**MAGINING THE GOOD CITY FROM ENNORE CREEK**

Interview Transcription

**Interview Information**

Interviewer/s: Raju K (RK)

Place of interview: Mouthammedu village

Geo Coordinates: [13.322950 N, 80.302154 E](https://goo.gl/maps/qYU9SfAqBdosvZ2n9)

Date of interview: 09.08.2022

Transcription by: RK

**Interviewee Information**

Pseudonym: R1

**Transcription note:**

*Mohan is 56., Year old man from Mouthammedu (next to Cheppakkam) is currently working as watchman in the Stage 4 Thermal Power Plant (Ennore SEZ Thermal Power Plant). He worked as a salt pan ‘Mesthri’ in the salt pan which existed opposite the current NCTPS. A ‘mestri’ is a foreman who leads the group of workers. He estimates the number of workers needed on any given day, brings them to the work site, distributes wages and also works on the pan along with other workers. A ‘Mestri’ is an employee and also an employer.*

**00:00:00**

My father was working in the salt pan from his childhood days. I started working in the salt pan at the age of 10; while I was studying 5th standard. My elder brother died at the age of 19 years in the year 1974; He was also working in the salt pan.

Working in a salt pan is an occupation (thozhil), just like farming. Only if we could go to the Uppalam, we could get our daily bread. We’d earn Rs.5/ Rs.5.25 per day per person. **As daily wages** (this is uncertain as in 2 places he mentioned about monthly wages).If we go to the salt pan by 9 AM, we would be relieved only by 4 PM. Earlier, we had no vessels to take our lunch; we would take it in a “Thondi.” We’d take porridge (kanji) in the Thondi. Thondi is made from mud/clay. We (workers) also call it ‘Kuduva’.

I was employed in the salt pan till it was closed. After closure, I was about to get a permanent job in NCTPS. But my parents wouldn’t let me work in NCTPS when there was work in other salt pans. I worked there for 6 months. But when the salt pan work starts, I would have to organize the workers and coordinate the work. My father would get money from the owner and distribute it to the workers as did the *mestri* work. I would take a 5-liter can of diesel and run the pump in the salt pans at night to pump water from the canals to the salt pans.

Not everyone received employment after the closure of the salt pans; only some who were able to pay some Rs.3000 or 4000 were able to get the jobs. But salt workers are still experiencing the hardships. After losing my work in saltpans I was working in agri-farms and doing logging work. Now I’m working as a watchman in Ennore SEZ thermal power plant as a contract employee and the job is uncertain.

When the salt pan existed, the salt pan workers worked in the salt pan for 6 months and worked in farm fields for 6 months. For 6 months the people would be employed in paddy cultivation in the fields in Moumthammedu village; after the establishment of NCTPS all the places became plots and it was bought by a single person and later it was sold to a person who had built a company (storage yard) here. When NCTPS was established in the 1990s land was only Rs.4500 per cent. I also sold 30 cents at that time. It was farmland. As everyone was selling their lands, I was worried that they would anyway claim it; I thought it was better to sell off the land and so I sold it. There are some lands that were not sold then and fenced for protection. Otherwise, the larger land-owner would cheat the small land owners by forging documents and claiming that all the land was bought and adding the land area in their documents.

I was (tenant) farming in other lands; the harvested paddy will 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’. The area of cultivable lands has shrunk; now the worker/tenders give only yearly compensation to the land owners. The land owner pay taxes called ‘Gisthi’. I would do farming if I can muster up the manpower; last year I couldn’t as I wasn’t well. Three years back, I was able to earn 10 sacks of paddy.

As a ‘Mestri,’ many employees would come to my house to get their wages, and I would feed them too; but that culture doesn’t exist today. Earlier, there used to be a watchman guarding the land and the trees on the land. No one could fell the trees. Now no one cares if the trees are felled. People would cut wood and make charcoal for sale. Charcoal was a big business.

There are many salt pan workers in Mouthammedu. [He noted the name list of salt pan employees. Many salt workers have died.]

The salt pan lands belong to the Union government; the private party would acquire the land through tender and pay taxes (Gisthi) to the government. The water will be brought to the pans through canals. From the canals the water would be pumped with diesel engines/motor pumps or electric motor pumps. Like agri-fields, salt pans would be made as different sections but pans would have salt water with earthen bunds; salt water is filled in the pans and allowed to evaporate. The water is raised upgradient to the highest field and water would flow down to the lower fields; the last fields would be the salt pans.

The clays will be removed and cleaned, the land will be stomped on with bare feet. \_\_\_\_\_\_ (midhikaradhu) cultivated with bare feet by the laborers. The legs will be worn out(thenjidum); He mentioned that his legs were Worn out. We would break the huge blocks of salt using Palagai (woods). The salt blocks were hard; it wouldn’t break even after it was pounded by the flat-thick wood timber (palagai). Salts would be loosen by legs (with process) and removed by wood (Vaaru palagai) from pans. The wood would be designed such that it collects salts from the pans to the edges of pans and from the edges the salts would be mounded; the mounded salt would be let to drain the water. Later that salt would be pure and edible. The wood used in the pan is called ‘Sevu Palaai’ and the holder would be made from bamboo. Workers would wash the salts in the pans with the salt water using the woods, if the degree measure of the salt water is lesser the salt could not be processed, salts would dissolve in the water. There was a scale or device to check the degree (salinity) of the salt water. The pans would glitter during the salts cultivation, It would later become a larger size crysta; it would be broken into small pieces for consumption.

He informed no north Indians were working in the pan he worked. People from Madurai (Madhurakaaranga) from Nadar community worked in the pans as north Indians work in Chennai. They rented rooms nearby and worked here. We have to take water for drinking from home or else we could get drinking water somewhere in the pans. Water would be taken in mud pots (Paanai -Thoondi). It was hard to get drinking water in the pans. Earlier there was Seppakkam lake and now it has become ashpond; We would take water from Seppakkam (Judistrically - Cheppakkam) lake in the mud pots and cover it with a mud cap.

If it rains in the pans, the salt would get dissolved in the rain water. A little drizzle would delay the salt process by 5 to 7 days. Based on the weather and rain we would work in the salt pan during the rainy season. Some would be employed to monitor the status of salinity and find the necessary time to process the salts. Even during rainy days, there would be some work like mounting bund for the pans, regulating canals-channels. We would go simply around the pans and come back once the working hours are over; because we receive the monthly wages not daily wages. It was around Rs.600 to Rs.700 per month per person and not daily wages. The wages were sufficient as the provisional costs were lesser. Earlier the edible oil could only be bought with any vessels/cans/pots; now it’s sold with plastic packages and the costs are higher.

Many of the salt workers have died, only people of his age are existing. 2-3 people still live in the same village Mouthammodu. One of the salt workers called *Baagu* (name changed) went to work as Concrete mixer Trucks operator in the NCTPS and later he got the government job in NCTPS and he retired by the age 58; he also stays in Mouthammedu and his age would be 60 years. Salt pan workers born after 1955 are alive and workers born before that might have died. \_\_\_\_\_ (R1) father was a ‘Mestri’ in salt pans and his mother used to work in salt pans to port the processed salts to a distance more than 50 meters.

The salt would be mounted as a huge heap and it's called a ‘net’ as mentioned by \_\_\_\_\_ (R1). (Some 3 seconds is not clear - \_\_\_\_\_ ). The mounted salts would be layered with muds to stop erosion by winds; the mud were taken from the Kosasthalai river (sediments). The mud patch over the salt is stronger as strong as iron. The muds would be removed and patchy muds would be cleared by broom. The salts would be packed (katti poiduchu) as one, it would be loosened by digging bars. Then the salt would be packed in gunny sacks (8 maraka mootai) and the cost of each sack is Rs.16 or Rs.17. Salt is loaded to trucks or through boats for the transportation

Each boat would carry approximately 100 sacks. The boats would travel in the canal, two people would ride a boat, one person would pull and another person would push the boat with logs. I worked in the salt pans named Velangkaadu (near Ennore), Puzludhivakkam, Kurivumedu ; these are all the same pans with different parts.

People (Kuppathar - people living in Kuppam) in Ennore living near VGP were evacuated as NCTPS was coming at that place. We also stopped working due to the ashes affecting the quality of salts, the color of the salts becomes black and it’s toxic for humans. So, the salt pans stopped functioning. \_\_\_\_\_ (R1) mentioned that he worked in pans where the NCTPS is established currently. NTECL is built over the salt pans. The other salt pan area is Meganandurai. Even then, we were working hard in salt pans for 6 months and 6 months in farm fields. There would now be wages for 6 months from the salt pans. Salt pans works would be from Mid December to Mid-August (Margazhi, Thai, Maasi, Panguni, Chithirai, Vaigasi, Aani, Aadi - Tamil Months); i.e. It would be for 8 months. Salt could be extracted from mid-January (Thai month). Other months we would have rains. Now the rainfalls are sudden, not like those eras. The rain precipitation would be periodic in earlier days.



TRANSCRIPTION

Line 1: Saltpan Labor

Line 2: Association

Line 3: Request for Alternate Employment

Line 4: Request Conference

Line 5: 26-1-97 - Minjur

Line 6: K. \_\_\_\_\_ (R1)

**Audio 2**

**00:00:00**

\_\_\_\_\_ (R1) went to a convention on salt pan workers rights held at 1997 in Minjur held by

the salt pan workers association. This pamphlet will be given when we attend such a movement meeting. The organizer would say that they would give money and ask us to bring all the salt pan workers who have worked for so many years. The organizers wish to discuss and make a movement regarding the salt pan workers rights.

Salt pan is owned by the union (central) government which will be tendered to private players. The tendered party will maintain; cultivate the salt farm. They would employ people for the wages Rs. 700 per month per person. He has worked in a salt pan in salt pans Karingal which is near Kattur village.

There was a temple near the salt pan, where the workers used to worship the god while going to work. The temple has a women deity called ‘Muthu Mariamman’ and the place where the temple exists is called ‘Line’. They worked next to that temple. God is important, how many bad spirits (kaathu karuppu) we have.

You have seen a village called Athipattti vanish in a Tamil movie, like that whole village of Seppakkam was moved from that place and that place was made into 3 bunds (ash ponds) to discharge the waste water from the North Madras Thermal power plant; earlier that village was inside that bund. Now the last bund has been cleaned and a new thermal power plant (Ennore SEZ) is being built at that place, which is near Oornamedu. All those land belong to the central government. Many people from Oornamedu were farming in the Poramboke (commons) lands, they warped (madakki) the land and were doing farming, this was before the EB (NCTPS) commissioned, before 1997.

His youngest son, 27 years older, is working in the Vallur Thermal Power station ( NTECL ) I as a supervisor. He is working as a watchman in the ENNORE SEZ Thermal Power Plant which is in the construction phase. \_\_\_\_\_ (R1) also mentioned that one of his daughter-in-law is working in Mumbai has taken her children to Mumbai for education as the school education cost of school education in private schools in Chennai is costlier than the school educational cost in the Mumbai (In development aspects this implies that, in Tamil Nadu education is valued most prominent material than land value; But in Mumbai land is valued much; but sure if it is valued relative/more than education)

**00:15:55**

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