

This publication is a collaborative initiative between the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) of the International Institute for Asian Studies Leiden, The Netherlands, and the Department of Social Sciences at the French Institute in Pondicherry, India. Building trans-regional, civically grounded pedagogies, and educational resources relevant to participation in a global society is a shared goal.

மோட்டாங்கால் பிடிம் மார்த்தநாறு எனவே  
**மலையாளத்தேபாந்தம்**  
**கெபூரூபாப்பாதை**  
கைக்ஞந்தல் நூழ்கைகளைச் சாம நாளையும்  
மாணாவரி கொல்ல படும் பர்க்கறை

## Words from Jawadhu Hills

Eastern Ghats, South India



Words From Jawadhu Hills Eastern Ghats, South India





*To the farmers and agricultural workers of the  
Jawadhu hills, whose labor, knowledge, and  
perseverance shape landscapes, sustain livelihoods,  
and continue to preserve millet cultivation*



*Words from Jawadhu Hills*, is part of the Wordbook Series project of the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). HAB wordbooks inhabit the in-between world of words (nouns, verbs and phrases) as they are spoken and used in different socio-cultural and geographical contexts. Unlike glossaries, lexicons, and dictionaries, these wordbooks make visible and audible the communicative routines, and the invisible practices of reminiscing, disclosing, visualizing, longing, retelling, crossing, negotiating, that are often part of everyday speech exchanges. *Words from Jawadhu Hills* is the fourth publication in this series.

This booklet is fifth in the Science & Society series, published by the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP), which aims to make scientific research accessible to a wider audience. Enriched with field illustrations, these booklets contribute to the growing fields of action research, applied research, and citizen science. Beyond knowledge dissemination, the series seeks to inspire the younger generation, encouraging them to explore similar opportunities in India and beyond. It builds on IFP's long-standing role as a bridge between India, France, Europe, and the wider world.



# Words from Jawadhu Hills

## Eastern Ghats, South India

# Foreword

Hélène Guétat-Bernard, Sociologist  
École Nationale Supérieure de Formation  
de l'Enseignement Agricole de  
Toulouse-Auzeville, France

The idea for this booklet first emerged with Aarti, during a brief stay in the home of Jaya and Raman, a millet farming couple living in Vazhakkadu village in March 2023. I had always been inspired by the way this couple, whom I have come to know over the years, held their relationships towards each other, their children, extended family, neighbours and other members of their community. In this booklet, the voices of Jaya, Raman and other farmers, offer a glimpse into the world of millet cultivators in Jawadhu hills in the Eastern Ghats of Tamil Nadu, in South India. I am ever so grateful to them for taking the time to interact with us. Their unflinching generosity has been vital to the making of this co-production.

This wordbook seeks to draw readers into the life of millet farmers inhabiting a semi-arid region, through the words they use in their daily life. It underscores the value of local food ecologies, a long-term interest of the French Institute of Pondicherry (IFP) under its Local Food Systems (LFS) platform. I am happy that this wordbook project, initiated by the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program, of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), provides us an opportunity to collaborate in developing a new, linguistically engaged, community-based approach to the broader question of food justice.

Millets are staple grains in demand for their nutritional value and climate resilience, even more so after the recognition of 2023 as the International Year of Millets by the United Nations (UN) and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Even though the fair distribution of food and food democracy i.e. the capacity to organize issue-based discussions between multiple stakeholders (namely farmers, governmental and non-governmental organizations, academics, policy makers, food entrepreneurs, and consumers), is not our primary aim here, the words of farmers themselves are very revealing of these concerns.

*Words from Jawadhu Hills* confronts the politics of scientific and developmentalist knowledge production, whilst acknowledging the unequal relationship between researchers and millet farmers in South India. We have selected 30 words drawn from personal conversations and collective discussions, in consultation with the farmers themselves. The exercise has proved to be invaluable for understanding the world inhabited by millet cultivators in their own words. These words draw attention to a people's intimacy with objects, spaces, times, ideas, representations, interventions, and ongoing relationships within the context of a group's socio-cultural and ecological legacy in the Jawadhu hills.

The booklet is both a testimony of, and a gift to, the Malaiyali community who have lived in these hills for centuries.

It may be used as a demonstration of their life-world as well as an instrument of self-recognition which they could strongly reclaim in a rapidly changing world.



# A Note on Method

Aarti Kawlra, Sociologist

Academic Director, Humanities Across Borders  
IIAS, Leiden, The Netherlands

*Words from Jawadhu Hills* is an exploration in dialogic interaction in a specific place, the Jawadhu hills. Rather than a strict application of the methods of linguistic ethnography, this booklet is a collaborative exercise in storytelling with words. Paying attention to words pertaining to the landscape, objects, tools, techniques, rituals, etc., offers a generative space of narration, somewhere between macrosociological analyses and thick descriptions in humanities research.

Focusing on spoken words, the speakers, and the context of interaction, is a form of immersion that has the potential of offering linguistically nuanced insights into the way language is used in society. Sometimes words tend to reinforce differences and hierarchies. For instance, the distinction in popular marketplace parlance between *thaniyam*, the word for 'grain', and 'little grain' or *siru thaniyam*, or small millet, is an artificial one, possibly from the distinction between 'minor' and 'major' millets from the agricultural scientist's vocabulary. Associating cultivators of a diversity of millet crops with the diminutive adjective, not only takes away from hermeneutically richer insights into the food culture associated with millet farming but also, fails to attend to the meanings attributed to these words by the farmers themselves. More recently, the rebranding of millets as *shri anna* or 'the grain of the gods', is yet another way

in which words and phrases frame and co-opt marginalized identities within dominant language publics.

This wordbook is intended as a window into the world of subsistence millet cultivators of the Jawadhu hills, *one-word-at-a-time*. Each word alludes to a larger web of contingent realities and serves as a place-holder for further inquiry. The words that make up this wordbook are neither a random selection nor a comprehensive one. Instead, they document situated conversations, and present a vocabulary of specific moments and contexts of linguistic interactions between IFP researchers and millet farmers, over a period of a year and a half. Each word is written in Tamil script and accompanied by its English transliteration. We have included word meanings both in French and English to broaden its readership scope to include Franco-phone scholars and communities worldwide. The images serve a similar purpose of expanding the potential for connections and comparisons in subsistence agriculture, beyond the context of Jawadhu hills.

Readers can flip through this wordbook in no fixed order or read it as a single text from beginning to end. The words trigger questions applicable to millet farming communities in India or in any other part of the world.

Some thoughts that come to mind are :-

- the hegemonic opposition between production efficiencies and experiential knowledge handed down from one generation to the next;
- community responses to colonial and postcolonial administrative categories, technology innovations, and policy interventions pertaining to subsistence millet cultivation;
- food insecurity and patterns of labor migration experienced among rain-fed and/or scarce water cultivators;
- the contemporary commoditization of certain millet varieties and simultaneous disavowal of millet farming practices as a strategy for nutrition security, and ecological/climate resilience;
- the space of resistance, however, narrow and dwindling, occupied by small household cultivators, and women's self-help groups in agriculture.

*Words from Jawadhu Hills* spotlights the ways in which spoken words, when unpacked through layers of translation and meaning-making, are windows into diverse imaginaries of a landscape, a farming society, their knowledge practices, and strategies for the future. In this sense then, the words, photographs, and sketches presented here are vehicles of humanist know-how and meaning, foundational to any collaborative endeavour, including research.

# Note on Tamil dictionaries, dialects & translations

Rukma Anil & Boopathiraj S.

Contemporary Tamil Culture, IFP

The first ever compilation of words in an Indian language was da Proença's *Tamil-Portuguese dictionary* (1679), written specifically for Portuguese speakers to further their colonizing and proselytizing goals among the local population. Soon, other European missionaries began to produce similar one-way (e.g. Tamil-French, Tamil-English) manuscripts, establishing a tradition of publishing dictionaries of South Asian languages as either English-to-vernacular or vernacular-to-English. These compilations were done in the context of colonialism and did not necessarily refer to the context-of-use of the word, nor address the needs of mutual comprehension or reciprocal relations.

Post-independence, there has been a proliferation of dictionaries that assert the linguistic diversity of the various regions of Tamil Nadu. They demonstrate the existence of a multiplicity of speech communities specific to certain historically significant geographical and cultural landscapes. *Vattaara valakku sol akaraathi*, “Dialect dictionary of the black soil region” by Ki. Rajanarayanan (1982), *Kongu vattaara sol akaraati* “Dictionary of the Kongu dialect” by Perumal Murugan (2000), *Naanjal vattaara sol akaraathi* “Dictionary of the Naanjal dialect” by A.K. Perumal (2004), *Chettinadu vattaara valakku sol akaraathi* “Dictionary of the Chettinad dialect” by V. Palaniappan (2006), *Nadu naattu sollakaraathi* “Dictionary

of the central region” by Kanmani Gunasekaran (2007), *Neithal sol akaraathi* “A Dictionary of the coastal region” by Kurumbanai C. Berlin (2020), are a few dialect dictionaries that provide a more textured understanding of the linguistic culture of the inhabitants of the different regions and landscapes of present day Tamil Nadu.

Other dictionaries, relating to certain occupations or practice-communities, are also in production. These dictionaries follow lexicographical principles and draw their database from varied textual sources with inputs from contemporary linguists, scholars, writers, and artists. For instance, The Central Institute of Classical Tamil has published texts like *Kaalnadai valarppu kalaichollakaraathi* “A dictionary of technical terms of animal husbandry” and *Tamizhaga miinavar tozhil panpaattu sollakaraathi* “A dictionary of occupational and cultural terms of the fisherfolk of Tamil Nadu” by S. Elumalai in 2023. More recently, a lexicon of the dialect of the people of Jawadhu hills titled *Jawadhumalai vattara vazhakku sollakarathi*, “Jawadhu hills dialect dictionary”, has been published by Jaisankar K in 2024, a teacher who was inspired to make this compilation in order to gain deeper insights into the life and culture of the people with whom he lived and worked.

*Words from Jawadhu Hills* also focuses on the local dialect, on words-in-use to see how the speakers perceive their immediate world through these words. Such an approach,

not only helps to keep the integrity of the colloquialisms but also, provides insights into the ways in which the Tamil language is used in the micro-cultural region of the Jawadhu hills. While we have consulted the Tamil lexicon and dictionaries for insights during the translation process, we have retained the local pronunciation, context of meaning and narrative coherence of the words, as we heard them. For instance, the commonly spoken word for hand dispersal of seeds is *veraikkirathu*, and not *vidaikirathu* here. We have maintained the popular spelling for English transliterations and have provided equivalent synonyms in English to the best of our comprehension.





Our  
Lives

Our  
Words

## 1. மலையாளி

malaiyali (noun)

People of the hills  
Les peuples des collines

## 5. கொவன்யூ கொல்ல

revenue kollai (noun)

Government land  
Foncier public agricole

## 9. செடி வெட்டுறது

sedi vetturathu (verb)

Clearing (cutting) weeds

Désherber

## 13. கருப்பு உரம்

karuppu wouram (noun)

Black fertilizer  
Engrais chimique

## 2. தூண்யம்

thaniyam (noun)

Grain

Céréale

## 6. பட்டா

patta (noun)

Deed of ownership

Titre de propriété

## 10. மூட்டம் கொளுத்துறது

moottam koluththurathu (verb)

Setting dried plant matter  
and twigs on fire

Pratiquer la culture sur brûlis

## 3. சாமி

saamai (noun)

Little millet

Petit millet

## 4. ஓரட்டி

oratti (noun)

Flatbread (roti)

Galette plate

## 8. மானாவரி

maanaavari (adjective)

Rain dependent cultivation

Culture pluviale

## 11. ஏர் ஓட்டுறது

er otturathu (verb)

Ploughing land with bullocks

Labourer le champ avec l'aide  
des bœufs

## 12. விசுரி வெராக்கிறது

visuri veraikkirathu (verb)

Broadcasting seeds

Semer les graines

## 15. பச்ச வெக்கிறது

pachchai vaikkirathu (verb)

Offering made of uncooked food

Offrande composée de nourriture non cuite

Growth

Rendement agricole

16. கொல்லைக்கு இடுறது  
kollaiku idurathu (verb)

Offering to the field guardian  
Sacrifice en l'honneur du dieu  
de la Terre et de la fertilité

20. தோம்பைக்கொச்  
thombai & kerasi (noun)

Storage containers  
Silo

24. கீழ் போறது  
keela porathu (verb)

Going down  
Descendre des montagnes  
à la recherche de travail

28. சேஷன் அரிச்  
ration arisi (noun)

Ration rice  
Riz subventionné

17. கலம்  
kalam (noun)

Drying and threshing floor  
Aire de battage

21. உலுவல்  
uluval (noun)

Grain de cheval ou dolique

25. வெள்ளை  
vellari (noun)

Gherkin  
Cornichon

18. பொனக்கட்டுறது  
ponakatturathu (verb)

Turning over and  
threshing the stalks  
Etaler les épis et les battre

22. கைக்குத்தல்  
kaikkuththal (adjective)

Hand-pounded  
Pilage manuel

26. சந்தை  
santhai (noun)

Weekly Market  
Le marché hebdomadaire

29. நூறுநாள் வேலை  
nuru nal velai (noun)

100 days' work  
100 jours de travail

19. பதம் பாக்கறது  
patham pakkurathu (verb)

Check for readiness  
S'assurer d'un séchage  
convenable des graines

23. கொடிவழிப்பாதை  
kodivalipaathai (noun)

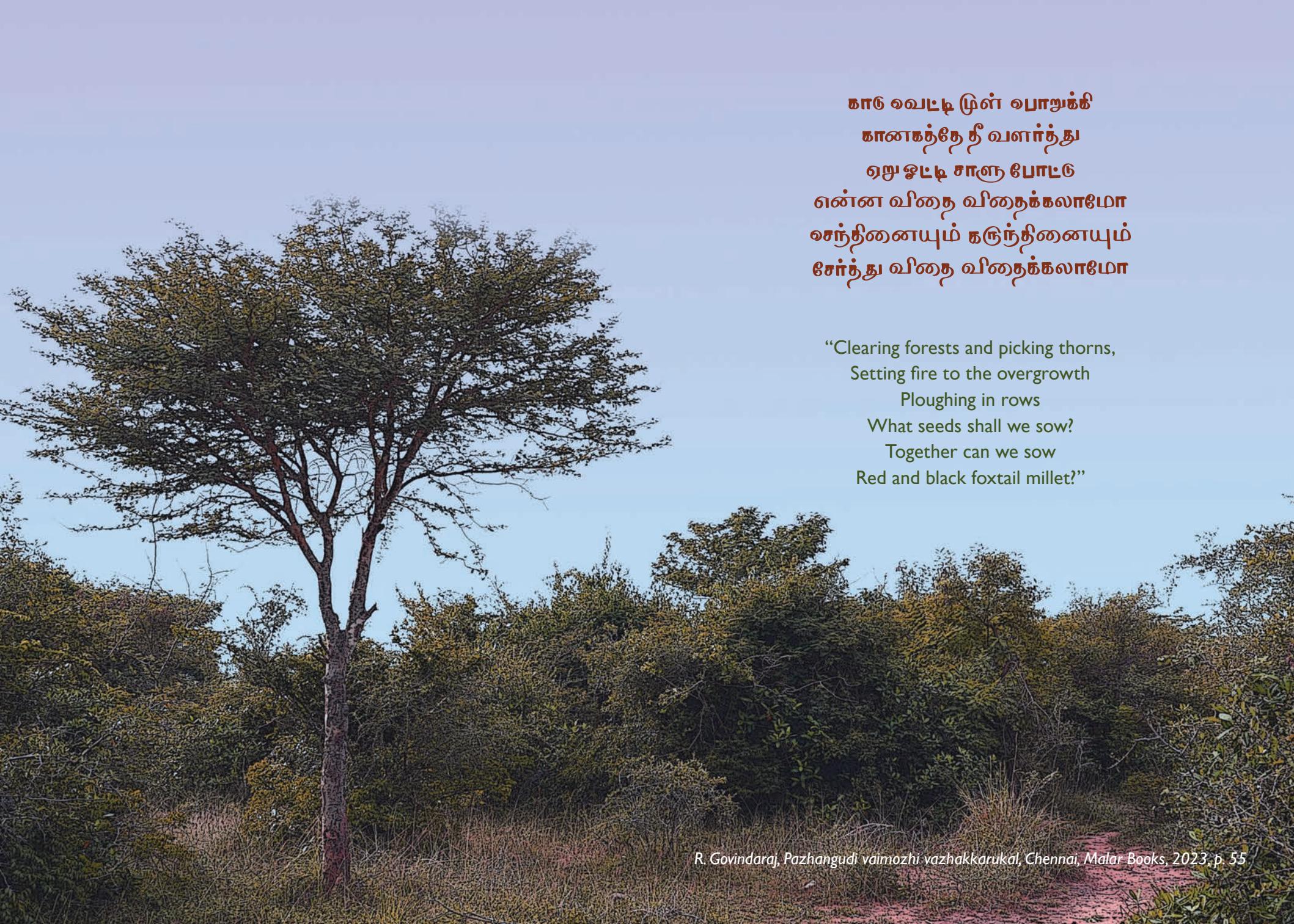
Narrow winding pathway  
Sentier sinueux

27. ஹாஸ்டல்  
hostel (noun)

Hostel  
Internat

30. கெனரு  
kenaru (noun)

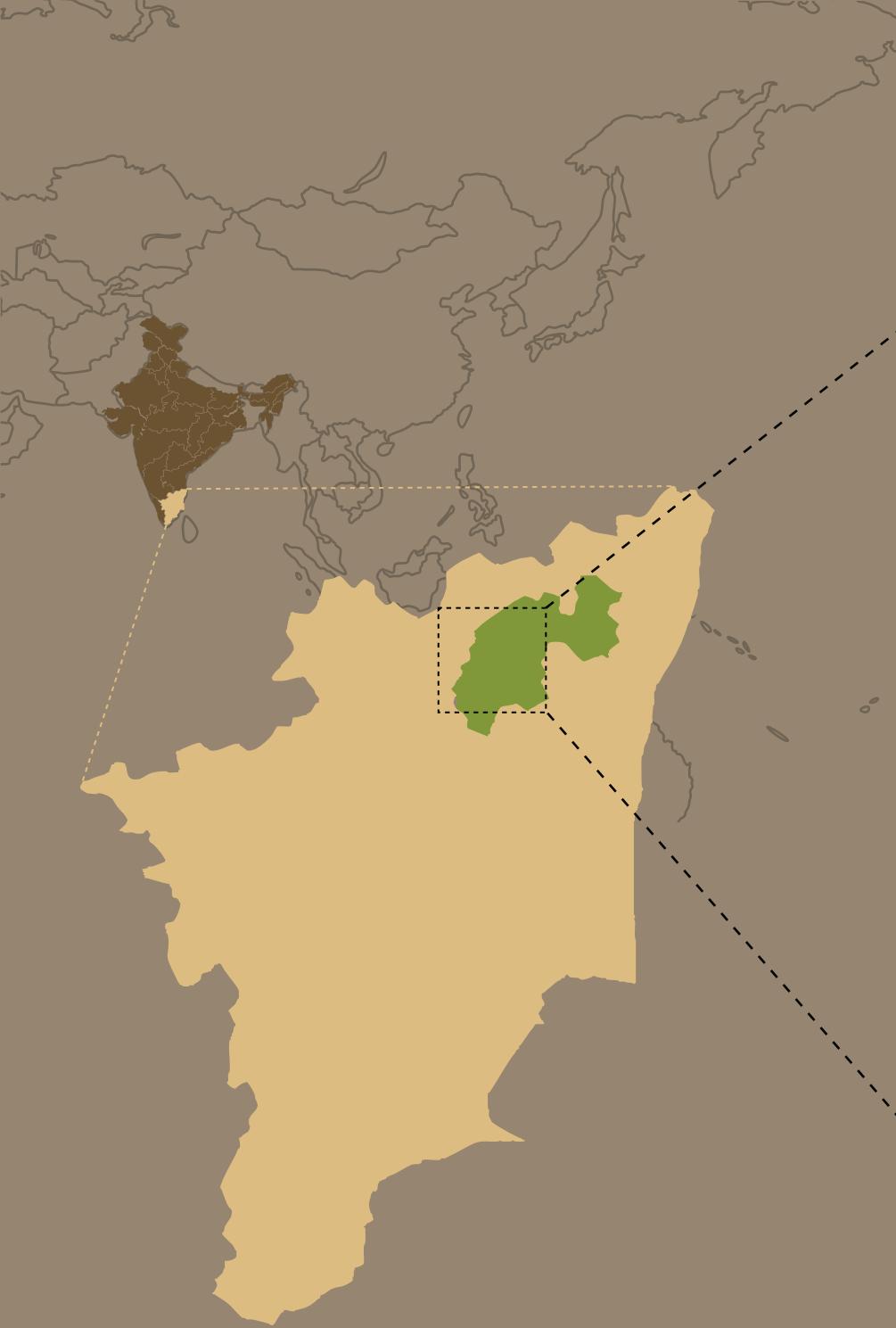
Well  
Réservoir d'eau



காடு வெட்டி முள் பொழுக்கி  
கானகத்தீர் தீ வளர்ந்து  
ஏழூட்டி சானு போட்டு  
என்ன விதை விதைக்கலாமோ  
செந்தினையும் கருந்தினையும்  
சேர்ந்து விதை விதைக்கலாமோ

“Clearing forests and picking thorns,  
Setting fire to the overgrowth  
Ploughing in rows  
What seeds shall we sow?  
Together can we sow  
Red and black foxtail millet?”

# Map of field sites



# 1. மலையாளி

malaiyali (noun)

People of the hills

Les peuples des collines



Settai is a malaiyali elder. Her children have moved to Chennai. She stays with her relatives and finds work in the MNREGA program during the off season. She has some land that she cultivates during the sowing season.

Jawadhu hills are located in present day Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu where the night skies are very clear and the landscape is partly arid and mostly rainfed. It is designated as a scheduled tribal area. Jamnamarathur, the closest urban center, is also the traditional capital of the region. In ancient times, referred to as 'rulers of the hills', malaiyalis were once known for their local know-how for producing a unique fragrance extracted from the glandular secretion of the civet cat. When worn as a pendant, the musk or perfume is known

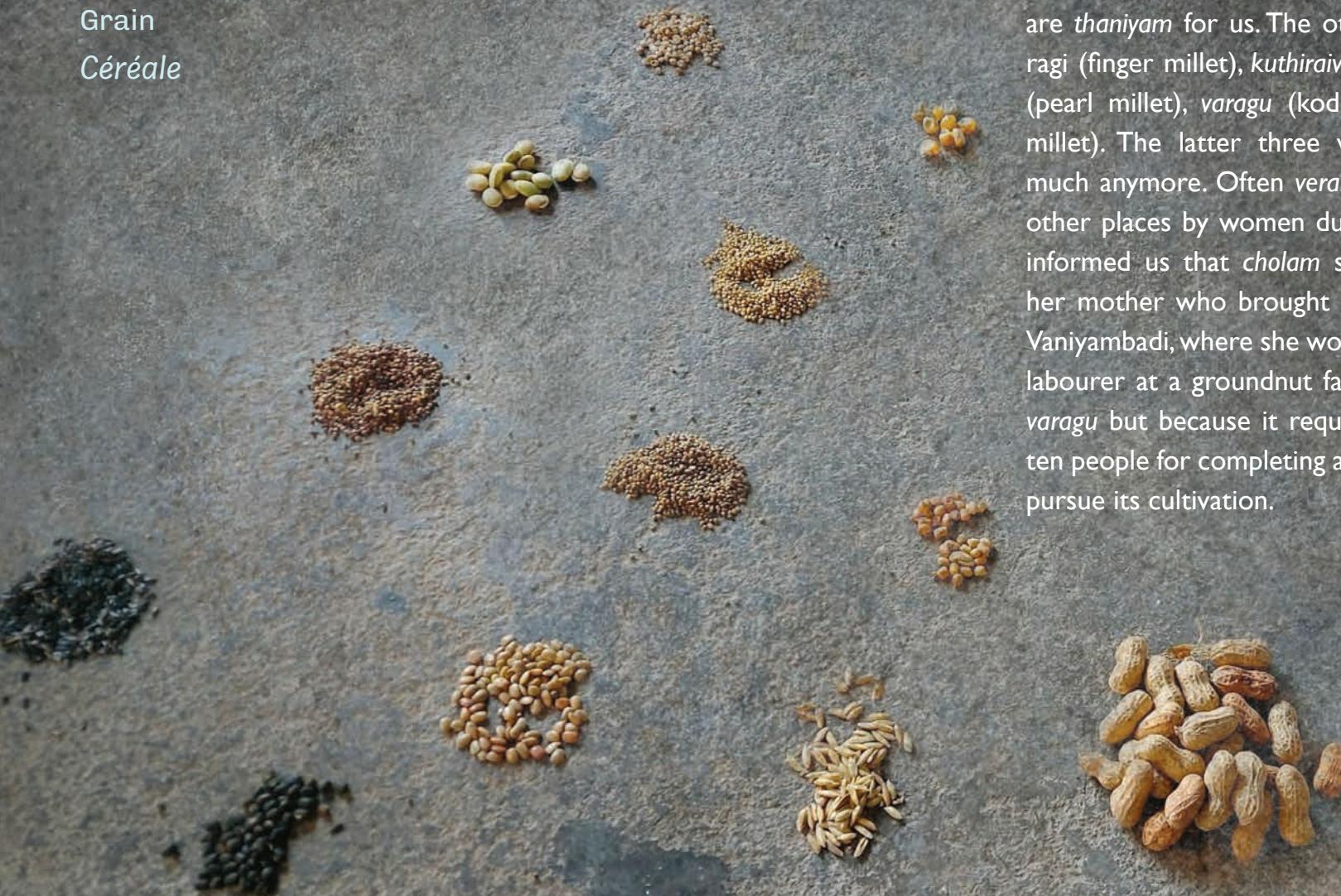
to have protected the wearer from excessive heat. Today, whilst continuing to rely on the *kanippu* or experiential knowledge handed down from ancestors (*munnorghal*), the malaiyalis are also known for cultivating honey bees, and for growing a variety of millets and pulses in dry lands.



## 2. தனியம் thaniyam (noun)

Grain

Céréale



Millets are an integral part of our food culture. *Makka cholam* (corn), *cholam* (sorghum) and *saamai* (little millet) are significant grain crops for us. All varieties of staples are *thaniyam* for us. The other millets we produce are *ragi* (finger millet), *kuthiraivaali* (barnyard millet), *kambu* (pearl millet), *varagu* (kodo millet), and *thinai* (foxtail millet). The latter three varieties are not grown as much anymore. Often *verai* or seeds are brought from other places by women during seasonal migration. Jaya informed us that *cholam* seeds were given to her by her mother who brought them back from Vellore and Vaniyambadi, where she would travel for work as a wage labourer at a groundnut farm. They also tried to grow *varagu* but because it requires flat ground and at least ten people for completing all the processes, they did not pursue its cultivation.

### 3. സാംഡ

**saamai** (noun)

Little millet

*Petit millet*



Harvest-ready saamai crop in the fields of Vazhakkadu, Jawadhu hills.

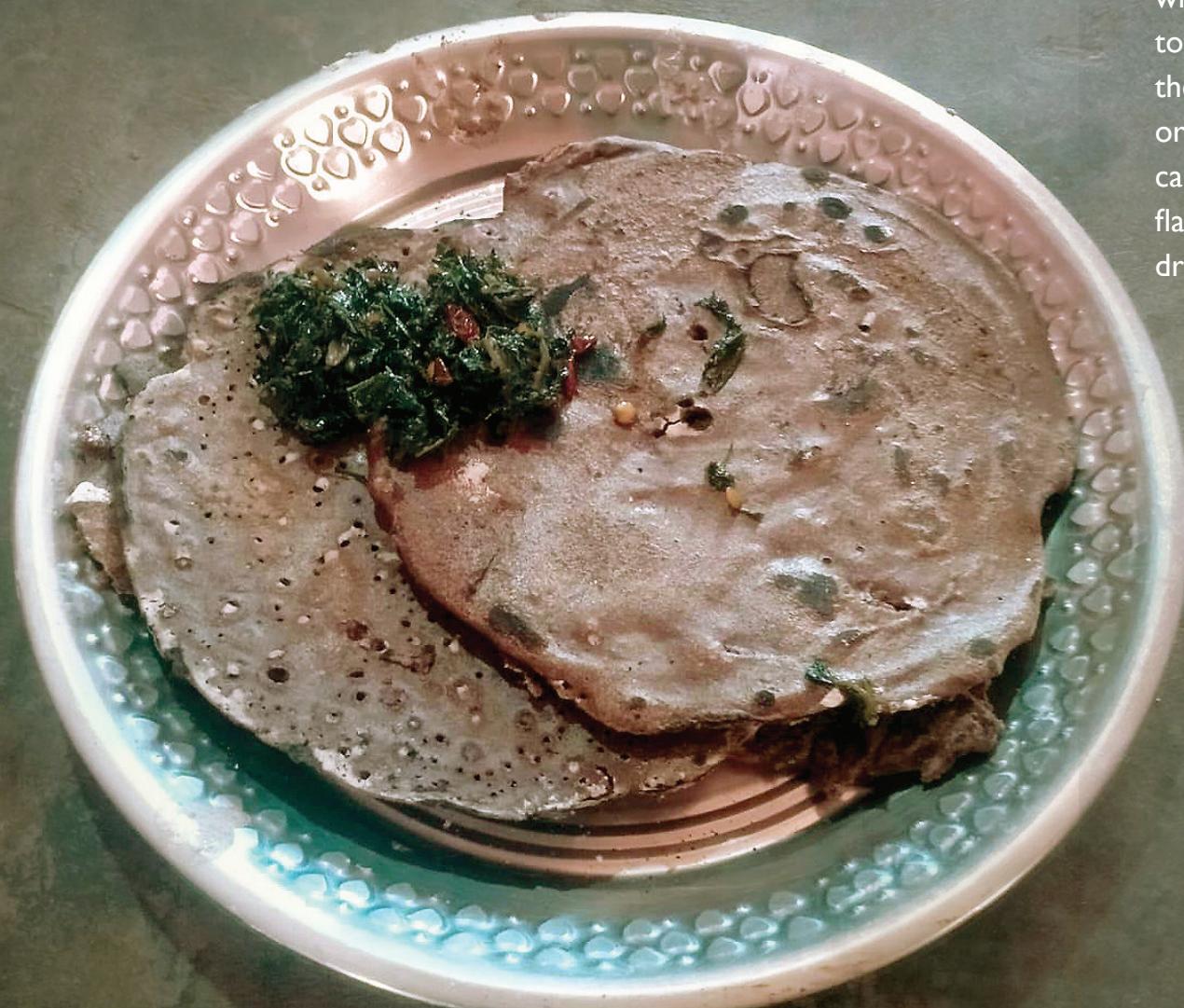
*Saamai* is a four-month crop and our main source of security. We sow it in *Aadi* (June-July) and harvest it in *Aippasi* (October-November), coinciding with the Northeast monsoon. The varieties of *saamai* that thrive here are native varieties such as *chittan saamai*, *koluthuna saamai*, *perunchaamai* and *kochchaamai*. The Dhan Foundation provided us with seeds of a new variety of white *saamai* (*ayyaru*), but it gets easily destroyed in the rain. We stock our *saamai* and sell it only when we require money. Unprocessed *saamai* grain sells for Rs. 41 per kilo, and processed *saamai* sells for Rs. 120 per kilo. We rarely keep *saamai* for our own consumption, although there was a time we ate cooked *saamai* rice or *soru*.

4. ഓരാട്ടി

oratti (noun)

Flatbread

Galette plate



There are many ways in which we cook our grains. We enjoy making *ragi*, *kambu* and *kevaru orattis*. They are eaten with *ekkiri kozhambu*, a dish made from a kind of spinach that grows in the *saamai* fields. According to an old saying, if these flatbreads are taken outside the confines of our villages, especially if they are mixed with jaggery, a *pey* (ghost or goblin) who is attracted to the sweet fragrance of the millet *orattis*, will possess the bearer. As an antidote and distraction, lemons, coal or firewood, dried chillies, and a broom stick must be carried alongside for protection. Some say that millet flatbreads and sesame balls also have the capacity to draw out the *pey* from a person's body.

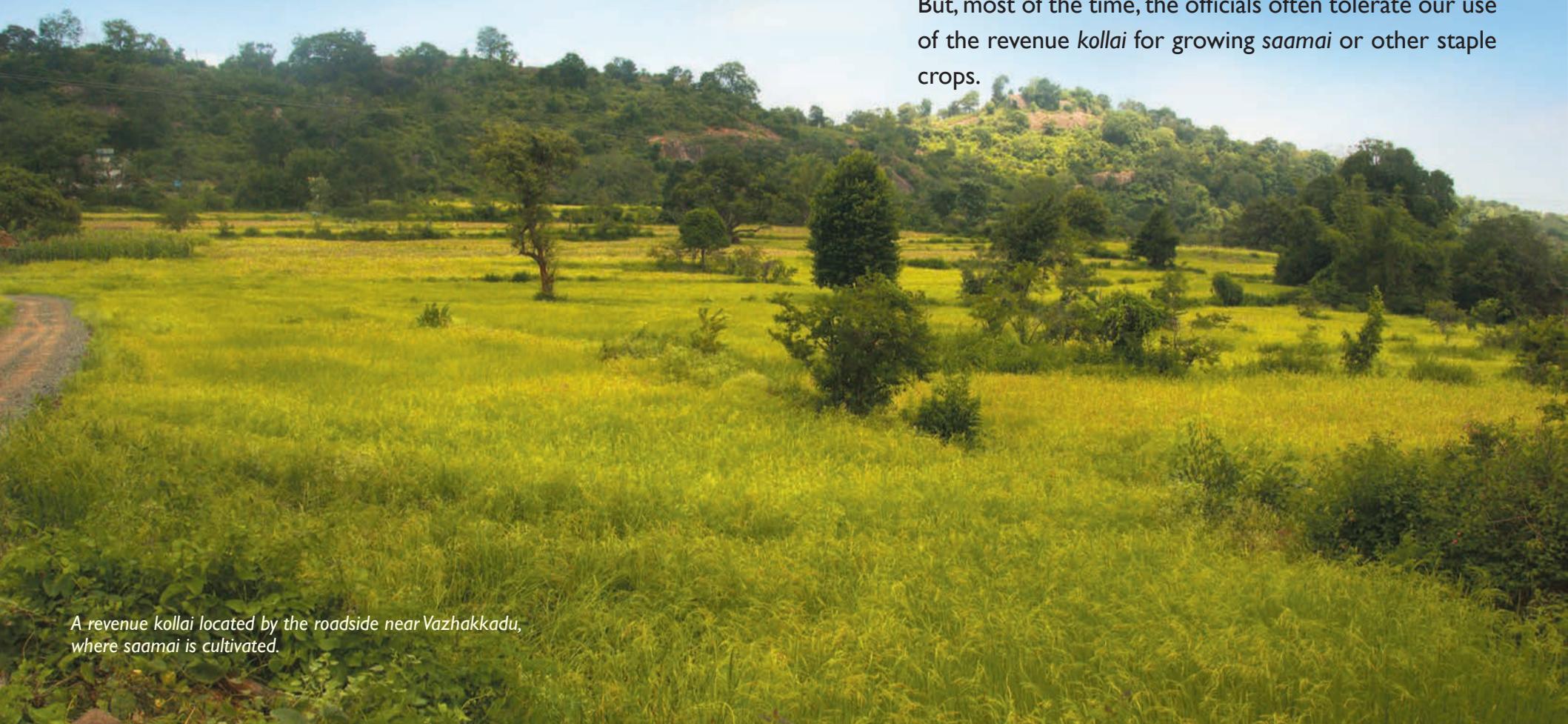
## 5. റേവേൻഡു കെപല്ല

revenue kollai (noun)

Government land

Foncier public agricole

Apart from the land that belongs to the revenue department of the government is referred to as revenue *kollai*. Sometimes, we also call it revenue *poromboke*, signifying unassessed government land. In the absence of alternatives for the sake of survival, we may still cultivate this land, albeit with the risk of officials demanding its abandonment, as it does not belong to us. Revenue land near the roads are usually monitored by the government officials, and they do not permit us to cultivate there. But, most of the time, the officials often tolerate our use of the revenue *kollai* for growing *saamai* or other staple crops.



A revenue *kollai* located by the roadside near Vazhakkadu, where *saamai* is cultivated.

## 6. ପତ୍ତା

patta (noun)

Deed of ownership

*Titre de propriété*





தமிழ்நாடு அரசு  
வகுவாய்த் துணை

நில உரிமை விபரங்கள் : கு. எண் 10(1) பிரிவு

மாவட்டம் : திருவண்ணாமலை

## வகுவாய் கிராமம் : கொவில்லூர்

## வட்டம் : ஜமூனாமரத்தூர்

ਪੰਤ ਮਨੁੰ :

4

୧୫୫

二四六

3

二四六

பல எண்	க.ப்பிரிவு	புள்ளீடு		தாங்கீடு		மற்றுள்ள		குறிப்புகள்
		பரப்பு	தீர்வை	பரப்பு	தீர்வை	பரப்பு	தீர்வை	
		மூறங் - ஏ	கு - மை	மூறங் - ஏ	கு - மை	மூறங் - ஏ	கு - மை	
2	1 - 30.50	1.80		--	--	--	--	----- 23-07-2001
	1 - 30.50	1.80						

സ്ഥിപ്പ2 :



- 1- முறையிட காலம் / ஈர்க்கிற தமிழ் விவரங்கள் பின் பதினாற்கு இலக்கு பொறுப்புகள். இவற்காக காலம் <https://eservices.tn.gov.in> என்ற இணைய தாங்கில் 06/12/2005/01595/70570 என்ற குறிப்பு விவரங்கள் உள்ளிட வேண்டும்.
- 2- இத் தகவல்கள் 03-10-2023 அன்று 10:32:41 AM போதில் அச்சுக்கப்பட்டது.
- 3- கைப்பற்றி கொருவில் 2D barcode படிப்பாக் குலம் படிக்கு 3G/GPRS வழி இணையத்தில் ரிபர்க்கவும்

த.கோவுப்பும்சுவை முயம்  
சுகுமார திருத்தம் வாங்கி ர.ஏ.எஸ்..  
உதவுமாற்கார் - 635 703.

**Copy of a farmer's patta document from a meeting at the Block Development Office in Jamunamarthur.**

A *patta* is a document provided by the government to those of us who are entitled to own inherited property or land. The document formally transmutes the land to the current family member. It states the name of the owner to whom the land belongs, that is to the *patta* holder. A *patta kollai* is documented land where we live and farm. Our *pattas* usually go back to three generations, the grandfather, father and the son. When the *patta* holder passes away, we rewrite the *patta* in the heir's name. The *patta* that belongs to the daughter is usually written in the name of the male sibling, uncle or husband's name. *Patta* land can range anywhere from half an acre to five acres, or even more, in some cases.

## 7. മേടുപ്പെടുത്തപ്പെട്ട മെഡിക്കൽ

**mottankal** (noun)

Elevated land

Parcelle en pente

*Mottankal* is the land within our own fields that is dry, uneven and raised. We sow millets here because the *mottankal* is rainfed and millets are drought resistant. Usually *mottankal* are parts of land adjacent to our houses. While some of us have wells, irrigating *mottankal* land is challenging due to water runoff on slopes. As a result, we primarily cultivate *saamai* and various millets in this area.



A *mottankal* in Jaya's land, Vazhakkadu.

## 8. மானாவரி

maanaavari (adjective)

Rain dependent cultivation

Culture pluviale



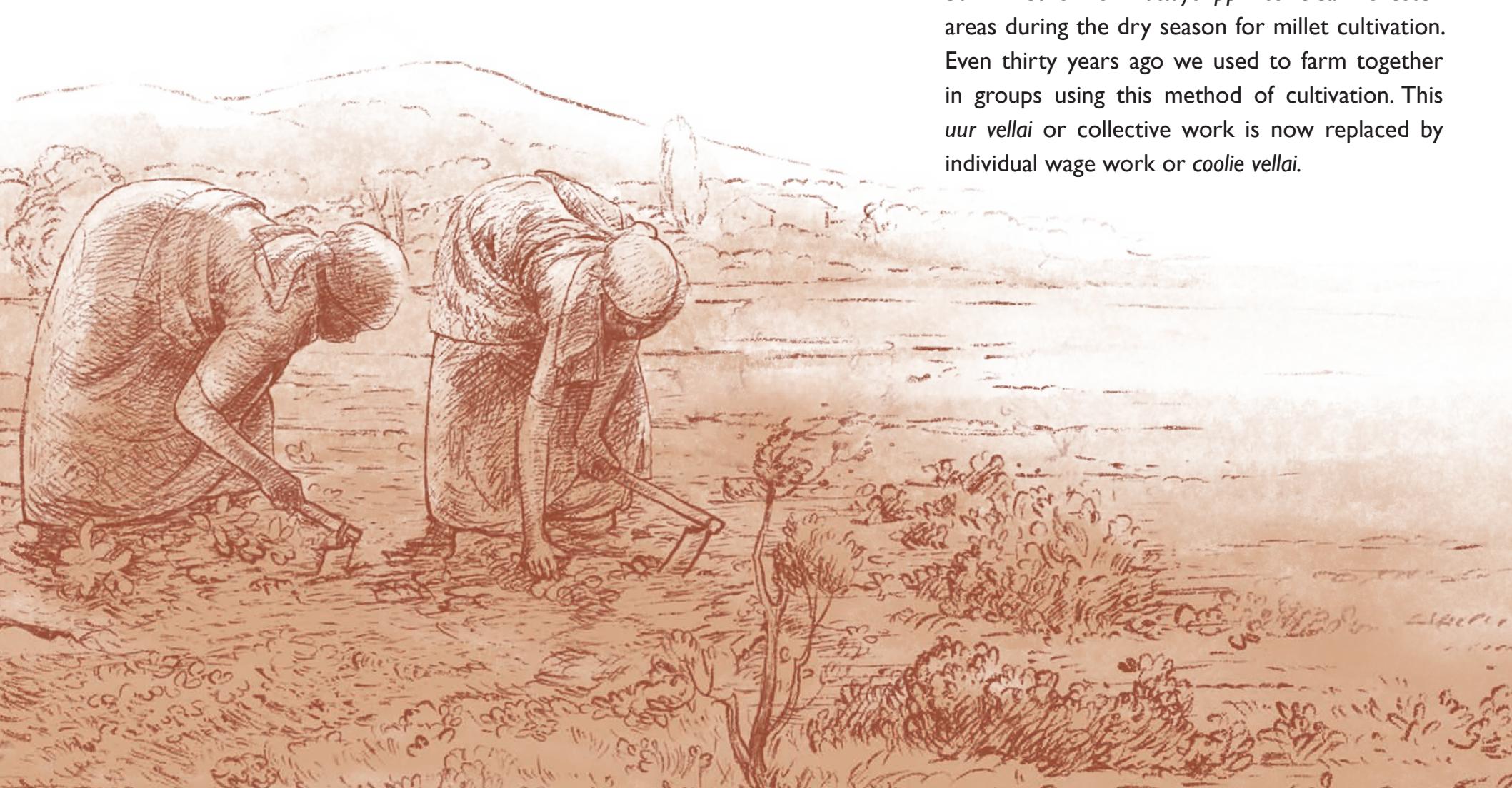
After the dry season, or *kaasa kaalam*, which occurs between March and May, the monsoon season begins in the month of *Adi* (June-July). *Saamai* and other millets are rain-fed crops, and since most areas of our hills are not irrigated, we sow *saamai* here. Some of us who have access to wells and water have begun to cultivate paddy, BT cotton, and gherkins for external buyers. To promote agriculture and improve livelihoods in our hills, the Block Development Office has dug approximately 200 wells.

## 9. செடி வெட்டுத்து

**sedi vetturathu** (verb)

Clearing (cutting) weeds

Désherber



Before sowing saamai, we begin by clearing the land of overgrown plants and shrubs accumulated from the previous cycle, preparing it for millet cultivation. Thorny bushes and shrubs are cleared between the months of Vaikasi and Ani (May to July). Traditionally, our elders used the slash and burn method or *kattayerippu* to clear forested areas during the dry season for millet cultivation. Even thirty years ago we used to farm together in groups using this method of cultivation. This *uur vellai* or collective work is now replaced by individual wage work or *coolie vellai*.

## 10. மூடம் கொலுத்துதலு

moottam koluththurathu (verb)

Setting dried plant matter and twigs on fire

Pratiquer la culture sur brûlis

After cutting the overgrowth on our fields, we gather it and burn it. The resultant remains are left to decompose and settle into the land. The burnt remains become manure, and is used as a natural fertilizer. We are careful not to take any forest leaves or soil as it is illegal.



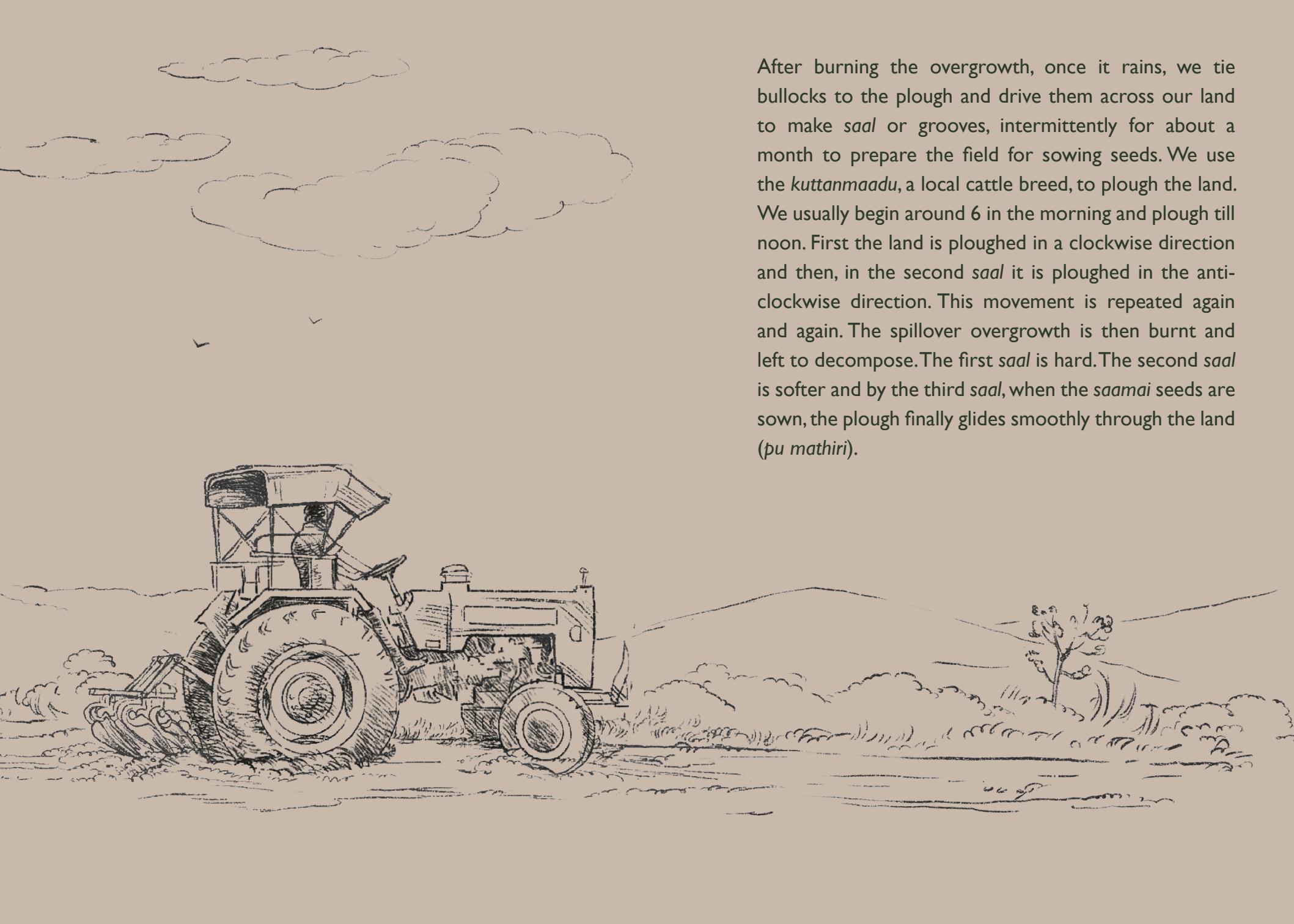
# 11. ஏர் ஓட்டுறது

er otturathu (verb)

Ploughing land with bullocks

Labourer le champ avec l'aide des bœufs





After burning the overgrowth, once it rains, we tie bullocks to the plough and drive them across our land to make *saal* or grooves, intermittently for about a month to prepare the field for sowing seeds. We use the *kuttanmaadu*, a local cattle breed, to plough the land. We usually begin around 6 in the morning and plough till noon. First the land is ploughed in a clockwise direction and then, in the second *saal* it is ploughed in the anti-clockwise direction. This movement is repeated again and again. The spillover overgrowth is then burnt and left to decompose. The first *saal* is hard. The second *saal* is softer and by the third *saal*, when the *saamai* seeds are sown, the plough finally glides smoothly through the land (*pu mathiri*).

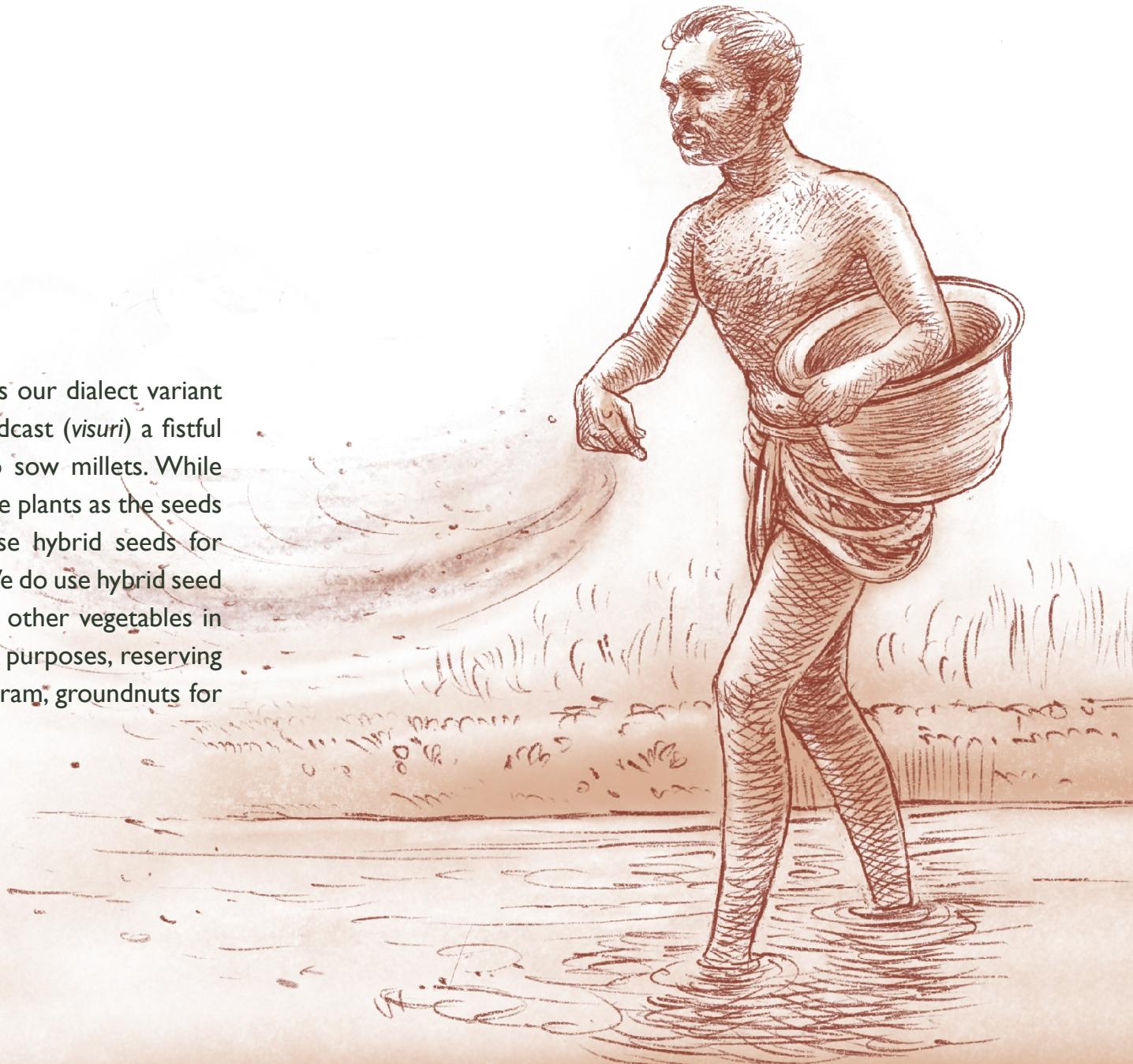
## 12. வீசு வெட்டுக்கிறது

visuri veraikkirathu (verb)

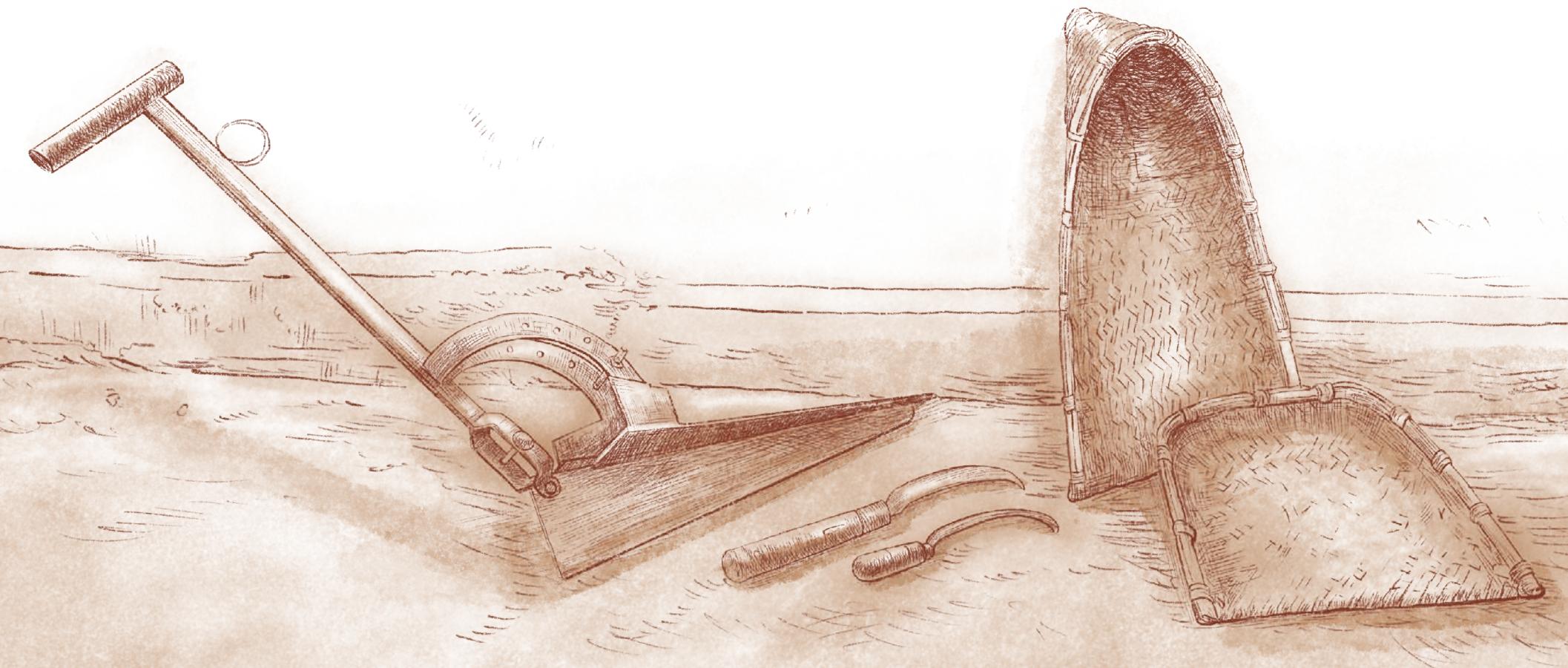
Broadcasting seeds

Semer les graines

After ploughing, we sow the seeds. Verai is our dialect variant of *vithai*, meaning 'seed' in Tamil. We broadcast (visuri) a fistful of seeds across the land three times, to sow millets. While men sow the seeds, women must weed the plants as the seeds mature into crops. We prefer not to use hybrid seeds for millets as they require a lot more water. We do use hybrid seed varieties for growing paddy, gherkins and other vegetables in irrigated land and usually for commercial purposes, reserving indigenous seeds for millets, corn, horsegram, groundnuts for our own consumption.



We usually use grains from the previous harvest as *verai* for the next crop cycle, and seldom purchase seeds from markets or government stores. It is the responsibility of the women to select and preserve the seeds for the next year during the no/new moon day. The seeds are tied in a cloth which is then put in a mud pot and kept in the darkest corner of the house.



Tools from Raman's house in Vazhakkadu. The *kalappai* (iron plough), *koduva* (sickle) and *muram* (woven winnowers) are used for ploughing, harvesting and winnowing respectively.

## 13. கருப்பு உரம்

**karuppu wouram** (noun)

Black fertilizer

Engrais chimique

We use *karuppu wouram*, fertilizer pellets made of potash, phosphorus, and nitrogen. A sack of this fertilizer costs us Rs. 1200 to 1300. We purchase it from shops in Jamunamarathur, Alangayam or Polur. We began using this in the past 4 or 5 years to enhance the *saamai* crop's yield, and also because it bears heavier grains. The plants look lively when we use this fertilizer. We also use organic (*iyerkai*) fertilizer like neem oil, cow dung, and vermicompost. The Block Development Office in Jamunamarathur also promotes the use of bio-fertilizers such as Ruby gel, and azospirillum, a beneficial microbe.

*Bio fertilisers and black DAP (Diammonium Phosphate) fertiliser used by some farmers.*



14. வெள்ளச்சல்

velachchal (noun)

Growth

Rendement agricole



Harvesting Saamai in Jawadhu hills.

The sown millets are allowed to reach a height of up to 3 feet before harvesting. We harvest millets using the *koduva*, a variant of the conventional sickle. Regular weeding is essential for our *saamai* crop to thrive; neglecting this task results in excessive overgrowth, hindering the crops' natural growth. On a 5-acre plot, a successful *saamai* harvest yields ten sacks of grain, whilst a less fruitful yield provides five sacks of grain. If you visit us during this period, we will not be able to spend any time with you. Our mind will always be in our fields!



## 15. பச்ச வைக்கிரது

pachchai vaikkirathu (noun)

Offering made of uncooked food

Offrande composée de nourriture non cuite



We prepare an offering of 9 balls of pounded rice flour and jaggery along with uncooked food like honey, flattened rice, bananas and tubers, as a tribute to the seven *kannimar*, revered as the seven goddesses of prosperity. We observe this ritual either before or after the harvest. Additionally, we extend this offering in honor of children or pregnant women, invoking protection against malevolent spirits or the evil eye. We conduct this sacred gesture within our immediate family circle.

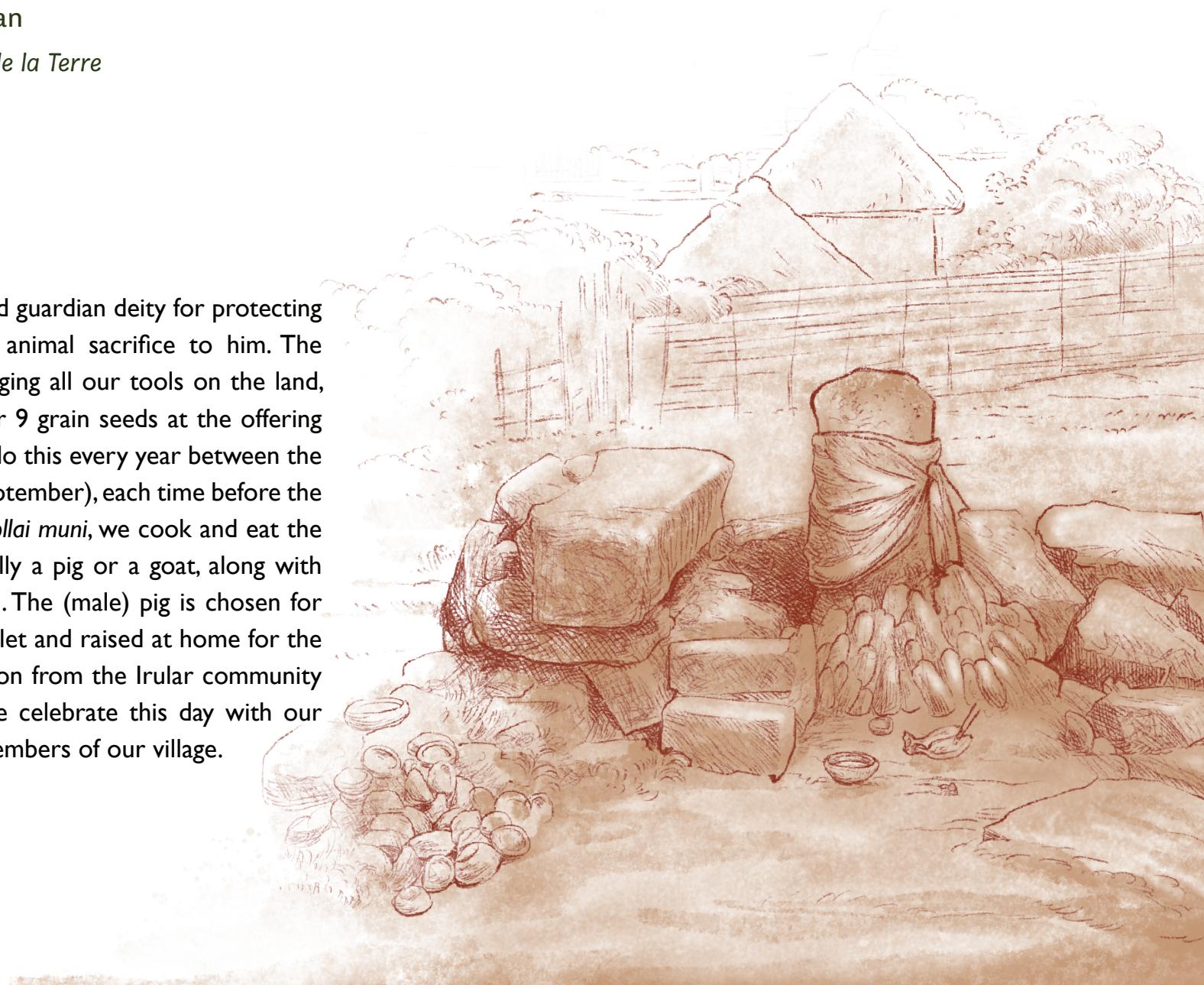
## 16. கொல்லைக்கு இறைது

**kollaiku idurathu** (verb)

Offering to the field guardian

*Sacrifice en l'honneur du dieu de la Terre  
et de la fertilité*

We thank our *kollai muni* or field guardian deity for protecting our crops by offering *bali* or animal sacrifice to him. The *kollaikku idurathu* involves arranging all our tools on the land, and placing a mixture of 5, 7 or 9 grain seeds at the offering site along with 7 rice balls. We do this every year between the months *Aani* and *Avani* (June–September), each time before the harvest. After offering to our *kollai muni*, we cook and eat the sacrificed animal, which is usually a pig or a goat, along with *pongal* (cooked rice and lentils). The (male) pig is chosen for sacrifice already when it is a piglet and raised at home for the purpose. In this offering, a person from the Irular community must pierce the pig's chest. We celebrate this day with our family, neighbours, and other members of our village.



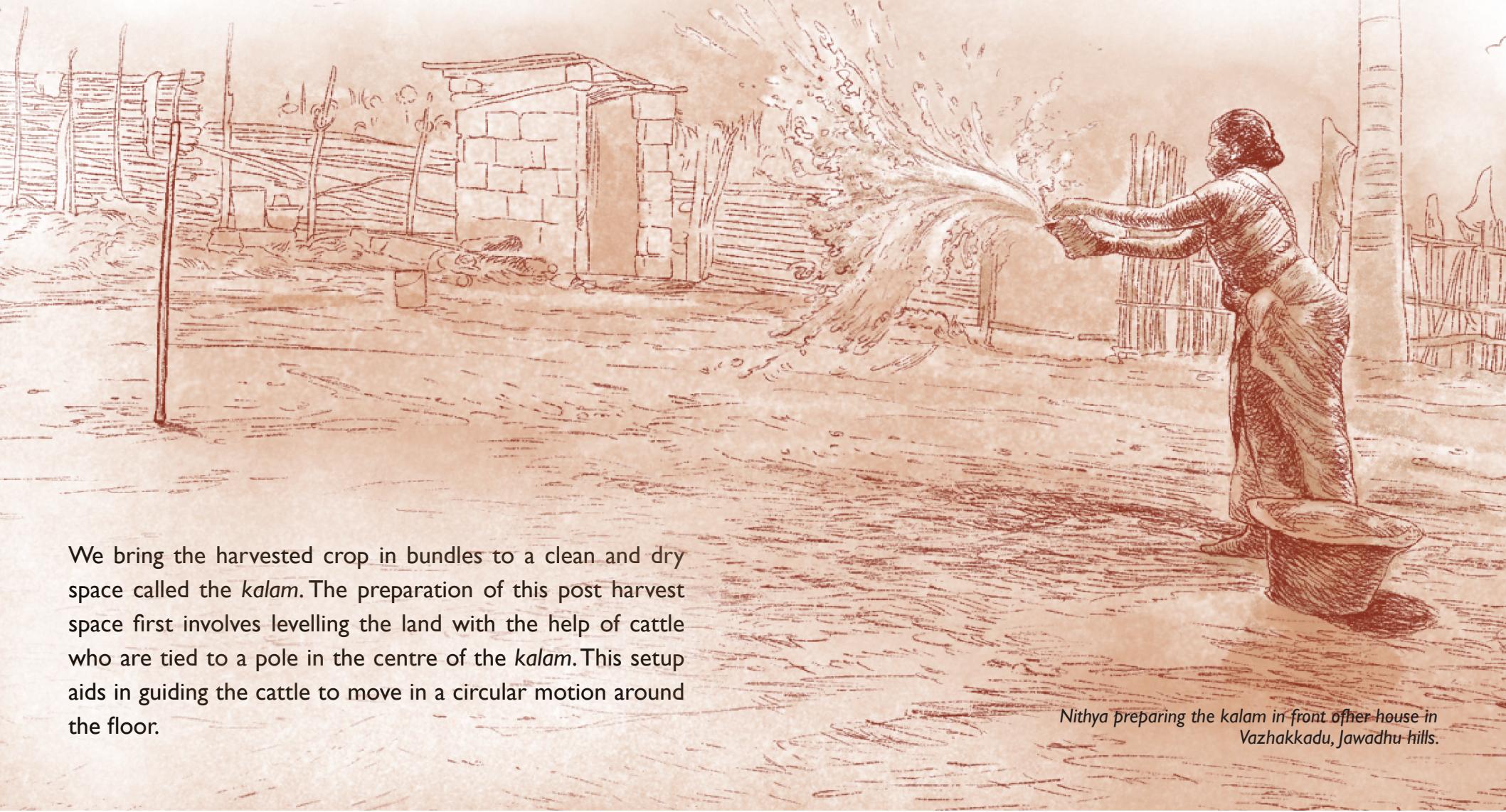
## 17. கலம்

**kalam** (noun)

Drying and threshing floor

Aire de battage

Finally, the *kalam* is smeared with a mixture of cow dung and water. After allowing a day for this coating layer to dry, the *kalam* is ready to serve as a threshing floor for the grain sheaths.



We bring the harvested crop in bundles to a clean and dry space called the *kalam*. The preparation of this post harvest space first involves levelling the land with the help of cattle who are tied to a pole in the centre of the *kalam*. This setup aids in guiding the cattle to move in a circular motion around the floor.

Nithya preparing the *kalam* in front of her house in Vazhakkadu, Jawadhu hills.

## 18. பொக்கட்டுறை

ponakatturathu (verb)

Turning over and threshing the stalks

Etaler les épis et les battre



Turn over sheaths of saamai at a kalam while the tractor threshes at the same time, enroute to Vazhakkadu.

Stalks of *saamai* are bound together in bundles and threshed to separate the grain from the sheath. At the *kalam*, we tie cattle and allow them to move in circles over the stalks of grain, facilitating the threshing process. We manually turn over the threshed sheaths with our hands to further separate the grains. Threshing 10 bundles of grain sheaths typically takes about an hour. This method is the only option for threshing grains in areas inaccessible to tractors.

However, these days, tractors are increasingly employed for this task, albeit at a rental cost of Rs. 1000-1500 per hour. Tractors move in clockwise and anticlockwise circles and are notably faster than using cattle. For those of us who have smaller *saamai* fields, every member of our family contributes to the threshing process.



## 19. பதம் பாக்குறது

patham pakkurathu (verb)

Checking for readiness

*S'assurer d'un séchage convenable des graines*

The grain that has been threshed and dried, must be checked for its readiness for packing and storage. Farmers know that the grain is ready for storage, when they hear a distinctive *kada-mada* crackling sound when the individual grains are rubbed together, akin to the sound of frying *murukku*, a deep-fried rice flour based crispy snack. Additionally, well-dried *saamai*, when allowed to fall, produces a *sala-sala* sound. This sharp sound is absent when the grains retain moisture. Once sun-dried, the *saamai* is packed and transported to the local market, from where the grain is taken to wider markets.

*Saamai* spread out to dry at Thirumalai's terrace  
in Vazhakkadu, Jawadhu hills.



## 20. നോമ്പൈ & കെരാസി

**thombai & kerasi** (noun)

Storage containers

Silo

In earlier times, when buying and selling were not the norm, our ancestors utilized traditional storage methods such as the *thombai* and *kerasi* to preserve grain. The *thombai*, crafted from bamboo, and the *kerasi*, a hollow cylindrical structure made of mud and straw, were commonly employed for this purpose. Earlier even gunny bags (*koni pai*) were used, but now we mostly use bags that have an inner plastic coating. These bags serve to protect the grain from moisture and mould, ensuring their longevity. They also help us to conveniently store and transport the grain.



## 21. உலுவல்

**uluval** (noun)

Horsegram

*Grain de cheval ou dolique*

Following the *saamai* season, we transition to sowing *ulaval* or horsegram and *pei ellu* (niger oil seeds). This must be done before the Northeast rains after which we must migrate to the plains for work from January to June, as this period typically experiences no rains and is considered the dry season. Usually, our families staying back in the hills oversee the harvest of *ulaval*. We commonly refer to it as *ulavalu*, which is the Telugu term for horsegram, rather than *kollu*, the Tamil equivalent.



## 22. கைக்குந்தல்

kaikkuththal (adjective)

Hand-pounded

Pilage manuel

Harvested *saamai* needs to be dehusked before it can be cooked. A mortar stone (*kallu urali*) embedded in the floor of the front room in the house and a long wooden pestle (*kuththi*) are used in different calibrations of pressure and frequency to pound grain. Many women with whom we spoke said that “we must pound in order to eat!” After a day of hard work in the fields, it is not a welcome proposition and is the reason why many families in the Jawadhu hills have taken to eating rice distributed by the government. There are millet processing facilities in nearby towns like Attipatti, but for those living in remote villages this is not an easy option. Sometimes the prospect of transporting machine pounded grain through narrow hill paths drives them to the task of hand pounding at home. *Saamai* is therefore used mostly for special occasions like weddings and funerals.

*Amma* checks the millets for debris, pours the grains into the grinding stone. Usually she is supported by her daughter and together they hand-pound the *saamai* with a wooden pestle in tandem, Palamarathur.



## 23. കൊടിവല്ലിപ്പാത്ത്

**kodivalipaathai** (noun)

Narrow winding pathway

Sentier sinueux

As one goes to the higher and more remote villages of Jawadhu hills, one encounters walking routes that are narrow and winding. These, referred to as *kodivalipathai* are often the only routes to get around the hills on foot. These paths are extremely narrow and are tricky to navigate. To transport the sick or injured down these rugged roads, makeshift cradles are fashioned.

*Kodivalipathai* enroute to village Vazhakkadu.

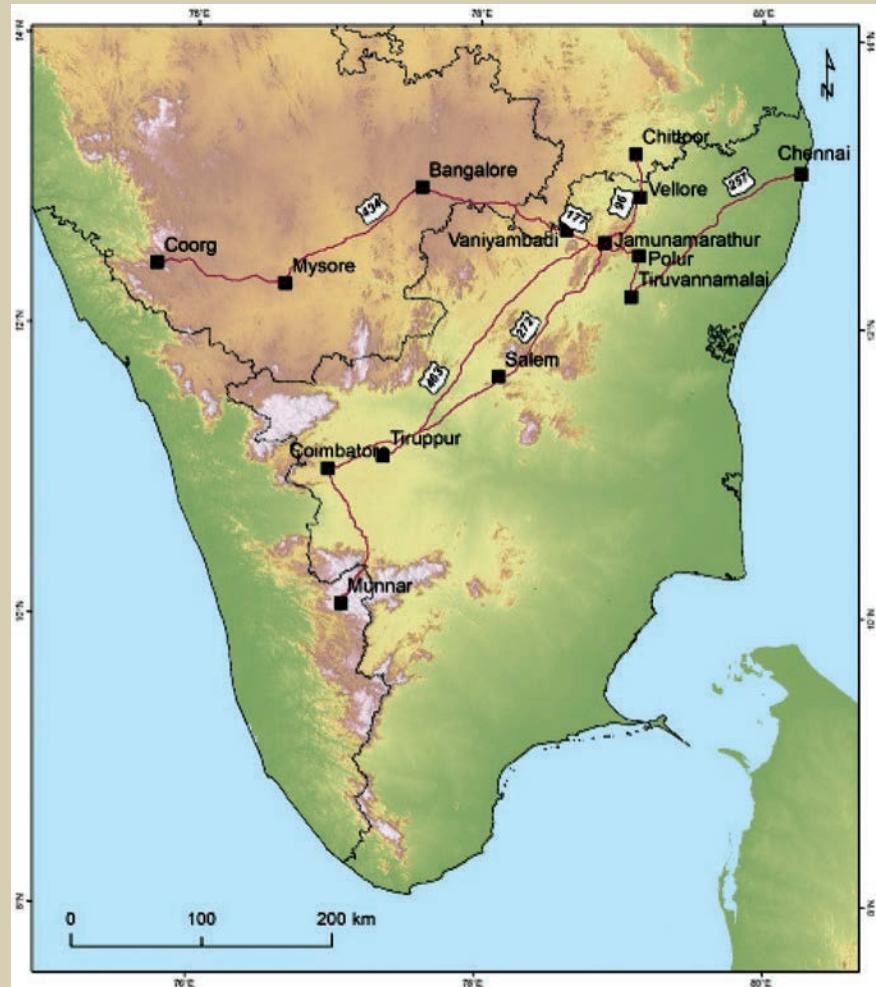


## 24. കീല പേരു keela porathu (verb)

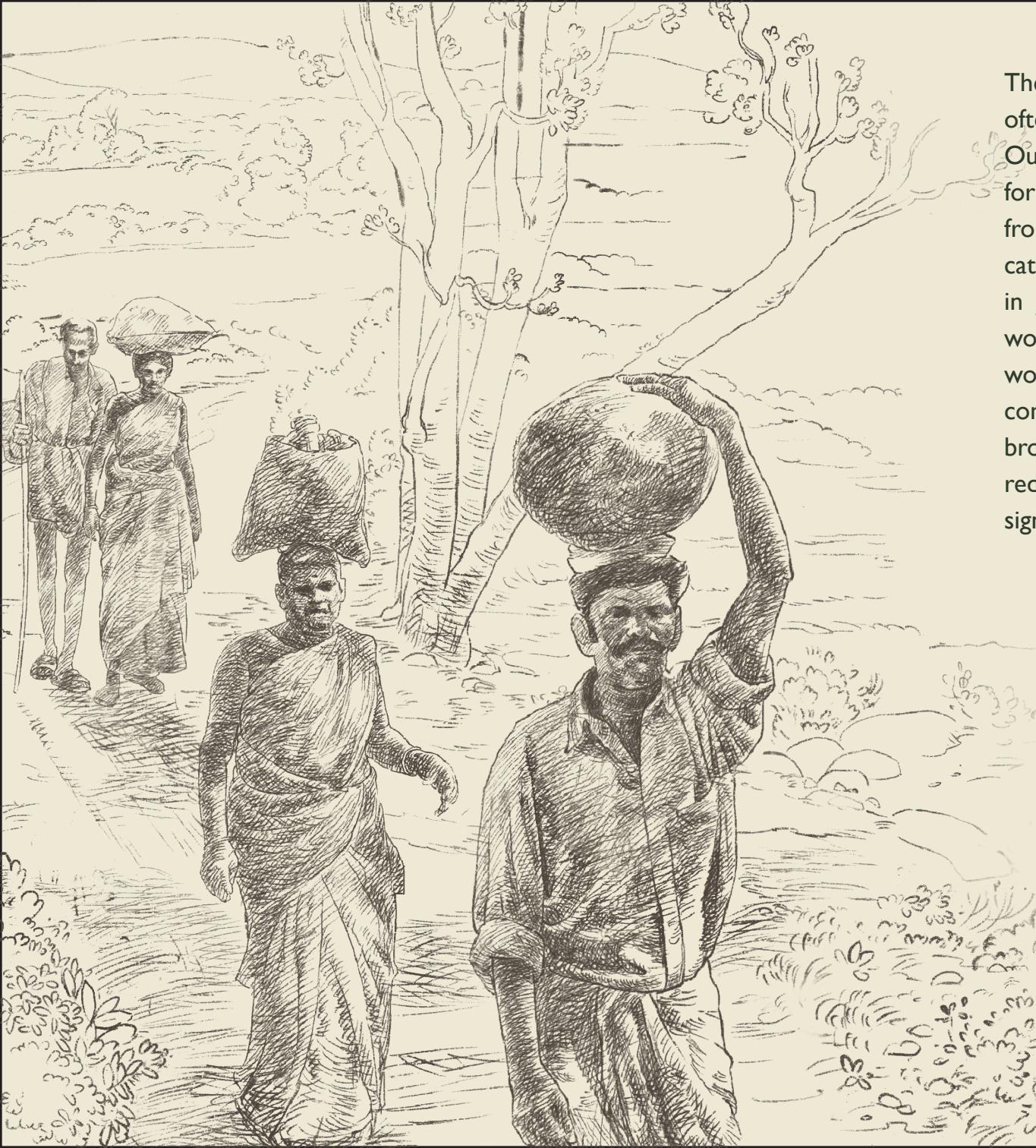
Going down

*Descendre des montagnes  
à la recherche de travail*

As the year draws to an end, having harvested the millets sown earlier this year in June, we prepare to go down to the plains in search of work. We will return home from the plains or *pattinam* (town) for *Ugadi*, the Telugu New Year, in time for next year's crop season between May and September. During the off season, between November and April, we migrate downhill in search of work. Our destinations often include construction sites in Chennai, Bengaluru, tea and coffee plantations in Kerala or Karnataka, where we engage in tasks like picking pepper and coffee, or knitwear factories in Tiruppur where we work double shifts in order to earn enough to begin the fresh sowing cycle.



*Migration routes of the malaiyali community in pursuit of employment opportunities between December and March.*



The journey to these work sites can be arduous, often spanning up to two days of travel by bus. Our children sometimes join us when we travel for work, which means that they have to be absent from school. During this off-season, people with cattle or those who have businesses, all stay back in Jawadhu. Some even find agriculture related work in the *kallani* (irrigated lands), or 100 days' work in Jawadhu itself. Unfortunately, some of our community members have fallen victim to deceitful brokers promising lucrative opportunities in the red sanders and sandalwood business, resulting in significant losses and hardships for our people.

## 25. வெல்ளாரி

**vellari** (noun)

Gherkin

Cornichon

Some of us engage in the cultivation of small, export variety cucumbers or gherkins, a practice we have been dedicated to for over a decade now. Usually, larger companies make contracts with farmers for gherkin cultivation, benefiting those of us who have irrigated land. We grow the *vellari* for them and they pay us based on the size of the gherkin. For a 3-inch-long gherkin, we get paid around Rs. 34 per kilo, and for longer sizes, the amount decreases. The companies also cover the expense for the fertilizer, provide the seeds for sowing, and oversee the collection of the *vellari* from our fields for export to foreign countries.



A contract farmer harvesting cucumbers near Krishnamurthy's farm in Veerappanur.



Employees of the Tiruppattur Agro Producer Company Limited collecting gherkins at Krishnamurthy's farm in Veerappanur.

We noticed that the increased cultivation of *parutthi* (BT cotton) and *vellari* in our hills has led to a decline in the bee population and a decrease in soil fertility. Despite these challenges, the cultivation of *vellari* and *parutthi* remains a source of income for us.

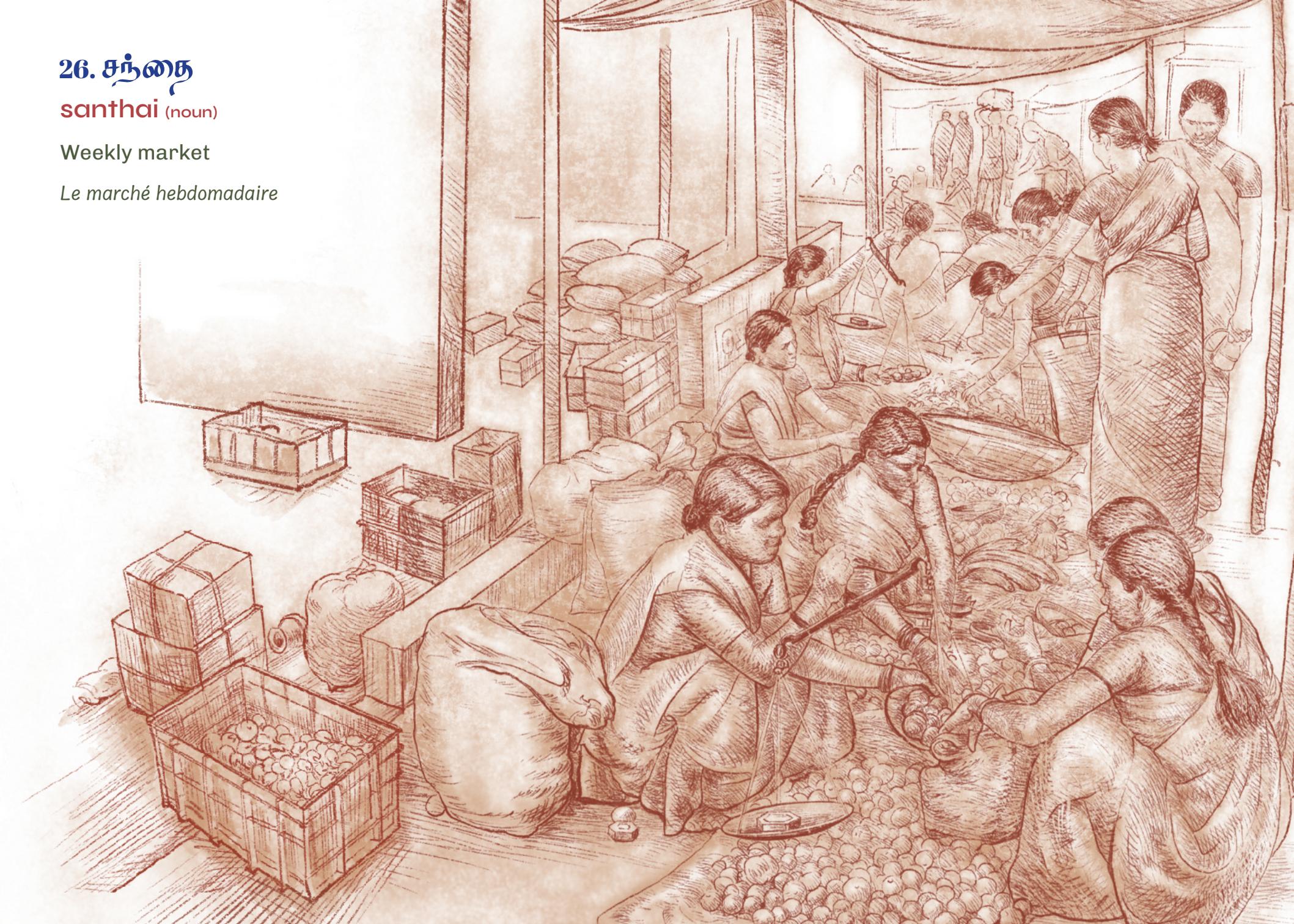
A few decades ago, a French company introduced gherkin production here. For the past 5 years, with borewell support from the government, farmers have been growing gherkins, allowing them to earn 6–7 lakhs in a 3-month harvest period. The cultivation of this crop requires technical expertise. Raman's experiments in gherkin farming failed as they must be harvested before they become too big. Farmers are aware of the changing ecological effects of gherkin cultivation, but they feel compelled to continue due to the burden of heavy debts they carry. This economic indebtedness has ecological consequences and compels subsistence farmers in Jawadhu hills to exploit the fertile soil with hybrid seeds and extractive agriculture systems.

## 26. சந்தை

**santhai** (noun)

Weekly market

*Le marché hebdomadaire*





Every Monday, we transport our produce to the *santhai* at Jamunamarathur. Our *saamai* usually fetches Rs. 40 per kilo, depending on the season. During *Aippasi* (October-November), which marks the end of the *saamai* season, the price may rise to Rs. 50 per kilogram. This market was established just over 30 years ago. Prior to its existence, farmers could take their produce to weekly markets located in Alangayam, Polur, or Odukkathur. The Monday *santhai* offers us farmers a wide range of products, including farming tools, pesticides and fertilizers, clothing, fruits, and vegetables. The *saamai* brought to the markets are taken in lorries to various destinations.



Narnia Self Help Group shop run by Manimala has been in Jamunamarathur for 10 years. Located within the market, this shop specializes in selling millets.

'Fresh and Pure from the Tribal Terrain'



The packaged saamai sold at the Jawadhu hills of a Tribal Farmer Producer Company, Jamunamarathur.

Local NGOs like Dhan Foundation and the Jawadhu Hills Tribal Farmer Producer Company, a government initiative, also procure grain, process and sell it through Self-Help Group-owned shops or private, self-run initiatives like Divine and Pure which is a cooperative company at Jamnamarathur.



Millet processing facility, Dhan Foundation, Jamunamarathur.

## 27. ஹாஸ்டல்

hostel (noun)

Hostel

Internat

The schools in our hills are also residential hostels. The schools come under the Forest Department, Tribal Welfare Department or the State Education Department. In all these hostels, children are given food and accommodation up to grade 8. Some of us who migrate for work, leave our children in hostels. Many of our children have lost the taste for millets which used to be our daily food, especially *ragi kali* or rice balls and *ragi koozh* or porridge made by soaking finger millet, corn and salt in hot water overnight. They are also somewhat distanced from farming as they live in hostels. When our children go to hostels, we work the land ourselves. The biggest boarding school here is Don Bosco and was started by missionaries.

Government Tribal Residential Higher Secondary school,  
Pattaraikkadu, Jawadhu hills.



## 28. ரோட்டன் அரிசி

ration arisi (noun)

Ration rice

Riz subventionné





The Indian Government distributes rice to all families with ration cards through its Public Distribution System, a welfare scheme aimed at providing essential food items to citizens. Our local ration shop typically distributes rations once a month, and we ensure not to miss out on this assistance. Since we are able to get rice for free (30 kg per family in Tamil Nadu), we rarely eat *saamai* these days. We know ration rice is not particularly nutritious. Some of our people who are landless, or do not have *patta* land, ration rice is essential to ensure the sustenance of the family. When the PDS shops arrived 30 years ago in Jamunamarathur, we had to walk with headloads of ration rice through narrow hilly pathways to our villages in remote parts. But now there are PDS shops closer to us and many farmers have motorcycles.

Plaque outside the village ration shop, Vazhakkadu.

## 29. நூற்றுப்பள் வேலை

**nuru nal velai** (noun)

100 days' work

100 jours de travail



100 days' work labourers at the Government Bee Park project, Jawadhu hills.



Plaque with details of 100 days' work, Jawadhu hills.

During the *kasakalam* or dry season, those of us who do not migrate to towns downhill, engage in the 100 days work program under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) of the government. We usually go to work in our own villages or neighboring villages. Our tasks may include constructing *varappu* or *marasi* (bunds), erecting *veli* (fences), digging or undertaking various other construction works such as masonry work for walls and wells.

30. கெனரு

**kenaru** (noun)

Well

Réservoir d'eau

The seasonal rainfed agriculture cycle is fast changing in Jawadhu with the introduction of bore wells by the government. When there are wells, we can grow rice, millets, bananas, and other crops and have agricultural work all year round. Some ngo's are helping farmers in Jawadhu hills to dig wells and maintain water bodies for organic and integrated farming. Jaya and Raman too managed to finance their own borewell and also install a motor pump there. They are now growing a hybrid variety of rice called Mahendra.





எங்களுக்கு என்ன வேணும்?

What do we want?

Ce que nous demandons?

- A minimum support price for millets from the government
- Providing at least 5 kilos of millets along with PDS rice
  - Loans and subsidy to farm millets
  - Better roads and healthcare
- Education that takes our culture and ways into consideration

ஓடு ஓடு வீதைச்சாலும்  
ஓரவுந்தினை மிஞ்சலையே  
பாடப் பாடு வீதைச்சாலும்  
படுத்தினையும் மிஞ்சலையே

“Despite sowing our lives out  
There isn't any *thinai* left to pound in the mortar  
Despite sowing and singing our lungs out  
A *padi* (volume measure) of *thinai* (foxtail millet)  
doesn't remain.”



# Afterword: Voices of the Hills

Delphine Thivet, Sociologist

Head of Social Sciences Department  
French Institute of Pondicherry, India

Not all voices are equally or easily heard in our society, and this book aims to amplify those that sometimes go unheard. Despite facing significant challenges such as a lack of support from the government, geographical isolation, and limited access to resources, the dignity of the farming profession in Jawadhu Hills shines through the resilience and pride of its practitioners. This book is first and foremost the echo of voices we have listened attentively during encounters (mainly between February-March 2023 and October 2024) with the communities residing in the Jawadhu Hills. It is born out of our genuine curiosity about their lives and their challenges. Through careful observations and active engagement, we have sought to understand not only the words they speak but also the practices they embody, such as preparing the soil, weeding, ploughing, sowing, harvesting, threshing, processing, storing, cooking, and selling. Central to our exploration has been the significance of millets in their daily lives - from cultivation to consumption, millets being deeply intertwined with their cultural and culinary traditions. Our approach has been multidimensional, encompassing linguistic analysis, ethnographic inquiry, and the visual medium of photography. By weaving together these diverse perspectives, we aimed to provide a holistic portrayal of life in the Jawadhu Hills, capturing the nuances of language, culture, and social dynamics, with millets serving as a thread connecting these elements.

*Words from Jawadhu Hills* is a testament to the richness and complexity of the communities we have had the privilege to encounter, and it is our hope that it serves as a bridge for deeper understanding and appreciation of their experiences.

விவசாயம் பண்றது எனக்கு பெருமைதான்.  
இங்க ஜவ்வாது மலையில விவசாயம் பண்றது  
தான் பெருமை

“Here in Jawadhu hills, to be able to farm is a matter of pride”

Thirumalai, millet farmer, Vazhakkadu



# Acknowledgements

This booklet is the result of a collaboration between Aarti Kawlra, Academic Director Humanities Across Borders, IIAS, Leiden, Hélène Guétat, former Head of Social Sciences Department, IFP and Delphine Thivet, on-going Head of Social Sciences Department, IFP, who together garnered institutional support from their respective institutions, and contributed to the development and production of the wordbook. We would like to acknowledge the invaluable work of Aarti Kawlra, whose support in securing funding was essential for the project's success.

The project was coordinated by Aarti Kawlra and Delphine Thivet, who both contributed to the surveys, the selection of words, and the final editing of the text and booklet design. Rukma Anil and Boopathiraj S. closely participated in the surveys, photography, and selection of words, and in producing the first draft of this booklet. We also acknowledge the contributions of Hélène Guétat and Prasanth A. in the initial stages of the project.

The translation of the Tamil words collected in this book was carried out by Rukma with the support and advice of Kannan M. and Muthu V. Prakash from the Contemporary Tamil Culture program (IFP, Department of Social Sciences) provided information regarding the publications of R. Govindaraj, Assistant Professor at Thiagarajar College, Madurai, from the Malaiyali community. His

extensive research and writings on the society, culture, geography, history, language, and traditional medicine of the Jawadhu Hills have been invaluable resources for us. Our thanks go also to Muthusankar G. from the Department of Geomatics at the IFP, whose expertise in cartography enabled us to include detailed maps in this booklet. A special thanks to Santhakumaran, advocate and founder of the Jawadhu Hills People's Welfare Organisation, Sridhar Lakshmanan, development consultant who has worked with millet cultivators in Kolli hills, and Father Vinodh of the Don Bosco Tribal Development Society, Jamnamarathur, for their inputs.

To artists Krishnapriya C P and Narendran K of the Onemai Foundation we owe a very big thanks. Not only for their passionate engagement and coordination of the design and artwork of the booklet but also for their patience in allowing the many pieces of the booklet to come together. Special thanks to illustrator Selvam P, graphic designer Priyadharshini K, artists designer Kumaran D and coordinator Parvathi G B of Studio Nigandinam, Chennai without whose diligence and hard work, this wordbook project would not have been completed.

Our heartfelt gratitude goes to Jayakodi and Raman, for their infinite hospitality and wisdom. Their long friendship with Hélène Guétat, enabled us to enter their world of millet farming in the Jawadhu Hills. We are ever so grateful to all the farmers, especially Krishnamurthy (associated with the Dhan Foundation), Manimala, Settai, Ramaswamy, Thirumalai, Nithya, Kuppamma, Papathi, Mani,

Chandra, Amma from Veerappannur, Jamnamarathur, Vazhakadu, Melsilambadi, Kothaneri, Mallanur, and Palamathur respectively, who took the time to talk with us during our visits. We thank all the other farmers we met during group discussions, and who cannot be named here. It is their openness to share with us that singularly shaped the narratives related to each word in this booklet. We are indebted to their generosity and will always remember the warmth with which they welcomed us into their homes and millet fields.

## Booklet Team



Left to right Prasanth, Raman, Vetrivel, Hélène, Aarti, Jaya, Dhanalakshmi, Archana, Snegha



Delphine Thivet, with women farmers



Rukma Anil and Boopathi S



Kumaran D, Selvam P, Krishnapriya C P  
Narendran K, Priyadarshini K, Parvathi G B

The **International Institute for Asian Studies** is hosted and supported by Leiden University in the Netherlands. IIAS functions as an autonomous, interdisciplinary, and inter-regional facilitating platform that serves a multitude of stakeholders in Asia, Europe, and other regions around the world. Since its inception in 1993, IIAS promotes critical, humanistic, and collaborative work on Asia-in-the-World, through five interrelated core priorities namely, research, education & pedagogy, civic engagement, network building, and communication & dissemination.

International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)

Herta Mohr Building, Witte Singel 27A  
2311 BG Leiden, The Netherlands

Tel: +31 71 527 2227 ; Email : [iias@iias.nl](mailto:iias@iias.nl)

Website : <https://www.iias.asia/> ; &

<https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/about>

**Institut Français de Pondichéry** (IFP), UMRIFRE 21 CNRSW-MAE, is a financially autonomous institution under the joint supervision of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) and the French National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS). It is a part of the network of 27 research centres under this Ministry. It also forms part of the research unit 3330 "Savoirs et Mondes Indiens" of the CNRS, along with the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH) in New Delhi. It fulfills its missions of research, expertise and training in Human and Social Sciences and Ecology in South Asia.

French Institute of Pondicherry, (IFP)

11, St. Louis Street, RB. 33, Pondicherry—605001, India

Tel: +91 (413) 2231609, Email: [ifpdir@ifpindia.org](mailto:ifpdir@ifpindia.org)

Website: <http://www.ifpindia.org>

**Onemai Foundation** is a Singapore based non-profit that works to facilitate collaborative art based multidisciplinary projects. It mediates relationships and processes with the aim to expand on the possibilities of art practice that is based on research and archiving.

Onemai Foundation

7a Craig Rd, Singapore - 089667

Website: <https://onemai.net>

Email: [info@onemai.org](mailto:info@onemai.org)

Words from Jawadhu Hills Eastern Ghats, South India

**Co-published:** *Humanities Across Borders Wordbook Series (#4)*, IIAS & *Science and Society Series (#5)*, IFP

February, 2025

© International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) Leiden, The Netherlands & Institut Français de Pondichéry (IFP) Pondicherry, India  
All rights reserved.

**Text coordination and editing:** Aarti Kawlra, IIAS and Delphine Thivet, IFP

**Tamil translation:** Rukma Anil, IFP

**French translation:** Delphine Thivet, IFP

**Photographs:** Aarti Kawlra, Hélène Guétat, Prasanth A, Delphine Thivet, Boopathiraj S, Rukma Anil, Thirumalai, Marine Al Dahdah (IFP), Ponraj Kumar M (Nigandinam)

**Maps:** Muthusankar G, IFP

**Book Design:** Priyadarshini K, Kumaran D, Nigandinam

**Illustrations:** Selvam P, Nigandinam

**Tamil Typeface:** Narendran K, Nigandinam

**Graphic Design:** Narendran K, Kumaran D, Nigandinam

**Design coordination:** Krishnapriya C P, Parvathi G B, Nigandinam

**Printed at:** Jothy Enterprises, Chennai - 600005,

Tel: +91 (044) 28483067, Email: [jcstgm@gmail.com](mailto:jcstgm@gmail.com)