

Suicide rate rises among adivasi communities in the Nilgiris, says study

Alcoholism and displacement are said to be the major reasons

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Paniya community people of Gudalur and Pandalur

Suicide rate among the adivasi communities in Gudalur and Pandalur is eight times the national average, an analysis by the Gudalur-based Association for Health Welfare in the Nilgiris (ASHWINI) has found.

An analysis of the number of deaths and the leading causes for premature death in four adivasi communities – the Paniya, Kattunayakan, Betta Kurumba and Mulla Kurumba, has revealed that suicide is

prevalent among the communities.

It has revealed that the number of suicides has increased from around eight reported suicides a decade ago, to between 25 and 30 in 2019, meaning that the number of suicides has tripled over the last decade.

“Among the four communities in the Gudalur and Pandalur regions, the suicide rate is far higher among the Paniyas, especially men aged between 20 and 40,” said Shylaja Devi, founder-member of ASHWINI – Gudalur adivasi hospital.

Dr. Shylaja said that a common thread that was noticed by the doctors and researchers at ASHWINI was the prevalence of alcoholism in the community, including among those who had died by suicide over the last decade.

“Suicides are always multi-factorial and cannot be attributed to a single cause, but the easy availability of alcohol to the community members is definitely a contributing factor,” said Dr. Shylaja.

Displacement from their traditional lands and loss of livelihoods, as well as a sense of alienation from being moved closer to towns could also be the other contributing factors, says Jiji Elamana, Community Program Coordinator for ASHWINI.

“For instance, the members of the

Kattunayakan community in Bennai in Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, who are used to living in wide, open expanses have been moved to more structured housing near bigger towns. These kinds of changes could definitely have an impact on their long-term mental health,” said Ms. Elamana.

In an effort to bring down the number of suicides among the community members, ASHWINI is partnering with the Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives in intervention programmes to prevent suicides among members residing in the 300 adivasi hamlets.

“The 300 hamlets have been divided into eight areas, with health volunteers in each village communicating with a health animator, who when informed about a person with problems related to alcoholism or mental health issues, intervenes with the help of counselors,” said Ms. Elamana.

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on the State’s health helpline 104 and Sneha’s suicide prevention helpline 044-24640050).