initially used. Now, the art is in demand a lot more among tourists.

Sunil Pradhan doesn't limit his products to bedsheets, canopies and sarees. He sells kettles and bottles with tribal art drawn on them.

In Pradhan's workshop, a subtle amount of gender segregation remains. Pradhan says women are paid less in his workshop as they cannot devote full time to appliqué handicrafts.

Aashik said though artisans here did not suffer huge infrastructural damage due to Fani, a month-long power cut put back their production and sales targets. All artisans-cum-businessmen have received a compensation of Rs 12,000 each.

A musical mission

KANISHKA BIRAT

Krushnaprasad: A fisherman's daughter, Shreya Malik, coming from Mirzapur in the block, bagged the first prize in a singing competition held in Odisha last year. The class 9 girl from the Bhavakundawar Dev Vidya Niketan in the village is among the participants from 42 higher secondary schools from all over State in the contest organised by the All Odisha Teachers' Association (OSTA). Malik dreams of making it to Indian Idol one day and is recording her songs in preparation. This in spite of the fact she has never attended any music class as her father couldn't afford it. Nor could she appear for any audition for singing competitions at the national level, for the same reason. She wants the Odisha or Central government to provide her with a harmonium to hone her skills. Her teacher Laxminandan says "She is good in both studies and music."



Shreya Malik dreams big | KANISHKA BIRAT

Malik is thinking of starting her own Youtube channel to upload video recordings of her songs for showcasing her talent. Topan Jali from the same school won the first prize in javelin throw at the block level, organized in 2014 by OSTA. The association, started in 1946, has been holding various competitions at the block, district and State levels to encourage latent talent among students coming from a humble background.

Fani or no, temple project goes ahead

ABHIMANYU HAZARIKA AND KANISHKA BIRAT

Krushnaprasad: A temple dedicated to Lord Ram here has collected over 40 lakhs for the past decade and a half now, with several locals contributing small sums frequently.

Once complete, the Mandir, coming up on a stretch of land that acts as a three-way dividing Rayapur, Mirzapur and Parbatipur villages of the block, will add to the 'grandeur' of the area, the priest claims. The temple will house the idols of Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman.

Locals on condition of anonymity said that idols were brought here from Ayodhya nearly four decades ago. The temple is now in a race for completion with its namesake at Ayodhya, even as residents of the fishing village have been

struggling to make ends meet months after Fani. Villagers are awaiting more relief, than the Rs 3200 given for their fully damaged boats and houses.

"Known earlier only for an idol of the Lord [Ram] and its poverty, our village will soon become very well known. Our own sons of the soil from Berhampur are the skilled artisans and sculptors behind the holy building. We have not received help from any religious trust or the government. We're on our own to add to our village's grandeur," said the priest.

Incidentally, neither the priest nor the men surrounding him have received their due compensation post-Fani, nor do they have alternative career options.

Gumption to preserve ancient Gotipua

Guru Basanta Kumar Maharana reviving dance form in gurukul style

AATREYEE DHAR

Raghuburajpur: Eight out of 10 students drop out of a dance school here, drawn by the lure of quick money promised by newer institutes. But its master is determined to preserve an endangered dance form, 'Gotipua,' by maintaining the traditional Gurukul system in his 'Abhinna Sundar Gotipua Nrutya Parishad' in this heritage village.

In Oriya language, "goti" means "single" and "pua" means "boy". For centuries, this unique dance has been performed by young acrobat boys dressed up as female to worship Lord Krishna.

Guru Basanta Kumar Maharana (35) teaches the dance to 30 students, from different villages in the State, who reside in his institution-cum-residence. In recent times, encroachment by business on the gurukul system has led to its systematic destruction, he says.

Regretting the dropout episode, Basanta says, "A couple of institutions have come up

in the district but they are not gurukuls in the real sense as they are run by students who didn't complete 10-15 years of his Gotipua training."

A precursor to Odissi, Gotipua involves acrobatic formations (for example, a human pyramid) called 'Bandhas' inspired by the figures of Radha and Krishna. Apart from rituals associated with the Jagannath temple, this dance is performed on special occasions such as Chandan Yatra and Rath Yatra, based on verses from the Gita Govinda by Jayadeva. To master the stunts, the boys have to start training at the age of 5 in the gurukuls for enacting postures from the 17th century manuscript Abhinaya Chandrika.

Basanta says the structured training in his institution begins with meditation followed by feet exercises, oil massage, acrobatics and voice culture. It also provides for formal schooling for boys up to Standard X. Although Gotipua hasn't been accorded the status of a classical dance yet, there is no other dance form where the trainees can sing,



The 'Gotipua' Master | AATREYEE DHAR

dance, play music and teach, all in one, he adds.

Ten years ago, the 'Gotipua school' was started by the institution when the dance was on the wane due to a lack of financial support from the government and the collapse of

gymnasiums or 'akharas' across Puri. The institution uses income from performances to cover the expenses of the gurukul. It earns over Rs 60,000 from every international performance whereas a national show fetches only, Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000.

Basanta's troupe has performed at world events in the Royal Festival Hall (UK), at the Fes Festival of World Sacred Music (Morocco), the Omar Festival and the Spring Festival (Belgium). On a Fes Festival performance held in the palace of the King of Morocco, Basanta recalls, "On a stage graced by the likes of Birju Maharaj, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra and Zakir Hussain, audiences around the world exploded in applause that couldn't stop till the end of their performance."

Basanta's father Guru Lakshman Maharana saved his earnings from his Pattachitra paintings to pay off the expenses of the institution. A new institution, on the way to Raghuburajpur from Puri, is in the pipeline. H adds, "We cannot bribe officials as it tampers with the values taught in the gurukul system."



Beautification vs livelihood

Fishermen face displacement threats in the Sangumal beach

ANSHUL GUPTA

Rameswaram: Amidst privatization and the threat of being permanently uprooted, the fishermen of Sangumal beach here are left seeking the right to their land.

The beach is a natural fishing point. The water here is shallow and fishermen from around 10-15 villages engage in fishing. It is one of the safest fishing points even during cyclones, claims a fisherman.

According to Karunamoorthy, a fishermen leader, the fisherfolk stay in a settlement opposite to the beach, allotted to them by the government.

"The idea of privatization has resurfaced and the government has asked the fishermen to move from the settlement," says Karunamoorthy. A resort has been constructed behind the settlement. In order to "beautify" the beach, the government wants to remove the temporary houses in front of the resort. It has even pulled down a few huts. But the fishermen refuse to



The government wants to remove the huts to make way for the resort (behind), claim fishermen | ANSHUL GUPTA

leave the place as it is their only source of livelihood.

In the past, the government tried to occupy the fisherman's land on the Sangumal beach. It proposed to construct a children's park where the fishermen lived, amid the coconut groves they had created, but dropped the idea when the locals threatened to hold an agitation.

The issue came to the forefront again when former President Pratibha Patil came for a visit. Citing security, many of the huts were removed and the fishermen were given land opposite to the beach.

"Now, they want us to move further from the sea to beautify the beach," says Sagayaraj, a fisherman whose family has lived here

for generations.

"We demand that the government either restore our original land or let us stay at our thatched shelter to which it moved us," added Sagayaraj.

The government, instead, has built a fisheries building "to address the fishermen's grievances." The issue is pending in the court.

The households here depend on the coconut trees they have cultivated over the years to earn money during the fish breeding season, when fishing is banned.

But the government has leased out the land to a private party, who has constructed a pathway to the resort. It also offers boating to tourists.

"We used to earn a few extra money by taking the tourists for boating, Rs. 200-300 per ride," says Sagayaraj, "even that has stopped now."

The fishermen here are left fighting for survival and live in the hope that they will get access to the land that rightfully belongs to them.

We take pride in our job: seaweed divers

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Globally recognized but neglected by the government. This is what the seaweed divers of Chinnapalam village, Pamban, say. About 350 women of the village are engaged in the ancestral practice for a living.

They are wives of fishermen and they proudly say, "This empowers us. We do not need much investment. We do not depend on our husbands to buy us things".

Only Hindu women practise this as livelihood. Christians, who constitute almost 90% of the fishing community, do not collect seaweed.

Seaweed divers work for 12 days a month. During rains, they do not go into the sea. They collect 10 kg of seaweed a day. The quantity shrinks to 5 kg after the seaweed dries up. For every kg, the women get Rs. 50.

The divers collect "marikozhundu/kadappaasi," the only variety harvested on their shore. Since they



Seaweed diver at work | MANTHRA KOLIYER

can find seaweed only in shallow water, most of them also go to the nearest island. The boat ride costs them Rs. 60 each.

Bhagavathi, who has been working since she was 15, is the head of the seaweed divers' association.

She says, "Nothing stops us. Forest officials, snake bites or even menstruation. We believe that the sea is as impure as we are during that time of the month".

In the past, there were only 40 boats but today there are 400. The

women say, "the quantum of seaweed has gone down badly due to climate change and pollution".

The Tamil Nadu government does not provide any assistance or even recognize seaweed diving as a means of livelihood. The health facilities provided to the women are next to non-existent. They are forced to go to Pamban as doctors aren't available in the village round the clock.

K. Murugesan, a fisherman, says, "Private hospitals charge Rs. 2,000 for medicines but they are better. Some government hospital doctors give the same injection to humans as they give to buffaloes."

Nagarani, assistant of the seaweed divers' association, had to undergo a hysterectomy last year.

"I carry 10 kg of seaweed at any given time and this has taken a toll on my health. It is difficult, but I am still working".

Besides collecting seaweed, women polish seashells and make garlands.

Challenge of dwindling fish, low returns, climate change

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Climate change, global warming and excessive use of non-biodegradable plastic have led to the decrease in the number of fish, making many species extinct in Rameswaram.

Irudhayaraja, a fisherman, says: "Many species are on the verge of extinction. Varieties like sardines (mathi/chaale), seer fish (neemeen), vanjaram and ayla are not available on our coast at all." In the past, one boat would get 5-10 tonnes of chaale in four hours. Today, getting even 10 kg is difficult, he says.

The fishermen of the island town have always been dependent on the variety of sardines, abundantly available on their coast. In 2019, they did not get a single sardine fish. Now they are dependent on prawns, the quantity of which has

also dwindled from 100 kg to 50 kg a catch. Christmas orders for fish export from various countries have declined in the past two years. "It is because of the decrease in the availability of fish that we have to venture into the Sri Lankan boundary, though, the Indian government has not permitted us to do so," claim the fisherfolk.

Sesuraja, head of fishermen association, says, "Plastic has also caused immense trouble. Now, we have banned plastic. No fisherman uses polythene bags."

Some country boat fishermen use monofilament nets. The net emanates sound that disturbs the fish. Monofilament nets are banned by the Sri Lankan government but Indian government hasn't banned them yet. The boat owners say they have no options.

The fishermen also blame the

north-eastern winds for the decrease in the number of fish. Raja says, "There was no lightning and thunder this monsoon. Only when it rains, and there are heavy winds one can see a lot of produce".

The fishermen of Nagapattinam and Cuddalore are at the start of the bay, from where they fish using mechanised boats, leaving the ones in Rameswaram with very little fish altogether.

They believe they do not get back even what they invest. Irudhayaraja says, "90% of us are in losses. My heart sinks when the men on my boat do not answer the phone."

The fishermen also point out that while there were only 40 boats at the harbour once, there are 400 today. "The number of boats has increased and the space for fishing has decreased."



Fish produce unloaded from a fishermen boat at Rameswaram harbour | KRATI PURWAR

Private tanks, the only fresh water source

KRATI PURWAR

Dhanushkodi: This ghost town of Ramanathapuram, which housed the old harbour in the past, has around 350 families. All belong to the fishermen community. They stay here "illegally" to earn a livelihood, which they cannot do if they shift to the quarters provided by the Tamil Nadu government near Rameswaram town.

Since Dhanushkodi is flanked by the Bay of Bengal, on one side and the Indian Ocean, on the other, fresh groundwater is not available. Nor is electricity, another basic requirement, available. Muthumaniyai, a resident, says the Tamil Nadu government has never bothered about people's plight here. "Political parties turn up when the elections are around the corner but they forget us soon after."

Since the government has made no move to provide fresh water, "we went for private desalinated water tank supply," Muthumaniyai says. However, the government feels that the town became unsafe after the 1964 Rameswaram cyclone. Hence, it wants people to leave and hasn't offered even the basic amenities to them.

Three water tanks come to the settlement every day. A pitcher of unfiltered water costs Rs. 5 whereas, a pitcher of filtered water costs Rs.10. The filtered water is used for drinking and cooking. The unfiltered water is used for bathing, washing, and other household purposes.

Priya, another resident, says that a family spends around Rs. 80-100 a day on buying fresh water.

Earlier, the residents used to go across the road, dig a well, and use the water until it reached the point of salination. And repeat the exercise in another location. It used to become hectic for women, especially during pregnancies. The water tank is a better option even though they have to pay for it.

First step towards menstrual hygiene

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Dhanushkodi: The use of sanitary pads, even in the absence of toilet facilities, has put the Dhanushkodi Old Harbour fisher community a cut above the rest of Rameswaram.

While rituals such as keedakarai (the first three days of menstruation when a girl is kept isolated) are still practised in this small hamlet, it is interesting to see how people's attitude towards menstruation has changed.

At the old harbour, the girls do not shy away from the topic of "monthly problems".

"We are taught about menstrual hygiene in school. They play an old DVD although the teachers don't talk to us about it," says Maruvarasi Mariappan (14), a Class 8 student of P. U. Middle School.

Government schools are supposed to provide free sanitary pads to the girls. However, according to Sethalatchmi (16), who studies in a

high school at Rameswaram, "some government schools give free pads and some don't. The middle school near our house does not."

The girls travel to Rameswaram to buy their monthly supply of two sanitary packs worth Rs. 35.

The practice of keedakarai affects the attendance of girls in school. As per the dropout rate of Dhanushkodi, girls continue education while most boys quit. Yet, during keedakarai, girls are not allowed to go out and are forced to miss three days of school.

The custom is practised inside homes as well where the women are in-charge of cooking, cleaning and cutting fish.

"We never suffer any menstrual cramps or back pain," says Murieshwari Chermuragan, a mother of one of the girls going to school. But she has no answer to why women are not allowed to touch the tools and utensils on "those three days."

Nets and boats, backbone of fisheries

KRATI PURWAR

Rameswaram: Harbour. A place where the day starts even before the sun has risen. While some fishermen come back to the shore with loads of catch, others get ready to go deep into the sea. Whirring motorboat engines, men loading and unloading the boats, nets getting untangled, and fish containers being transferred to a wagon to be carried into the city dot the scene as another day starts.

Fishermen depend heavily for their day to day activities on net manufacturing companies and boat makers. They, in fact, form the backbone of the fisheries industry.

At the Rameswaram harbour, there is a net making company that not only makes nylon nets from scratch but also repairs, remakes, and alters them. The nets are sold around other coastal areas like Kanyakumari and Nagapattinam.

About 240-250 people work here every day to build eight different types of nets for fishermen to catch varieties of fish, crabs, etc. A net



A labour giving a final touch to a fishing net | KRATI PURWAR

can be 90 yards long and weigh up to 500 kg so that it can hold 15 tonnes of fish at a time, says John Britto, owner of the company. The company gets Rs. 50,000 worth of work every day.

Afrem Ricky, a mechanical engineering student in Coimbatore,

says fishermen have a preference for individual net makers. They believe that they will catch more fish if a particular person crafts their nets. Afrem works here part-time during his mid-term breaks.

Each net takes about two hours to complete. The price varies bet-

"Till the end of my life, I want to serve my people"

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Rameswaram: A 55-year-old man in a crowd of a hundred, sloganeering for the national strike declared across the country on January 8. To strangers, he might have seemed like an ordinary man but ask the people around and they will recognise him as S. Karunamoorthy – the hero of Rameswaram's fisher community.

A member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI(M) - he and his party are known for their continued support to the labour communities in the area.

Karunamoorthy's first significant work as a party worker was to help two fishermen who were

raped by Dhanushkodi policemen in 1995. He ensured that the policemen were convicted. "One of the proudest moments of my life was when those men were brought to justice," he said.

He joined the CPI(M) in 1984, nearly five years after his 10th grade. He was inspired after reading an article called "Taraku" by a communist in a Tamil newspaper. He then joined the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU). Later, when he took up the work of a fisherman, he joined the Tamil Nadu Fishermen Federation (TNFF). He was the first in his family to join the CPI(M). "My family is well connected with the Indian National Congress but they never said any-



Karunamoorthy | RAHUL MANOJ

hing about my joining the CPI(M). As long as I don't join the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it is fine," he said.

Currently, the CITU member is acting as an arbitrator between fishermen using traditional fishing

boats and trawler boats. His party first took up this issue that started in 2008.

In December 2012, he helped the families of Indian fishermen who were imprisoned in Iran. Out of the 19 held, 16 were from Tamil Nadu. An NGO had advised the families of the fishermen to invest Rs 5 lakhs to take the legal approach.

However, Karunamoorthy dismissed the idea as he felt the families would lose ground due to international border laws. He prevailed upon the Tamil Nadu government to deal with the problem through the diplomatic, not legal, channel.

He issued a statement saying that he, along with the fisher folk,

would picket the Iran embassy in New Delhi. The Jayalalithaa government paid an interim relief of Rs One lakh to the families of imprisoned fishermen. Of this, Rs. 2000 was claimed by the Fisheries Department as "expenses." Thanks to Karunamoorthy's intervention, the department returned the money. However, the government failed to help the families further.

Karunamoorthy renewed the threat of picketing the Iran embassy. This time, he managed to get a contact from Iran who told him in which jail the prisoners were and by which plane they were to be sent back. "This was brand new information even for the government," he said.

Elephant in limbo

RAHUL MANOJ

Rameswaram: When you see the man clad in a blue towel and lungi, you may think he is just another senior citizen. But Nambu Rajan is different. He was an elephant mahout for 40 years in the famous Arulmigu Ramanathaswamy temple of Rameswaram. "There were three elephants in the temple in the 1990s but there is just one elephant now named Ramalakshmi, who is 17," says Rajan.

"If the elephants suffered any ailment in the past, we used to give them Ayurvedic medicines, but now the veterinary doctors of the Animal Husbandry department give them vaccinations which lead

to a shorter lifespan", claims Rajan. Ramalakshmi does not get proper fodder and is not treated properly, alleges Rajan. It is harassed by the temple authorities to perform different pujas. Recalling the death of Bhavani, 52, in November 2012 at Thekkampatti where the annual elephant rejuvenation camp takes place, Rajan says the elephant died due to the long journey and climate change.

Denying any harassment, Muniyasaamy, Assistant, HR&CE, says the temple provides grass, chow-chow, palm leaf, raw rice, ragi flour, sugarcane and banana to Ramalakshmi every day. Rajan's son, Ramu (37), takes care of Ramalakshmi now.

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RAMANATHAPURAM

Oppressed even in the 21st century

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: The houses on the left side of the Muthuramalingapuram village in Paramakudi remain unoccupied. "Nearly 20 of the 25 families have left the village," says Kitnaraasa (53), secretary of the Tamil Puligal party, nodding towards the *kaccha* houses arranged in a line.

Like in many villages of Ramanathapuram, such houses act as a symbol of oppression. They bear testimony to those who gave up and moved to cities like Madurai, Thoothukudi and Chennai, where "no one asks you your caste," to start anew.

"This place was given to us by the District Collector after the Reddians tried to take the land away from us. Now, we work for them as agricultural labour. They make sure that we, the Arunthathiyars (Dallits), know who our 'master' is," says K. Sangreswaran (21).

His father was allegedly attacked thrice by the Reddians when he was fighting the case for the land *patta*.

"We are isolated from the village [commonly known as colony]. The Reddians, the dominant caste in the village, abuse our women. They have even usurped a part of our burial ground. We take a long route to the school, burial ground and hospital as they circumvent the main road," says Balamurugan (30). "The people of Ramanathapuram boast that this is the birthplace of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. But what is the point of him becoming a



K. Sangreswaran and his community talking about their experiences at Muthuramalingapuram | VALLARI SANZGIRI

scientist if his own village is backward?"

These voices come from the less caste-sensitive areas. The situation is more volatile in places like Kamuthy where the main occupation is farm labour.

The Appanur Indira Nagar of Kadaladi taluka has been complaining about the lack of water for some years now. The women of this village have to pull their water wagons to the nearest river or water body (sometimes using waterbodies near the road) to fetch water for daily use.

"We have to draw the water at 3a.m. so we can start our day. The wagon can carry only four to five pots and we can't store more than one litre at a time. Had the upper caste complained to the municipality, the problem would have been resolved by now," says Pushpavalli Mukandi (45).

The upper castes also keep the residents from building concrete houses in place of their thatched sheds as they believe that even the government-sanctioned land belongs to the Thevars, who originally owned it.

"Most of our children drop out of schools after Class 8 or 10 to help support our families. We try to encourage them to finish their education. At least in schools, instances of caste abuse have lessened," says Perumal Sonai, the present Indira Nagar colony chief.

Indira Nagar does not have a dustbin. The only one at the entrance of the village was taken away a year ago. The villagers have complained but the municipality has done nothing to help.

"We just burn the garbage," says Rajalaxmi, mother of a three-year-old. "The villagers suffer from respiratory diseases because of that."

Migrants cry maltreatment

RAHUL MANOJ

Rameswaram: Physical exhaustion is at its peak as the two conservancy workers slog in the heat collecting piles of garbage on the road.

"We get Rs. 8,000 a month cleaning garbage," say Renukabei and Shantabai, both from Latur, Maharashtra. The two migrated to Rameswaram two years ago in search of employment.

Their working hours - from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day - are "very long," adds Renuka. Though the Rameswaram municipality provides coats, mugs and uniform, Renuka and Shanta say they are not treated with respect since they are temporary workers. Full-time sanitary workers with the municipality earn around Rs. 17,000 a month.

The two collect, segregate and dispose waste in a godown at Vadakadu, around 3 km from Rameswaram. Hotels, households and petty shops dump their waste on empty grounds making their work more strenuous.

"While permanent employees of Tamil Nadu get their salaries credited in their bank accounts, we get them in cash," says Shanta.

Their salaries are disbursed by their contractors. Some contractors allegedly siphon off money.

When Renuka questioned the municipality officials, she was asked to collect garbage in two more streets.

To this, Muthukumar, Sanitary Inspector, Rameswaram Municipality says, "Workers should approach me with their grievances in a time-bound manner and prompt action will be taken against corrupt contractors."

We prefer India to Sri Lanka, says refugee

ANSHUL GUPTA

Mandapam: "The children of those who have lived here for more than 30 years know only this place. If they go to Sri Lanka, they will feel alienated," says K. Mathivathanam of the Trincomalee village of Sri Lanka.

Working as a coordinator in the Organisation for Eelam Refugees' Rehabilitation (OfERR) since 2007, he considers India a home that will never abandon the Sri Lankan Tamils despite their exclusion from the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019).

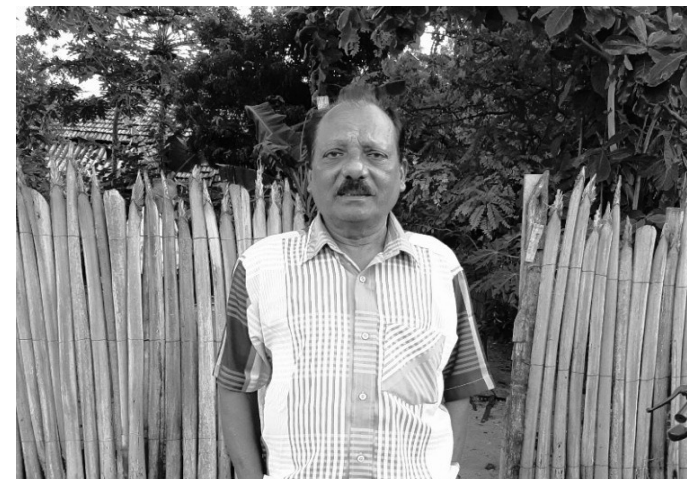
Mathivathanam was in Sri Lanka until India intervened in the Sri Lankan Civil War by sending the Indian Peace Keeping Force to the island nation. Although many Sri Lankan Tamils came to India after the start of the civil war in 1983, most arrived on the Indian shores around 1990.

"We did not know where we were heading. Thousands of us were brought here in buses and other modes of transport. We lived in godowns. People would go to Dindigul, Coimbatore. Camps in Tamil Nadu were distributed across the State," he adds.

The Mandapam camp is the largest Sri Lankan refugee camp in Tamil Nadu with nearly 500 families.

OfERR started in 1984 to aid thousands of Tamil refugees who were forced to flee their homeland and take refuge in India during the conflict that went on for 25 years.

"When we came here, we did not have the right to education, em-



Mathivathanam outside his house | ANSHUL GUPTA

ployment. Later, we were promised education for our children. They said they would help with medicines and education," says Mathivathanam.

OfERR helped the refugees start small scale jobs and gave on-the-job training to develop extra skills. "People who graduated from here are working in Sri Lanka now. Those who didn't hone their skills here are facing employment issues there," says Mathivathanam.

The refugees who have stayed back here have taken up jobs like painting, carpentry and masonry. Women from the Mandapam camp have begun working in crab and prawn industries to support their families.

Mathivathanam has been living in the Mandapam house for 13 years. "We have no issues related to water or electricity. We pay no rent. The Tamil Nadu government gives

the head of the family Rs. 1000 and we get 20 kg of free rice every month," he says.

Citizenship is the primary issue for the refugees - a topic that is the talk of the country today. A child born in the camp doesn't get citizenship in either of the countries.

As one not born in Sri Lanka, he cannot get citizenship there and because he is a refugee here, he is not eligible for Indian citizenship.

After much struggle, some refugees have got the Sri Lankan citizenship, as their parents are Sri Lankan.

"In Sri Lanka, we are also a reason for the problem. The Tamilians are divided and the Sinhalese united. In government jobs, education, etc., 65% is reserved for the Sinhalese. That is why we prefer to live here rather than in our own country. At least, we don't feel alienated here," says Mathivathanam.

SBA toilets in poor shape

RAHUL MANOJ

Ramanathapuram: The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is meant only for small, landless labourers, the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and the physically challenged.

People belonging to the Above Poverty Line (APL) cannot apply for these toilets but some of them do, depriving the Below Poverty Line (BPL) families of their right. The toilets are not permanent structures.

The government gives Rs 12,000 for constructing toilets under the scheme. "It is an incentive, not a subsidy," said S Navaneethan, District coordinator, SBA, District Rural Development Agency, Ramanathapuram.

"The government provides dustbin and toilets but the public lacks awareness and is not using them," added Navaneethan. "Sub-standard construction material is used to construct toilets," said Sathyabhama, a resident of Lakshmi Nagar, Kuyavankudi village.

K. Rajamanickam, who runs the Arul Foundation for the uplift of sanitation workers, alleged that he was forced to spend his personal money in order to construct a toilet for his house. He added that contractors under the SBA siphoned off Rs 2000 each per toilet.

In places such as Peraiyur, Aapannoor and Saayalkudi, low quality toilets constructed under the SBA have been converted by the public into animal sheds and godowns.

Armed with education, Kilakarai girls move towards an empowered future

KRATI PURWAR & ANSHUL GUPTA

Kilakarai: "We went from door to door begging parents to send their daughters to college after Class 12," says Dr. S. Sumayaa, principal of the Thassim Beevi Abdul Kadar College for Women in Kilakarai, Ramanathapuram.

Since 1988, the college, as well as the town, has come a long way in women's education, empowerment and self-sustenance. The institute provides education and voice to underprivileged women belonging to the minorities.

There are families in which girls are married off early or are not permitted to go for higher studies. Syed Aziz Mohammed, Accounts Manager of the college, says that this mindset is prevalent among many communities, especially Muslims. "That is why the need to change people's perception is very important."

"The NAAC accreditation of 'A' grade has helped in more families accepting the credibility of the college in achieving the overall objective of education for the underprivileged and minority households," says Mohammed.

"In the name of religion, people refuse to send their girls to college. They face severe restrictions," says Naseema Farveen, Head, Department of Arabic and Islamic studies.



Thassim Beevi Abdul Kadar college is one of the leading educational institutions for minority women | KRATI PURWAR

She says people are not aware of Islam which says education is a mandatory activity for this and any other future life.

But many parents are afraid of possible sexual abuse of their daughters.

The college, therefore, follows a strict dress code of *churidar-kurta* and offers a safe bus ride to commute to and from college. It is compulsory for Muslim students to wear an abhaya.

Srimathi, Head of the Department,

Chemistry, says Kilakarai women are now getting increasingly educated, becoming entrepreneurs, starting online business, getting jobs in multinational companies and working abroad. Teaching, however, remains the most preferred profession.

Families in Kilakarai do not prefer to send their girls to co-ed schools or colleges.

"Interestingly", Srimathi points out, "among the Muslim community here, it is the boy's family that

gives dowry (known as Mehr) to the girl's family." Also, it is the man who moves to the wife's family after marriage.

"This is because most households here have men working abroad. And women are better placed at their mothers' homes," says a school teacher, who wishes to remain unnamed.

In the Labbai community, women are allowed to study but not allowed to work. Aaynun Farida, a resident, says: "Women are not allowed to interact with men because, for us, marriage is the aim of life."

Once women finish school, they are married off. But early marriages have taken a toll on the young women. A gynaecologist at the Kilakarai government hospital says women have two children by the time they turn 22-23. "Many turn up for family planning and even report polycystic ovarian disorder (PCOD)."

The women, however, are politically well-informed. "We organised a protest a few days ago against the Citizenship Amendment Act," says Farida. Even so many, prefer to stay quiet.

Some believe that their God is with them so they will get by. Others believe the BJP government considers Muslims "parasites" and wants to throw them out of the country by exercising the CAA.

Caste pervades rural classrooms

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Ramanathapuram: K Sangreswaran had never imagined that he would be reminded about his caste in the fifth grade at a private school. Yet every day of that year he faced discrimination at the hands of children belonging to the Reddian community, an upper caste, in Muthuramalingapuram.

Sangreswaran was hit on the back of his head, made to add the suffix "master" to his classmates' names and even asked to address his juniors of the Reddian caste as "master." He never retaliated. He was too scared.

"I now study in a government college," says Sangreswaran, "The uniform in the Government Arts and Science College, Kadaladi, keeps caste discrimination away. But I can never forget how these people treated me in the past."

Such stories illustrate not only how deep-rooted caste still is in our country but also the many ways in which caste discrimination has hindered the lives of the oppressed.

"For my middle school years, I used to cycle a route of 11 km to go to the local public school although it was only 3km away," he says. "I had to do this because the Arunthathiyars [his caste], are not allowed to walk on the main road. This is the law of the land as laid down by the Reddians."

Be it in Muthuramalingapuram,

Sayalgudi, Kamuthi, Mudukulathur or any other caste sensitive area of Ramanathapuram, the discrimination towards them is similar throughout the district, albeit with varying levels of intensity.

An example of this is given by activist Rajamanickam who works for the betterment of the Kudavars, a community that used to engage in manual scavenging until the government banned it in 1998 - in the hope that it would result in a better quality of life.

However, the upper caste continued to view the Kudavar community through the lens of manual scavenging - a group of manual scavengers by virtue of their caste.

A young boy, whose parents were sweepers, bore the brunt of this perception 10 years ago, when he was asked by his school principal to clean the school toilet.

Disturbed by the fact that even his principal had failed to draw the distinction between caste and individual, the boy quit his education and now works as an agricultural labourer.

In Panaikulam, on the eastern side of the Ramanathapuram district, men engage in manual scavenging, women work as domestic labour and children never study beyond Class 10.

The government has turned a blind eye as the people are too scared to voice themselves against marginalization.

Asia's first community radio for Rameswaram fishermen

KRATI PURWAR & ANSHUL GUPTA

Pamban: Rising above religion, politics, and caste, Kadal Osai 90.4 FM Radio Station is operated for the fisherfolk, by the fisherfolk, says Gayathri Usman, head of the station. The driving force - empowerment of the fisher community.

The Central Ministry of Fisheries and Research Institute considers Kadal Osai Asia's first community radio for fishermen. CMFRI, along with the marine police and Coast Guard, is the major content provider for the 24x7 radio station with a listener reach of about 45,000, stretching from Uchipuli to Dhanushkodi in the Ramanathapuram district.

Armstrong Fernando hit upon the idea of the community radio station. The shows are dedicated to

youth empowerment, sea conservation, and sustainability. For instance, the show "*Samudram Pazhaghu*" (get used to the sea), conducted by Zeenat Rabia, educates the fishermen on how to go fishing, undertake safety measures and not pollute the sea.

Along with updates on the weather, fuel rates, foreign exchange, fish rates, areas for a good catch and areas of demand, Kadal Osai educates people on women empowerment and child welfare.

Another talk show, '*Adhikale-subhavel*' (early morning, auspicious time), is conducted by Madhumita. It is about positive quotes from Swami Vivekananda and the Tirukkural, followed by talks on kindness, healthy lifestyle, etc.

The women's programme, *Parrandhu Sellava* (Come, let's

fly), features women achievers, safety rules, right of choice, inheritance laws, education, etc.

In partnership with the United Nations International Children's Education Fund, an initiative on the importance of education, Kadal Osai runs a programme called *Kutti Chutti Express* (little naughty express). It stresses on the importance of education, talks about child marriage and its disadvantages, good touch and bad touch.

In June 2019, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan Trust conducted four episodes on climate change and its effects on day-to-day lives. They included interaction with local fishermen, journalists and experts.

One of the major issues, which the community is concerned with, is fishermen venturing too deep into the sea to catch fish. Kadal Osai actively takes part in warning



Team of Kadal Osai Fm. (from right) Gayathri, Madhumita, and Zeenat Rabia | KRATI PURWAR

the fishermen against going too far, as greed might cost them their lives. In the last six months, three

fishermen have died in the sea.

Majorly funded by the Trust and some advertising, Kadal Osai has

also started conducting public shows, creating awareness on open defecation through a skit by school students.

Under the Swachh Bharat Scheme, the station helped build six public toilets. This led to queries for six separate toilets for women and dustbins in public spaces.

Recently, the FM carried out a campaign on the government's policy of Poshan Abhiyan that focuses on nutrition.

Health check-ups including blood pressure monitoring, haemoglobin tests and weight measurement, were conducted. It hopes to focus on menstruation problems in future.

Kadal Osai is working towards getting the fisherfolk interested in recording and doing their own shows on the radio.

Gurudwara in temple town

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: The Sikh gurudwara in Rameswaram is open to people of all religions and *yatis*. Rebuilt in 1990 after the demolition of the old gurudwara, which had become structurally weak, the new gurudwara has been involved in social welfare work.

"The Khalsa flag atop the gurudwara is a symbol of Sikhs," said Granthi Sanjay Singh, chief priest. The gurudwara is a branch of the Chennai gurudwara in T.Nagar.

Sanjay Singh said from January 13 to 15, the gurudwara would conduct a reading from the Guru Granth Sahib. The gurudwara would also take out a procession of the Guru Granth Sahib accompanied by recitals around the Rameswaram temple.

RAMANATHAPURAM

21

Earnings over education

Children of Dhanushkodi believe that school is a waste of time

VALLARI SANZGIRI

Dhanushkodi: Manikandan (12) hates going to the Panchayat Union Government School near his house at Dhanushkodi Old Harbour. "It's a waste of time. I'd rather help my father with fishing," he says, fiddling with the marbles he was playing with a few minutes ago. "I'm in Class 6 now but as soon as I finish my 12th and get a passport, I'm going to work." Why does he want a passport? He looks away and says, "I want to go out of the country."

Manikandan is not the first from the fishermen community to have such an attitude towards education. According to the parents, none of the boys in the hamlet has finished his education. Says Nambrani, a village elder: "They just want a luxurious life, they don't study. The girls are more hard-working. They finish their education."

While factually correct, Nambrani misses the point. Manikandan's first statement, "It's a waste of time." Children from rural areas turn their back on education not because they find it difficult but because they don't see any use for it.

Like Manikandan, most children



A 4-year old helping his father with his daily chores. (Right) Sethalachmi and Maruvarasi | VALLARI SANZGIRI

watch their parents work and earn, and prefer to help with the family income rather than understand the complexities of the Pythagoras theorem.

Sarathy Munuswami (18) is another student who has no ambition to study. He studied until Class 12 but dropped out at the last minute. He barely remembers what he learnt in school. "Sarathy has studied till twelfth, and his older brother, Anay, till the eighth but in the end, they will fish like us. What's the point in sending them to study far away from home," asks Sarathy's mother as she untangles a fish from the net Sarathy is packing.

Local schools in Dhanushkodi

teach till Class 8, after which the children go to Rameswaram to study. Sarathy's sister is the only one in the entire hamlet who holds a B. Com degree. "She never got a job with that degree. She's married now and lives in the neighbouring village," says her mother.

Regardless of education, marriage is seen as the end goal for girls here. In the fishing community, women are not allowed to enter the sea. They clean the fish, the house, help in net-making and cook. Thus, it stands to reason that more girls prefer to study than boys.

However, their dreams are seldom treated seriously. When Maruvarasi Mariappan (14),

studying in Class 8, voiced her wish to become a police officer everyone around her laughed. "People from the neighbourhood often get drunk and harass others. That's why she says she wants to be a policewoman," says Nambrani with a laugh.

According to Maari, perhaps the only member of the fishermen community who understands English in Dhanushkodi, girls are simply married off. "Look at what happened to Sarathy's sister," he says.

Murieshwari Chermurugan, though, has a different dream for her daughters.

"I sent my daughters, Jayastreamadi and Saranyamadi, to study and get office jobs. One of them already works in Rameswaram. I don't want them to clean and gut fish like I did all my life."

Under the Indian Constitution, education is the fundamental right of children.

That children in rural Tamil Nadu of south India prioritise job opportunities over their fundamental right not only creates a bleak image of India's future but also presents an apt picture of India's current economic status.

The solitary horse cart rider of Rameswaram

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Rameswaram: Dwindling livelihoods and dying culture of people engaged in age-old occupations are the norm in rural India today. In Rameswaram, one man holds on to the age-old profession of driving a horse cart. Subramanian, 65, is the only horse cart rider in the bustling town.

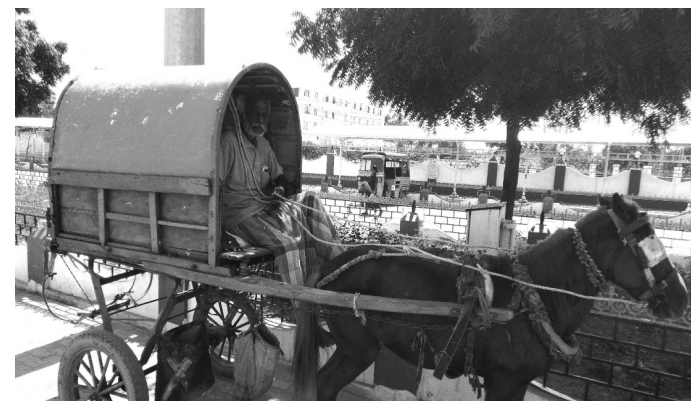
His day begins at 4 a.m., when the first train arrives at the Rameswaram railway station. He works till 1 p.m. every day. A survivor of the 1964 Dhanushkodi cyclone, Subramanian has been living in Rameswaram since then.

"I have been riding a horse cart for 40 years. There were 300 of us before the [Pamban] bridge was built. Today it's just me," he says.

The Indira Gandhi Road Bridge, built in 1988, connects Rameswaram with the outside world by road.

After the bridge was constructed, horse carts were replaced by auto-rickshaws and cars. Many also quit horse cart riding as they could not find "mechanics" to repair the carts anymore. Thanks to the bridge, they opted for other jobs.

Subramanian has gone in for



Subramaniam outside railway station | MANTHRA KOLIYER

newer wheels and has made many changes to his cart since he purchased it. This has helped him stay in the business.

He changes his horse every two years (male or female). A horse costs him Rs.15,000. For the first 10 days, he trains the animal. He calls his horse "Raja". He names every horse he rides. "It creates a bond", he says.

Subramanian charges Rs. 50 per ride for four persons. His income is around Rs. 100-150 every day. He pays Rs. 1,000 as tax and licence every year, to park his cart at the

railway station. Subramanian is well versed in Hindi, thanks to the north Indian tourists who throng the pilgrim town.

He says proudly, "I'm very famous in Rameswaram. I have appeared in TV interviews, and my photo has come in newspapers."

Looking at Subramanian, one cannot but recall the words of A.R. Venkatachalapathy, professor, Madras Institute of Development Studies, "Given how quickly Tamil Nadu is urbanising, protecting our culture is tricky, as it often flies in the face of new aspirations."

Karankadu eco-tourism, step forward for locals

RAHUL MANOJ

Thondi: Karankadu is a hub of colours as brown boats, white birds, blue backwaters and green mangroves congregate at East Coast Road, Thondi. The economic development of fishermen and conservation of rare species were the main objectives of the eco-tourism project introduced by the officials of the Gulf of Mannar National Park in August 2017.

"I was engaged only in fishing earlier but this project has given me an additional income of Rs 400 per day," says Sengol Rajasekhar, 55, of Puthupattinam fishing village. He ferries tourists on the island.

His income from the project, which is around Rs 12,000 a month, touches upto Rs 40,000 in April-May.

The initiative has benefitted the fishermen community in other ways too. Self-employment opportunities have increased, says Vijaya Baskar, a Forest Watcher. Activities like kayaking and snorkelling have been introduced

for tourists but heavy rain played spoilsport last year. "There were only 20-30 tourists a day in July 2019 due to heavy rain but the number has increased to 100 per day now," says Rajasekhar.

Only one boat is available to ferry the tourists, as the other boat is under repair. Despite multiple representations to the government, no steps have been taken, says Rajasekhar. A boat can ferry a maximum of 15 people at a time and tourists are unhappy if there are delays.

It is interesting to see natural mangroves on one side and artificial mangroves on the other, built by the forest department to attract more footfall.

Asked about the water shortage in the nearby areas, Baskar says, a borewell was built at the cost of Rs 30,00,000 by the corporation but it was a total failure. "Pipelines increase water consumption and tourists suffer as there is less water." Mandatory rainwater harvesting for all hamlets can solve the crisis, he feels.

The Thadupu Sevaru (compound wall) which was to be built after the 2004 tsunami is yet to materialise. Baskar says the wall will be useful for identification and can help the fishermen return home safely.

Situated at a distance of 3 to 4 km is a 40-foot watchtower on the Kuvaangu Island that monitors criminal activities such as trespassing and smuggling in the 900 square metre region. Baskar, who was involved in raids earlier, says cases filed for poaching rare species such as sea horse have increased.

The fines have increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 50,000. But the forest department is under-staffed and it is tough to monitor activities at night in the absence of lighting. The lighthouse is also dysfunctional. On the flipside, the scope of eco-tourism is bright in Karankadu, thanks to the aggressive promotion by the Eco-Development Committee of the Forest Department.

Faith drives centuries-old dargah

MANTHRA KOLIYER

Erwadi: The Erwadi dargah in Ramanathapuram district has been in existence for 950 years. It is famous for faith healing. People affected by "black magic" and "satanic illnesses" and their families throng the place in the hope of getting cured.

Currently, the 16th generation of Al Qutub Hamid wal Gausul Majid Badhusha Sultan Syed Ibrahim Shaheed is handling the administration of the dargah.

The 950-year-old dargah is considered a haven for mental patients.

Many families leave their mentally challenged relatives at the doorstep of the dargah and go away. For believers, the dargah is the solution to all their illnesses.

Besides people from Tamil Nadu, devotees from Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, cutting across religions, visit the dargah.

The administration record reads, 50% of the patients are from Kerala.

But Buddhists do not come here. Syeed Ismail, one of the administrators, says, "Hindus use other measures and keep the dargah



Erwadi dargah, Ramanathapuram | MANTHRA KOLIYER

as their last resort." Most of the residents are women and infants.

The only form of medicine provided in the dargah is sugar crystal with water. People who suffer from physical pain are given oil that is considered 'blessed'.

The Tamil Nadu government recently built a hospital on the land donated by the dargah's trust.

The hospital has been active since 2014, and has a rehabilitation centre. Alcoholics and others who can be cured medically are transferred to the hospital.

The patients at the rehab centre are made to do light work like basket making.

Hospital officials say, "The work keeps their minds diverted."

Forty-five-year-old Selvi* has been in the dargah for years now. She was left at the dargah by her son-in-law since she would run to the sea every day and not want to return.

After years of prayers, she says she has now been cured but is waiting for the time to return.

According to the norms of the dargah, patients can only leave when they feel they've been cured completely.

Syyed Ismail says, "The watchman of the dargah was also a patient a few years ago. Today he is fit and fine and serves happily"

What drives the people and the dargah is 'faith'. (*Name has been changed.)

Homes turn into lodges, eateries

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: Roadside eateries and those operating outside homes, are aplenty in Rameswaram for visiting pilgrims.

"November to December is the Sabarimalai season and that is when we do a lot of business" say couple A. Velmurugan and V. Madhavi, owners of Hotel Velan in the Agni Theertham Street. "Apart from this, we see huge crowds during the annual school vacations."

Even houses have been turned into low cost lodges for pilgrims.

"On the East Street, out of approximate 400 households having a ration card, 60%-70% are running as cottages, and in the roughly 1,200 houses with voter identification cards, 50% are running as cottages," says D. Karthikeyan of Ishwarya Lodge, Agni Theertham Street.

The official number

According to K. Lingavel, Food Safety Officer of Rameswaram, "there are 355 eateries in the town and approximately 50% of them don't have the mandatory food safety licence to run an eatery."

Demonetization & GST, a twin attack

KRATI PURWAR & V. GANESH

Rameswaram/Dhanushkodi: Even while experts are worried about the slowing down of Indian economy, fishermen here continue to struggle with cash crunch, reduced labour, and high diesel prices - the aftermath of demonetization and the Goods and Services Tax.

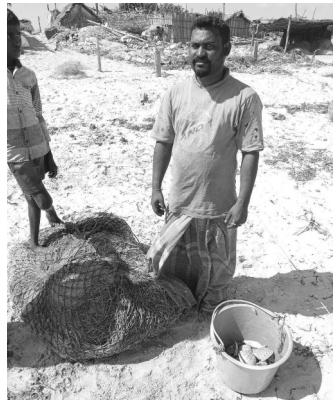
When the fishermen lost their business for a continuous period of four to five months after demonetization, other businesses that depended on fisheries were also adversely affected. Due to lesser flow of cash in the market, nearly 30-40 per cent of their business dwindled.

Hike in excise duty

The fisher folks somehow overcame the cash flow crisis. Now, it is GST that has become a larger issue. It is levied on all equipment. In 2019 alone, the Central government increased the excise duty three times, says Nathan, a 33-year-old fisherman.

He says during the UPA government, a barrel of diesel was bought at \$140 and sold at around Rs. 44 a litre in India. But after the NDA came to power, the cost of a barrel has reduced to \$90 while the price of diesel, along with tax, has increased to Rs. 73 a litre.

This is despite the consumption of diesel remaining the same. Depending on the size, boats



Sankar at Dhanushkodi harbour | V. GANESH

consume around 600-1000 litres of diesel every day, says Sesuraja, head of Fishermen's Association.

Nathan says 70 per cent of the money the fishermen earn is spent on diesel and 20 per cent on ice, wages and maintenance. The rest is their monthly income.

According to his friend Sankar, fishermen lack knowledge about bank loans, money transfers, etc. Balamurugan informs us that since banks insist on some known person for granting loans, Maari, an educated fisherman, has got half of the loans approved for them.

Fishing industry is an informal sector where labour demands to be paid in cash. Due to cash crunch, availability of labour has declined.

Fishermen in the Dhanushkodi Harbour earn only Rs. 3,000-4,000 a month after meeting the expenses on motorboats and fuel.

Fond memories of Abdul Kalam

V. GANESH

Rameswaram: The A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Memorial here is flooded with people. "We are proud of the memorial," says S. Karthika who has come with fellow student M. Ramamurthy to visit the memorial. Both of them are students of SIT College, Ramanathapuram, pursuing a diploma in lab technology.

K.G. Derekar of Pune, who is here with his friend Ruhidas Ramachandra Kodhre, says: "The description in English along with Tamil is useful" for people like him who come from outside Tamil Nadu. Another Pune resident, 70-year-old P.M. Bhagat, was all praise for the missile man. Bhagat was particularly happy about the free entry to the memorial.

J. Sheik Saleem, grand-nephew of Kalam, who lives a few kilometers away in their ancestral house, has fond memories of the former President. "The memorial was made in nine months," he says. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi holds him [Kalam] in high regard. There was a personal friendship."

Saleem recalls Kalam's two visits to Rameswaram as President. "He instructed the police not to stop anyone from visiting him in his house."

However, intelligence had been collected before his visits, the waters of Rameswaram blocked by the Navy, and a no-fly zone created by the Air Force. "Only military helicopters were allowed to fly when Kalam was in Rameswaram," Saleem said.

ANSHUL GUPTA

Thamaraikulam: "I am not proud that my son is a doctor, as toddy tapping is in our blood. My father, my grandfather ... all of them were involved in tapping," says S. Balasingam, Chairman of the Tamil Nadu State Palngur Cooperative Federation.

There are more than 720 primary societies of toddy tappers (or panayeris) across Tamil Nadu, of which 96 are in Ramanathapuram, which has the highest concentration of palm trees in the State.

"Comprising around 7,000-9,000 members, these societies exist for the welfare of the tappers and their families. Most of the tappers are landless migrant farmers who settle near the palm tree areas from February to September, which is the season for tapping," he said.

Toddy tapping was never a lucrative profession and a ban on it has further dampened any chances of its revival. It has been banned on the ground that it intoxicates, which is ironical because liquor is sold in Tamil Nadu government outlets.

When tapping toddy liquor was not banned, the government used to help the tappers through programmes like Haritha Haram (Plantation of Palm trees), raising money through auctions, etc.

According to Mr. Balasingam, income for toddy tappers has become a challenge after the ban. "A tapper used to earn Rs. 100-300 a day, depending on the number of trees he tapped. This was not enough but as they say, something is better than nothing," he says.

Toddy tapping, no longer lucrative



T. Kamaraja, M. Subramaniam and S. Balasingam (Right) Murugandi, the blind toddy tapper from Thamaraikulam | KRATI PURWAR

Some tappers go on to work as coolies, drivers, etc. but the community wants the profession to be revived, which is possible only if toddy tapping is legalised.

Women in the family, apart from separating the distilled portion of the toddy sap, also involve themselves in the sales of the articles made of the palm tree leaves, such as bags, caps, fans, seats, etc. of which prices start from Rs. 50. The articles made from palm leaves are not very durable but still the women sell to make the ends meet.

The government doesn't give sufficient funds for the sustenance of this profession, because of which even the primary societies are shutting down.

Most of the tappers belong to the Nadar community. They start tapping quite early in life. "There is a 92-year-old man doing it, there's a blind man who did it for a long

time. So you see, the passion which people have for the profession is such that no one wants to leave it, but when they are cornered, they don't have any other choice but to leave it," claims Balasingam.

Tappers are trapped in a conundrum. They don't want to leave the profession but they have to earn a living.

There are licensing issues, since only a licensed person can climb a tree. The societies have become helpless as the government isn't doing much.

The tappers wait for the February sun every year, in the hope that things will change.

Story of strength

Murugandi is blind by birth. Amid the bushes and off a narrow road in the Thamaraikulam village, the 58-year old man sits near the entrance of his house in the evening

sun. Murugandi was 12 when he started tapping toddy.

He doesn't belong to the Nadar community, so it was more difficult for him to start. "I learnt it on my own, on the field," says Murugandi.

He last tapped in 2009, after he spent 39 years palm climbing. The ban on toddy has only worsened his plight.

He has two daughters. Although Murugandi gets some income from the MGNREGS, it is not enough for the education of the girls. Television news channels and other media outlets often visit him. Some have even undertaken to educate his daughters.

Last week, a news channel came on a visit to see him on the job. Despite being out of practice for over 10 years, he showcased his skill to the best of his abilities.