

## ***How the farmers of Semmenarai came back to their Thenai Kadu***

Amidst the green tea fields as one drives up to the hills of Kotagiri is the small village of Semmenarai and 20 Irula families are hard at work in the traditional Irula land called Marikadu. It is but a small clearing in the majestic hills stretching up from the Bhavani Sagar but it is a rare community spirit that drives these families. These families have started a process that used to be a common sight in the district about two decades ago but is now a rare sight. They are preparing a *thenai kadu*.—



-*thenai kad\_u* is a mixed cropped field with an astonishing range of crops including Ragi(Finger millet), Samai(Little millet), Thenai(Foxtail millet), Keerai(Amaranthus), Macca Cholam(Maize), Kadugu(Mustard), Varagu(Kodo millet), Milagai (Chillies), Pusinikai(Pumpkin), Togari(Pigeon Pea), Mochai(Lablab) and

Suryakanthi(Sunflower). This diversified crop system not only offers a variety of foods to the family diet but is a carefully evolved system with ecological considerations for pollinator and pest management and one that also factors in labour availability and efficiency through staggered harvesting practices.

The *thenai kadu* has a special significance in the cultural lives of the Alu Kurumbas and the Irulas who inhabit the Nilgiris Slopes. It is the traditional subsistence crop that yielded food and small surplus and along with forest produce collection, formed the two important pillars of indigenous livelihoods. Traditionally, the village elders called the Gowda(village headman), Urali(leader), Jathi(clan leader) and the Mannukaran (keeper of seeds)are important players in the formation of the *thenai kadu* and officiate at decisions of when to start land clearing, when to sow, start harvest etc.

Over the years, increasing wildlife raids, uncertainties of rainfall, unavailability of seed, difficult manual processing and poor marketing facilities\_ have taken a toll on many small agricultural communities and many families have moved to small scale tea and coffee planting while others leave their lands fallow and work on nearby tea estates as daily labour.

The *thenai kadu* is as much a social mobilization as it is an agricultural activity. Rotational fallows are practiced by several families to help the land regain its fertility. The fallow cycles usually range between 3-5 years. And in the interim, the forest quickly returns to the land and to tap into the fertility of the land, the family must work hard to clear



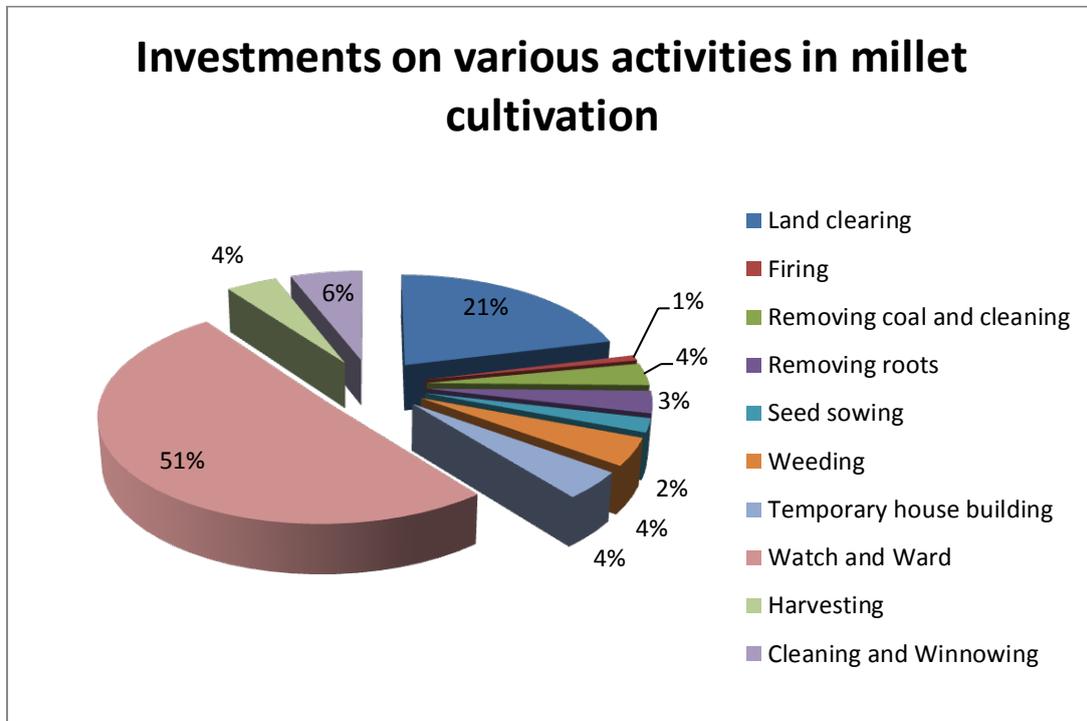
the bushes and weeds. Many forest animals have also made the fields their home during the while. So of necessity, the land clearing activity prior to creation of the *thenai kadu* is a community effort. It is very difficult to undertake it as one or two individuals. Of the total effort required to cultivate one crop, land clearing expenses account for a third. This is an important deterrent for communities like Semmanarai when they decided to start millet agriculture.



As we sit on a fallen log talking about the fertile land around us, Lakshmiamma says, “we used to do millet cultivation here in and in 2003-2004, we have grown ragi and thenai and mochai here. Even though it is an *yanai kadu* – elephant land, we have worked this land and they(the elephants) have not affected us because we have maintained the respect and decorum that the *thenai kadu* requires. Speaking of why they stopped millet cultivation, she says that in between we had lost the seeds required and then when Keystone helped us with seed and soil and water conservation work support we recultivated the land till the Special Task Force(in search of bandit Veerappan) started patrolling these fields.



Raman says “we have to buy *thenai* from Karamadai even for our ritual uses and what kind of farmers are we that we cannot even grow our own *thenai*?” It was this sentiment that led Balan, Raman, Lakshmiamma to resolve to start millet cultivation this year. And the biggest obstacle in front of them was the land clearing activity.



Who would be able to support them in clearing the bushes and weeds and making then land fit for cultivation again after more than an decade? They came to Keystone with this question and we advised them that the Tamil Nadu Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme had land development, especially for tribal communities, in its mandate. We helped them represent the case to the District Rural Development Agency and its Project Director moved swiftly to instruct the- Block Development Officer. A survey of the land was done and an estimate for land clearing and soil and water conservation measures drawn up. Job cards were issued to the people who did have them and the families went back to work on their own lands with the support of the government. It was a pleasant surprise to the people to see that the government had moved so quickly in response to their request. Too much delay would have meant that the lands could not have been made ready by the *Aadi pattam*(the sowing season in the tamil month of Aadi).

At the time of writing this, 28 members belonging to 20 families have worked between 75-100 days on their own fields and estimate a requirement of a further 50 days of work per family. The average farm size per family is about an acre.

This one strategic support has multiple outcomes – agricultural renewal on fallow lands, people working on their own lands, enriched family diets, ecologically appropriate land use and strengthened community initiatives. This instance of millet cultivation in Semmenarai is a powerful example of how a government scheme can route public investment to support crucial livelihood activities among the most vulnerable populations. Indeed, with scaled up support and widespread replication, it can restore a lost agriculture and a dying food system to the indigenous people of these hills.