

## **Agariyas, Salt Farming, and Little Rann of Kutch, Gujarat - A Brief Note**

To most of us living away from the Little Rann of Kutch it is known for its wilderness and wild asses. But to thousands of people living on the edge of the Rann, it is the only source of their livelihood. These are the Agariyas, salt pan workers and producers. Scorching heat, extreme physical labour and isolated life away from human habitats and social interactions mark the lives of these agariyas who are struggling to prove their rights to produce salt in this land.

### **Background**

It is believed that once upon a time, little Rann of Kutch was part of the sea. Rivers like *Saraswati*, *Banas*, *Rupen* and many others were meeting the sea here. These rivers brought sediments which got deposited over a period to time to form **little Rann of Kutch**. During the monsoon, the little Rann of Kutch converts into a huge water body.

*Little Rann of Kutch* is known for its traditional salt production and various references mention this to be 600 years old activity. Like for example :-

1. Document “Gujarat Sarvasangraha” Salt farming is being carried out in LRK since 10<sup>th</sup> Sanctuary
2. The method of salt farming was well developed by 1680. (Doc. Zalawad, 1977, Page 48). Firman<sup>1</sup> by Mughal emperor Aungzeb in 1669-70 says that king of Halvad was re-established as owner of Agar. (Salt pans). This firman clearly mentions that the order by which Mohammadnagar alias Halvad was allotted to Nazir Ali as “Jagir” is being revoked and the rights of *King Yashvant Sing* are re-established as he is the rightful and traditional owner of the land.
3. Kernel Watsan has clearly mentioned about Vadagara Salt (Crystal salt). Document says that before British took over, Vadagara salt was farmed by king and community independently without any restrictions. But British had put provisions on independent production of salt, and salt making was taken under them. Kingdoms on the periphery were given permission to produce salt only to satisfy their need. There is also mention and description about “Wild Ass” in this doc.

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<sup>1</sup> Copy of the firmaan attached as annexure - I

4. In 1900 British completely ban the production of Vadagara salt, which was released but only for Kingdoms not for Agariyas.
5. Mahatma Gandhi initiated Salt March against the British rule preventing individual salt making. As a result of which in 1931 Gandhi-Irwin pact was done, in which for the first time in British rule of 200 years, people living near salt areas were given permission to make, collect and sale salt in the village.
6. There was possibility of salt farming in various other parts of India, but becoz of prevention from Britishers, we were depending on Salt import.
7. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1948<sup>2</sup>, one remarkable initiative was taken by government. As per notification of GOI, any individual making salt upto 10 acre was free to do so and no permission lease was required for the same. There is special mention that no application may be done to any department for seeking permission for making salt below 10 acre.
8. In order to promote small producer, production upto 10 acre was also given exemption from CESS. As per policy of Government of India, Agariyas freely started making salt in LRK after this notification and they were recognized as “Das Ekariya Agariya” “10 acre Agariya”.
9. One of the well know Teacher, Historian and Ex. MLA shri Arvindbhai Acharya has collected above 55 songs of life of Agariyas. As per his views there are many songs remained un-documented. These songs talks about history of Vadagara Salt, salt making process which reveals the historical importance of vadagara salt.

During the British period, this activity increased manifolds. There is mention in many documents about having railways, water services and even schools in Little Rann of Kutch during British period. Income from salt was used to meet substantial part of military expenses of British government. Salt produced in the Little Rann is known as ‘Vadagaru’ salt. It is believed that the British used to call the large salt pans of Rann as “Bada Agar” which became vada agar and from there the name ‘Vadagaru’.

The brine (salty water with concentration up to 17° to 23°) is available at the depth of 80 to 120 ft, which upon evaporation forms crystal salt called as “Vadagaru salt”. The community involved in salt production is Mainly Chunvaliya Koli, Ahir and Miyana, Sandhi (both muslim) residing 250 in the villages on periphery districts (Majority from

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<sup>2</sup> Copy of the notification attached as annexure-II

107 villages adjacent to LRK) of LRK. These communities are traditionally known to have the skills of salt production and are known as '**Agariyas**'. Water quality in 107 villages of LRK is saline, thus agriculture production is very low. In absence of any other strong alternative for livelihood, Salt farming is the only livelihood option for Agariyas! As per the Salt Commission's report there are about 45,000 Agariyas (12 thousand families) working in the salt pans of Little Rann.

After the monsoon, the Agariyas migrate to the Rann and stay there in extremely poor living conditions with very limited for 8 months upto mid summer. Just before the onset of monsoon, they sell their entire harvest to traders and return back to their native villages. Education is very low among them. They migrate with families to salt pans as the salt making process is highly labour intensive and each of the family member shares some work. This does not let their children access the village schools. Recently with community initiative and support from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan, "Rann Shalas" are being run in the desert where in around 1100 children study.

#### **About Little Rann of Kutch:**

Little Rann of Kutch spreads is 5180 sq. kms<sup>3</sup> consist of many islands with rich biodiversity. It was put on the world map due to the Wild Ass, locally known as **Ghudkhar**, as this is the only home in Asia to this specie.

LRK land was never surveyed before or after independence. When we sought for the documents and details of survey number of LRK under RTI, government replied that this un-surveyed piece of land is historically being known as Little Rann of Kutch (*Kutch Nu Nanu Rann*) and has been allotted a "Survey No Zero". Government also accepted that it does not have documents for claiming ownership over the piece of land.

**As mentioned above LRK is unique ecosystem which acts as "dry land" as well as "wet land when filled with water during monsoon. This is also known for its unique crystal salt made by Vadagaru or PODA salt.**

#### **The Issue**

In 1973, government issued notification<sup>4</sup> (under wild animal and bird protection Act) about its intension to declare 4840 sq. km area of LRK as Wild Ass Sanctuary.

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<sup>3</sup> Singh H.S.et el. 1999- "Ecological Study of Wild Ass Sanctuary: Little Rann of Kutch – a comprehensive study of Bio-diversity and management issues" GEER Foundation, GoG- Gandhinagar.

Through another notification in 1978, another 112.81 sq. km was added to this. (Total area of sanctuary becomes 4952.81sq.km, whole of LRK).

As per wild Life Protection Act 1972, the additional collector was appointed for verification of rights (customary) of local people in proposed Sanctuary area. The collector office, (wild ass Sanctuary) survey and settlement, Survey Bhuvan, Surendranagar issued a Notification dated 25<sup>th</sup> September 1997 to Agariyas for representing their entitlements in the Sanctuary area within a period of 60 days from the issues of the notice. It was also mentioned that this notification shall be widely published in all the *Panchayats* of the villages surrounding LRK and daily progress shall be intimated to the additional collector's office (wild ass sanctuary). When this notice was issued Agariyas were inside the Rann for salt production which is outside the boundary of any Panchayat or revenue village. This notification never reached many of them and only very few could apply in those 60 days.<sup>5</sup> Sanctuary declaration has completed 40 years now and several things have happened so far<sup>6</sup>.

### **Enactment of Forest Rights Act**

**Forest Rights Act (FRA)** was enacted in 2006, which recognized the rights of communities either dwelling or depending on the Forest or protected areas for making their livelihood. In Gujarat notification was issued for its implementation in non-scheduled areas in Dec 2013. Implementation has not yet started for LRK. No forest Rights Committees are formed in any of the villages on the periphery of LRK for accepting claims from the community for their community rights.

### **BCLRIP Project:**

Meanwhile in the year 2012, Forest department introduced a project named Bio-diversity conservation and Rural Livelihood Improvement Project. This project is supported by World Bank. The project is aiming to make efforts for conservation of

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<sup>4</sup> Copy of the notifications attached herewith as annexure. - III

<sup>5</sup> In response to an application dated 12<sup>th</sup> Dec 2006, put under right to Information Act 2005, Public Information Officer of Additional Collector (wild Ass) Office has clearly said that the office has received only 1776 individual claims and 77 representations within stipulated time of 60 days from the date of notification. Out of which 268 individual applications and 14 claims from co-operative societies are being approved. As per annual report of Department of Industries, 45,439 families are engaged in salt production in the districts Surendranagar, Patan, Rajkot (maliya) & Kutch, surrounding sanctuary area. The question comes, that if 45,000 Agariyas were aware of process for verification of rights in the proposed sanctuary area (LRK), why only 1776 gave their representation before collector?

<sup>6</sup> Table showing sequence of events one LRK was declared as sanctuary has been attached as annexure IV

Bio-diversity in LRK as well as to improve livelihood of stakeholder communities (salt farmers, Pastrolist, charcoal makers & fishing community) depending on LRK. During pre-launching of the project several consultations were held to disseminate information of the project. However once implementation was started, it focused on periphery villages, where as the major stake holder – Salt farmers who also play key role in conservation of wild life in LRK got excluded. Community organization AHRM was not informed for any meetings, workshops or not involved in the survey process and we are worried that the approach will invite conflicts, defeating the very objective of the project. However project does mentions about recognizing community user rights over the resource.

#### **Threat of Eviction for the communities:**

Meanwhile Agariyas were served with eviction notices several times since 2007. The notices said that Agariyas need to produce documentary evidences for salt farming in LRK or else they will be sentenced to jail. Due to such notices, this traditional community is under tremendous pressure and threat that their only livelihood option of salt farming may be taken away from them.

#### **AHRM & its Effort**

Agariya Heetrakshak Manch is an organization working for the community, since 2001. AHRM has worked for the awareness, empowerment of Agariyas to develop their leadership & capacity and have got them into decision making process. AHRM has ensured that 50% of its trustee board members are also from Agariya community itself.

AHRM focused on effective implementation of various welfare schemes meant for Agariyas and started representing the grass root issues at state level. AHRM was also invited to become member of State Empowered committee headed by Dept of Industries. AHRM played key role in bringing effectiveness to Government's welfare efforts for Agariyas. When AHRM came to know about the ongoing process of verification of rights in the sanctuary area, it began discussions with the community and it was soon realized that the agariyas were completely unaware of such a notification and process of representing their claims for establishment of their rights. It was not easy to reach the agariyas working in different parts of the Rann and thus a weekly radio program '*Gangdo Lage Vhalo*' was started to give voice to their concerns and to communicate with them.

Once aware, a large *sammelan* was organized in December 2006 to demand their rights in the sanctuary. As a result, from December 2006 to June 2007, about 4800 agariyas had applied for granting their claims and have made several representations to approve their customary rights. They had also demanded that the verification of rights shall be done through Gramsabhas. In addition this government may also visit Agariyas at workplace to verify her/his rights.

**AHRM played key role in recognizing community's concern for Wild life conservation, LRK resources, and the fact that fishing community, Pastoralist too enjoy similar customary rights over same piece of land over different season of the year.**

When LRK was declared as sanctuary there were only 710 wild assess. Today, with sustained community conservations efforts and traditional co-existence between wild life and Agariya community, the number of wild assess has reached to 4300. Further there is not a single case registered in the past of harming wild life in LRK by community. On the contrary, several incidences to which organization and even forest department are evident, where in Agariyas have saved, protected wild assess from any external danger.

**Though entire issue of LRK and Agariya look complex and having several aspects, each of those strengthens the appeal from the community for recognizing Customary Seasonal community User Rights (CSCUR) of Agariyas in Little Rann of Kutch.**

References:

1. Amubha Zala, 1977, Premidivan Mansingjee, Ek Vibhuti ane Dhangadhra Darshan (Publisher Umedsingh Zala –Appendix I)
2. Kernel Watson 1886, Gujarat no Sarvasangraha, Publisher Education Soc Press-Mumbai (Appendix II)
3. James Campbell, 1887, Gujarat Sarvasangraha, Gujarat Book Depo, Appendix III
4. S.C. Agrawal, 1936, 1956, The salt Industry In India, Vol 1&2, Govt of India Press Delhi, (Appendix IV)



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