

A Study of the Educational
Status of Children in the
Sittilingi Area

Submitted to Asha for Education, Princeton chapter

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Foreword

When we moved to Sittilingi and decided to start working with the children of this area, we had little knowledge of the situation here vis-à-vis the current educational status of the children. To get some foothold, we relied heavily on THI [Tribal Health Initiative, an NGO with 10 years of experience in working in the area] -- their individual experiences, a study of children they had done earlier, as well as their various reports/ documentation. We had a series of discussions with Drs Regi Geroge and Lalitha Regi of THI, and later with Anita Balasubramanian of Asha. With the help of their suggestions, the idea of village visits to familiarise ourselves and to be introduced to the area and its people emerged. It was also agreed that information collected could be made into a useful document, that would communicate to those interested, the situation here, as well as become a point of reference for us to look back at in the future. This would be of great use while evaluating our work at a later date.

The visits to the villages, in themselves, were energizing. It helped a lot that we went with THI staff who are familiar to the locals and carry a lot of credibility due to a decade's sustained work in the area. We have been made to feel welcomed and needed, by the locals. There is a very real felt need for quality education among a large number of people. This is in part due to education being perceived as a tool for empowerment as well as in part due to the appalling quality of education available currently.

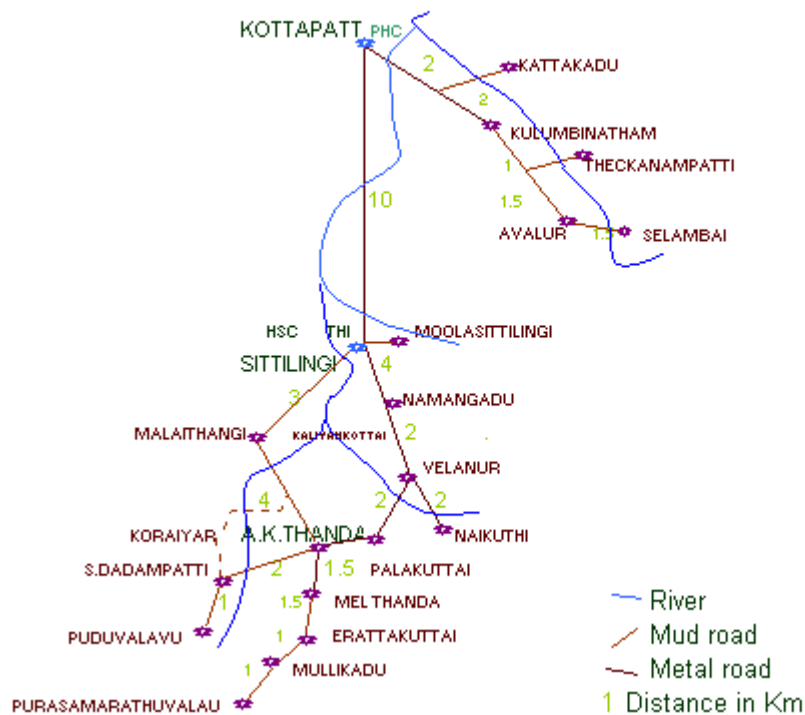
The actual writing of this report has also been a very useful exercise. We made several qualitative judgments while we were visiting villages, and it got refined/ corrected as we started putting the facts on paper. We hope we have done a reasonable job of making a report that conveys some idea, to those of you who have not visited the area, of the situation vis-à-vis the educational status of the children here.

While this report concentrates more on the population profiles and also educational facilities available in the area, an evaluation of the current levels of academic proficiency of the children was only possible after the actual Thulir sessions took off, and so could not be included as a part of this report. It is something we are currently working on and will be reporting in due course.

Part I - Introduction

Sittilingi is situated in a valley between the Sitheri Hills and the chinna Kalrayan Hills. The population here is predominantly tribal (95% tribal). The people are called Malayalees (hill people) or Malaivasis. There are also a few lambadi (gypsy) hamlets. This Area has very poor transport facilities - 5 buses a day from the taluk headquarters, Harur, which is 40 km away. There is a new private minibus service, to Thumbal (20 km. away, towards Salem), but this service is very unreliable and gets cut off during rain or floods in the streams.

MAP OF SITILINGI AREA



Health status

Before THI came to this area, lack of medical facilities was one of the major problems. There were no functional PHCs [Primary Health Centre] in the area. The IMR (infant mortality rate) was 146/1000. Most sick people in the villages had to walk 3-5 km. to the road to catch the bus. Any emergency needing surgery or specialist treatment is 100 km away in Salem. After THI started its activities, now there is a vast improvement in Health facilities.

Occupation

The predominant occupation is agriculture. Agriculture is mainly rain-fed. They grow traditional millets like bajra, corn, ragi & pulses without irrigation. Pesticides and fertilizers are used only for newer crops like hybrid rice and cash crops and not for the traditional crops. A few families (mostly non-tribal) have started growing cash crops like sugarcane and industrial tapioca now. Sheep and cattle rearing is the second major occupation. Many men have migrated to Kerala and Tirupur (garment industries) in search of work. Many people work as casual labourers - Daily wages for men are Rs.60 and for women Rs.30. Almost all families own land and a house to live. Family size mostly ranges from 5 to 8.

Food

Bhajra or ragi porridge or rice with rasam and sambar is the normal meal. Vegetables are not included much in their food. Vegetables are not easily available and are bought only on weekly market days or when they are grown in their own land during the rainy season. The only vegetables available in the weekly market are tomato, potato, brinjal [aubergine], cabbage & beetroot.

Housing

Most people have their own houses. Houses have low mud walls with hipped roofs thatched with hay or sugarcane leaves. Houses have lofts for storage. They have a "panthal" or a covered space in front of the house which is basically a framework of bamboo or country wood poles covered with bamboo and shoots & leaves of a plant called "Velarithalai" (the peculiarity of this plant is that the leaves do not drop away from the shoot after drying for a considerable length of time). This space is the most important space in the house- besides keeping the house cool it also functions as the living room. Cooking is mostly indoors and is done on the traditional wood stoves. The smoke is considered beneficial to drive away insects and to keep the house warm in winter.

Sanitation

The tribal hamlets are generally kept clean and are in fact cleaner than other rural villages of Tamilnadu. Water supply is mostly from govt. built bore wells (hand pumps) or from open wells. Open-air defecation is a popular practice. The govt. has recently provided a water closet for each house. These have been fitted near the houses, with no walls around, no proper septic tank and no water supply. None of them are being used.

Social problems

Till a decade ago, dowry was not known here. The bridegroom had to pay a bride price to the bride. Now with the migration of non-tribal into the area, the dowry system has started. Girls are married off immediately after attaining puberty. Female infanticide and alcoholism are the other problems prevalent here. Borrowing money from moneylenders at high interest rates is common. Youth out of school and unemployed or working as migratory labour also are source of troubles in the villages.

Other interventions in the village

The Govt initiated women's self help groups have been formed in all the villages. Every village has one or two such groups with around 20 members in each group. The Forest Deptt. too has started some Women's saving groups in some villages. The main activities of these groups are related to savings and loans. Other Village issues are not usually dealt with or discussed in these groups. The Christian missionaries have been working here for many decades now and there are many converts to Christianity.

Facilities Available

Most villages are electrified. Phone lines have reached the valley just a few months back, but connections are still unreliable. Post office, Panchayat office, Teashops, ration shop and a small grocery shop with minimal provisions, a middle school, and crèche are available in Sittilingi. Most tribal hamlets do not have any of these facilities and people walk to Sittilingi. For Photocopying, workshops, bigger grocery shops, Bank, Electricity office, Cinema theatre and Police Station- one has to travel to Kottapatti 12 km. away. Vegetable and Fruit Markets, Bakery, Dental clinics, Government offices, fuel gas refills, etc one has to go to Harur- 45 km. away. For all bigger hospitals, stationery items, clothes shops, construction materials and everything else, one has to go to Salem, 100 km. Away.

Part II - Education Status

Most of the adults - men and women are illiterate. Till a few years back, the school dropout rate was high among children, but now education seems to be a priority for most parents. Most children now go to the govt. school in spite of the difficulties in reaching the school and poor quality of the facility. Most govt. schools have one or two rooms staffed with one or two teachers. Teachers mostly live in Harur (40 km. away) and their work schedule is guided by bus timings- they come around 10.30 or 11 am and leave by 3 pm. Quality of education imparted is generally very poor.

Table 1.
Village wise statistics

S.No	Village	Distance from Sittilingi [kms]	Total no. Of families	Total no. Of children	Children of ages 6-10	Children of ages 11-18
1	Sittilingi	0	222	262	76	186
2	Moola sittilingi	1.5	60	114	53	61
3	Nammankadu	4	98	166	75	91
4	Kaliyankottai	4	36	45	20	25
5	Velanur	6	163	261	111	150
6	Naikuthi	7.5	102	171	86	85
7	A.K.Thanda	10	150	216	80	136
8	Palakuttai	8	80	121	32	89
9	Melthanda	10	52	78	30	48
10	Erattakuttai	11.5	40	63	26	37
11	Mullikadu	13.5	33	61	33	28
12	Purasamarathuvalavu & Kombai	16.5	73	113	45	68
13	Puduvalavu	10.5	58	82	35	47
14	S.Dadampatti	9	85	158	58	100
15	Malaithangi	3	90	147	65	82
16	Theckanampatti	14	53	106	39	67
17	Avalur, Dadamkottai and Selambai	16	168	248	107	141

Table 1 shows the village wise statistics of population and children of school going age. This is followed by description of educational facilities in each village. Table 2 shows the detailed figures for Sittilingi Village. Collecting data family wise for Sittilingi was very useful for us to get to know individual family level situation. As we expand we hope to repeat this exercise for the other villages.

1. Sittilingi Village

Total number of families: 222
no of children aged 6-10: 76
no of children aged 11-18: 186

There is a government tribal residential middle school here, but no student stays here as there are no hostel facilities. There are two male teachers staying in the village. This is a big improvement as earlier the teachers used to stay in Harur and attend school irregularly. The school is supposed to provide all the three meals to the students. The noon meal (given by the noon meal scheme) and a 4 'o' clock evening meal are provided. The meal mostly consists of rice and rasam or rice and sambar. 18 children from this village go to Kottapatti, 12 kms away to attend the private English medium school.

2. Moola Sittilingi

1.5 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 60
no of children aged 6-10: 53
no of children aged 11-18: 61

As the distance from Sittilingi is less, these children also access the govt. school in Sittilingi or the private school in Kottapatti.

3. Nammankadu

4 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 98
no of children aged 6-10: 75
no of children aged 11-18: 91

The government has built concrete houses for them. The people have modified them by building thatched verandahs or thatched houses adjacent to them, which are their main living areas. There is no primary school or balwadi or any educational facilities for children here. Children go to Sittilingi (4 km.) or Velanur (2 km.) for studying. Most of the older children have gone to Karumandurai (up the hill) to the tribal residential school. Children walk back on weekends.

4. Kaliyankottai

4 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 36
no of children aged 6-10: 20
no of children aged 11-18: 25

This vallaage is situated between two streams. There are 36 families here. These families were originally part of Nammangadu. The fields they owned were in Kaliyankottai- so gradually they started staying here and this became a separate village. There are no government educational facilities here. Children have to walk to Velanur (3 km. away) or to Sittilingi (4 km. away) for even primary school facilities.

5. Velanur

6 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 163
no of children aged 6-10: 111
no of children aged 11-18: 150

There is a Panchayat Union Primary school here. There is one headmaster and one lady teacher both of whom commute from Harur. There are 65 children enrolled here, of these 26 are boys and 39 are girls. There is a new school building with toilet and water facilities. The old building is currently being used by the forest ceapartment as a tailoring training centre.

6. Naikuthi

7.5 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 102
no of children aged 6-10: 86
no of children aged 11-18: 85

It has a primary school with a single teacher who comes from Harur. She comes by 9.30 a.m and leaves by 3.30 p.m. There are 40 children on the roll. But the avarage attendance is only 25. Most children go up the Kalrayan hills to the Karumandurai government tribal residential school. They walk down the hills for weekends. Other children go to Sittilingi as dayscholars. The primary school teacher has personally employed a substitute local teacher to look after the children when she is absent. The school building has recently been done up and is in good condition.

7. A.K Thanda

10 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 150
no of children aged 6-10: 80
no of children aged 11-18: 136

This is a lambadi (gypsy) village and has about 150 families. They talk the lambadi language. The older women still wear their traditional gypsy shirt and embroidered blouse. The younger generation wear saris. Many men have migrated to Tirupur and other cities for work and so there seems to be a lot of money in the village. One can see a few concrete houses here. The Govt. primary school has 3 rooms. The school has 41 students- class I to V. The main classroom is about 50' x 20' and has a concrete roof. It has steel furniture and a number of **good** posters hung all over the room. This school has one headmaster and two lady teachers. The headmaster stays in S.Dadampatty (2 km. away) and comes daily. The two teachers come daily from Harur in the morning and reach here by 11 a.m. and leave by 3 p.m. for the 3.30 p.m.bus. Compared to the other govt. schools this seems to be maintained better. One does not know the quality of education being taught. One noon meal is given.

This is the last hamlet in the road. It is a very beautiful village surrounded by the Sitheri Hills. One can trek upto Sitheri, Erumakada, Pereri & Kundalmadavu villages on the hills. There are many patients with leprosy here. Children from here go to the tribal residential school in Sitheri from Monday to Friday and trek back home in the weekends. There are no govt. balwadis or any primary school here.

8. Palakuttai

8 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 80
no of children aged 6-10: 32
no of children aged 11-18: 89

There is a primary school here. It has about 29 children attending. The building is in a very bad condition. The teacher also comes from Harur. There are many drop-outs after primary level. Some older children go to Sittilingi or Karumandurai schools.

9. Melthanda

10 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 52
no of children aged 6-10: 30
no of children aged 11-18: 48

This is a lambadi (gypsy) village. There is a government balwadi (child-care centre) here. The balwadi has an asbestos roof and is in very bad condition. The government balwadi teacher lives in Harur and hardly ever comes here. Only the ayah (helper) opens the door at noon and provides the noon-meal. The children only come, collect the meal and go back home. All the older children of the village except 3 have been sent away to gypsy hostels run by christian missionaries in Salem, Pappireddipatty etc. These hostels provide free lodging, boarding and even clothing for the children.

One warden looks after 60-100 children. From here, children go to govt. schools. The women in the village expressed the opinion that the quality of care and food in the hostles was poor. But yet they send them away because the govt. school here is bad, kids play truant here and because they get free food and clothing in the hostel. After finishing class X almost all the boys go to Tirupur (200 km. away) and work as casual labour in the garment industries there.

10. Erattakuttai

11.5 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 40
no of children aged 6-10: 26
no of children aged 11-18: 37

There is a government primary school here. It consists of one big badly maintained hall. The room has no doors or window shutters. A teacher comes from Harur in the bus and stays in school from 10 a.m.to 3 p.m.. She is not very regular. The teacher has personally engaged a local girl from the village for Rs.300/month to handle the classes on the days she is absent. The health auxiliary said that many children in the village had dropped out from school and were tending their sheep or farms. The total no. of children in the primary school is 26. Some children go to Puduvalavu school 6.5 km. away. One or two families had sent their children to the govt. tribal boarding school at Karumandurai but the children didn't like the boarding school and had come away.

11. Mullikadu

13.5 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 33
no of children aged 6-10: 33
no of children aged 11-18: 28

There are no government balwadis, primary or middle school here. Children from here walk 1 km. to Erattakuttai for primary school and 6 km. away to S.Dadampatti for Secondary school. Some families have sent their children to Karumandurai govt. boarding schools.

12. Purasamarathuvalavu

15 km. away from Sittilingi

& Kombai

18 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 73
no of children aged 6-10: 45 [including children from kombai]
no of children aged 11-18: 68 [including children from kombai]

Most people here farm on hill-slopes. They grow traditional millets, but industrial tapioca has started coming in. Children from here trek up the hill on Monday, attend classes in the tribal residential school in Sitheri from Monday to Friday and trek back on Friday evenings. There are no government educational facilities here or in any nearby village. The primary school in Erattakuttai is 3 km. away and secondary school in Puduvalavu, still further away (8 km.). There are no buses to these villages. Buses stop at A.K.Thanda .

13. Puduvalavu

10.5 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 58
no of children aged 6-10: 35
no of children aged 11-18: 47

There is a Government tribal residential middle school (classes I to VII) here. This was started in 1976. The school is situated on 1 acre of land and has four buildings. There are 68 boys and 73 girls enrolled here. Hostel facilities are available for only 50. All three meals are provided for 50 students. Only the noon meal is provided for the rest. The staff consists of one headmaster, one assistant headmaster, one physical education teacher, one watchman and one cook. Three more teacher posts are vacant and have to be filled. The headmaster stays here during the week and goes to Dharmapuri during the weekends.

14. S.Dadampatti

9 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 85
no of children aged 6-10: 58
no of children aged 11-18: 100

There is a Panchayat Union Primary school here. There are 20 boys and 16 girls studying from class I to class IV. There are no students in class V. There is only one headmaster who commutes from Harur. Recently a new school building with toilet facilities has been built. The old building is also being used. A noon meal is provided for the children.

15. Malaithangi

[3 km. away from Sittilingi]

Total number of families: 90
no of children aged 6-10: 65
no of children aged 11-18: 82

There is a government tribal residential primary school here (classes I to V). There are 32 boys and 35 girls enrolled here. Of them, 50 are boarders and 17 are dayscholars. The boarders get all three meals. The staff consists of one headmaster, one assistant headmaster, two cooks and one watchman. Everybody goes home in the weekends. The school consists of two classrooms, one kitchen and one residential quarters.

16. Theckanampatti

14 km. away from Sittilingi

Total number of families: 53
no of children aged 6-10: 39
no of children aged 11-18: 67

There is a Panchayat union Primary school here (classes I to V). There are 14 boys and 28 girls enrolled here. There are one headmaster and one assistant teacher. But the assistant teacher has been on leave for a long time. The headmaster too comes irregularly. He has personally employed one youth from the village to look after the children during his absences. The school which is situated on an area of 80 sq.m was started on 24/01/94. There is one big classroom with water and toilet facilities. The noon meal is provided.

17. Avalur, Dadamkottai and Selambai

16 km. away from Sittilingi, 6.5 kms from Kottapatti

Total number of families: 168
no of children aged 6-10: 107
no of children aged 11-18: 141

Till recently there was no bus to these villages. People walked 6 km. to the main road. All the villagers then got together and got the government bus to ply twice a day to their village. There is a govt. primary school here. It has 150 children and two teachers. The school has improved lately (according to the villagers). Teachers come by bus in the morning and stay till the evening 3.30 bus from kottapatti. There is no surrogate teachers in the primary school. About 100 children go from here (from the 3 villages around- Selambi, Avalur and Dadamkottai) to kottapatti to middle and high school. 10 children from Avalur go to hostels outside. From Dadamkotai 4 are in Thiruvannamalai, 2 in Naripalli, 2 in Pudukkadu and 1 in Kanyakumari. In the rains the road gets blocked and the bus-service is stopped. An NGO had started tuition centres in these villages. One or two villages youth were employed to run these centres. But this programme was woundup, and so these centres functioned only for a few months.

A Closer Look at the Sittilingi Situation.

With the help of THI field staff for Sittilingi we were able to go familywise and enumerate the current educational status of the children. As can be seen the dropout rate at the 6-12 age group is very low. There is a definite group of dropouts of a significant number at the 13-16 age group. This is an area of concern and a group that probably requires alternatives to the mainstream education which has failed them.

Table 2. Detailed Data for Sittilingi Village

S.No	Details	no. of children
1	Dropouts -- 6-12 age group*	2
2	Dropouts – 13-16 age group*	20
3	Children going to Govt. School [6-16 yrs]	133
4	Children going to Private School at Kottapatti	18
5	Children studying outside	33
6	16-18 age group working at Sittilingi in farms**	22
7	16-18 age group working outside***	16

Note

*dropouts in both age groups [s.no 1 and 2] above are evenly distributed sex wise i.e. 50% boys and 50% girls

** working in their own family's fields and/ or working as cooly labour in others fields

***as migratory casual labour with lorries [4 persons] , in garment factories at Tiruppur area [8 persons] , elsewhere [4 persons]

Part III - Conclusions

1. There is a Govt. Primary school within 3kms of most villages. There is a general feeling among the people that the condition of schools have improved in the recent past. Despite this, the schools are generally badly run with the teachers not attending regularly.
2. There are hardly any dropouts at the primary school level, and generally the dropouts occur at or after class 8 level. The drop out rate among both boys and girls is the same.
3. There is a high level of motivation among parents to send their children to school. Parents often send children away to Govt./missionary run boarding schools wherever possible. Those who can afford it and are in the school bus route, send their children to a private school at Kottapatti.
4. The dropouts at the 13 yrs to 16 yrs age group look for livelihood options and generally prefer migrating out to industrial centres nearby, such as Tiruppur famed for hosiery/garment export industry.

After visiting all these Govt schools one observes that the schools provide the children only literacy and numeracy skills, which is not sufficient to survive in the fast changing world. Even this, most children are not proficient in, after years at school. Exposure to various books, general knowledge, awareness of current issues, news, social issues, even practical understanding of academic subjects is woefully inadequate. There is a need of Supplementing school education with all these missing aspects. Further, there are dropouts at class 8 who are usually 'failed' students, often from underprivileged groups. These children need to learn vocational skills as also get their self esteem back. There is a definite need to provide them with alternatives.