

# Caste discrimination 'needs higher international profile'

Leading academics and activists from India demanded a higher profile for caste discrimination at a conference on caste and development in September initiated by Village Service Trust. The aim of the conference was to raise the profile of caste in the policy and practices of UK NGOs engaged in programmes in south Asia. More than 100 people from a variety of UK development organisations attended.

In staging the event - hosted at SOAS - VST collaborated with four other organisations – Christian Aid, Anti-Slavery International, Karuna Trust and Dalit Solidarity Network.

What we learned:

**Professor Sukhadeo Thorat, Chair, Indian Council of Social Science Research**, told us that discrimination meant that talented Dalits were unable to fulfil their potential and in consequence the Indian economy failed to benefit from their abilities.

**Ashwini Deshpande, Professor of Economics, Delhi University**, said that despite the opportunities presented by globalisation and liberalisation economic outcomes for socially excluded groups were still affected by caste hierarchies.

**Barbara Harriss-White, Emeritus Professor of Development Studies, Oxford University**, displayed the results of her exercise in mapping the complex extent of different types of Dalit disadvantage across India's regions.

**Prakash Louis, Researcher and Activist**, urged international NGOs to do much more to identify who was being excluded from development and why they were left out. NGOs should support efforts to increase the ability of those left behind to voice their demands.



**Anand Kumar, Director, Change Alliance**, said India's constitution and laws oppose caste discrimination. The problem was that much of Indian society does not share these values. He

spoke of the need to break the silence around the hidden barriers that prevent full uptake and implementation of laws and programmes that benefit and protect Dalits.



**Asha Kowtal, General Secretary, All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum**, said violence against Dalit women had worsened, along with impunity for these crimes. She questioned

the authenticity of data on atrocities, highlighting how much is not reported nationally.



**Dr Jayshree Mangubhai, policy officer at Change Alliance**, explained the need for greater solidarity among the wider women's movement which could be silent on issues of

caste. She highlighted the role of dominant groups, including the women among them, in perpetuating untouchability practices. In this context, caste could 'trump' gender.



**Ashif Shaikh, Secretary, Jan Sahas Social Development Society**, described some of the successes in his organisation's campaigning work to end manual scavenging

(removal of human excrement – regarded as work only for Dalits.) He said manual scavenging should not be seen as 'employment', but rather as a form of slavery, perpetuated not because of a lack of alternative sanitation arrangements but as a means of subjugation of Dalits.

You can read a summary of the conference speeches and an article about caste today by VST trustee Professor David Mosse at <http://villageservicetrust.org.uk/who-we-are/vst-in-action/caste/>



## Determined David does us proud

Our Prudential RideLondon 100 cyclist this year was David Plews - retired teacher, keen cyclist and rugby club coach. He trained like a man possessed, survived a hit-and-run accident while out on his cycle just a couple of weeks before the event, but went on to ride an admirable race with a time of 5 hours 52 minutes and an average speed of 17.6mph - taking in those formidable Surrey hills! Well done, David, you did us proud!

He also raised a fantastic £815 in sponsorship for VST - that's nearly £1k with GiftAid. We are very, very grateful for your support and that of all your friends. Thanks also to your wife and sons who had to put up with all your cycling absences!



## Concert raises £2,906

A concert in Richmond raised £2,906 for VST. Our thanks to the Willow Orchestra and soprano Katy Lees, and to supporters Gerti Wilford and Pat Monro for organising the event.

# Village Service Trust Newsletter Autumn 2015

## India's poorest people in struggle for their rights

The tribal people who live in the forested hills of south India are entitled to many welfare benefits - but they rarely arrive.

**Dea Busk Larsen and John Dalton explain.**

The Palliards, the indigenous people of south India, are one of the most excluded, marginalised and poorest communities in India. Their means of livelihood as hunter-gatherers is disappearing; yet they are far from integrated into mainstream society. Older people remember that in their youth they subsisted on the forest and had little contact with outsiders. It is only in the last two generations that their semi-nomadic lifestyle has changed to living in settlements.

There are Palliar hamlets where people are outside the cash economy, without shelter, and with not a single child going to school. Many families live in a situation akin to bonded labour. They take loans from landowners and are then obliged to work at half the usual wage rates.

About half the families collect forest produce for sale. These products command a good price, but they are forced to sell them for much less than their true worth to middlemen with the connivance or coercion of forest officials.

Two-thirds of the families lack the documents and registration needed to receive the many government benefits available to tribal people. These include decent housing, allocation of land, village services such as roads, electricity, clean water, toilets, lighting and sanitation, school scholarships, and village health visitors.

Most of the Palliards are landless. Many do not even own the plot where they live and



A young girl at home in the Palliar village of Munthittu

eviction and migration are common. Many hamlets lack clean water supply, sanitation, road connection, housing, and electricity.

Officials dealing with social welfare and child protection have little idea of the exceptionally deprived status of Palliar families. Even when the authorities engage with tribal communities they often side with landowners, traders and even some NGOs who contribute to the denial of Palliards' rights and entitlements. For instance, forest officials deny legal rights in the forest and the right to sell forest produce. Funds earmarked for tribals are diverted to other uses. Bribes are required for all sorts of facilities. Officials are indifferent or put off by genuine difficulties in working with isolated communities.

Our partner, Arogya Agam, works with Palliar villages by setting up Village Development Committees. The committee members attend training sessions at Arogya Agam to learn about rights, applying for government benefits, legal advice and more. The objective is to train and support the people concerned to go to the authorities themselves. It is much more effective to enable, motivate and empower the people because they will create a lasting change within their communities. Arogya Agam has been active in 11 Palliar villages for five years. It plans to extend its activities to 25 hamlets over the next five years.

This work is funded by the Miriam Dean Trust and Kindernothilfe of Germany as well as VST.

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# A tale of two villages

Jill Pirdas describes her visits to two very different tribal settlements

## Day One: Munthittu

We set off for Munthittu, a hamlet identified as in need but not yet visited by the team from VST's partner Arogya Agam. We wonder what kind of reception we will get. There are four of us western visitors plus three staff members. We've been warned that there won't be many people about; they'll be out collecting produce in the forest.

The countryside is incredibly beautiful. Waving coconut palm trees border the road, which gradually peters out into a sandy track. Across the valley a forest-clad hill rises abruptly.

Before our visit to the village we'd had a meeting with representatives from various tribal villages. Kaliappan, a volunteer, explained the complications involved in obtaining government help for the tribal community: "The government never used to recognise any of our petitions, but since we have formed village development committees they have started to listen to the people. We've gradually come to realise the importance of meeting up and working together."

As predicted the village is more or less deserted, only a small group of young children sit huddled together on a knoll. They watch us warily with solemn eyes turning their heads at our every move. Three young girls who couldn't be more than 13 or 14 sit holding small babies; one of them sits apart staring ahead at nothing.

The woman in charge of the children talks to Sharada, a staff member from Arogya Agam. "The children here are left on their



Clockwise from left: young mother and child in Munthittu, Ramasamy explains the situation, Kadamanao's school, street scene with concrete road, new houses and electricity, girls in conversation with Jill and huts in Munthittu



own all day, it's normal - their parents are away collecting seeman [long grass used for making brooms] up in the hills. There's a school in the next village where they go for food. I don't think there's a proper teacher there but they get the food. They keep some of it and bring it back for the night time meal."

Three men from this hamlet have stayed back to talk about the problems they face. It turns out that this tribal community is outside the cash economy. The Forestry Department rules supreme and the tribal people are forced to sell through a middleman who has bribed the Forestry Department into letting him have monopoly over the sale of forest produce. In exchange for the seeman grass they are paid in rice. When the value of the rice is calculated the villagers are in effect being paid 25 rupees per bunch, whereas the middleman sells it on for 200 rupees.

"We can't sell directly to the public, there is a mafia system here," Ramasamy explains. "There are spies who will denounce us, and nothing can get past the forest checkpoints. Of course we can smuggle out anything from the forest, pig, deer, bison, even an elephant as long as we pay the Forestry Department enough

money! We are really reduced to living like animals ourselves."

We look about us. There are five government built houses with electricity installed; those who have 'connections' with the government or others in power inhabit these. The rest of the dwellings are huts made from branches and coconut fronds.

The only beauty to be found here are the children and the magnificent view. Goats and chickens abound. Goat rearing isn't a traditional source of income for tribal people; they themselves will not eat goat. "We raise these goats like our own children," the lady explains, "so how can we kill them! We eat a little chicken, but mostly we eat rice with whatever we can glean locally, we can't afford to buy vegetables." She looks around her and sighs. "Sometimes when I have to go to Palani [a big temple city nearby] I see the people there and I want to be like them." The goats are sold to individual customers who come to the village to choose a goat for sacrificing at the temple.

"We prefer it this way, we don't like the idea of selling them simply to be slaughtered for food, but we're paid very little, probably half the normal price."

The children are scampering about the rocks herding the goats and tethering them to stones. They are all very young; the older boys especially will be out in the forest. There is plenty to be collected in the way of berries, tree bark and lichens, but here again, they aren't allowed to sell direct.

The government has seemingly ignored these people who are among the poorest I've seen. One of the excuses is that the tribal name of Palliar is very close to a Dalit community called Pullayar. The tribal people don't want to be associated with the Pullayar because they eat beef, and in any case they want to keep their own identity. The outcome is that the tribal people aren't classed as either tribal or Dalit and so miss out on many government welfare benefits.

As the sun sinks behind the hamlet's rocky outcrop children are starting to bring branches to build a fire; there's no electricity in the huts. We drive away feeling despondent and frustrated that these people are being ignored, unrecognised and oppressed, and we set about discussing the best ways we can help, and we know we can make a difference as was demonstrated in a village that we visited the next day.

## Day Two: Kadamanao

I had visited Kadamanao three years previously and had been struck by the fabulous view over the Cumbum valley. The village is built on a hillside, and at the time all that could be seen were huts made of mud, sticks and branches. I had attended a meeting where a handful of women had gloomily reported how hard it was to get anything moving. However with Arogya Agam's involvement and the group's perseverance the village had progressed in leaps and bounds.

First they had managed to petition the government to get proper housing and electricity. The builder came, built the foundations and left. They carried on pestering. The builder came and built the walls and left. Ditto for the roof.

As we stroll down the hill we're invited into a small room where children who have dropped out of school are catching up with their studies. The children are a lively bunch, mostly girls. Only four boys are present; the others are out working. Some of the children have been to Arogya Agam for training sessions.

"The children there seem to be so self-confident compared to us," says one girl, but we had great fun and played games and learned how to interact with others. It was funny because we were cheering a boy who was in a race from our village shouting Suresh, Suresh, and he thought we were calling him and he came back and said 'What is it!'

Another lad told us that he had called the child help line to inform them that one girl was going to be married off and she was only very young.

The children asked some telling questions. "Do you have early marriage for girls in France? Do you have a caste system?" They were surprised at the answers and wanted to know why not.

When girls come to child bearing age the word goes out and various suitors are contacted. Uncles can marry their nieces on their sister's side and this is often the case.

Some of the girls try out their English and there's a lot of giggling and covering of mouths with hands. We walk down the hill looking at the new houses. Most have an extra shelter built onto them for cooking and housing goats.

Chitra, a young girl of about 14, walks with us and we manage a little conversation in English. We visit the main school, two large rooms with one teacher and an assistant. The teacher says she could do with more help but she has been told to "make do". Three years ago the school was extremely basic. Now it takes young children up to 5th standard, and has about 25 children who attend regularly.

Since the authorities have been persuaded to open a semi-formal supplementary school they can continue up to 8th class there. It is this group that has come together at the children's group promoted by Arogya Agam.

The children are bright, forward, eager to study and compete in sports and games with those of different villages. What a change from three years back and what a difference compared to the hamlet of Munthittu with its ragged children huddled round a fire at night.

But anything is possible. Arogya Agam staff never approach the authorities themselves; it's much more effective to train the people concerned to go themselves.

"We help fill in forms and official papers, we inform them of their rights; we give back-up to the volunteers and pay their expenses," John Dalton, from Arogya Agam, explains.

We wave goodbye to the school children feeling heartened and hoping that one day before long the children from Munthittu can be raised up and given the same education possibilities as in Kadamanao.