

The saga of India's salt workers*

The BOBP-IGO recently completed a one-year study of India's salt workers. The study was commissioned by the Salt Commissioner's Office, Government of India and the results were presented at a National Workshop held in Ahmedabad on 17 February 2006. This article provides glimpses into the study.

Salt sustains all life on earth – that of humans, animals, plants. Centuries ago, Roman soldiers were paid their salary in salt. And ancient Greeks used to buy slaves with salt to sustain their sybaritic lifestyle.

Salt has some 14 000 uses in industry. Salt was the unlikely weapon used by Mahatma Gandhi to galvanise India's freedom struggle.

Despite this impressive history and its tremendous everyday utility, "common salt" is usually taken for granted. And salt workers – those who extract this substance from the seas, lakes or the earth – are hardly the heroes of history or mythology, ballad or legend. If anything, they are unsung beasts of burden.

Not many know that salt works begin where civilization ends; that salt pans lie in coastal and desert areas under a pitiless scorching sun; that some 150 000 salt workers in India and their families (perhaps half a million people in all) live for eight months a year in this harsh environment that's often devoid of basic amenities such as drinking water, schools, hospitals or markets; that they do the toughest of manual jobs, risking blindness, blood pressure, skin lesions, knee injury, back pain and exhaustion, and epidemics such as malaria; that most salt worker children are school drop-outs, and are vulnerable to chronic cough and tuberculosis; that despite such living conditions, salt workers

are paid low wages, and suffer vile exploitation at the hands of the many intermediaries in the salt business, including money-lenders. Little wonder that they seek to drown their sorrows in alcohol or blow them away with smoke – further aggravating their problems.

Perhaps the cruel landscape of the Little Rann of Kutch in Gujarat best exemplifies the plight of India's salt workers. This area has a lot of underground saline water. Extracting salt from it is a business opportunity tapped by some 1 500 small and large salt pans, mainly in Surendranagar and Patan districts. Some 15 000 families – merchants, *agarias* (salt workers-cum-entrepreneurs) labourers – farm salt here during the September-March season. Many of them live here for eight months, setting up small grass-

roofed shacks. Little children grow up playing in salty water under the blazing sun, sometimes helping out their parents in the salt pans with sundry jobs.

The sea and the subsoil brine are the main sources of salt in India. Solar evaporation of brine (from either source) is the main technology for salt production; vacuum evaporation is the mechanisation method used by the industrialised west and by large companies in India. Subsoil brine is tapped mainly in the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat and in parts of Rajasthan. Rocks (found in Himachal Pradesh) and lakes (such as the Sambar lake near Jaipur, Rajasthan) are other sources of salt.

The salt workers of the Little Rann of Kutch make salt by digging wells and evaporation ponds, and

Women in the salt industry bear a heavy burden



* This article has been condensed from the BOBP-IGO report on 'Socio-Economic Status of Workers in the Salt Industry' by Mr S R Madhu.

transferring subsoil brine from the wells to the ponds. This translates into a series of chores that have basically remained unchanged for years. Selection of sites; well-digging; preparation of the land nearby for a series of evaporation ponds; construction of ponds by bunding the land, and setting up channels for movement of brine; hardening and evening out earth on the ponds by trampling it repeatedly with bare feet; use of diesel pumps to flood the evaporation ponds with brine from the wells; use of heavy wooden rakes on the salt bed to obtain large-grain crystals of salt.

These crystals are heaped up in pans, loaded into trucks and transported out. Collection, storage and transport of salt is a highly labour-intensive task. The entire cycle – from well-digging to salt harvesting – takes three or four months.

For marine salt production, sea water is admitted at high tide by sluice gates through creeks or man-made canals to low-level reservoirs or small creeks. The production process is similar to that of inland salt. But salt collection from marine pans is even more tedious than from inland pans. Salt layers are broken up with metal hoes and shovels. Disintegrated salt is collected in small heaps, washed of impurities and loaded into trucks.

Despite their back-breaking work, salt workers at many places lack access to protective gear such as eye goggles or gum boots. Amenities for first aid and for rest and recreation are inadequate, at places non-existent.

Following a spate of reports and complaints on the plight of salt workers, especially in the Rann of Kutch, the Salt Commissioner's Office decided to organise an in-depth study. The BOBP-IGO was assigned the responsibility, in view of the many studies it has carried out on similarly under-privileged fisherfolk communities in countries around the Bay of Bengal.

The BOBP-IGO, conducted a socio-economic survey of salt workers in the major salt-producing states (Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal) from September 2004 to August 2005. More than a thousand salt workers from the seven states filled up a structured questionnaire; a detailed interaction was carried out with a sampling of salt workers in these states, using the tool of PRA (participatory rural appraisal). Discussions were held with ministries, salt associations and NGOs.

A report and a video film have been prepared on the basis of the study and its conclusions. The report contains useful statistical information. The video film that accompanies the report shows some lively interviews with salt workers.

A few basic facts: Some 120 countries produce salt today. Total salt production is about 210 million tonnes. The USA is the top producer; China ranks second; India, with 17 million tonnes, is third. The salt industry is governed by the Salt Cess Act of 1953, which is implemented through the Salt Commissioner's Office, headquartered in Jaipur. Gujarat accounts for about 70 percent of India's salt production, followed by Tamil Nadu with 14 percent and Rajasthan with 11 percent (Figure 1).

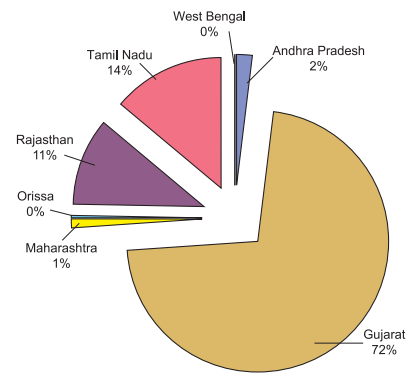


Figure 1: State-wise contribution in salt production in India (2004)

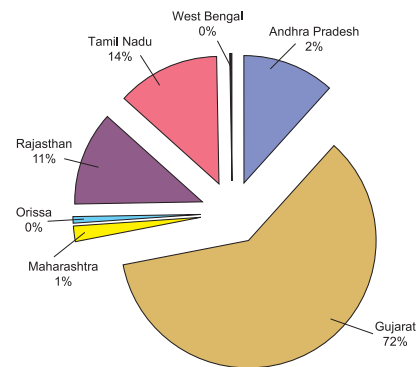


Figure 2: State-wise average daily employment (2004)

Historically speaking, India's salt industry is many centuries old. Its growth was hobbled by the British who imposed heavy taxes on it, forcing import of salt from Britain. It's after independence that domestic salt production was encouraged once more. The industry was de-licensed in 1996. Today, some 2.25 million tonnes of salt is exported annually.

Drawing sub-soil brine in Santhalpur



Some 10 347 units in India produce salt. About half a million acres of land have been allocated to salt production, of which 300 000 have been developed. The 10 347 units have been classified into four categories ranging from more than a hundred acres (Category 1) to “unrecognised units” of less than 10 acres (Category IV).

India’s salt industry is labour-intensive. It engages some 150 000 workers on an average per day. Gujarat provides the maximum daily employment (Figure 2). Most of them (except a few who are employed by large companies) operate on a no-work-no-pay contract for eight months a year. Several thousands depend indirectly on the salt industry for their income.

There are three kinds of salt workers in India, depending on the type of location and the pattern of entrepreneurship. The worker may be hired by a land leaseholder who owns a salt pan, or by a manager or a labour contractor on behalf of the leaseholder or sub-leased out to the salt worker with a buy-back system.

Salt workers in small salt pans are the worst sufferers. Muthumani of Rajapandinagar village near Tuticorin breaks down as she describes the plight of her 45-year-old husband. He is paralysed and moves about in a wheelchair, because of his work in salt pans. “I have spent a lot of money on his treatment that I can ill-afford, but he has not recovered. We have six daughters. What is to happen to us?”

Says an *Agaria* of Patan district in the Rann of Kutch: “Life is very tough, though I was born here. There’s no provisions market close by. Essentials for day-to-day living are hardly available. Take drinking water. We have to buy it from a tanker, though I can hardly afford



Trampling the salt pan

it. Medical facilities, even for first aid, are poor. If we fall ill or get hurt, there’s no transport even to take us to the hospital, which is 25 km away. I would like to educate my children, but there’s no school here. We can’t leave them alone back home, we bring them along to the Rann, they grow up here playing and helping us out in the desert.”

Salt workers in the organised sector are relatively better off. Mr Bharat C Rawal, Deputy General Manager of Solaris, Jamnagar, says “We provide all basic amenities to our workers – such as drinking water, education, health. A teacher lives here. There’s a dispensary. Major

ailments like TB and night blindness are treated. In the field, we provide workers with eye goggles and gum boots. We take particular care about safety. Electricity is available round the clock. There’s a rest shed, a crèche to take care of little children. We provide decent wages. The benefit of provident fund is available even to a person who has worked for just one day. There are insurance schemes.”

Mr Rawal suggested that the government could use some of the substantial revenue from big salt producers to help small-scale producers and workers, such as those in the Little Rann of Kutch.

Women workers loading salt in Tuticorin



Salt Commissioner

Mr S Sundaresan said in an interview that the industry has made tremendous progress since independence. The importer of the British era is today an exporter. "Workers have problems because salt manufacturing is confined to remote, backward, drought-prone areas. The working environment here is harsh. Further, salt manufacturing is a seasonal activity. Labour is mainly on a contract basis." On the other hand, the salt industry provided succour to thousands who had no other job option.

He said the Central Government has under the Tenth Plan introduced the Namak Mazdoor Awas Yojana, for the construction of 5 000 houses for salt workers. Pilot plants were being planned through Bharat Heavy Electricals to supply potable drinking water, using the reverse osmosis process. Next year, five reverse osmosis plants would be set up in each salt producing state. Mr Sundaresan agrees that "more welfare schemes are needed for salt workers".

A major problem of the salt industry is that of timely transport of harvested salt from Gujarat or Tamil Nadu, the main producing states, to other areas. Tractors and trucks move salt over short distances, Railway wagons over long distances. During the peak salt season, the Railways are unable to provide enough rakes. The freight charges are very high, small producers say. This affects their



Loading of salt in Hindustan Salt Works, Sambhar, Rajasthan

revenues, and indirectly impacts on the salt workers as well.

The BOBP-IGO study team has made a number of recommendations concerning salt workers (box below).

Implementing most of these recommendations would be the best way of recognising and rewarding salt workers for their contribution to the Indian economy.

Recommendations of BOBP-IGO on salt workers:

- Create a data base on salt workers. Undertake a full census. Register all salt workers.
- Guarantee employment, fix minimum wages.
- Improve workplace amenities, such as access to potable drinking water, mobile clinics, protective gear, sanitation, rest sheds. Strengthen awareness on family planning. Recruit health workers from the salt workers' community.
- Set up a group insurance scheme. Improve and widen credit access.
- Set up child crèches and schools. Mobilise NGOs for the purpose.
- Modernise the industry without marginalizing small-scale salt units. Standardise production techniques. Improve power supply. Set up salt parks in select locations.
- Strengthen infrastructure for storage and transport of salt, with jetties, and efficient rail rakes.



Bay of Bengal News is a quarterly publication of the Bay of Bengal Programme Inter-Governmental Organisation (BOBP-IGO). The BOBP-IGO is a regional fisheries body, which presently covers four countries around the Bay of Bengal – Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka. The BOBP-IGO plays a catalytic and consultative role in developing coastal fisheries management in the Bay of Bengal to help improve the conditions of small-scale fisherfolk in the member-countries.

