

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 8 | Issue 2

2025

© 2025 *International Journal of Law Management & Humanities*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.ijlmh.com/>

Under the aegis of VidhiAagaz – Inking Your Brain (<https://www.vidhiaagaz.com/>)

This article is brought to you for “free” and “open access” by the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities at VidhiAagaz. It has been accepted for inclusion in the International Journal of Law Management & Humanities after due review.

In case of **any suggestions or complaints**, kindly contact support@vidhiaagaz.com.

To submit your Manuscript for Publication in the **International Journal of Law Management & Humanities**, kindly email your Manuscript to submission@ijlmh.com.

A Study on the Plight of Saltpan Workers in Gujarat

M. ARAVIND KUMAR¹

ABSTRACT

Salt production in Gujarat, India, is a significant industry, contributing about 70% of the nation's salt supply. The industry is labor-intensive, employing a large unorganized workforce, mainly from the Koli and Chuvaliya tribes, known as "agariyas". These workers migrate to areas like "the Little Rann of Kutch" for about eight months annually with their families to extract salt from subsoil brine. The process involves digging wells and transferring brine to evaporation ponds, a method unchanged for years. Agariyas face numerous hardships, including "a lack of basic amenities like health facilities, clean water, and education", coupled with extreme working conditions. Exposure to the sun and salt leads to health issues such as blindness and skin diseases. Despite their crucial role, saltpan workers receive a small fraction of the salt's market price, with the majority going to traders and other intermediaries. Children often start working in the salt pans around age 10, foregoing education and perpetuating a cycle of poverty. There have been efforts to improve their conditions through welfare measures and organizations like the Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch, but challenges remain in improving wages and market access.

Keywords: Agariyas, Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch, Cycle of poverty, health issues. Little Rann of Kutch.

I. INTRODUCTION

Salt holds a paramount and deeply ingrained place within Indian history and society. It is a vital component of human subsistence, and since Gandhi's renowned protest against "the India Salt Act in 1930", this humble commodity has assumed a special significance in the Indian socio-political landscape. ² India ranks as the "world's fourth largest salt producer" and "a major global exporter". Despite the involvement of nine states in salt production, "the states of Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan" account for approximately 95% of India's total salt output, with "the brine marshes of Gujarat" alone responsible for an astounding 70% of the nation's salt production. The salt industry has long been interwoven with India's cultural fabric and economic

¹ Author is an Assistant Professor at Government Law College, Coimbatore, India.

² Evan Andrews, "When Gandhi's Salt March Rattled British Colonial Rule", *History Classics*, Aug. 14, 2023, available at: <https://www.history.com/news/gandhi-salt-march-india-british-colonial-rule> (last visited on Mar. 19, 2025)."

fortunes, underscoring its enduring significance in the lives of its people.

In India, the private sector dominates the salt production industry, accounting for over 98% of the total output. This dominance has led to a severe lack of standardized wages and working conditions across the industry. While some large corporations do offer “workplace amenities and specialized healthcare facilities” for their employees, these benefits are provided out of the employers' generosity rather than any legal or statutory requirement.³ On the other hand, a complex network of contractors and subcontractors employed in the industry frequently pay workers at alarmingly low rates, often well below the minimum wage. This practice is carried out with a blatant disregard for legal sanctions, exploiting the workers' vulnerabilities and lack of bargaining power. The absence of robust regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms has allowed this exploitative system to persist, depriving salt industry workers of fair remuneration and basic labor protections.

Although the salt-pan industry employs over a lakh people, it pales in comparison to larger industries like the beedi or tea plantation sectors. Consequently, as a socialist welfare state, India's legislative policy must transcend the sole pursuit of “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Even the most marginalized communities, if deprived of basic rights to subsistence, merit the attention and support of the State, whether through legislative or other means.

II. AGARIYAS - SALTPAN WORKERS IN GUJARAT

The 'Agariya' people derive their name from the Gujarati word “Agar”, which refers to the salt farms where they have traditionally worked. These South Asian natives have been tasked with the production of salt in “the Little Rann of Kutchh” for over 600 years, extracting it from the highly saline sub-soil brine that is 20 times saltier than seawater. This physically demanding and arduous work has been passed down through generations, with the Agariya continuing to toil in the same harsh environment and carry out the same back-breaking labor as their ancestors before them. Their intimate connection to this unique salt-harvesting tradition and way of life is a testament to their resilience and deep-rooted cultural identity.

Agariyas, the salt workers, reside in their native villages during the monsoon season, but for the remaining eight months of the year, they migrate to the salt fields. The isolation of the salt-producing landscape poses significant challenges for these families. They are required to carry all the provisions they will need for the next eight months, including their clothing, food, and

³ “Panigrahi, Ashok and Chaudhury, Dr. Suman Kalyan, An assessment of the performance evaluation of the salt industry in India with special reference to the state of Gujarat (January 10, 2025). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5096808> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5096808>.”

the tools necessary for salt harvesting. As they venture further from the comforts of civilization each year, the Agariyas find themselves at the mercy of the harsh environmental conditions they encounter. They must adapt and learn to cope with the extreme temperatures, often reaching 40 degrees Celsius, as well as the blinding glare of the white, shining salt under the scorching sun. This demanding lifestyle, entirely reliant on the whims of nature, is a testament to the resilience and resourcefulness of the Agariya community.

Rather than being passive victims of their environment, the local people have demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in navigating and adapting to the challenges presented by their surroundings for their own benefit. A prime example is their sophisticated method of harvesting salt from the saline groundwater in the Rann of Kutchh, which speaks to their resourcefulness. Historically, this region was part of the sea bed, but an earthquake has since transformed it into an arid, expansive desert located approximately 10 kilometres from the Arabian Sea. The groundwater in this area is exceptionally saline, yet the local population has developed a complex process to extract the brine and produce salt. They utilize pumps to bring the brine to the surface, which is then poured into massive, square-shaped salt pans. Through the natural process of evaporation, these pans yield valuable white salt crystals. Preparing these pans for the salt-making operation requires considerable effort, as the farmers must use their bare feet to pound and level the ground, creating a surface that prevents the saltwater from seeping back into the soil. Finally, the addition of dry twigs helps facilitate the formation of the salt crystals.⁴

As is evident, the Agariyas have adapted to their harsh and unforgiving environment, living in an uneasy coexistence with the natural forces that reign supreme. The toll of their labor is most starkly evident during the cremation rituals, where their feet, excessively concentrated with salt from years of working in highly acidic saline conditions, do not burn completely on the pyre. This exposure to salt has also taken a significant toll on their physical well-being, causing persistent skin diseases and impeding the healing of other wounds.

Despite their persistent efforts to adapt to their surroundings, the Agariyas continue to be vulnerable to the relentless influence of the environment they inhabit and work within. Furthermore, the government has designated the land the Agariyas have cultivated for years as wildlife conservation territory, effectively transforming their long-standing livelihood practices into unlawful activities. Additionally, current projections suggest that groundwater levels in the region have reached an all-time low, and it is possible that within the next two decades, the

⁴<https://enrouteindianhistory.com/survival-of-the-agariyas-struggles-of-the-everyday-environment-for-the-salt-marsh-tribes/> (Last visited on 18.03.2025 at 11.34PM).”

wells will run dry, rendering the harvesting of salt from the area no longer viable. Acknowledging this pressing concern, the government has attempted to intervene by supplying the workers with rubber boots to safeguard their feet and solar panels to power the pumping of groundwater.

Furthermore, there exists an informal agreement between the government and the salt farmers, permitting them to continue their salt farming activities on the peripheries of the wildlife-conserved land. Nevertheless, more significant efforts are necessary to support the healthy sustenance of the Agariyas within their environment. A crucial measure would be to encourage the formation of labor unions among the Agariyas, which would empower them to negotiate improved rates with the salt merchants, thereby enhancing their overall quality of life. This would help ensure the Agariyas can maintain their traditional livelihood practices in a sustainable manner, while also addressing the environmental challenges they confront.

III. WORKING CONDITIONS OF AGARIYAS

“The salt manufacturing cycle” commences with the conclusion of the monsoon season in October and persists until the following June, when the monsoons return. Consequently, during the manufacturing period, workers are obligated to be present at the remote, arid Rann of Kutch site. This region poses significant challenges, as the workers must retreat to nearby villages like Kharagodh during the monsoons. The distinctly migratory nature of this occupation creates numerous vulnerabilities for this community, which in many ways exists in a constant state of dependence on seasonal rains and leads a dual existence. The government's efforts to address the concerns of these saltpan workers have been largely inadequate. Welfare programs related to health, education, and subsidized food are typically provided only in the peripheral villages, and rarely reach the distant worksite itself. Furthermore, “inspectors appointed under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948” often fail to visit the actual site of work, due to an “established nexus between the contractors and governmental authorities”.

Over the past decade, the local workers' union, Agariya Heetarakshak Sangh, has played a pivotal role in driving positive changes. Through their concerted efforts, approximately 45,000 workers have been provided with identity cards, which has facilitated their integration into the state authorities' vision and policies. However, more remains to be done to ensure the wellbeing and safeguard the rights of this vulnerable community of saltpan workers. Regrettably, the nomadic nature of their existence will persistently create a problematic political identity for the agariyas, a community compelled to travel from one location to another in search of employment. This itinerant lifestyle poses significant challenges, as schemes and interventions

tend to be targeted at the more accessible villages rather than the actual worksites. This disconnect further marginalizes the agariyas, denying them access to essential services and protections.

In addition to the fundamental challenges surrounding the complex identity of the agariyas, this group also encounters a range of other distinctive vulnerabilities. Their susceptibility to natural disasters, such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather events, can have devastating consequences, disrupting their livelihoods and threatening their very survival. Moreover, the nature of their work, often involving strenuous manual labor in harsh environmental conditions, gives rise to a myriad of health issues, ranging from musculoskeletal disorders to respiratory problems and skin ailments. These vulnerabilities highlight the urgent need for comprehensive policies and interventions that address the multifaceted challenges faced by the agariyas, ensuring their basic rights and well-being are protected.

IV. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

The Agariyas, who work in the salt marshes, face significant challenges due to their impoverished living conditions. Inadequate nutrition and limited access to proper healthcare are pressing issues that profoundly impact their well-being. A notable consequence of their occupation is “the calcification of their bones”, particularly in their legs. The high saline content in the groundwater leads the Agariyas, a community of salt workers, to absorb excessive amounts of calcium and other minerals through their skin. This extensive mineral intake results in their bones becoming abnormally dense and resistant to combustion. Consequently, when the Agariyas die, their bones do not fully burn during the funeral pyre, unlike the remains of other individuals. Their family members must then collect the unburnt bones and bury them separately in a small grave, supplemented with salt, to facilitate the natural decomposition process over time.

The Agariyas, a community engaged in salt farming, face the detrimental impact of their occupation on their visual health. The intense light reflected by the white salt crystals and the dry environmental conditions can inflict damage to their corneas, leading to the development of cataracts, glaucoma, and even complete blindness. Many Agariyas experience “eye infections, inflammation”, and are compelled to wear protective eyewear such as “dark glasses or cloth” to safeguard their vision. Regrettably, some members of this community have lost their sight entirely, rendering them incapable of working or performing routine tasks. In addition to visual impairments, the Agariyas confront a range of other health concerns, including “skin diseases, respiratory disorders, kidney stones, and hypertension”. Prolonged exposure to salt

and sunlight can lead to skin issues such as “cracking, bleeding, ulcers, and infections”. Inhaling dust and salt particles may also trigger respiratory problems like “asthma, bronchitis, and tuberculosis”. Excessive salt intake increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases and high blood pressure. Inadequate access to clean water and proper sanitation further contributes to problems like dehydration, diarrhea, and susceptibility to typhoid within the “Agariya community”.⁵

V. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch, a non-profit organization advocating for the rights of salt farmers known as Agariyas, estimates that the Tauktae cyclone that struck the region in May 2021 resulted in the loss of approximately one million tonnes of salt, valued at around Rs. 360 million.⁶ This devastating impact severely affected the livelihoods of these salt farmers, who depend on the harvesting and sale of salt as their primary income source. However, the authorities failed to undertake a comprehensive survey or provide any compensation for the affected Agariyas. This lack of support is particularly concerning, as regular farmers typically have access to insurance or government compensation for crop losses during natural disasters. In contrast, the Agariyas are denied these basic protections, despite salt production being a traditional and essential livelihood for the local communities, as it is considered an illegal activity by the authorities.

VI. LAND RIGHTS OF AGARIYAS

The Agariyas lack the necessary documentary evidence of land tenure, which prevents them from obtaining bank loans and other forms of formal financial assistance to aid in their recovery efforts. Even when the Agariyas, a community of traditional salt workers in “the Little Rann of Kutch region”, made the commendable decision to adopt environment-friendly solar pumps instead of relying on polluting crude oil to extract brine, they were still unable to secure essential loans from banks. This lack of access to financial resources highlights the challenges faced by the Agariyas, who have long been marginalized and classified as an “unrecognised” group.⁷

The Agariyas were allowed to produce salt without licenses by the newly independent Indian government in 1948, in an effort to ensure self-sufficiency in salt production. However, this lack of formal recognition has left the Agariyas in a vulnerable position, as they now lack the

⁵ “Heart Wrenching: Why the Cremation Fire Cannot Burn the Bones of Salt Farmers”, *The Times of India*, Jan. 12, 2024, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/etimes/trending/heart-wrenching-why-the-cremation-fire-cannot-burn-the-bones-of-salt-farmers/articleshow/106771272.cms> (last visited on Mar. 18, 2025).”

⁶ “<https://ahrmindia.org/> (Last visited on 20.03.2025 at 10.43 PM)”

⁷ “https://www.icsf.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/08_TOT_Gujarat_2022.pdf (Last visited on 20.03.2025 at 10.45 PM).”

official documentation necessary to secure their salt farms and access vital financial and social support systems. The Agariyas' inability to obtain the necessary documentation has perpetuated their exclusion from mainstream economic and social opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of marginalization and limited access to resources.⁸

“The Wild Ass Sanctuary” was officially designated under “the Wildlife Act of 1972”, initiating a process for the state forest department to identify and settle the land rights of individuals and communities residing within the sanctuary boundaries. However, the settlement proceedings for the Wild Ass Sanctuary only commenced 24 years later, in 1997. The government subsequently issued a notification granting a mere 60-day period for the Agariyas to file land claims. Regrettably, this deadline was not sufficiently publicized, leading to most Agariyas remaining unaware and failing to submit their claims. Furthermore, the government neglected to conduct a survey to determine the precise number of Agariyas dependent on the Rann region. Unexpectedly, in November 2006, during the peak of the salt harvesting season, the Agariyas were alarmed to receive eviction notices from the state's forest department, informing them that their land claims had been rejected. Most Agariyas were shocked and perplexed, as they had never filed any claims in the first place.

The AHRM conducted a series of radio programs to educate the community about their legal rights and entitlements. Despite these efforts, the forest department ultimately rejected new claims filed by the Agariyas, citing the expiration of the filing period.⁹ Even 48 years after the Wild Ass Sanctuary was first designated, the land settlement process remains unresolved as of September 2021. In the past, the government had issued and regularly renewed short-term leases to the Agariyas, but ceased this practice once the settlement process commenced. The protracted nature of the process has been compounded by the fact that the LRK area previously fell under the jurisdiction of five different districts, posing significant challenges for coordination and resolution. The Agariyas have been living in a constant state of apprehension and uncertainty. The forest department has claimed that the presence of the Agariyas poses a threat to the Wild Ass, threatening to evict them. However, the department's own data contradicts these assertions, showing that the wild ass population has actually increased from 700 in 1976 to 5,000 as of

⁸ Aditi Patil, “Agariya Farmers in Gujarat Demand Seasonal Land Rights, Minimum Support Price for Salt”, *Land Conflict Watch*, Aug. 2017, available at: <https://www.landconflictwatch.org/conflicts/farmers-demand-seasonal-rights-to-fam-salt-in-little-rann-of-kutchch#> (last visited on Mar. 19, 2025).

⁹ “<https://icsf.net/newss/gujarat-the-marginalised-community-of-agariyas-the-salt-workers-in-the-little-rann-region-of-gujarat-produce-30-percent-of-indias-inland-salt/> (Last visited on 18.03.2025 at 12.08 PM).”

now.¹⁰

VII. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The Agariyas of Gujarat, who have been producing salt for centuries, face a multitude of challenges, including harsh working conditions, health issues, financial insecurity, and social vulnerabilities. Despite their crucial contribution to the economy, they often remain marginalized and lack awareness of their constitutional rights. While the government has implemented some welfare schemes, these have often been plagued by issues such as poor implementation and corruption. A more holistic and sustained effort is needed to address the root causes of their plight and ensure a better future for this community.

Based on the available information and the need for comprehensive solutions, here are some suggestions to improve the lives of Agariyas in Gujarat:

- Comprehensive and special legislation for their protection should be enacted to address the unique needs of agariyas can be addressed through “on-site healthcare, education, housing, and safety equipment”.
- A minimum support price for salt should be fixed and exploring cooperatives can standardize the market and ensure fair returns.
- A common fund for healthcare should be established and providing safety equipments at workplace should be made mandatory.
- The literacy level of agariyas should be improved and promoting alternative livelihoods during off-season can further empower the community.
- Transparent implementation of welfare schemes, disaster preparedness, and ensuring land rights are also vital for their well-being. Ultimately, these combined efforts can contribute to a more secure future for the Agariyas in Gujarat.
- The rights of the agariyas as farmers and their legal claim to the land in “the Little Rann of Kutch” for salt farming should be ensured. Benefits like agricultural relief and financial support during natural calamities should be provided for them.

¹⁰ “Ravleen Kaur, “Traditional Salt Workers Contribute to Wild Ass Conservation and Regain Access to Little Rann of Kutch”, *Mongabay*, Oct. 19, 2023, available at: <https://india.mongabay.com/2023/10/role-of-traditional-salt-workers-in-wild-ass-conservation-recognised-get-back-access-to-little-rann-of-kutch/> (last visited on Mar. 19, 2025).”

VIII. REFERENCES

- Agarwal, S.C., *The Salt Industry in India*, New Delhi: Government of India Press, Controller Publications, (1976).
- Bhattacharya MB. Evaluating overall social and health status of salt workers in experimental salt fields at Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India. *MOJ Public Health*. 2017; 5(3):97–99.
- C.Venkataswamy, “Salt-Pan Keratitis” 16 *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology* 2 (1968).
- Kripa Ram Haldiya, Murlilal Mathur, et.al., “Risk of high blood pressure in salt workers working near salt milling plants: A cross-sectional and Interventional Study”, 4 *Environmental Health* 13 (2005).
- Lalwani Shashikala Tuljaram, *A Study on Nutritional and health Status of Salt Workers* (S.B.Gardi Institute of Home Science, Saurashtra University, Rajkot, 1st edn., 2006).
- Mayuri Banerjee Bhattacharya, *Evaluating overall Social and Health status of salt workers in experimental salt fields at Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India*, 5(3) *Med Curave-MOJ public health* 1-3 (2017).
- S.Muthu Raj, *Job satisfaction of the workers of salt pans*, 5(10) *Intercontinental Journal of Human Resource Research Review* (2017).
- Sen, Ratna, *Organizing the Unorganized Workers : The Indian Scene*, 48(3) *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 415-427 (2013).
- Sugato Mukherjee, “Harvesters of the White Desert” 17 *American Sociological Association* 54 (2018).
- Umesh. K Sangeetha and Deena N. Rajyaguru, *Assessment of oral health among salt workers of Little Rann of Kutch, North Gujarat*, 3(3) *International Journal of Applied Sciences* 431-437 (2016).
