

# The village has not had a single wedding for more than 10 years: Crops fail, young people cannot marry, the elderly are left behind in the countryside... just because of this!

As the sea encroaches on India's coastal villages, livelihoods are devastated and weddings are a luxury as young women refuse to move to places where they see no future.



In Udaykani – a coastal village in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, the walls of houses were once decorated with motifs related to marriage that were considered auspicious for the bride and groom. Nowadays, the patterns have faded a lot. The village, which was once a center for celebrations, has not been able to welcome any brides in more than a decade.

With the sea on one side and fields on the other, Udaykani along with the neighboring village of Tandahar were severely affected by a super cyclone. With the increasing environmental upheaval of the Bay of Bengal over the years, soil and water salinity has increased, with consequent loss of agricultural land, livelihoods and even marriage prospects.

Mr. Vaidehi Kardi, 64 years old, from Tandahar village, said: 'When the soil is salty, crops shrink. Gradually, the water also became salty and our lives faded away. Our son's marriage has become difficult. Everyone feels that our village is no longer safe.'

According to the Indian National Disaster Management Authority, with a coastline of 7,500 km, the Indian subcontinent is exposed to nearly 10% of the world's storms, most of which form over the Bay of Bengal and

reach the coast. east. The Bay of Bengal records four times as many cyclones as the Arabian Sea on India's west coast. From 2020 to June last year, nine cyclones hit the Bay of Bengal.

The state of Odisha also recorded 28% erosion along its 280-mile coastline. Last year, 16 villages in the state were swept away by seas and another 247 villages face the same fate as sea levels rise.

Mr. Budheswar Kardi, 74, from Udaykani village said: 'Our house was completely destroyed and we lost most of our agricultural land. The sea has moved inward so we had to move deeper inland. We tried to revive our land but with little success. Now it feels like the sea is encroaching every year.'

Mr. Arjun Pradhan, 58 years old, has been looking for a wife for his son Abhijeet for 5 years. Four years ago, he urged his children to move to the city. 'There was a time when men in our village got married at the age of 20 or 21. Today, many single people in their 30s still haven't found the right person.'

'I told my son to leave the village, not only to find a job but also to find a wife. I want him to have a stable and good life,' he said.

It's not just the prospect of marriage. With increasing soil salinity making water undrinkable, even friends and relatives are reluctant to visit the village. Kanchan Swain, 50, from Tandahar village, said: 'Whoever visits us never stays overnight because there is not enough potable water. Even bathing is not allowed for tourists for fear of skin diseases. Villagers had to trade grain or oil for drinking water from villages 10 miles away.'

Salinization of agricultural land is one of the most pressing environmental problems. According to a study by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, more than 833 million hectares of land worldwide have been affected by salinity, equivalent to 10% of agricultural land. Some estimates show that high salinity affects one-third of irrigated agricultural land, and the rate is increasing, at 10% a year.

As agricultural land becomes increasingly unable to withstand salinity, traditional livelihoods are thrown out of balance. 'What is left for the village for us to continue here?' Mr. Kardi said bitterly.

'We have been farming for generations but today the land is no longer productive. What other choice do we have but to send our children elsewhere?'

Coastal villages are now home to mostly older men and women – those left behind to tend their lands as young people migrate. Even so, neither a job nor a life partner were easy to find even after migration.

Abhijeet Pradhan, who moved to Hyderabad, said: 'My job here is not permanent. I work as a waiter at a hotel. I've moved three jobs in the past two years, and always come home after work. Who would agree to marry someone with such an uncertain future?'

A 32-year-old man from Udaykani, who did not want to be named, said he had been rejected four times by women introduced by his family.

He said: 'Every girl who comes to my house is worried about her future. My parents want me to find a life partner and get married where I work, Chennai. They were afraid that if she or her family visited our village, they might also refuse.'

The parents and grandparents of Satya Kardi, 27, from Tandahar, also hope he finds a partner at work. 'But I haven't decided yet whether I want to marry someone with many cultural differences and far from home,' he said. 'Also, how can I feed my family on a meager salary of 17,000 rupees (5.1 million VND) a month?'

Kardi's father Jagannath, 53, reminisces about the rich fields and bountiful harvests of the past. He said: 'We have tried to restore crop production but salinity has caused heavy damage. Our crops cannot grow and all vegetables are infected with pests. We can only harvest enough to eat, let alone sell to make money.'

NA Ansari, a social activist in the area, said: 'The impact of climate change is increasingly evident in these villages, forcing the forestry department to plant casuarina forests to minimize the impact of encroachment. saline intrusion. But up to now, there is still no accurate assessment of the damage or the impending consequences to support these villages.'

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