**EIMAGINING THE GOOD CITY FROM ENNORE CREEK**

Interview Transcription

**Interview details**

Interviewers: Raju K.

Place of interview: Vallur

Date of interview: 21.12.2022

Geo Coordinates:

Transcription by: RK

**Interview Notes**: The respondesnt talks about the working places and about his livelihood.

**Transcription Notes: NA**

**00:00:00**

I was working in salt pans and my parents were also working in the salt pans. I had no grandparents when I was born. I have 3 daughters and 1 son. My daughters got married to Sons-in-law from Chennapedu, Bangaarumedu and Pattamundhiri. My son is working in NTECL (Vallur), he is working on contract; haven’t got any permanent job. The NTECL was started in 2005. He is earning some Rs.15,000 or Rs.18,000

I started working in the salt pan when I was 27. Prior to that I was working in farms along with my family. We don’t own farm land, we were working as farm labor for others. Some relatives (have to confirm) possessed the farm land. We would work in their land when they seek labors. I used to get Rs.1.25 as daily wages for working in farm lands. The paddy cultivated in the farm fields were Sirumani, Vatchamba, Seeragasamba and other cultivation was green gram (Pacha Pairu).

I used to comb the salts in Naidu Aalam (name of the salt pan) in the Athipattu salt pans. This salt pans existed on the other side (South East) of current Athipattu Pudhunagar. Salt pan also existed in the palace where the oil company stands now (IndianOil Petronas Pvt. Ltd - respondents have a dilemma if this place were farm fields or salt pans). I used to do Vaarumodhalu; Vaarumodhalu means letting the salt water in the pans, drying the salt water in the pans; the salt would be formed only if the sun shines over the salt pans, if not it would take 3 to 4 days for salt formation. If there weren’t enough sunshines, the salt would float as leaves. After salt formation (Uppukattum), we would break the salt into a wood (Palagai) with a holder (Thaangu), then dredge the salt and place the salt in ‘Yekka’ (The elevated sides of the pans). The other laborers from Koranjur, Athipattu villages would dump the salts in the elevated soil structure called ‘nett’. The salt would be filled as heaps over the ‘nett’, the heap is called ‘Ambaaram’. There would be 20 ‘Gersy’ of salts; commonly 1 ‘Gersy’ accounts to 2400 sacks of salts (‘Gersy is the value (/magnitude) of the ‘Ambaram’). ‘Ambaram’ was built with a quantity of 2000 sacks, 1500 sacks and 1800 sacks. Based on the profitable market, the ‘Ambaram’ would be opened and the salts would be sold. An ‘Ambaram’ would be like a hut house as it is built with the palm leaves and knitted with threads. These ‘Ambaram’ would protect the salts during the rain showers and also the ‘nett’ would safeguards the salts in the floods as the’ nett’ would be elevated to 8 feet high. Steps like structure would be carved in the sides of the ‘nett’ to climb and deposit the salt over it. Later ‘Amabaram’ would be built on the salt heap. The salt would be sold when the tenant could get relatively more income. The boat would come and collect the salts.

To carry out ‘Vaarumudhalu’, we (labor) have to be in a specific time in the salt pans. We would go by 8 AM in the morning and we would leave work by 3 PM in the afternoon. We would take rice porridge with some green chili or grinded pickles to the pans in aluminum vessels.

**00:14:00**

**Audio 2**

**00:00:00**

Before that we would take some rice porridge in pottery called ‘‘Koduva’ which would be carried with a hanger made with rope to hold it and it would be covered with some cloth. We would collect the water from salt pan owners borewell in a larger pot, if the pottery is mishandled then there would be no water for the whole day. We have to go and get a new pot to fetch water.

There are some metrics in the salt works. 16 ‘paathi’ (one ‘Paathi’ is one salt field or pan) equals one ‘Ottam’ (Ottam - 1 run). We 15 laborers would dig up 7 ‘Ottam’ in a day and dump the salts in elevated sides of the salt pans. The other laborers would upraise (lift) it to ‘nett’. Singara Mudaliar was the manager of our owner. My owner lived in Tondiarpet (named in the ascent of the English folks; local name: Thandaiyarpettai). I forgot my owner's name, his wife's name is Kanchana. His house was next to Agasthiyar Theater in Tondiarpet.

If I/we decided to work on that day, we would reach the person coordinating with laborers and communicating mode of work in the salt pans like packing the salts in sacks by filling the sack and knitting sacks. We used to process both edible salts, salts required for the industrial process and also we would send salt to ice companies. The whitest salt would be marketed for edible salts; relatively less whiter salt would be sent to the ice companies. If the salt pans earth are more sandy, the salt processed would be more whitish. If the salt became less sandy and had some soil content, the salt processed would be quite impure and those salts would be marketed directly without storing with ‘Ambaram’. The ice company agent would bring a truck to load the salts packed in sacks. I was working in salt pans till my 35 - 40 age. Due to my age factor later I was working as a Mason on contract.

In 1975, I used to get Rs.3 per day, weekly I used to get Rs.18 for 6 days in a week. The living cost was lesser in those days, it would be enough for my family; myself, my mother and my father. We would only get weekly wages. But on the day of the lifting of salt sacks for shipping to boat/truck, we would get the wages on the same day of the work done. This wage is not part of salt production, the wages would be provided by the boat owners/truck owner/salt marketing agent/company owners who are taking the salt from the pans. Truck owners would directly provide the wages on the same day but the boat owners would provide the wages through the accountant only on the next day early morning by 6 AM. The wages would reach the laborers from agents through accountant Ramu; Radha ‘Meshtri’ (labor bank coordinator to work; would be an experienced worker in a specific field) would handover the wages. There 12 ‘Sales’ women workers, 8 sacks lifters ‘men’ would work at a time. Women would fill and knit the sacks; men would lift the sacks to port to trucks. Shipping to boats would be an easier job as we had to lift and throw the sacks over the boats in the canals. 130 smaller sacks would be loaded in boats, if the sacks are larger we would load 100 sacks. The loaded sacks would be unloaded near the place next to the railway bridge (Salt Bunglow) in Ennore creek and that inturn would be loaded to trucks. (He was saying some unloading in rail goodies)

If any order has been received, the salt sacks would be loaded to ‘wagon’ ; one ‘Wagon’ would hold some 200 sacks and that would be loaded to goodies on the train. In the rainy season, I would build huts as there would be no work in the salt pans. I used to get Rs.50 per day for knitting huts. If not I would go to Mason work. There would be some sort of farm work like weed plucking in the farm field. In ‘Thai’ month (mid-Jan to Mid-Feb) I used work for harvesting paddy, that includes reaping, hauling, threshing and cleaning. Some landowners would compensate us with Paddy and some would provide wages; Rs.10 per day.

The salt work industry started degrading when Kalignar (former CM Karunanidhi) started the construction of NCTPS in 1990s and later after the establishment of NTECL, the salt work industry vanished. The central government took all the salt pans as their land. Here people with unemployment are impacted much after the establishment of the industries. People with employment have no worries.

I stopped working in the salt pans due to age factors. It might not be possible for me to work with full capacity as I used to be, the tenant might speak bad about the lower capacity of my work. I don’t like others scolding me. So, I stopped working in the salt pans. There would be no guidance from my parents, they would only advise me not to roam with friends.

We salt pan workers had no job after the loss of salt pans. MP. Varadhara, head of a salt pan association met MLA Balaraman and MLA Ponraj during ADMK tenure in 2015 regarding the job offer for the salt pan workers. None of the salt pan workers have got job offers and many salt pan workers have died.

Ramadass from North Chennai has filed a case regarding the employment for salt pan workers and also won employment offers for some 85 individuals. In the list of 85 appointments, 40 individuals have been identified as non-salt pan workers. Thus the order got stayed. It’s been 7- 8 years, salt workers are helpless.

In salt pans, workers would slip in the pans and would slip while lifting the salt sacks to the trucks. It would take a couple of days to get back to work. The tenants would give some Rs10 or Rs.20 for medical expenses if the workers were injured.

Currently people in Kattur work processing the impure salt (blackish salt) for industries; those salts would be with larger crystals. Thus they have to work wearing shoes. We don’t have such situations. If it started raining, we workers who were combing the salt pans had to lift the salt sacks on the sides of the salt pans and dump it on the ‘nett’. We would be 15 people combing the salts in the pans. There would be no female workers in combing (Vaarumudalu) the salt pans. Women only work while packing the salts in the sacks. If it rains, there is no work for combing (vaarumudhalu vaaruradhuku vela illa), we have to do salt lifting work. In salt pans, this kind of work includes Salt filling in sacks, collecting salts from the salt pans, Lifting salts to trucks, andboats.

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