**REIMAGINING THE GOOD CITY FROM ENNORE CREEK**

Interview Transcription

**Interview Information**

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(AJ,GV,MS, RK)

Place of interview: Karaiyaanmedu, Athipattu Village

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Transcription by: RK

**Interview Notes**: Respondents speaks about the salt lifters association, salt pan workers employment rights, the cases he filed with TIDCO

**00:00:00**

R1: We registered our union in 1972 in the Labour department, the commissioner of the labor department Balaraman helped to form our union, he died recently. Which is under renewal in court.

**GV: Why is the union under renewal?**

**R1:** I petitioned a case on the Ennore harbor (port). Because, the saltpans were functioning till 1996. At least 10,000 families were dependent on that salt pans for their livelihoods. The salt labor force in Ennore weren’t fulfilling the requirements, thus each year 500 to 1000 people would be immigrated from Thoothukodi (Tuticorin) to work in the salt pans.

In 1998, CM Kalaignar laid his hands on the salt pans. He was the first person to touch the salt pans. Prior to that, NCTPS ( called as NMTPP earlier). We made this as an issue asking not to bring NCTPS here as it would impact our salt pans and in turn our livelihoods. Then employment was promised by the officials for the salt pan worker which was not furnished till now. By 1998 all the salt pan works were stopped and closed. Then went to the court. Firstly TIDCO is acquiring 538 acres of salt lands. We raised our concern with TIDCO when it was acquiring our land to stop the land acquisition and TIDCO promised employment for the saltpan workers and I filed a case in the year 2000 in court and in 2004 I was able to get a fair judgment to provide employment. Later the opposition appealed to the judgment and again in 2007 I was granted the judgment from the Sivasubramaniyam, Sadha SIvam and Paul Vasantha Kumar bench confirming the government employment. I got 2 judgments even then TIDCO is cheating us without providing employment.

Again I filed contempt of court petition, again in 2015 the judgment came in favor of providing employment in 6 months and even then we didn’t get employment till now. Still we were protesting and went to the collector with judgment.

Have you heard of the Anti-corruption International, I am the Secretary of the Thiruvallur district. After joining the Anti-corruption International I was gaining support for my struggles. Even the recent District Collector John Vargees also informed me that he would help me. But he was transferred after that. Tahsildars have been prolonging (/pending) our petition for employment for more than 3 years.

**GV: You said that in 1996, the salt pans were closed.**

R1: In 1998, all the salt pans were completely closed.

**GV: What is the case that you have filed in the year 2000 against the port?**

R1: The case is regarding the employment for union members who have lost their employment as TIDCO acquired the salt pan lands. Already 126 members from our association have gained permanent employment in TN Electricity Board as we have lost our livelihood. Our 62 boats (padagu) were shipping salts from salt pans and later got employed; the 126 laborers who were working in those boats were given employment, those employment were part of employment given to the fishers. Fishers demand employment as their fishing livelihood was impacted by the NCTPS. During Jayalaitha’s period as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu 550 jobs were allotted to fishers to compensate for their fishing livelihood loss due to Thermal Power Plants, along with that the people working in boats (padagu kaaranga) were also provided with employment. At that time, I had a boat and was also allotted a permanent job and I provided that job to my nephew (Macha); now he is about to retire. But, I couldn’t get the job which the TIDCO was supposed to give me.

**GV: Have you provided the job to your nephew (Machan)?**

R1: Yes, the boat was in his name. Thus I was able to give the job to him.

**GV: What was the use of those boats?**

R1: The boats were used to load the salt and ship it to the destination from salt pans. I have all the photos of salt production, salt loading and all such.

**R1: When was 550 jobs allotted?**

R1: The 550 jobs were allotted during the year 2000 for the boat owner and others.

**GV: What was the basis of the case that you filed in the year 2000?**

R1: In 538 acres, salt was manufactured which we would load and deposit Basin Bridge (Yaana Gowni) and that would be exported to foreign countries. From Basin Bridge the salt would be transported and retailed business is carried. In the wall tax road there were 13 salt companies, who did salt business. We did the shipments for them. Now all the salt related works have been closed because of salt production impact.

NTECL alone has acquired 1101 acres of salt pans and it belongs to only one central government agency. IOCL has been established on salt pans and Bharat Petroleum is also built on the salt pans. My case is with the Chettinad coal yard that has been established over the 538 acres of salt pans, to establish a coal yard the port (Ennore) took those lands. The court ordered us to provide employment to us (laborers) in the judgment. Lastly Chettinad also took more lands after that. Now it would be on 3000 acres.

**GV: What is the response from the other side?**

R1: When we and the Chairperson of Ennore Harbour had a round of discussion, they were ready to give us employment if the TIDCO and salt department recommended the employment. They also asked for some details to confirm the salt works we have done in the salt pan. The owner (Salt Tenants) also helped us to get those documents and provided us.

**GV: Who were your owners?**

R1: There were many salt pan owners (Tenants). One of them is Balarama reddiyar and he is no more. He stayed in Anna Nagar, Chennai. My advocate was Raghavachari, he was the family lawyer for the MGR (former Chief Minister of Tamilnadu)

**GV: What other documents have they asked to prove that you worked in salt works?**

R1: They have asked about our Union legality and we were able to produce that document. I petitioned to stay on harbor, but the case was taken for hearing.

**GV: Were the cases filed only for you or others too?**

R1: Not only for me, we filed for 83 salt load workers. Salt factories are different how Leyland, Countries and Parry companies are different. Puzhuthivakkam is one salt factory, Vallur is another salt factory unit, the central government had offices at those places. Other salt factories are Thillai, Voyalore salt factories and Kattur salt factories. Kattur is the only salt factory that produces salts. Kattur salt factory has been licensed to Madras Fertilizers Limited (MFL) and MFL is producing chemical salt that is required for them.

**00:10:28**

**GV: Can you tell us about how salt loading works in salt pans?**

R1: Earlier boats were the only mode of transportation for the shipment of the salt from salt pans and later Trucks were used to load and ship salts. Now in Thoothukodi (Tuticorin) also they are using trucks to transport salts. We would store the salt in Ambaaraml, so we would load salt in summer and also in rainy seasons; we would have work in most of the year.

Have seen the ‘Paathi’ (smallest salt pans), still we can see ‘Pathi’ while coming from Ennore; 20 acres of salt pans are left untouched. BPCL and HPCL were established on 600 acres of salt pans, which belonged to a single owner. Each company took 300 acres of salt pans. No salt worker could claim their employment. Thus, we approached the court.

We salt loaders would take salt from Ambaram in a 100 kilogram sac. Each boat would carry 150 such sacs. Sometimes sacs size would be 75 kg, 120 kg from 100 kg. Later the government ordered the use of only 25 kilogram sacs to stop laborers lifting highly weighed sacs as a labor regulation.

**GV: What were your wages?**

R1: In 1975, an individual would be paid Rs.5 to collect the salt in 100 sacs and sew the salt sacs; the lifters were paid Rs. 7 per sacs. Totally 12 Rupees would be paid for 100 sacs of shipment from Ambaaram to boat. Mostly women would get the sac ready and men would lift the salt.

**GV: Who would place the sacs in a boat?**

R1: The same person who would be lifting the salt. I also salt sac lifters. Now the case has been taken to vigilance (Anti-corruption Division) via the Anti-corruption international council. I am the President of the Anti-corruption International council in Thiruvallur district, Tamil Nadu.

**00:15:00**

**GV: How did you come to know about this organization?**

R1: Daily people would ask about the work, people would talk bad about me that I am cheating them; they would feel that there is little hope. The person from Thoothukodi was building a house next to my house, he noticed all the quarrels for 2-3 days and one day he contacted me over phone and asked me about the issue and I informed him about the issue and later he informed his son who was in the ‘Anti-corruption International council‘ representing Thoothukodi district and also shared my number with his son. His son called me at PM. Then I informed his son about all the issues and shared the court judgment. He read the judgment and contacted the collector over the phone and asked about the status of employment that was assured in the judgment. Later the District Collector contacted the RDO and on the next day with direction from RDO, Tahsildar visited my home at 11 AM in a jeep. There was no action on judgment as the officials were expecting money (corruption) from me, later on intervention from Anti-corruption International council, the Tashildar visited me and there's an inquiry happening on this at present. This happened about 1 year ago.

Once, the documents for employing a (saltpan) worker were inspected by the Collectorate office. They were inspecting, verifying and getting confessions of the family members and the confessions were not received from the successors (vaarisu). But the officials from the Collector office were taking accounts of family members like number of sons, granddaughter/grandsons concerning the hereditary successor. Rather than providing employment to the successors, the officials were thinking that in future the next generation would also go to the court citing that we are also the successors (if a salt worker is aged, there would be a conflict with their grandchildren claiming the employment, as the rights are earned several years later). Thus the officials were asking for Successors certificate (vaarisu Saandridhal). Now we are getting all those required documentation (successor certificate) for all 83 salt pan workers. Now we are doing it separately for salt pan workers from Oornamedu, Senganimedu, K.R. Paalayam, Athipattu and Vallur. We are coordinating this for all the villages.

**GV: How many members are there in this Salt Loaders Association ?**

R1: The members include only salt loadersand we are 126 members.

**GV: Has the case been filed only for 83 salt workers?**

R1: Yes, only laborers worked in one section of the salt pans. I.e. where the coal yard stands now. TNEB also took saltpans and there is another separate order from Collector to TNEB to award employment on humanitarian basis as people were protesting against TNEB when salt pans were acquired; District Collector enquired this case and governed the order to TNEB. The order has been sent to the TNEB chairperson and EB was saying that time has elapsed. All these went political, because of political intervention and influence. No employment awarded.

**GV: Do you have the copy of the District Collectorate order?**

R1: No. The order copy wasn’t given or presented to workers. It was directly given to the TNEB Chairperson, the chairperson is forwarding it to the CEO and the CEO is earning by selling the jobs for those who can pay for the job. We were not able to pay such a large amount.

**00:20:56**

**GV: You said that there are 126 people in the association? Since when they were working in the salt pans?**

R1: They are working in the salt pans for generations, because earlier there were no industries. Only salt production was done here. For six months, people would be working in the salt pans and for the six months, they would be working in the farm fields. Once the work in agriculture is done, they have no other option other than working in the salt pans.

**GV: Would you go to agricultural work?**

R1: Yes, we would also go to agricultural work and would also work in the salt pans. The salt production and gathering the salts from the salt pan is done only for 6 months. All the collected salts would be stocked, stored as a heap called ‘Ambaaram’. The labor from ‘Salt labor union’ would be working to fill the salts in sacks.

**GV: Is that a separate union?**

R1: With that only we filed the case.

**GV: Would that union provide employment throughout the year?**

R1: Yes we would be getting jobs (sack holding-lifting) throughout the year.

**GV: Would the other salt pans worker have jobs only for 6 months?**

R1: Yes, the other salt pans workers would have worked only for 6 months. Sack holding (moota pidikiradhu) work would be always available in a year; even in the rainy season and also during summer, we would be having that work.

**GV: Then you would be having salt works throughout the year?**

R1: Yes, we don’t engage in any other work as we have work throughout the year. In the surrounding 10 villages, most of them were working in the salt pans.

**GV: Has anyone filed a case with respect to salt pans other than you?**

R1: No.

**GV: Why haven't others filed the case?**

R1: Only people who are part of the union could file the case, no one else can’t file the case. All of them are with our union; We have only one union called,’salt laborers union (uppala thozhizlalar sangam)’. Even if you check with the salt department in Shashthribavan(,chennai) you can identify. How much land was acquired from the salt department. I thought you were actually coming from the Pollution control department. Earlier the life expectancy of the people was 70 - 80 years but now it’s only 50 years because of the pollution; similarly one of my sons died because of pollution 3 years ago.

GV: What happened to him?

R1: Dust pollution. In the Electricity Board (EB), companies named ‘Radha Engineering work’ and ‘Arun Contract’ are doing contract work for the Electricity board; only those two companies are doing the EB work there, now the government is doing any work. Rada Engineering work is the company working in the Electricity board and he is one providing electricity to the whole Tamil Nadu, Chief Minister Stalin is not doing anything, it’s only these two companies doing all the work. My son was working with the ‘Arun company’, later he got impacted with coal dusts and he is dead now

**00:25:16**

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