

Opening New Frontiers



Neyyamalai's stepped hillsides

The jeep grumbled its disapproval as we climbed up the steep mud road to Neyyamalai. We were eight of us travelling on the newly made road to this cluster of 4 villages with a population of about 3500 people. They had no roads till 4 months back except for the rocky, uneven path hewn into the mountainside, which motorbikes could traverse with difficulty. Electricity too arrived just 4 months back, before which the Govt had put up solar panels in each house ,

which provided one night light per hut.

Neyyamalai is a new frontier for us. For many years the tribals from this remote hill range brought down their sick in hammocks made of bamboo and old sheets and then either caught the infrequent buses or pay through their nose and hire a jeep to come to Tribal Hospital. We too wanted to reach out to them, as no Govt health personnel were ready to go there. But , with no roads, we were at a loss. Now that had



Millet fields sway in the breeze

changed and we were on our way to meet the villagers there.

Once the climb is done, the road opens into gently rolling stepped , green hillsides and



Cooking hut is part of every house

houses pock mark the verdant slopes. Neyyamalai has 4 villages – Neyyamalai proper, Aathuvalavu, Akkarapatti and Alangudi. There are 2 schools of which one is 10th Std, but teachers are absent. Strangely there are many brick and even concrete buildings including a large Govt Tribal Hostel [not yet opened]. When asked how they brought up the cement, the people said that they used to carry it one sack at a time and

the bricks were made locally.

We spoke to a motley group who had gathered near the local temple and asked them about the conditions there, their health, food and agriculture. Water is often scarce and by common agreement all hand pumps are chained and locked except for a few hours in the morning and



Flask for porridge during hunts

evening. There is no access to medical facilities and it is either the medical shops in Thumbal for minor illness or Tribal Hospital for major illness. By default, most agriculture is organic, but there is huge exploitation by the middle men as the tribals are not able to bring the produce down to the plains, whereas the middlemen employ tractors or jeeps. The food is still mainly traditional as they still grow and eat a lot of millets , so

they are all relatively healthy. They keep cattle , poultry, goats and go for the occasional clandestine hunt to supplement their nutrition.

The people are simple and guileless still and the land caressed by the gentle winds.

We have yet to form a concrete plan of how we will be of use to the tribals in Neyyamalai and a meeting with the elders of the 4 villages is fixed this week. As always in THI, the needs are expressed by the people and we sit along with them and plan for the next 3 years. For the THI team it is yet a new frontier which is opening – exciting and full of possibilities. Watch this space for more updates in the future.



wooden grinders for grain



Flexible cow shelters in the fields so that the dung and urine fall in the fields and the shelter is moved every week to fertilise the next part



Chained hand pump to conserve water, opened only in the evening and morning for a few hours