

Talk with Siddamma

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1) Panchayat Elections

Panchayat election is coming up. This year 35 people from Irula communities are standing for elections. They are competing at all levels District, Union, Panchayat, Ward.

There is also reservation for the Irulas. In the 1991 census the number of Irulas were grossly under represented. This was because most of the teachers who take census did not reach out to people not in the mainstream. While we did point this out to the commission and also contacted the central government, we were not very organized then. In 2001 census, when the survey started we made a detailed survey of all the villages and population in Vellore and Tiruvallur, and made a booklet that we submitted to the central government. We were well represented in these two districts and made the government aware of the very low representation in the governance too. The numbers in Tiruvallur were 60,000 vs Govt collected numbers 11,000. The reservation for the Irula population in the Panchayat elections this year has been increased from 0.25% to 1% due to better representation.

Last Panchayat, 3 seats had reservation this time there are 12 people. However, we have lost 4 seats because there are no Irulas in these locations. Even according to census there are no Irulas in the villages so it makes no sense why they were allocated to Irulas. Among these 4: 1 is in Tiruvallur where non-Irulas are being asked to stand because no Irulas have come forward. There are 3 in Vellore, in one there is a landowner who is standing claiming to be an Irula.

We have had only very little time to prepare for the Panchayat elections in the last 10 days, that was when the seats for the Irulas were announced. People need to decide on who they want to be their representatives and the representatives need to have correct documentation to be nominated.

What is the documentation required for an Irula to stand for elections:

1. Birth certificate
2. Residential certificate – ration card
3. No criminal cases against the person – no objection certificate from the police
4. No pending income tax
5. He should be on the voting list. In some case, if they have voter's ids, but are not on the list and then you have to take it to the bureaucracy, get a letter from police, Panchayat, etc.

6. Three people from the village need to nominate the person and state that he is a person from the village

Q: When was an announcement made about which seats will be on reservation for the Irulas.

A: All the information was announced only 10 days back.

In the higher level of the elections the political parties get involved and try to get the seats. It is highly competitive and political and you need to reach out to a lot of people, so as independent candidates we have managed only one candidate.

Q: Why not also stand for areas without reservation.

A: They are standing for 35 seats. There is reservation only in 12, but other areas are difficult since people don't vote if someone is an Irula, but we had a little luck last time so we will try again.

Q: In Vellore, how did a landlord stand?

A: The system of reserving seats has a loop-hole that you don't have to produce a tribal certificate to stand for election. If someone objects they need to produce proof that the person standing is not a tribal. Last year, in one case, we had to go through legal means and show that the person's son's admission in school was as a Reddy. It took 2 yrs for the court to say that he was not eligible and he was then given an honorary position. But, this is a learning experience.

Tsunami Cuddalore:

There is an appointment on October 18th with the collector for the South Pichavaram housing. The land was allocated for the construction, but it has not been mapped out or measured and it needs to be official before we can start building. We will be sitting and planning this with the government. They have issued general pattas without actually mapping it and putting it in official records yet.

I'm not sure we will be able to meet him on 18th though since there is election on 13th –14th. Counting and announcement of results is on 18th. We had to meet him personally to get this appointment. We start construction with the design we already have. We will need permission from the government for the drying platform for the fish in the village and allocation of common space.

The schools are presently being run in North Pichavaram and it is not comfortable for children in South Pichavaram to travel to this center. However, we will need some support to do the same in South Pichavaram as well.

3. Resource Center

There had been some continued problems with the landlord and his son, from whom we purchased the land for the resource center. After we purchased the

land, Madhavan, the landlord's son was volunteering for the resource center. We believed that he was quite motivated towards helping the villagers be able to learn from the experiments on the land. When we hired the staff we also hired him. However, after the experience of organizing the farmers meeting that some people did not come because they thought that it was associated with the landlord, there were further problems both in terms of taking advantage of the other staff and the resource person who had come to help us, as well as taking commission on goods procured for the center. Also, things like vermi-compost that we were supposed to make on the center was purchased directly from market to pocket the initial investment. We were quite taken aback and got everyone together and talked about the issues, we also took into the loop our friends who had supported the finances for those efforts. We decided to ask Madhavan to leave the resource center. Of course this was easier said than done. Following this we had some trouble in getting back supplies that we had stored in the landlords house. But, eventually involving the Panchayat and the local people we have finally got back our supplies and are not being troubled by the landlord.

We had put an open accounting system in place like we did in all our other efforts, but since he was maintaining accounts he had managed to misuse the resources. Sugandi the treasurer of Bharathi Trust is now looking into all the finances and the responsibility of the finances is on all the staff at the center.

Q: Have you informed your friends about the issue since they were supporting it?

A: Yes, we informed Muriel and kept her in the loop for resolving the issue.

Q: Do you have an idea of the amount that he incorrectly used or tried to keep?

A: Sugandi estimates that this is around Rs.40,000. We plan to continue working on getting these funds back including legal action once we have an accurate estimate.

Action Items

- 1) Confirm Tsunami Cuddalore budget supported to Siddamma
- 2) Educational center Cuddalore and support of teacher follow up
- 3) Send funds for resource center and breakdown of funds
- 4) Asha-fellowship followup