**Interview details**

Interviewers: RK

Place of interview: Mouthammedu

Date of interview: 4 November, 2022

Geo Coordinates: 13°15'53.58"N, 80°17'53.81"E

Transcription by: Raju K.

**Interviewee Information**

Names: Anonymised

Pseudonyms: S1

I am not educated. I started working in the salt pans when I was 15 years old. If the elders got Rs.2 as wages, I as a teenage boy would only get Rs.1.5. Wages would be provided by our boss via a Gumastha /Mestri (an Accountant). There is some accountability like ‘number of workers in one licensed salt pans’ (10th License has 5 workers); License is a section of salt pans where the tenants would acquire license.

There would be continuous salt production for continuous 5 months and if started raining, we would have such work as covering the salt ‘Ambaaram’ (Ambararam - salt heap); filling the holes in the covered ‘Ambaram’ if any; Covering with soil if any of the coated sand has eroded from ‘net’; Covering the ambaram with ‘Vehili’.

Net is built with workers forming a closed bunds with soil; only then the flood water could not intrude into the ‘Ambaram’ and does affect the stocked salts. Net would be at least 2 meters or 6 feet in width. Even then the flood would wash away all the dumped soil and melt the salt stocked as ‘Ambaram”. One ‘Ambaram' would contain 1200 sacks of salt; where 1 sack is 100 kg. Harvesting 5 to 6 acres of paddy is like harvesting a minimum of 2000 to 2500 sacks of salt. The flood can wash away even such a huge salt heap. It would be a great loss for salt pan tenants. I worked in the salt pans till the year 1995. Later I worked on contract in NCTPS for 4 years for Rs.40 per month. I worked as Plumber, Gardener and Digger; basically its maintenance work in the campus, the work would be based on requirement as the thermal power plant was in the construction phase. On 1 May, 1999 under Chief Minister Kalaignar Karunanidhi governance the Tamil Nadu government passed an Government Order to make contract/temporary employees as permanent employees. By that order 11,000 temporary employees got permanent employment across Tamil Nadu. I worked in the same place for 19 years. Now I get a pension amount of Rs.19,000. I retired by June 2018.

The salt pans got closed by the year 1995. The NCTPS stage I was commissioned by the year 1994. Once the NCTPS was commissioned the whole salt work got impacted and the salt pans were closed. The dredged sea sand was dumped on the salt pans (probably from the Ennore Satellite ports). It impacted the salt pans and the salt pan workers as the salt couldn’t be cultivated as sand was dumped. Salt pan tenants were provided compensation for their loss, but salt pan workers weren’t compensated and also lost their livelihood. The sand was dredged and dumped on salt pans to pave the way for the coal yard. The coal would be useful to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB), Chettinad coal yard on the other side of the Kosasthalaiyar river and also transported to Thoothukudi (Tuticorin), Mettur and other power stations. I worked with the salt pans tenant of 12th Licence, 10th Licence and other 2 salt pans. The tenant had 4 salt pans leased. If 10 workers are working under a tenant, the workers would be working in different salt pans of the same tenants in a periodic cycle. Mostly the cyclic period would be weekly. Sunday is a holiday.

In the year 1995 the daily wage was Rs.10 per person and I started to work in the salt pan with a wage of Rs.1.5 per day. I left this work and started working in TNEB (i.e NCTPS). I used to get a daily wage. The wages in the salt works are daily wages; aged people who were working in the salt pans for months would get a monthly salary. Youngsters who were working like us (loganathan and Mohan) would get daily wages.

Now the Chettinad coal yard is established over the salt pans where I worked. The dredged sea sand was brought through the pipes and dumped on salt pans which belong to the central government. The tenants were given a settlement (amount) from the Central (Union) Government. The central government took the land and provided this place to build the coal yard by the private entity Chettinad company.

I used to work in salt pans till 1 PM. After that we (salt Pan workers) would take a rest for 1 hour (lunch time) and then we would go farming our own lands. We used to work in salt pans from January to July and from August month we used to work in the farm fields. The salt works would be terminated once it starts raining.

The salt works stopped in 1995 as the dredged sand from the sea was dumped near the salt pans, the sand inundated the salt pans. The salt pan tenants informed us that we couldn’t do anything on land take over, the central government took their land. The tenant would pay the lease amount of the salt pans to the salt office. Later I chose to work in the NCTPS.

My parents were working in the salt pans. My father's name is Kannan and my mother's name is Murugammal. My grandparents Chinnappan and Munniyamma were also working in the salt pans. In that era most of the people from the village would be working in the salt pans.

One day in a salt pan would be like earning our daily bread. By doing agriculture we would store the rice in our homes. We would start working in the salt pans from 6AM in the morning and work till 1 PM in the noon. We only take rice porridge to the salt pans. The remaining rice from the previous night would be kept in a pot; we would take that porridge in the morning with some pickles for our breakfast in the tiffin boxes or metal vessels. We wouldn’t take any excess water for drinking as there would be more water in the porridge.

My work involved trampling the pans (Paathi medhikaradhu); Salt Collection (collecting salt from pans and dumping in the salt nets); Draining water into salt beds; dredging canal; operating motors to pump water; Salt pans had electricity access but later the electric wire posts flipped and the electricity access was cut down. Then diesel oil engines were placed to pump water. The motor pumping exercise was practiced for a decade, then the sand was dumped when NCTPS was in construction phase (Probably by the Satellite Ennore port commissioned for coal trade) and salt works stopped. The salt works stopped not due to the power plant but rather it was due to the dumping of the dredged sand. The salt workers were impacted more and the salt tenants also had no other option but they have received the compensation.

In Puzhuthivakkam village there were only some 4 to 5 families when salt pan existed. More people were in the Kattupalli panchayat. Athipattu, Seppakkam village was part of Kattupalli Panchayat. This place was an agricultural village and it had larger space; Now the larger, richer land sharks have bought farmers' land by fraud. One person got signatures of the farmers in the paper stating to provide INR.6,80,000 per unit land, but only gave 3,00,000 per unit land to farmers. The real rate was INR.6000 per cent but only INR.3000 for a cent was given to farmers. We farmers filed a case, we also went to Bangalore for this case. The overall land is 250 acres and is not suitable for any use by any party because it only has shrubs (velikathan tree) in it. My family also sold the land which is part of this disputed land. This happened when DMK was governing the state.

We, salt workers, would have no health issues. Only issue is that our hands are chapped. (Kaila Kaichi poiduchu). The salt crystal could scratch or tear our feet. To do such work we would go early in the morning when the fog was out (present temperature is low) and that would keep the salt relatively soft and moisturized; by that time we would complete that work. The other work carrying salt, pumping water, collecting salt wouldn’t scratch or tear the feet. Later while doing other works those stamped sand would be crystallized with spikes in it. We would not stamp those sand which would be dried and spiked. That is why we would start the work by 6 AM.

\_\_\_+\_\_\_