

# LIVING IN DARKNESS FOR LAST 50 YEARS, LET THERE BE LIGHT IN KERI

It is a listless life for residents of Keri hamlet located atop Ravana Hill deep inside Cotigao wildlife sanctuary. Living in darkness for over 50 years without any electricity and other basic amenities, time has come for the government to formulate a constructive rehabilitation policy for the Velip and Gaonkar tribals, writes **NIBEDITA SEN**.

The outer world connects with Goa as being a fun destination where one can chill out. But then there is another side of Goa, which lives on the fringes and is crying for basic amenities, like Keri hamlet. Located on top of Ravana Hill inside Cotigao wildlife sanctuary, one can reach this hamlet only after a treacherous trek of 12 km from the Cotigao village panchayat office. It takes almost three hours to reach the hamlet. Here the Velip and Gaonkar tribals live in isolation and in darkness. As the process of tribal development has assumed greater significance in the country, the State of Goa too is gearing up with the process. While the last two decades of developmental intervention has ushered in perceptible and appreciable social transformation and change of life style among the tribals in certain areas, the situation seems to be paradoxical to some extent.



**Prized possessions:** A 100-year-old woman herds her cattle home.



**Water of life:** Fresh water trickles through a spring in the hills. Pics: Atish Naik

There are also inhabitants where the developmental intervention has not been of a progressive nature. The social condition of the Velip Scheduled Tribe while examined from the perspective of social transformation is rather pathetic on one hand, while on the other is in a process of quick change.

"Of the different hamlets located in the Cotigao Wild Life Sanctuary, the hamlet of Keri poses quite peculiar and distinct type of livelihood challenges. The Velips residing in the far-flung and isolated settlement of Keri have lingered for long on several socio-economic indicators. These indigenous people have always considered land and blood as homologous, and have therefore not given up their original places of settlement. Their society, culture, religion, identity, and their very existence are intimately linked to the land they hold," Associate Professor in Sociology, Shree Mallikarjun College Canacona, Arvind N Haldankar told GT.

Prof Haldankar, who is a specialist in 'Sociology of Tribes', said that after having encountered an absolute deprivation of the barest livelihood necessities since the genesis of the settlement, a majority of the Velips are now manifesting an inclination of leaving their age-old habitats.

"In the wake of embracing modernity, these forest dependent families aspire not to remain marginalised but to be a part of the mainstream society. Thus, their desire and hope for a better future warrants a special attention and necessary intervention from concerned stakeholders to propose adequate and appropriate social action. This would require sustainable investments by government and non-governmental agencies to reconstruct



**In the lap of the forest:** Lush green fields on the hill top.



**Light in darkness:** A woman moves around with a solar powered lamp at night in her house.



**AT WORK:** A Velip tribal woman all set to prepare a meal before the dusk begins to fall.

their livelihoods in much better ways than before," he said.

According to Laxman Kushta Velip (aged above 60 years), one of the senior residents of Keri, initially there were only two houses in hamlet Kerim. As time passed by, some members of this hamlet moved to a nearby settlement Tirwali in Sanguem.

"But after a while they returned back to Keri. In 2018, Kerim village shelters 80 people in 15 houses. While 40 of us reside in the village, the younger population consisting of school students, drivers and daily wage labourers live in and around Cotigao village panchayat office," Velip said.

According to him, there is no electricity in his hamlet, although power is there in other hamlets in the base. We've made constant demands to the government but nothing has been heard so far. Neither do we have proper roads, nor any medical help," Velip lamented.

It is not just lack of electricity and toilets that trouble the tribals living here. There are other teething issues like absence of proper medical care due to the remote location of the hamlet.

"My 35 year-old-sister Regina is suffering from mental ill-

ness. We don't know whom to show and where to take her as there is nobody to help us. Earlier, in case of pregnancies, midwives came for help. But nowadays, the women go down and stay with their relatives," he said.

It is not just Velip who has borne the brunt of no medical facilities in the area. Hundred-year-old local resident Babu Velip had to be wrapped with a cloth and taken on the shoulders of villagers after suffering from paralytic attack.

"When I had a paralytic attack, I was taken to Canacona hospital by the villagers. They had wrapped me in a piece of cloth and shouldered for 15 km until we got any vehicle. The experience was terribly painful. Later I was taken to Karwar for further medication," said Velip, who also has a problem of chapped lips.

Ullas Mane Gaonkar, 40 year-old-farmer of Keri from Gaonkar tribe, mentioned that a solar lamp post installed by the government proves highly ineffective and therefore the villagers need an immediate substitute.



**ENVIRONMENT FRIENDLY:** Neat steps lead to the house on the hill top.

"Four solar panels for the entire village and two bulbs in each house are given to us before elections. But these solar panels do not work during the rainy season," Gaonkar said.

The tribals also vented their ire at the local public representatives. 80-year-old Babu Gaonkar and his 61-year-old wife Pandare Babu Gaonkar commented, "Even after our settlement was inspected by our elected representatives, we still do not have electricity and face hardships. We vote for them and this is what we get in return," the couple said.

The villagers however offered two solutions to the authorities for bailing them out. Either give them better amenities here which include electricity, road connectivity and toilet blocks or resettle them in a place of their choice after duly compensating them for their plantation.



**100-year-old Babu Velip survived a paralytic attack.**

"In the wake of embracing modernity, these forest dependent families aspire not to remain marginalised but to be a part of the mainstream society.

**Arvind N Haldankar,**  
Associate Professor in Sociology

## Leaders speak:

The elected representatives when approached for their response to the demands of Keri dwellers, said that they were aware of the issue. This is what they told to **NIBEDITA SEN**:

"There are some pockets entrapped in the wildlife area where problems cannot be resolved like any other normal problem. Similarly, Cotigao-Keri has its own restrictions and its solution is an exception. Those are specific cases and have to be dealt by specific provisions."



Chief Minister **Manohar Parrikar**

"We have already prepared an estimate for those villages which were left in Rural Electrification program. I have received the files. Within next month, we will be able to give them electricity. I don't know how the fifteen houses were left out. The problem was caused because the houses are located in the forest area. The forest department is not issuing a No Objection Certificate."



Power Minister **Pandurang Madkaikar**

"I will have to speak to the concerned local MLA and find out what is the exact condition there. In consultation with the MLA, I will decide if my assistance is required. Under Soubhagya Scheme, the power connection can be provided."



South Goa MP (Lok Sabha) **Narendra Sawaikar**

"I had visited them many times but I find they enjoy living there. Only thing is, they should be provided with proper sanitation and electricity. Regarding medical care, they are not dependant on allopathy but herbs. They were given a place to shift but they did not want to agree to it. I am waiting for the decision of Forest Right Committee (FRC) cases which will be done in one year's time"



Canacona MLA **Isidore Fernandes**

"The gradient makes it difficult for reaching up to Keri. The tribals will be provided with all the facilities if they agree to settle in plains."



Minister of Tribal Affairs **Govind Gaude**