**REIMAGINING THE GOOD CITY FROM ENNORE CREEK**

Interview Transcription

**Interview Information**

Interviewer/s: Raju K. (RK)

Place of interview: Mouthammedu

Date of interview: 4 November, 2022

Transcription by: RK

**Interviewee Information**

Pseudonym: R1

**Q: Can you tell me about the salt works union?**

**R1:** An old lady from North India (Hindikaara amma) organized salt workers and invited them for the salt workers association. We 30 salt pan workers went to Kovalam for a meeting, but we didn’t get benefitted from the meeting. One person who was lifting salt baskets in a salt pan with us, later was working on contract in NCTPS construction site. As he was working inside NCTPS campus, he was able to gain government jobs with the help of government officials.

**Q: What work did your parents do?**

**R1:** My mother used to lift the salt (***uppu sumakaradhu*** - collect it in a basket from the sides of the salt pan to pile it next to the pan) and my father was a ‘Mesthri’ (---------)

at that place. My father's name is ***Kathir vel*** and my mother's name is ***Goindamma*.** My Grandpa’s name is ***Murugan***, but my grandparents weren’t working in the salt pans. The salt pan might have existed during their time, but they were working in an agricultural field.

**Q: Did you own agricultural lands?**

**R1:** When the salt pan existed, the salt pan workers worked in the salt pan for 6 months during non-rainy season and worked in farm fields for 6 months during the rainy season; people would be employed in paddy cultivation (after Verapeduppu) in the fields like harvesting ( Kalai eduthal - removing unwanted plants); feeding fertilizers (marundhu thelithal) in Moumthammedu village. Those 30 cents of land was sold (near sunnammbu alam shed) for Rs.450 per cent, at present rate of a cent land is Rs.40,000. It was not our land, I was (tenant) farming in other lands; the paddy would be shared 50:50 with the owner. This kind of using other farm-fields for cultivation and giving considerable compensation to land owners is called ‘Vaaram’.we used to cultivate Vatch-samba, Neerang-samba, ponni and vella-ponni in paddy variety and Moond dal (‘Paitham parupu’). We used to sow (Iraippom) the ‘Siru paruppu’ during mid-December (Margazhi month); it’s only a 3 month crop; we would remove the crop from the field and beat the bean to get the beans/pulses.

**Q: Where would you get water for agriculture?**

We used rain water for cultivation, but there were no wells to draw water for cultivation and also no bore wells. If not we would draw water from our Mouthamedu lake. We would draw water via canals from the lake, for some fields rain water would be more than enough. This was a better place. That is why we say ‘Magizlchiyaana idam Mouthamedu’ (Mouthamedu is the happiest place). But now we are only drinking canned water fetched from a ro-filter plant in Reddipalayam; It rate is Rs. 5 per 20 liter canned water. Now the water doesn’t taste good in Mouthammedu (Savuru thanniya iruku), people are not interested in consuming this water.

**[00:05:40]**

**Q: What are the health impacts of working in salt pans?**

In salt pans, our body would get heated; we would experience the heat above us from the sun and also heat from the pans below us;. We don’t eat much of the rice, we take rice porridge with us. Earlier we used ‘Koduva’ (pot) by tying it with rope, later we used metal vessels to carry our porridge to salt pans. We would be back by 1 PM in the afternoon and then would get a bath and eat lunch. Sometimes, after 12 PM we used to go do agricultural work after returning from the salt pans.

**Q: What time would you start for salt works on a daily basis?**

I got married in 1982. I was working in salt pans before that, I started working when I was 10-15 years old and I was working till the EB (Electricity Board) company (NCTPS) started functioning, after that all the salt works were abandoned. The laid bund (ash pond is also ‘Porambokku’ (commons). Out of 3 bunds (ash pond tanks), one bund is used for construction of another EB (Thermal Power plants), it belongs to central governments, no one can claim the land. Some agricultural land was acquired for the ash pond; those owners were given employment in EB.

**Q: What are the other health impacts you face while working in the salt pans?**

I used to get diesel from home to the salt pans to fill the motor to pump water to the tanks from the canals; the motor would run at nights (taga taga)

**Q: Who would pay for the Diesel?**

Land owner (tenant) would give money to buy motors; We would buy diesel at Minjur. 20 liters of diesel rated Rs.76 at that time. Now the rate is closer to Rs.100 per liter. All the workers would come here (his house) by 8 AM in the morning.

As a Mesthri, I don’t have specific time to work in the salt pans, even after dinner, I would take the diesel can and walk to the salt pans at 9 PM. I would run engines at night. Workers lifting the salt with baskets would come by 4:30 AM; I would take the baskets and give them from sheds.

**Q: What are the baskets made from?**

Those baskets were made of palm petiole (Panai mattai). Which would be very strong and 4 sides the coir ropes are tied to lift the basket. One end the loader would help to lift the loaded basket and on the other side there the lifter would lift the basket to head. Salts would be piled up to 100 ft above the ***‘nett’.*** If no ‘*nett*’ was built and if the salts were stocked on the flat pans, then the salt would melt/wash away in the flood as the salt would easily solvable (/melt) in the water. Labors have to lift over the *‘nett’* and above the piled up salt to shed the salt in the basket. My father used to build the ‘Ambaraam’ and later he got sugar and died. First leg thumb was removed and later a major part of the toe was removed.

**Q: Has anyone fallen sick because of salt work?**

No. People have died just because they are aged. One of salt worker **Logu’s** father who used to work in salt pans (Valimaram Valithal) is no more and **Munusaami’s** brother has died and my uncle (periyapa - father’s elder brother) **Kannan** who works for us for wages is also no more. Only some people exist today, including **Munuswami, Logu and myself.**

**Q: How your one day work would start from salt pans.**

We would wake up, brush our teeth, eat something and pack some food and go to the pans by 8AM. We all would go to salt pans with lunch to back based on the hours of work. If we have to ‘stamp’ (medhikaradhu) the pans, we would be back only by 4 PM in the evening, we have to stamp the pans (tharai -floor) for Rs. 5 per wages per day. Worker has to hit the pans with ‘Thimisu’ ( a 1.5\*2 sq.ft dimension wooden timber of more than 1 inch thicker - tool to levelate the field). We have to hit the small pans (paathi - 15\*10), in between small channels from which the pans would wet (/fill) the pan with salt water from ‘Ganjeri’ (a tanking system where the water would be evaporated and water would be salinated). The water channel would have bunds (madai) on both sides; the water channel would be in the center of the two small salt pans (***Paathi***).

We have to make sure there should be no dirt (sand content) or mud entering the pans (paathi) along warer. Once the water is filled, we have to close all sides of the pan with ‘madai’

We have to open the “Ganjeri" carefully for the water flow; even then sometimes holes (Bonnttha) would be formed and water would be drained away from the ‘Ganjeri’. We have to be careful with opening the buns and closing them. The channel would be closed by placing the stone and covering it with sand. There would be small pipe pieces as an inlet to irrigate water in the pans from upper tanks, which would be closed only by placing stone and covering it with sand. If we block the pipe only by sand, then the water would flush the sand and run away. The pipe is made of ceramic (‘pingaan’).

The salt water would start from ‘Ganjera’ and enter the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th tank. If such water with higher degree were left in the pans, the water would stick to our finger as oil if we touch those water as the degree of the salinity would be higher.

**Can you state the place before the Thermal power plants coming to this place?**

There were no companies, Zuari cement was built over salt pans, an office for salt pan was present at that place. The place where the Zuhari cement factory was built had a salt department office at that time. There was another office next to Seppakkam called ‘line’ office. The person from the last house on this street also worked at that line office.

Recent [stockyards](https://goo.gl/maps/bQ1JQQfDzQ4kXRWf9) were agricultural lands.

I worked in salt pans in Puzhuthivakkam village. Another salt pan exists in the ***‘Mekkanaathurai’***, it’s near forestry places next to the river. The other salt pan included ***Kenathukaal***, ***Pancha-paandavar aalam,*** **Srinivasa reddiyar alam,** People used to drink water from the ***kenathukal*** in the past. Kenathukaal alam was present in the place where the NCTPS ash pond was established.I would have 3 tanks and the 4th one is the salt pans. One more salt pan is license no. 28. All these salt pan exist in the Puzhuthivakkam village.

Other salt pan license no. 12 is called **Thillaalam, which** is too lengthy. It would have only 2 runs (ootam) of pans and it would be hard for the salt lifter as they have to travel long to ship the salt. Salt produced wouldn’t be as good as this pan as the other salt pans. There are 5 salt pans we worked with the laborers.

**Q: What are the changes you find in the salt pans that you worked?**

Now the salt pans has been converted into **Chettinad** coal yard; which could not be identified as salt pans. In all those spaces I have worked hard and even today I have been working hard by working the night shift as a watchman (kannu muzhikiran).

**Q: What was there in the place where the NCTPS ash pond was established ?**

There was a line residence, which was displaced to other places of Seppakkam for the construction of the ash pond. Those people couldn’t reside and resist because of constant ash dusts flying to their house from the ash shipping lorries movement from the ash pond. Displaced families got one employment per family from the government.

**Q: Did the displaced people belong to Sepakkam Village?**

The place is called ‘line’, the ‘line’ has been cleared for the ash pond. The salt pan office existed at that place; there were 4-5 offices. **Mayan,** who was working in that office.

**Q: Are there any interesting stories that your parents have told you?**

My father would stay in salt pans to secure the salt from theft. One day, a boat arrived via canal to steal the salts. They have opened the ‘Ambaram’, it would be built as a hut house by covering it with ‘vegile’; it’s available in the lakes; which would look like ***naanal*** *(type of grass)*, which will have white flowers on its top. those grasses tear our hand if we touch them and would be 5ft high. It also would be used in deaths (tharpana). Each bunch (Kattha) would cost Rs.5-6, thousands of ‘vegile’ bunch would be brought to build ‘Ambaram’ would. 5 Ambaram would be built. Muds would be taken and covered on the ***‘Vegile’***. It would stop salts eroding due to winds and also from rain. The ‘vegile’ would stick on the salts, producing salt would not be wasted. The amabram would be opened little by little based on the requirement in the market. The pushed slowly from the ‘Ambaaram’, that would be filled in the sacks by 2 workers, those sacks weigh 100 kilograms (sanal pai). Boats have different capacities such as 100, 70, 150 sacks. If the boats are overloaded, it would be drowned.

**Q: Have you seen the degradation of the salt pans?**

Before the construction of salt pans, the Kathivakkam ETPS ashes had been complained about in the past. Later Vallur thermal power plant was built and another thermal power plant Ennore SEZ was built. We can’t consume the ash salts contaminated with coal ash; those salt wouldn’t get pure white in color as usual. People would be impacted by health hazards. The salt pans were abandones once the North Madras Thermal Power Plant (NMTPP) aka NCTPS started functioning. We have to pay the taxes to the government, it’s also a kind of crop cultivation.

**Q: What are the industries that erected salt pans?**

Chettinad coal yard, NCTPS as pond, Ennore SEZ is being built on one of the 3 bunds of the ash pond; next to Chettinad company ‘***Thillaalam’*** salt pan sheds are present even now.

**Q: Can you explain about the canal back of the Chettinad coal yard?**

It’s called ‘Canal Kaavai’, it’s been used to move ship salts using boats. There was a canal that existed from Mouthammedu to the river, which has been blocked by the ash pond and industries. The canal which we used to draw water was closed (Thuthuttu); later Chettinad coal yard and ash pond was built over it.

**Q: What other work have you done after the loss of salt pans?**

I was working for a person in Edayamatt as a ’Padi aal’; they would give one sack of rice after harvesting and also give us daily wages like Rs.25, 50, 100 and later the land was sold for marginal rate. I used to work with laborers bought from Andra for less wages. Our people would work for Rs.150 and they could even work for Rs.100 and 3 times food would be served.

**Q: What work are you doing in the fields?**

I used to sprinkle fertilizers to the paddy, r[owing the bulls on the field](https://www.google.com/search?q=cultivating+fields+with+cows&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjElb-F3bP-AhUD9nMBHUiiBs8Q2-cCegQIABAA&oq=cultivating+fields+with+cows&gs_lcp=CgNpbWcQAzoECCMQJzoGCAAQBxAeOgQIABAeOgYIABAFEB5QmAVYmBBg4BFoAHAAeACAAYUBiAH0BpIBBDEwLjGYAQCgAQGqAQtnd3Mtd2l6LWltZ8ABAQ&sclient=img&ei=sbQ-ZIT5N4Psz7sPyMSa-Aw&bih=636&biw=1366#imgrc=oIxvZAGRx84ItM) (maram Adikiradhu), tying paddy samplings (**Naathu katti podradhu);** I would only were a plastic cover in severe rain (ooooo-nu malai peiyum). My wife doesn't do such work, my mother used to sow paddy sampling. I worked at that place for 20 years.

It’s been 3 years since I worked in farm lands. Last year I thought working in fields, that year rain was uncertain for cultivation. All those agricultural fields have been sold. In the North of the village, the agricultural lands were compensated for a lesser price than that has been entered in the land document. In the documents it was mentioned as Rs.6000 per cent, but landowners have only received Rs.3000 per cent. Landowner hasn’t verified the document as they weren’t aware of the land documentation/ registration process. This happened some 8 years back,

**Q: Who has acquired those lands?**

It belongs to a private party. They have compounded the place, it would be protected by a watchperson to monitor people taking sand from those lands which would be sold. Individuals also cut logs from those lands. A person died because he used to process charcoal by burning the cut wooden logs from those lands. Charcoal would be processed by arranging the logs in the ground, which would be covered with paddy straws. Later it would be covered with sand and burnt under. The wood log would get heated and charcoal would be formed, those would be too hard and would not break. Making charcoal is another form of business. Charcoal is more expensive than cut wood logs. He died because of smoke. Earlier people used to search for fire woods for cooking, now people use gas stoves. NTR storage yard company is not employing the local people, as some people are stealing the provisionals stored there.

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