



Arpit Haldar (second from left) with Chinna Ediyathur villagers; a recently-installed tap under a tree in the middle of the hamlet • Archita Suryanarayanan

THE MODERN 'STONE-AGE' VILLAGE

- Recently, two college students were instrumental in helping an Irula community get electricity and tap water from the government officials
- They continue to work with the community of 65 people, who have no documentation or sanitation facilities but ironically, have voter IDs and have voted regularly in Assembly polls

• Varun B Krishnan and Archita Suryanarayanan

The recent, coveted addition to Mohan's hut is a single light bulb, hanging in the middle of the 100 square-foot home, coating the odds and ends in the house in yellow. In one corner, an unlikely roommate sits inside a handwoven, upturned basket — a hen with her eggs. Built with brick walls held together with mud and a thatched roof, the room is bare, and one of the few pieces of furniture is an unused television set that was given to them as part of a free government scheme. But there is no electricity to run it, and it serves as a makeshift table.

The light bulb was the first glow of electricity they had received recently, after two students — Arpit Haldar and John Samuel — from the Department of Social Work of Madras Christian College (MCC) convinced officials to give this ignored village some basic amenities to live. Walking into the hamlet, Chinna Ediyathur is like stepping back in time — specifically, the stone-age.

Formed around a decade ago, the hamlet is as far away from modern life as possible — with no running water or toilet facilities. It is also one of the least accessible hamlets around Chennai, which is surprising especially considering it comes under the Thirukazhukundram taluk, which is not more than 90 km from Chennai.

Villagers here stay poor throughout their lives, but once every five years, they become 'rich' — they have valid votes, which in the eyes of the politician, makes them rich. "Yes, all of us vote every election, though we don't have anything," laughed Kamala, the oldest member of the village. She looks around 70, but does not know her age as she tries to guess it with a little help from her children. "We cannot get a ration card easily and are still fighting for our pattas, but we get voter IDs very easily and even have a vehicle arranged for us to go vote," she adds.

With just 13 houses, the villagers are often told that their village is too small to be given any facilities. "I have complained to

the panchayat leaders many times. I even made crab curry and gave it to them. They say they would look into it, but nothing happened," she averred.

Last year's December floods had damaged their homes and left them stranded. Somehow a professor of MCC heard about their plight and offered help. That's how Arpit and John ended up visiting there.

After running pillar to post, the duo finally managed to get approval from officials for electricity and water. "It was not easy. Language was a problem," said Arpit, who is from West Bengal. "Every day for 28 days, one of us would visit to the community and the other would go to petition the officials. Some of them were helpful."

Speaking to *City Express*, deputy block development officer K Kumar explained, "Only if we get a formal request can we look into it. After the students came, they helped the villagers give a request for the facilities. We sent a team to verify the request and the village got streetlights, water connection and electricity."

The village, with 65 inhabitants, all members of the Irula community, are mostly re-

SANITATION STILL A FAR CRY

The villagers are happy with these new additions to the village, but seem unaware of the other assistance they need. With no toilets, open defecation is the norm and the women have a tough time, especially during menstruation. The onset of puberty is a hard time for the young girls. Three teenage girls in the village dropped out between Classes 6 and 8, and the two students are making plans to move three girls from the village into a free hostel in Chennai. Institutional deliveries are very low, though 23-year old Karpagam, who has a baby coming in a few months, does not want to deliver the child at home. "We plan to go to the hospital for the delivery," she says.

SOCIAL (IN)SECURITY

33 of 65 kids don't have birth certificates

8 families don't have a ration card

11 families do not have SC/ST certificates

7 families do not have bank accounts

(Source: MCC student survey)

Tough Ride

To reach Chinna Ediyathur from the city, the reporters took the train to Chengalpet from Guindy Railway Station. From there, they hopped on to a bus to Thirukazhukundram. A 20-minute share-auto ride to Nerumbur later, by sheer dumb luck, they were able to ride in an auto to the hamlet, as the 5-km stretch to the village is generally unmotorable. Of course, the duo had to push the auto midway as it had got stuck on the mud roads.



lated to each other. They move from other nearby villages and are landless agricultural labourers. They fetch water for cooking and drinking from a nearby river, and use the banks for bathing and washing. Today, they have one tap for every two or three houses, but they still attend nature's call in the open.

The closest bus stop is in Nerumbur, a good 5-km walk, while the closest Primary Health Centre is 6 km away. Though the school and Anganwadi are at a distance of 1 km, the path leading there is a nightmare for young children to walk. The only recreation they have is to run around the village bare-bodied, play with old tyres and sink their teeth into watermelon slices to cool off.

Besides electricity and water, the duo from MCC have also been trying to arrange land documentation, community certificates and other documents. "Around three homes have been given patta. Once they have community certificates, they will be eligible for other schemes. We plan to create a self-help group and also apply for housing through Indra Awaaz Yojana," explains Arpit.

The community still relies on seasonal work at nearby farms. "Men get paid around ₹300 and women ₹150 for a day's work," said Suresh, who is the most educated person in the village, having studied up to Class 8.

"We don't get work throughout the year, and do whatever odd jobs we get. There is a patch of land belonging to the village temple, where we grow groundnuts," he said, plucking out a plant and offering us a bunch.

They also rear goats for other farmers; if a goat has three kids, they have to give two to the owners and they can keep one. "But we mostly don't slaughter the goat, it grows up like a pet among us and is a favourite among the children," said Valli, who said she is probably around 40 years old.

While the reporters were interviewing villagers, one girl began filming it on her phone. The cellphone is a recent addition to the community and Suresh has become smart at using it. "He even sent me a message in broken English," said Arpit. "He now has electricity in his house and can charge his cellphone. Before this, he had to go to a shop in the nearby village and paying a ₹10 just to charge his phone."

The houses are built by the owners themselves, and one of the new house owners spent around ₹23,000 for his house. "Before getting these lights, we had to be wary of snakes and insects in the dark. Children could not study after dusk. Now, we are more peaceful," smiled Mohan.

Valli concurred, and added, "We all take turns and fill water when the taps run every morning. We are all very united and do not fight over such silly things."

