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Education, an uphill task for the tribals of Udumanparai



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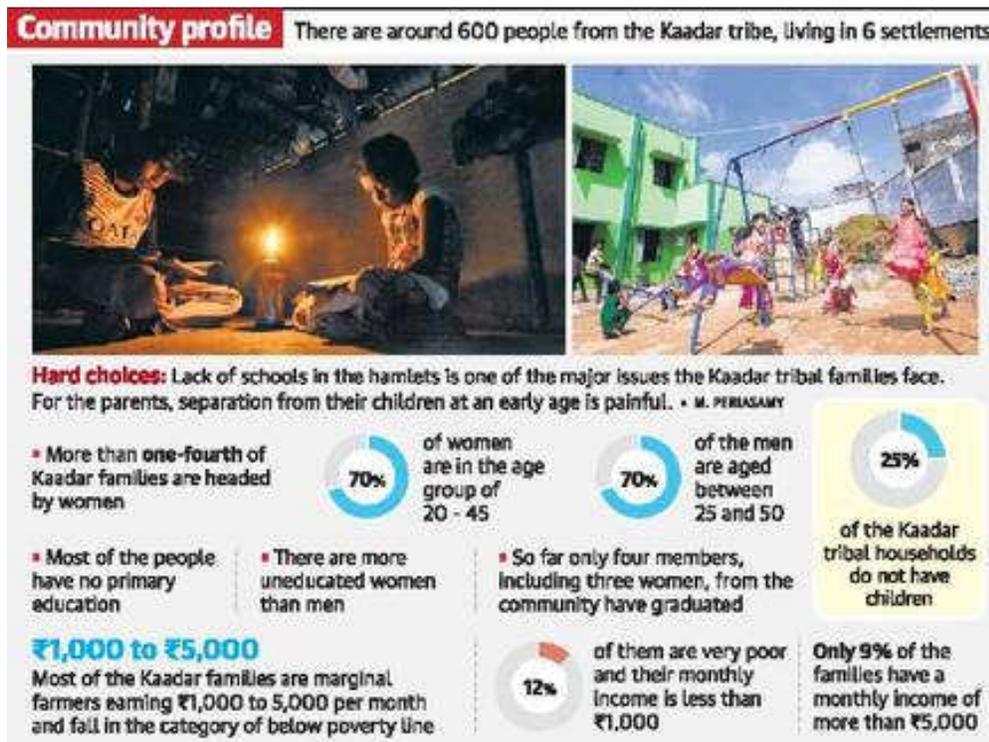
For children of the Kaadar community in the Western Ghats, getting an education means leaving home at the age of six to stay at residential schools.

Deep in the jungles of the Western Ghats near Valparai, over a 100 km from Coimbatore, is the small tribal hamlet of Udumanparai. The inhabitants of the village, the Kaadar community, live in literal isolation, largely ignored by the State. However, they are determined that their children should get proper [education](#) at any cost.

“We cannot afford to compromise on education, especially in these times,” says Kamaraj, a tea estate worker and young father of two. His older child is away at boarding school but the younger one, Kasturi, 8, is at home because she is ill. But she happily plays in a stream nearby. “She has to go back to school on Sunday evening. How will she recover if she plays in the water,” he asks, as he keeps calling her to come in. When Kasturi does come, she makes sure to snuggle up to her grandmother to avoid getting scolded by her father. At his prompting, she begins to pack for school, spending an extra bit of time showing

off a yellow frock she got from school. “They gave this to me in school before Deepavali. This is my favourite dress. I will wear it next Sunday,” she says.

From Mr. Kamaraj’s house, it takes more than an hour's walk through the rubble-filled and rough pathways inside tea estates, followed by a 45-minute drive to reach Valparai, where the Nesam Trust-Sarva Siksha Abhiyan Residential School for Tribal Children is located. Kasturi, her 10-year-old brother Yuvaraj, and almost all other children of Udumanparai are enrolled in that school.



With no school in the hamlet, its residents have to choose between the Nesam Trust's school and the Government Tribal Residential Middle School, also in Valparai, to enrol their children when they turn six. Almost all residents prefer the Trust school, says Mallika, a resident, “because the government school does not treat the children well and does not have facilities.”

The children come home only thrice a year — 20 days during the summer vacation in May and four days each during Deepavali and Pongal. Parents are allowed to visit their children on weekends.

Kasturi enjoys going to school though. “I have friends, I have toys, swings and we also get tasty food there,” she says. At the school, the children learn maths,

science, English and social studies, and attend vocational training classes. On weekends, they wear their best outfits and spend the day playing or completing their homework. “Mostly we only play,” she giggles.

Mr. Kamaraj however looks glum as he watches her pack. “She came home for four days during Deepavali, and then we had to bring her back again because she fell ill. I don’t feel like sending her, but we have no option. Also, she likes it more there,” he says, gently boxing her head, even as Kasturi nods cheerfully.



Children from various tribes across Valparai taluk in S.S.A. Nesam Trust residential school for tribal children.

“Often, once a child goes home, parents do not let them return. When we try to get them back, the children run and hide in the forest. So we have to tighten the rules, mainly for their benefit,” says Senthil Kumar, chairman of the Nesam Trust school. He adds that most of the children are bright and show great interest in extracurricular activities. Many of them seem to want to become Indian Forest Service officers or do social work to help their people, he says. “With the right guidance, they will excel,” he adds.

However, for the Kaadars, separation from their children at an early age and for prolonged periods is painful. “I wish there were better educational facilities in the hamlets. It’s very difficult to be away from our children,” says S. Sasikala, an anganwadi teacher and a resident of Nedungundram, another Kaadar hamlet, which takes an hour’s drive plus an hour’s walk to get to.

Unlike Udumanparai, Nedungundram has a single teacher government primary school. Though set up barely five years ago, the building is dilapidated, the walls are damp and it does not have power connection.

“The students are still stuck in the basics,” says Aishwarya, whose seven-year-old daughter was studying in the school but was later moved to the Nesam Trust school. “My husband and I had a huge fight over this. I didn’t want to send her away to the hostel because she is so young and needs me. But I finally gave in, else she too would have become a drop-out like me,” she says.

The residents want the government to develop an alternative approach so they can watch their children grow up. Their suggestion: appoint educators who will live and teach in the hamlet on weekdays, and simultaneously train graduates from the community, who could in due course take up the job. “In any ordinary family, a child is taken care of by parents and family members at least till age 10. But the moment our child turns six, we have to send them away,” Ms. Aishwarya says.



Fr. K.J. Kumar, director, Social Watch-Tamil Nadu, an organisation that works for the welfare of tribal children, shares this view. Training should be provided to members of the community, and primary schooling could be made an extension of the anganwadi centre by building an extra classroom with common facilities like kitchen, play area and washrooms. And till such a facility is set up, transport arrangements must be made for the children free of charge, he says.

A house in Nedungundram is the anganwadi from where Ms. Sasikala teaches five children below the age of five. While she enjoys teaching and playing with the children, a lot of her time is spent figuring out how to purchase supplies. She receives ₹100 every month from the government, which she uses to buy dal, vegetables and condiments for the children. “But when prices increase, I need to pay from my own pocket. I also need to pay for the transport of the goods,” she says.

An official of the Forest Department says it is difficult to maintain schools in the tribal hamlets as teachers fear going there due to animal movement. As an example, he cites the instance of a primary school in Kallar settlement, another Kaadar hamlet, 6 km from the main road, which was shut down due to similar reasons. “The school had only one teacher and one student, it was in a precarious location. But it had to be closed down, also because most parents did not want to send their children to schools,” the official says.

Lack of schools is one of the many issues the Kaadars face. The lack of proper roads, electricity, health care facilities and prenatal care for pregnant women are complaints that crop up.

“Ambulances cannot come here because there are no roads. It is especially difficult for pregnant woman,” says Radha of Udumanparai, recalling an incident when her friend, who was eight months pregnant, had to be carried in a cradle for six kilometres to the nearest hospital.

“The path we take is so narrow that even one wrong step could cause serious injury, or even death,” she says, pointing to a deep valley where a river flows.

The lack of roads also affects the old who no longer can walk an hour to get their monthly old age pension. “Officials from the forest department used to deliver it to us before, but now, since the money is deposited in our bank accounts, we need to go to Valparai every time to affix our signature and get our money. I haven't been able to get my last month's due since I'm not able to walk,” says 70-year-old Srinivasan of Udumanparai.

Mr. Srinivasan and other residents continue to live in darkness. Ten years ago, the local authorities set up two solar panels in the area, but they didn't last. The residents do not have the money to repair it.

A recent study carried out by **SOCIAL WATCH** says that the population of Kaadars in Tamil Nadu is nearly 600, all of whom live in the forests of Valparai, in six hamlets. Another 600 members of the community live in Kerala. Most of them work as marginal farmers, they also work in tea estates and as daily wage labourers and earn around ₹5,000 a month. So far, only four members of the community have managed to graduate — three of them are women. One is pursuing her post-graduation in Social Work.

“It has never been easy for us and it is a big thing that these children have even gone that far to live their dreams,” says 84-year-old K. Ganesan, one of the oldest members of the community. Mr. Ganesan recalls a time when they were more in harmony with their surroundings. “We were a self-sufficient lot. We grew ragi (a millet) and cholam (corn). But since the State’s policies changed, we had to stop our agricultural practices and our food habits have changed. Now we depend on ration shops, and keep falling sick,” he says.

Recently, the community was asked to relocate to the plains as part of the Central government-funded Project Tiger, aimed at creating safe spaces and protecting wildlife species. “They bluntly refused. They say that the forest is their home and as long as they live here, nothing would happen to the wildlife,” says a forest official.

Mr. Ganesan emphatically agrees. “We worship this forest. The moment we leave, the entire area will be exposed to outsiders and poachers. We will live here and guard it till our last breath,” he says.

Sivagami, first Kaadar to pursue post-graduation, wants to help her tribe progress

Twenty-five-year-old Sivagami has many dreams. One of them is to help her community, which has for long been living in isolation and neglect.

Ms. Sivagami is pursuing her Masters in Social Work from Bharathidasan University, Tiruchi. She and three others are the first generation college students from the Kaadar tribe. However, Ms. Sivagami is the only one pursuing a post-graduation degree.

“It has not been easy at all,” she claims, recalling her childhood and the labour her parents had to put in to help her get ahead.

Daughter of 50-year-old Jaya and Veeran, both of whom work in the tea estate in Anaimudi, an hour's walk from their hamlet in the Western Ghats, Ms. Sivagami owes it all to their passion and conviction that their daughter should get a better deal.

"Most women in our community have dropped out after class 5, mainly because there are no schools nearby and parents don't want to send them far away. But when I expressed my desire to study, my mother understood it and has stood by me throughout," says Ms. Sivagami.

"I used to live in a hostel run by members of a Christian missionary in Valparai and go to school from there. Going home everyday from school was almost impossible," she says.

She received her Bachelor's degree in English from Bharathiar University Arts and Science College in Valparai and did her teacher training. "I was told at the end of the training that I needed to pay ₹5,000 as fee, for which my parents had to take loans from usurious lenders. But they never complained," she said.

With no money to study further, Ms. Sivagami stayed at home for a year. She was depressed and, at the same time, sought help to pursue her interests. "Luckily I met **Christodas Gandhi, a retired IAS officer** (*Consultant of 'Social Watch - Tamilnadu'*) who visited us. I told him about my interests and he immediately agreed to sponsor my education," she said.

Ms. Sivagami is currently in her final year, after which she wishes to move back to her village and work for the villagers' welfare. "Also because I miss home, terribly. I cannot stay away any longer," she said. "But I would work hard and ensure that my people get all the opportunities they deserve without having to leave their roots."

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SOURCE:

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