

TODDY IS BANNED IN TAMIL NADU, BUT PALM JAGGERY SUSTAINS THE LIVES OF PALMYRAH TAPPERS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

On the connoisseurs' table, you may have feni or mahua, but certainly not toddy. And in Tamil Nadu, despite regular protests, the government has banned the sale of toddy derived (from the palmyrah tree), even though its alcoholic content is far less than other alcohol manufactured using molasses and sold in Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation Limited shops. Last month, a number of palmyrah associations came together for a meeting in Ramanathapuram, where they decided to submit a petition to the Chief Minister pressing for revocation of the ban.

So for the tappers in Tamil Nadu today, it is only palm jaggery that gives them succour.

A tapper climbs a palmyrah tree | Photo Credit: L Balachandar

It is three in the morning and the silence is broken by the whisper of a gentle breeze that sets the palmyrah fronds rustling. The darkness is broken by the flash of torchlights. The palm tappers have begun their day.

Clothed in just loincloths, with knives in hand to slice off the tip of the inflorescence axis, and a *kuduvai* (vessel used to gather the sap) fastened to their waist they begin climbing up the trees with headlamps lighting their way. On the crown of the tree hang pots collecting the slowly oozing sap.

Lured by the nectar are wasps and snakes that make these trees their home. It is indeed a dangerous occupation. And for those getting initiated in the art of climbing these trees, the petioles (grooves on the trunk) can draw blood.

As the blush of dawn cloaks the Palk Bay and the Gulf of Mannar, the tappers, with brimming *kuduvais*, walk back to makeshift sheds where jaggery is made. The coastline that makes a concave loop from Ramanathapuram to Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu, is seemingly barren. But the vast swathes of rust-coloured earth is perfect for palmyrahs.

India has some 10 crore palmyrah trees, of which Tamil Nadu has five crore: the palmyrah is in fact the State tree here. And of these five crore trees, about 1.5 crore grow in these vast, unbroken stretches in Ramanathapuram. All parts of the tree are useful — products like palm baskets are made from fronds and exported, and for centuries, the trees have made good fences.

They provide livelihood for 40,000 men who tap the sap — men who live impoverished lives. For these largely uneducated men, toddy tapping gives them an income for a six months a year. They spend the rest of the year doing nothing or make their way to Puducherry where tapping toddy is allowed. At the beginning of the season, the tappers travel from their villages to these palm-fringed farms, with their families, hens, goats and dogs in tow.

On bare earth, they set up temporary sheds with tin roofs that cost 5,000 to erect. Thopparaj, 35, walks to a shed with the sap he has collected. The roof is made of woven palm-leaf and is in shreds; a little curl of smoke rises up. Inside the shed his wife squats on the floor, stoking a flame beneath a big cauldron. As Thopparaj pours the sap, Lakshmi Thopparaj, 35, slowly stirs

the liquid with a ladel. After an hour, the liquid splutters. The smoke from the firewood turns suffocating but she goes on.

Three hours later the gooey mass is poured into broken coconut shells that act as moulds for the palm jaggery to set. One litre of *padaneer* (sap) gives her 140 gm of palm jaggery; tappers climb trees three times a day to bring home the liquid. As the first batch of jaggery is being made, the men take a breather and sit under the shade of a tree. Friendly banter slowly turns serious as they talk about money lenders.

Thoparaj's brother Chinnaraj, 28, wonders how he would be able to manage the birth of his second child. His wife Mari Selvi, 23, is ready to give birth anytime now. Her first son, a two year toddler, is living with them in the shed. For a scan they will have to shell out 2,000 and will have to go to Thoothukudi about 100 kms away.

For all this, Chinnaraj and his brother will have to use a moneylender the trader to get money for interest.

The men must pay a lease amount to the landowner to climb the trees, and for this they lean on money lenders: for 100 trees they need 20,000 as lease. They rely on money lenders also during the months of no work. The tappers have to sell the jaggery they make to these moneylenders for a pittance of 120 per kg, the same jaggery they can sell in markets for 400 kg. And the moneylenders also get interest for the money they have loaned. The tappers meanwhile are mired in debt.

Sixteen-year-old Kamaraj Chinnaraj who is resting on a broken cot, has discontinued his studies and is learning the trade to help his father Maria Singham, 50, pay back a debt of 5 lakh that he had taken for his daughter's wedding. Chinnaraj laughs wryly and says, "repaying the debt is almost impossible as we are unemployed for six months."

Ganesh, 45, a toddy tapper, fell from a tree and tore his ligaments in the spine. But he got no compensation from the Tamil Nadu Palm Tree Workers Social Security and Welfare Scheme (2006) as there was 'no physical separation of limb'. He had to borrow money to be treated at a private hospital. He continues to climb these trees to repay the debt.

It is this cycle of debt that government agencies such as NABARD are trying to break. K. Arun Kumar, district development manager, Ramanathapuram, says they have started two farmers' producer's organisations in the region around Sayalkudi and that one of the organisations has already got a loan of 10 lakh to start a jaggery making unit. "With these units coming up we hope to begin value-addition of palm products too," he says.

But for now, Thopparaj continues to sleep under the stars hoping that dawn will bring him a bounty of *padaneer* to keep the moneylenders at bay.

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