

South Indian villagers speak about rural crisis, job guarantee

Our reporting team
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WSWS reporters travelled to Arasampattu in the Thiruvannamalai district, Tamil Nadu, on February 6 and spoke with small peasants and landless agricultural workers. The village falls within the 200 most impoverished districts of India where the new National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) program is to come into effect over the next 6 months. Under the NREG scheme, the government has promised to provide one member of every rural household 100 days of manual work per year and has indicated scheme recipients will be paid at least Rs.60 (\$1.33) per day. (See: Indian government launches rural employment guarantee: A band-aid for a social calamity)

Sekar, 35 years of age and a small farmer owning three acres of land, complained that the lack of rain was causing his crops to fail.

“We generally reap three (rice) paddy harvests but due to lack of rain over the past few years we only get two harvests. From an acre we get up to 30 sacks of paddy. But this time I have got only 14 sacks due to severe rat bites.”

Sekar then complained about shrinking state subsidies, the inability of small farmers like himself to obtain bank credit, and rising production costs.

“We need nearly 60 kg seeds for an acre and that costs Rs.900. If we use a tractor to plough our land this costs Rs.600 per hour and we need to plough twice. Additionally, a further Rs.300 is needed for pesticide and Rs.500 for fertiliser (Urea). Expenses for agricultural inputs totals about Rs.6,500 per harvest.

“The government does not purchase our products. So we take them to private rice mill buyers and they determine the price in their favour. We sell a shack of paddy for between Rs.360 and Rs.430. In addition we also grow peanuts. We don’t get sufficient return for our investment in growing (rice) paddy. I grow banana trees in one acre and for this I spent about Rs.30,000. But it may take a year to get returns. I am relying on that money.”

Sekar next pointed to the hardship caused by growing debts. “Most of the people in this village own between two to four acres. They suffer losses due to multiple factors like lack of water, rat bites and insect attacks. In order to overcome the losses, they borrow money from private money lenders at an exorbitant rate of 10 percent per month. When they suffer further losses they sell their lands and migrate to some other places. Mostly they move to towns and work as daily labourers.”

When asked about health expenditure, which studies have shown to be the largest contributor to rural debt, Sekar spoke about the dismal state of the village’s health facilities. “For medical treatment in the government hospital we have to go to the town and that is about 8 kilometres from our village. So for urgencies, we depend on the private clinics in our village, who charge considerably.”

While Sekar is himself illiterate, he was proud that his three girls are attending school. “They study at the government school. There are over 100 children in the school but with only two teachers.”

Sekar knew nothing about the NREG scheme.

Arumugam, who is 61 years agricultural worker currently earning Rs.70 a day on the days that he manages to find work. According to national statistics 41 out of every hundred rural households are landless. If Arumugam were to receive Rs.60 a day under the NREG scheme, he would be enduring an almost fifteen percent decrease in his already abysmal daily wage.

While illiterate, he too made sure that his children went to the local school, but ultimately they had to quit for want of funds.

“My eldest and the youngest daughter studied up to the 7th standard (grade) and the second one up to the 10th. I couldn’t afford to provide the expenses for their further education.”

“My eldest daughter is 19 years old, I couldn’t afford for her marriage yet. She goes to work in building construction and she gets paid Rs.30 per day. Her work starts at 8 AM. in the morning and finishes at 6 PM.” Arumugam lives in government housing provided by the Housing Board during the 1970s, when the state government introduced some minimal social welfare schemes.

N.Nadarajan, also a small peasant, owns three acres of land used to grow tomatoes and (rice) paddy. But he suffered a huge loss with his last tomato crop, when he spent Rs.3500, but received just Rs.600 in return. Since then, he has taken to growing different vegetables.

Referring to the continuous state disinvestment in the agricultural sector, Nadarajan recalled, “About 15 years back (government) agricultural officers used to come to our villages to give agricultural training but they don’t come anymore. They also used to take us for agricultural tours, but this too is no more. We are no longer advised what to grow and which seeds to buy. We also are short of water supply, needed for cultivation. Hopefully, due to the recent heavy rain fall, there won’t be any water problem for some time.”

Unable to live from small and seasonal crops, the village’s approximately 200 households sell cow milk

as an additional source of income.

“Here mostly no one could depend on agriculture alone. Almost every one has cattle in their houses and they sell cow milk. We get about 4 litres milk a day from a cow. The government buys our milk at Rs.9 per litre. A milking cow costs about Rs.13, 000,” Nadarajan added.

old is a landless According to Nadarajan, the village authorities have compiled a list of individuals who are considered to be eligible to obtain work under the new NREG scheme, but have made no further announcement.

Pandurangan, 65 years old and a peasant, echoed Nadarajan’s comments. “For more than 10 years agricultural officers do not visit our village and give guidance to us. This they used to do in the late 70s and 80s. Now in order to manage the attack of various insects we use about 25 bags of pesticides but it has its side effects.”

He mentioned that many residents in the neighbouring villages of Kalpatti and Karungkali kuppam had sold off their lands and migrated in search of jobs as daily labourers in distant cities.

Kannan, 55 years old and landless, spoke of his recent displacement and distress.

“I was asked to vacate from the land in which I have been living for the past 28 years because it is government land. Already 20 families have vacated those lands. There are only two more families remaining. I get about Rs.60 or Rs.70 a day if I manage to find work. As I am aging I find it difficult to work now, even if I am lucky to find work. I bought 20 goats and look after them. One goat cost me Rs.2,000.”

Kannan, whose name was included in the village authorities’ list of those eligible for work under the NREG, was hopeful, “We have been told that we would get jobs in public work projects and that for the wage of Rs.80 per day. The announcement will come later.”



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