LIVELIHOODS January 12, 2024

Rethinking rehabilitation for the Irular tribe of Tamil Nadu

A social housing project offers valuable lessons on what works and doesn't when resettling marginalised communities.

by DR PRINCE SOLOMON
full name: Prince Solomon Devadass

8 min read

In April 2019, a housing colony opened its gates to its new residents, many of whom had never lived in a concrete house before. These were members of the Irular tribe, a semi-nomadic, indigenous group native to Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. The colony, built by the Tamil Nadu government in the village of Meesanallur in Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu, was called Dr Abdul Kalam Puram. Spread across 37 acres, it comprised 143 housing units, an anganwadi, a community centre, a biogas plant, grazing grounds, and plots earmarked for cottage industries that included a brick kiln, carpentry and charcoal units, a paper bag–making studio, and a dairy. The colony was conceived as a model village that would meet the twin objectives of formal housing and livelihood generation, both of which form the bedrock of a sustainable rehabilitation programme.

Families most afflicted by poverty and deprived of formal housing were shortlisted for the project. Of the 143, 100 had been rescued from bonded labour and 43 had been displaced by the floods of 2015—all of them had been gathered from different parts of Tiruvannamalai district.

Irulars consider it important to live in close proximity to the spirit of their ancestors. | Picture courtesy: Madras Christian College

The long road to resettlement

Resettling marginalised and vulnerable Adivasi families into new housing projects isn't simply a matter of building them new homes. Resettlement is a social transition after all—a gradual process where families adopt a new way of life. They therefore need help in overcoming anxieties about an uncertain future, one that they haven't scripted themselves but that has been written for them. The challenge becomes even more pronounced when the sociocultural complexities of the communities are not completely understood by the facilitating and implementing organisations.

We learned this the hard way with the Meesanallur project—when the houses were ready to be occupied, the families were reluctant to relocate.

One of the reasons was the deep connection that Irulars have with the land they call home, even when it doesn't legally belong to them. They consider it important to live in close proximity to the spirit of their ancestors, who are typically buried nearby. The other reason was assurance of work. Having found jobs—either as seasonal agricultural labourers or woodcutters—in and around their villages, they did not wish to give them up now for new and untested prospects.

And so, while they may have initially agreed to the offer of a self-owned house elsewhere, when the time came to move they wanted to stay where they were, even if it meant risking eviction later on.

In order to convince the families of the social security they stood to gain at Meesanallur and help them successfully transition to the new model of community living, the Department of Social Work, Madras Christian College, was brought on board. We, along with a nonprofit, designed a three-phase plan for the project.

Phase 1: Building trust

The Irulars, classified as a particularly vulnerable tribal group, number 1.89 lakh in Tamil Nadu according to the 2011 census. Chronic poverty has driven many to daily wage and agricultural work and, invariably, to bonded labour. By some estimates, approximately 90 percent of rescued bonded labourers in Tamil Nadu belong to the Irular tribe. One study confirmed that 27 percent of them were trapped in generational bonded work—a situation exacerbated by their poor access to government schemes.

Discriminatory attitudes towards Irulars are prevalent everywhere. Because of their storied skills at snake catching, those seeking scheduled tribe certificates are sometimes asked to demonstrate these skills as proof of their ethnic identity. Their continued social discrimination makes it difficult for them to trust outsiders, and so whether in rural or urban settlements, Irulars largely keep to themselves.

Given this context, our immediate task was to win their confidence. The more we engaged with them, the more we learned about their world view, their customs, and their psycho-social make-up. We realised, for example, that many Irulars live for the day. This means they'll only work as much as they need to for their immediate requirements, and stop working until the need for money arises again. It's important to understand these aspects fully before planning living and livelihood projects for them.

We started by engaging with the families in their homes. After a couple of such visits, which helped establish our credentials, we organised a cultural programme in a village close to the site of the proposed colony. We brought all the Irular families to the site in vans and invited a troupe of Irular performers to stage songs and dances and a street play for the crowd. A clear message was conveyed through these performances—that a new life awaited them and they must seize the opportunities on offer to experience it.

We drove home this message consistently through several exercises. One such exercise was to photograph each family in front of their old home and present the portrait to them at a ceremony. Most had never taken a family photo before, and we thought the image would also serve as a reminder of the life they had left behind when they later moved to their new home.

Additionally, we encouraged them to imagine the future their children would have. We got them to think about what a stable future meant, with a land *patta* (a type of land deed), a community certificate that entitled them to government schemes, and assured work. We brought in influential Irulars and leaders from the rescued bonded labour community to convince them. Their children helped too.

Phase 2: Plotting the path

Once the majority agreed to move, we proceeded to plot their demographics and map their skills. Over a two-day camp, our team of 10–15 volunteers surveyed the children, youth, women, and men, noting their age, individual skill sets, current livelihood options, and aspirations for their children. This data was used by the government to customise the colony for them, setting

up facilities they wanted and income-generating avenues that utilised their skills. A complete medical assessment was also conducted, and the necessary vaccines were administered.

The Meesanallur project took two years longer than what the Irulars were initially promised. | Picture courtesy: Madras Christian College

Progress, however, was slow: The families moved into their new homes three years after we started to engage with them. The delay was partly on account of the transfer of the officer who had conceived the project. There's often a lag between the conception of a project and its implementation, particularly when new government officials take over. One has to then go back to square one, discussing plans and strategies with the new officer all over again. Before we do this, we give them time to settle into their new role and understand the project well. It's only when they take no action that we gently remind them that the project is stuck. To compound the problem, some of them find it difficult to trust us. They don't understand what an educational institution has to do with a resettlement project. Nonprofits are viewed with the same mistrust.

We have learned that patience, persistence, and diplomacy are crucial, and so we carefully curate and pace our conversations. This, however, takes time and, in the interim, people can lose hope in the project. The Meesanallur project took two years longer than what was initially promised. When timelines are extended, we not only have to build trust with new officers but also have to rebuild the trust we developed with the community itself, assuring them of the project's continuance through constant engagement.

Phase 3: Homecoming

The families moved into the colony a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and we had to monitor their progress remotely over the next year and a half, given the curfews. We deputed colony leaders to send us regular reports on the phone about how people were adjusting to their new circumstances. When the curfew lifted, we sent our students to track ground realities.

On the whole, the families were content. They were proud of their new homes and invited us to enter them, when earlier they would talk to us at the door. We also noticed their attitudes changing—they now displayed a sense of confidence. Given new opportunities, some shone as born leaders, others as natural entrepreneurs.

But problems arose too. Lack of integration between different groups was one of the main challenges we encountered when the colony was occupied. Being a motley group from across the district, and accustomed to living in small clusters of no larger than 10–15 people, the Irulars were indisposed to community life of this scale. Dr Abdul Kalam Puram had 564 residents—intergroup conflicts were certain to arise and factions bound to form. The challenge was greater for recently rescued bonded labourers, particularly those who had emerged from generational bondage. The power dynamics that started to play out in the colony, with some community members asserting their authority (evident in all communal groupings), rattled them. They were accustomed to intimidation by their captors, but not by their own kinsfolk.

A leadership council had been set up at the start, with 13 members elected by the community itself to settle internal disputes and bring people's problems and needs to the government's notice. However, this new authority did not find support from those who had been hailed as leaders back in their respective hamlets. Additionally, group affiliations favoured some for employment over others, creating more social tension. Despite 11 cottage industries being established, there weren't enough jobs to go around.

Some Irular families were from the village of Meesanallur itself, and their connections with local landowners and employers helped them secure farm work, woodcutting assignments, or lease land for fishing outside the colony. But those who struggled to secure work both within the colony and outside found life difficult, and eventually sought to return to their old homes. Thirty to 40 families ended up leaving. Some would return to the colony intermittently having found seasonal work elsewhere; others did not.

Learnings for future projects

Housing projects for Adivasis must be undertaken with thought to their distinct way of life. We impose urban standards of progress and development on them, when we should, in fact, pay close attention to their own norms and practices and design projects accordingly. Here are some of the lessons we learned from this project:

1. The houses designed for them shouldn't be alien to them. Small adaptations can be made to make them feel at home—for example, instead of a flat roof, a slanting one to mimic the thatched roof they are used to, and a verandah for them to sit and chat with their neighbours or for the elders to sleep on. At other projects, I've seen houses converted into godowns or animal pens, with the window blocked and a lean-to erected against the

outside wall, which then becomes their home. I've also seen poorly ventilated concrete homes blackened with soot because the family continues to burn firewood inside.

We design these schemes and projects with good intentions, but we should make sure that the people for whom these houses are built want to live in them. We cannot assume that just because it's a free house, they'll settle in willingly. We cannot also make presumptions about their occupational skills; an example is dairy farming. Each household at Meesanallur was given a cow to supplement their income through the sale of milk. However, the Irular tribe is unaccustomed to owning cattle, and goat rearing would have been better suited to them.

2. It is important to consider the location of these colonies. Are they so far removed from primary health centres, schools and community colleges, and affordable transport systems that they become unsustainable in the long run?

3. Instead of drawing people from different talukas to one mega housing colony, the Meesanallur model can be replicated in smaller colonies for 35–40 families across talukas, so that people are not removed from familiar surroundings. This will also ensure that everyone has access to livelihood opportunities. We all have social bank accounts that grow from the social relations and economic opportunities we build over time in our cities and villages. When people migrate to a new place to start a new life, this account is often empty, and they have to rebuild it from scratch. This process becomes more onerous when the population outstrips available resources and competition ensues.

4. Resettlement projects for vulnerable groups must plan for a period of handholding not only before but also after people move in, for at least three years. This latter part—called community organisation—involves bringing the community together to foster a sense of solidarity through celebrations, by setting up self-help groups, and so on. Handholding includes helping them adjust to the new way of life and to new patterns of work. Government support helps plan and fund these interventions. Without this aided adjustment, there's a high risk that people will return to their villages if social or economic expectations crumble.

5. And finally, the individual who conceives of the project should be part of its advisory council till the project is completed.

Social housing projects have a crucial role to play in helping marginalised people access a better quality of life. However, an alternative to exclusive, homogenous (or even mixed-group) housing colonies could be to develop inclusive models that empower, integrate, and anchor people firmly within their existing environments. How can entrenched systems of class- and caste-based inequities be weeded out and equitable models of community

living be seeded? How can marginalised families step out of the margins and into the heart of a community? In other words, instead of sending people away, can we imagine a new and radical type of 'homecoming'?

—

Know more

- Read this article to learn why and how development plans for the Adivasis should be co-created with them.

- Read this report to understand the challenges and opportunities of developing sustainable social housing in India.

Tags: Adivasi Communities, Affordable Housing, Marginalised Communities

We want IDR to be as much yours as it is ours. Tell us what you want to read.
writetous@idronline.org

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DR PRINCE SOLOMON
Dr Prince Solomon Devadass is an associate professor and field work coordinator of social work at Madras Christian College.

COMMENTS

LOAD COMMENTS

READ NEXT