

On power trip, but villagers of Pavagada divided into powerful and powerless

This is the story of several farm owners, who leased out their land to Shakti Sthala -- one of the biggest solar parks in Asia, at Pavagada taluk.



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Residents sit under a banyan tree at Kyataganacharulu village in Pavagada taluk | ASHISHKRISHNA HP

By Chetana Belagere and Ashwini M Sripad

Express News Service

PAVAGADA: Muniyappa Reddy, who once spent hours tilling his six-acre land, is today seen in an inebriated state most of the time and smoking under a banyan tree, while his wife and daughter cross the border to Andhra Pradesh to work as farm labourers.

This is the story of several farm owners, who leased out their land to Shakti Sthala -- one of the biggest solar parks in Asia, at Pavagada taluk.

But for the land taken on lease, the villages are given a “government dole”, which comes in the form of the lease amount of Rs 23,000 per acre per annum. The villages now boast of 24-hour power supply, pucca houses and good roads, but lack basic facilities like toilets and drinking water.

Those who do not own land are falling deeper into the debt trap. Unemployment has peaked in the area and labourers have to travel long distances to find work. In all, 12,800 acres of land at Vallur, Tirumani, Balasamudram, Kyatagancharulu and Rayacharulu villages of Pavagada taluk were acquired to set up the solar farm by the Karnataka Solar Power Development Corporation (KSPDCL).

A large number of women from these border villages go to Andhra Pradesh to work in farms. “Every day, some 15 vehicles come to pick up workers, mostly women, who are taken to farms across the border. We are paid Rs 200-300 per day,” said Eshwaramma from Vallur. At times, they travel up to four hours to earn meagre sums.

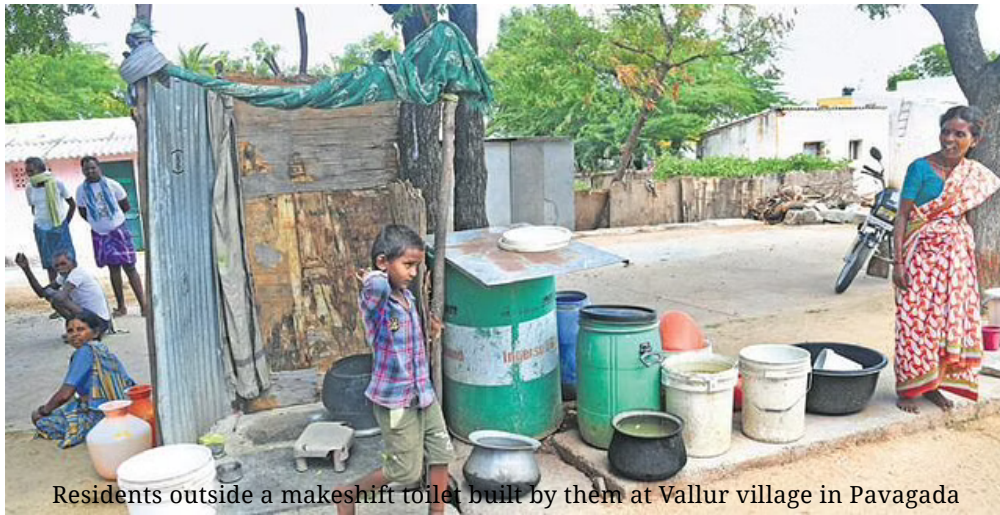
‘Farm owners push people from own community to work at solar park’

“Our men are not employed at the Solar Park. Large farm owners have their labour agents, who send men and women from their own community to the park for work. We are tired of requesting for even basic amenities like toilets. We have no option but to send even our teenage daughters for open defecation,” said Kamalamma from the same village.

A good number of farm labourers, who do not own land, have been demanding that they be given work, like cutting the grass or cleaning the panels, at the Solar Park. But, they allege, the company is not hiring them. A very few have been employed as security personnel who get a salary of Rs 12,000 per month.

When TNSE visited the villages, many farmers who had leased their land to the project seemed happy and content with Rs 23,000 given per acre. But many women are unhappy and ask how small landholders, with just 2-3 acres of land could survive with the lease amount. They said such farmers still have to find work.

Several elderly men, once landlords, said that Pavagada taluk once grew best sweet lime, groundnut, custard apple and tur dal, which were sent to Bengaluru. They even had groundnut oil mills.



Residents outside a makeshift toilet built by them at Vallur village in Pavagada taluk, Tumakuru district | AS HISHKRISHNA HP

But though rainfall reduced, farming activity, along with dairy farming and sericulture, continued. But not even a trace of those occupations is seen in any of the villages now. The usual sight in villages of cattle tied in front of houses is missing as there are no green patches. “Since cows have gone missing, the villagers are getting milk in sachets, which was unheard of earlier,” said Shivappa from Achamanahalli. “Many farmers who have leased out 5 acres or more are getting a good income . But the government should have ensured that those who did not have land were also given employment or trained in some skills. We can see alcoholism and a sense of laziness among majority of men in these villages,” said a senior official from Pavagada.

Siddappa (name changed), who owns 20 acres of land gets Rs 4.6 lakh per annum. He neither spends money on his farm or farm labourers, like earlier. He does not have to go to his farm nor is he worried about rain or drought. Since he started getting a steady income, he has built a bigger house.

With no physically demanding farm work, the health of villagers has started deteriorating and many are suffering from lifestyle diseases like diabetes and hypertension. Though the villagers now have better roads, regular power supply and streetlights, they are deprived of amenities like drinking water and toilets. Like most

parts of Pavagada, these villages depend on borewell, which has excess fluoride content that results in discolouration of teeth and other ailments. Many households do not have proper toilets, forcing villagers to practice open defecation.

Prof TV Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences at Indian Institute of Science said that when governments take up such projects, they should ensure community engagement. “The issue of co-benefits is not something that comes about naturally. It has to be prompted. These villagers can be given alternative land in other places or trained in some skills to make them employable,” he advised.

Agreeing that it is not all rosy for even big farm owners, several of whom have been cheated by agents, G Narasimha Reddy, president of the Pavagada Taluk Raiha Sangha, said, “Every minister promises employment for locals, but nothing has happened. Very few locals have been employed, while others have been shooed away, saying the company needs people with technical skills. But one can see labourers from Tamil Nadu and North India being employed even for menial jobs like cutting the grass and cleaning the panels.”

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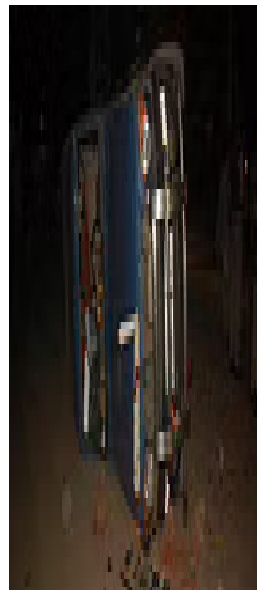
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