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KERALA FLOODS

Anger and uncertainty in Adivasi colonies hit by floods and landslides in Kerala's Wayanad district

Adivasis in Venniyode colony say the government has not acted on its promise to relocate their settlement to higher ground.

TA Ameerudheen

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Bindu (in photo) and her husband Gopalan live in this damaged shelter in Wayanad's Venniyode Vaishyan Adivasi Colony after the floods. | TA Ameerudheen

Since June 1, daily-wage labourer Kumaran and the six members of his family have had to evacuate to a flood relief camp in a school in north Kerala's Wayanad district four times. They returned to their home in Venniyode Vaishyan Adivasi Colony after their latest stint at the camp on August 22. They had to evacuate their homes on August 8, after their colony started flooding because of heavy rain. Their previous stints at the relief camp had lasted less than a week each. This time they stayed for 15 days.

“How many times do we have to seek shelter at the flood relief camps in a year?” burst out Kumaran, 61. “The school has become a permanent relief camp for the colony dwellers for the last 10 years.”

The colony is located on a low-lying area on the banks of the Cherupuzha, a tributary of the Kabini river. Every monsoon, the river breaches its banks and inundates the colony. When that happens, Kumaran and his neighbours usually evacuate to the flood relief camp in the school. They are seeking a long-term solution to the problem, and want the government to help relocate the colony.

In 2014, the government had promised that all families in the colony would be relocated to higher ground. But this proposal has not materialised. Local residents say that the revenue department, which is entrusted with land acquisition, is going slow on the project deliberately. “The government had issued an order to take over the land in 2016, but the revenue department officials are delaying it,” said gram panchayat member Abdul Nasser, who represents the colony. “I have checked with them several times but they have not given any convincing answer.”





Six people sleep on the damp floor of Channakkan's tarpaulin shed in Venniyode Colony (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen)

Monsoon troubles

Wayanad has the largest population of Adivasis in Kerala. According to the 2011 Census, Adivasis constitute 18.5% of the district's population. Of them, Paniyas are the largest tribe comprising 45.6% of the Adivasi population, followed by Kurichiyas (16.6%), Kurumas (13.8%) and Kattunayakas (11.2%). Each tribe lives in separate settlements.

This year, a heavy southwest monsoon has caused the worst flooding across Kerala in decades. As many as 322 people have died in monsoon-related incidents in the state so far.

From June 1 to August 29, Wayanad received an average rainfall of 2,944 mm, 24% higher than the normal precipitation in the district for this period. The catchment area of the Banasura Sagar dam, 20 km northwest of district headquarters Kalpetta, received the highest rainfall of 4,824 mm.

Besides flooding, Wayanad has seen 242 incidents of landslides and land subsidence since the start of the monsoon. These twin hazards have been threatening other Adivasi settlements in the district. While landslides are defined as the movement of a mass of rock, debris, or earth down a slope, land subsidence is a phenomenon in which land sinks or settles because of loss in sub-surface support.

The district administration has pegged the losses due to floods and landslides at Rs 1,400 crore.





Velli, 55, of Venniyode Vaishayna Adivasi Colony shows the high flood mark on the outside of his home. (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen)

Continuing misery

As many as 78 people belonging to the Paniya tribe live in the 12 houses that comprise Venniyode colony. Only three houses have concrete roofs, two have thatched roofs while the remaining seven houses are makeshift structures protected by tarpaulin sheets. “Those seven homes cannot be considered as houses,” said environmental activist PC Abdulla, who lives near the colony. “It is a shed covered with plastic.”

When the Cherupuzha river breached its banks on the afternoon of August 8, the tarpaulin houses were the first to be destroyed. The floodwaters swept away the flimsy structures along with cooking utensils and other household items, leaving around 50 people without a shelter and their possessions. Human casualties were averted as government officials evacuated all the colony's residents before the water level rose any further.



Residents of Venniyode Colony. (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen).

'No financial assistance'

One of the flood victims is Chinchu, 7, who suffers from polio. Her mother died shortly after giving birth to her in 2011. Her aunt Meenakshi, who looks after

her, used to take her around the neighbourhood on a wheelchair. The flood waters have damaged the wheelchair, curtailing Chinchu's ability to move around in the area. Now Meenakshi has to carry Chinchu in her arms. "She cannot sit on the floor, so I carry her all the time," said Meenakshi. "I wish someone would give her a wheelchair soon."

The Adivasis came back home on August 22 after the government closed the relief camp. They are angry that they have not received the Rs 10,000 financial assistance the government had promised to them by way of immediate assistance. "The government announced the financial assistance but the officials have not disbursed it so far," said Maran, a resident of the colony.

Several residents of the colony said that they would have been able to buy essential household items if they had been given the promised assistance.

Bindu, a daily wage labourer, said the floods swept away the plastic sheet that draped her home and she does not have the money to buy a new one. "We do not have any work," she said. "We could have bought a plastic sheet if the government gave us the promised amount after the relief camp was closed." For now, Bindu and her husband Gopalan sleep on a wet floor in a damaged shelter.

Another resident, 60-year-old Channakkan, said he would have used the money to buy cots as it was difficult to sleep on the floor.

The residents of the colony are risking illness as they are using non-chlorinated water drawn from an open well for their cooking and cleaning requirements. The Kerala health department has issued an advisory asking people in flood-hit areas not to use well water without disinfecting it with chlorine as the water is most likely contaminated.

Colony resident Velli, 59, said no health official has visited the settlement after its residents returned from the relief camp. “The water is contaminated, but we have no option but to drink it,” he said.

The residents reiterated their demand for the colony to be relocated, saying that it will end their annual evacuation.

Channakkan’s wife Santha said Venniyode colony is a place close to her heart. “Our ancestors were buried here,” she said. “But we will leave this place if the government rehabilitates us. We want to escape from this misery forever.”

The colony residents said government and volunteer organisations have given them enough food for a month, and they now need shelters that are not disturbed by floods. “We hope the government will consider our problems seriously,” said Sasi, another resident.



The wheelchair of seven-year-old Chinchu was damaged in the floods. (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen).

Damaged homes

In Thacharakolly, 40 km away from Venniyode colony, is another settlement of Adivasis. People from the Kurichiya community live here. Since the start of the monsoon, these houses have been weakened by landslides and land subsidence, with cracks appearing in some of them. The government has asked the residents to evacuate their homes till an assessment of the soil was completed.

While the tests are being done, at least 25 Adivasis from Thacharakolly have been accommodated at the Tribal Mission Church hall, less than 10 km from their settlement.

District soil conservation officer PU Das said people will not be allowed to live in vulnerable areas until scientific examinations are over. “People have been asked to stay in camps,” he said. “We need to analyse the soil pattern.”

The residents of the relief camp are waiting anxiously for the test results. The conversations at the camp are dominated by discussions about the rain, flooding and the landslides and land subsidence near their homes.

“There is a crack on the hill slope near our home,” said Sreeja, a resident of Thacharakolly colony. “I think it is not a serious one, but government officials are not allowing us to go back home. I am waiting for the test results. We don’t want to lose our home and land. The government cannot give us such fertile land anywhere.”

Her husband Raghu said they are worried about losing everything they built with sheer hard work. “I do not know what to do if I lose the land,” he said, grimly.



Residents of Thacharakolly colony in Wayanad at a relief camp at the Tribal Mission Church. (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen).

Some Adivasis said that the landslides have ensured that their lives are now completely dependent on the government.

Siji, 40, and her husband Shaji, 45, said they got a second life after narrowly escaping from a landslide near their house on August 9. “We heard a huge cracking sound at 4 am,” said Shaji. “Then we saw the mountain caving in. We ran from the house to safety. Our house is now covered with mud. We cannot go back there. We need government support to rebuild our lives.”

He added: “I hope the government will not let us down and will rehabilitate us.”



A view of the damage caused by the landslide in Thacharakolly. (Photo credit: TA Ameerudheen).