

WORKSHOP ON ISSUES OF SALT WORKERS

(Held on 5th October 2007, at Toran, Opp. Sabarmati Ashram, Vadaj, Ahmedabad)

ORGANISED BY
AHRM

In Association with

Central salt commissioner's Office
Office of Industry Commissioner – Gujarat
&

TamilNadu Salt Corporation Ltd.

Supported by
CARE (INDIA) SNEHAL PROGRAMME

Background:

Gujarat is the largest producers of salt in India and ranking 2nd highest export in the world. Though the salt industry has grown by many folds after independence, especially after 1980, salt making is now of the oldest traditional activity and livelihood sources for *Chunvaliya Koli, Ahir* and many other communities. The *Firman*¹ by emperor Aurengzeb in 16th Century has identified this as traditional activity. The total number of labours engaged in salt production and allied activities is more than 5 lakhs. Salt workers form the most unorganized form of workers. In case of inland salt production the workers, locally known as 'Agariyas' migrate in Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) for more than 8 months along with their families, while in case of marine salt, the migration is towards the sea coast. If one actually puts it, salt making in Gujarat involves men, women and children from the family in its production process.

Rationale of the Meeting:

The socio-economic condition of the workers is very bad. The destination of the migration is isolated spots of salt production, which leads to severe vulnerabilities like lack of access to water, health service, education, social life, road, electricity etc. The occupation hazards are also severe in salt production process. In past few years, the welfare measure and focused intervention by the state and voluntary groups, the situation in Gujarat has improved by some extent. Agariay Heet Rakshak Manch (AHRM), a forum of salt workers, has intervened effectively to create space for the community to talk, to raise voice. However the biggest challenges still remain unaddressed is to improve upon return of this labour, create access to market and value addition process.

These bigger challenges also need greater collaborations. AHRM has took initiative in this process and has invited major salt producing states to discuss upon the issues of the salt workers and common strategy to move ahead. In its visits to Rajasthan, Tamilnadu, it

¹ Salt Industry in India; Page no 837-838

was realized the salt workers vulnerability and marginalization is common issue amongst all the despite the wages or contract rates different. With series of discussion with concern officials, organizations, it strongly felt that there need to have a national legislature to regulate service conditions and welfare measures of salt workers.

A outline of national consultation was thus designed in collaboration with respective states and office central salt commissioners. It was felt that there shall be series of meetings in each of the states to discuss thoroughly on these issues and reach out common understanding so as to how the legislature should be. The first of this kind was conducted on 5th October 2007, at Ahmedabad in collaboration with Industry Commissionerrate- Gujarat, Office of Central salt commissioner and Tamilnadu Salt Corporation Ltd (TSCL). The meeting invited Deputy salt commissioner, Gujarat. Deputy Industry Commissioner- Dept of Industries, Gujarat, chairman & MD of TSCL, community representatives, and representatives of voluntary working on various issues related to salt workers.

Session 1:

Key presentations: AHRM, Central salt Commissioner's Office, Industry commissioner's Office, and TSCL.

AHRM:

- In globalization, as that of every industry, salt industry need to accept principles of integrated developments, human rights and fare return to its workers, conservation and protection of ecology and environment. There is great need that important stakeholders in context of unorganized workers in salt industry need to seat together and discuss about suggestive legal framework for salt workers.
- The focus of such consultation shall be
 - Service Condition and Welfare of Salt Pan workers
 - Land Management for land under salt production
- Issues

- Disparity of wages
- Non-uniformity of schemes & its implementations
- Central and state schemes and grants
- Implications
 - No regulation/control over service condition - resulted in worst socio-economic conditions of salt workers
 - Difficult to implement the schemes (lesser coverage)
- Way out ...
 - Need for Comprehensive National Act to regulate service conditions of salt workers
 - Act should cover Uniformity in welfare schemes for better implementation and avoid adhocism
 - To create independent Authority for land management (land lease, issue of environment, traditional salt making by NT-DNT communities, forest and sanctuary, CRZ, bio-diversity)
- Probable stakeholders for national consultations
 - Ministry of Commerce and Industries
 - Central Salt Commissionerrate
 - ILO & Ministry of Labour
 - Department of Industries from major salt producing states.
 - Voluntary groups working with various stakeholders

Office of Central Salt Commissioner

- Mr. D. L. Meena (Deputy Salt Commissioner)

- Little Rann of Kutch has over 30 lakh salt production. More than 20000 families are working in the salt production. Though we can Individual Agariyas, members of cooperatives societies and workers that are being engaged by big salt works. The working conditions of all are same. There is worst form of exploitation that one can see here

- The ownership over the land on which Agariya works can become one of the major steps towards their empowerment. Once they have ownership on the land, they can get loans from banks or micro-finance schemes so that future trading and advance fixing of prices can be stopped.
- As far as Gujarat is concerned, there is a major challenge of Wild Ass Sanctuary. Agariyas were traditionally involved in salt production in LRK. The proposed sanctuary will become a major livelihood issue for these communities.
- There are gaps in the quality and frequency of services of implementation of welfare schemes meant for Agariyas. This can be addressed by coordination and a local monitoring system.

Tamilnadu Salt Corporation Ltd.

Mr. Vijaykumar (Chairman & MD)

- **An Overview of salt industry in Tamilnadu:**
 - TSCL produces salt and supplies it to ration shops (public distribution system). In addition to edible salt, TSCL also supplies industrial salt to chemical industries.
 - There are 2000 workers engaged with TSCL. All the workers are from 15 villages surrounding the production area near Chennai. Workers are provided with wages, PF, Gratuity, earned leave benefits and also a yearly bonus.
 - The educational status amongst workers is high. 90% of the children from the workers seek education up to middle school and 10% till college level. The percentage of children of salt workers engaging in the same activity is almost negligible. 90% of the workers are habituated to drinking.
 - There is a facility of drinking water and sanitation for both men and women workers at the workplace. There is also a canteen facility.
 - 90% of the workers have pucca houses (roof of mud tiles) while 18% live in kaccha houses and 2% in concrete houses. An average income of every worker is not less than 3000 per month.

- TSCL is profit making unit, and strongly believes that workers shall get there wages and other benefits as their rights. The condition in private unit making slat production the service condition of workers is worst.
- There is shortage of workers in Tamilnadu as there are other options like construction work. In last few years, construction industry has grown by many folds. The wages paid in such a industry are also high.
- TSCL also strongly feel that productivity shall be linked with the wages that they earn/ for example, in TSCL we are thinking over and above yearly bonus workers can be given extra bonus depending on the market rate of salt. Salt production involves 60% of the labour cost. Cost of production is largely influenced by labour cost, transport cost, and electricity supply.
- We have felt need of having Education assistance schemes of facilitating higher education. There is need that all salt workers be covered under Group Insurance scheme.

Office of Industry Commissioner

Mr. D.O. Shah (Deputy Salt Commissioner)

- Industry Commissionerrate, government strongly feels that Central salt commissioner's office shall take initiative in having national consultation. Respective states and civil society organizations can associate in this effort to make it more effective. Salt commissioner, also need to involve Ministry of commerce and Industries –New delhi.
- Office of Industry Commissioner will be happy to associate with such a collective effort of having dialogue with important stakeholders. Office is committed to welfare of workers and have played key role in improving working conditions Agariyas in Gujarat.
- Gujarat government has put in more than 5000 lakhs rupees in last seven years for various welfare schemes in addition to Namak Majdoor Awas Yojana, supported by Central government.

- Various organizations and community groups have played very important role in making this schemes effectively. However government is deeply concerned about issues of proposed sanctuary. The pipelines that are already been sanctioned and plans for which are ready could not be laid due to prohibition from forest department. We have already written to ministry about this issue.
- We would be writing to survey and settlement commissioner, about the traditional communities involved in salt production in LRK along with details of total amount spent by the state government, on various welfare schemes.
- We also recommend that national workshop shall discuss about proposed wild ass sanctuary. We may ask various stakeholders and experts to make representation and take their suggestions.

Session 2 - Plan of Action

Key Speakers: Industry Department – Gujarat, TSCL, Central salt Commissioner Office, CARE, AHRM

- Industry commissioner Gujarat is ready to associate in the national consultation. Infrastructural support can also be provided if required and appropriate proposal need to be submitted for the same.
- There is strong need of convergence of various schemes. This will avoid duplication and resources will be effectively used.
- Regional consultation shall be conducted in Western and southern region (Rajasthan-Gujarat) and (TN, AP and Orissa) to have detailed deliberations on proposed legislation on regulation of service conditions and welfare of salt workers. The consultation shall finalize the proposed structure of the legislations, which can then be discussed in detail during national consultation.

- Central salt commissioner's office may take initiative in conducting regional consultation in association with department of Industries, and civil society organizations in respective states.
- The CESS collection and allocation of welfare budget is another issue which need to be discussed in the workshop. There need to be separate authority to look into CESS funds and its allocations.
- We need to actively involved trade unions, organizations and community groups from all the salt producing states in the national consultation.
- The tentative dates can be mid-January. In addition to Ministry of commerce and industries, and central salt commissioner's office following departments of respective states need to be involved. They are Education, Forest, Revenue, health, labour, Industry, Water supply, food and civil supply and Tamilnadu salt corporations, Commission for nomadic and de-notified tribes, Delhi etc.
- Research institutes like CSMCRI, GEER Foundation, VV GIRI INSTITUTE, and others shall be invited and asked to make their presentations.
- National level networks like VANI, CEECODEACOON, COVA may be involved which could guide the process in networking and coordination point of view.
- For the workers in organized units, factories or those who are engaged as contract workers, there are legislations to regulate their working conditions. (Though there are gaps at implementation level). Thus national consultation needs to focus on unorganized workers.
- The issues of ecology, environment & bio-diversity conservation are of serious concern in coastal areas, as coast is very sensitive to any change that are done
