

# Life at the Margins of Salt and Desperation: A Photo Essay

The Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) in Gujarat is widely known for salt production and for the Wild Ass Sanctuary. The “survey number zero” land is spread across 5,000 sq km and is difficult to access not only due to the fear of getting lost in the desert but also because it comes with the notorious tag of “severe weather conditions” that make basic amenities of life, such as fresh water and vegetation, almost non-existent. Temperatures soar up to 50°C in the summer months. Residing here in such harsh conditions are the salt farmers, the Agariyas, who migrate from the nearby 107 villages and spend eight months to produce salt using traditional methods. The lives of the Agariyas are filled with trials and tribulations, and every day, they wake up with a hope for a better life.



Naina, 20 years old, levelling the salt brine for crystallisation of salt in Kharaghoda. She is married but continues to stay with her parents at the Rann, so that she can help them produce salt as her siblings are too young to work in the field.

Gujarat accounts for 80% of the salt production in India (Mishra 2019). Around 8,000 households set up their makeshift huts from September and continue to live in their jhupdi till May, by which time, they have harvested approximately 800 tonnes of salt in each pan. They earn up to Rs 160 per ton of salt.



The jhupdi of Manubhai who lives with his wife, mother, two teenage daughters and a 12-years-old son.



Mina and Payal preparing lunch—"rotlo" (bread) to be consumed with "shaak" (sautéed vegetable)

Every day, 1 lakh litres of salt brine is taken out from the manually dug deep well called qui that is 80–120 metres deep, using solar power at night and diesel pumps during the day. The brine flows through the channels and pans and gets collected in the crystalliser, which is levelled across twice by a hand plough (dantar) and allowed to crystallise in the scorching heat.



The salt pans connected through channels for the flow of brine to the crystalliser. The water has to pass through 23 pans before it reaches the crystalliser.

Men visit their villages once a week to buy fresh vegetables or they go to Patadi, which is at a distance of 40 km from LRK. The unavailability of freshwater in the desert is one of the causes of health ailments among the Agariyas. With efforts from the Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch and Janpath, the state government now regularly provides water to the Agariyas through water tankers. A water tanker visits the desert once a week or depending upon the requirement to provide water. Prior to these efforts, each family had to pay Rs 1,500 per tanker to fulfil their need for water every month. The Agariyas take loans from their traders for various personal and emergency situations and later adjust the money. Thus, they continue to be in the cycle of loan and debt with the traders.



Agariyas collect water from the water tanker that comes once a week in Kharaghoda. Scarcity of water makes it arduous to survive.



A woman with her daughter and young son loading the filled water drum on their bicycle at Kharaghoda. Since there is a shortage of water, Agariyas shower once in two days, which is a concern as they suffer from skin ailments and their hygiene is compromised. As there is no system of sewage disposal, they drink less water and defecate in the open, leading to renal ailments. Women suffer during menstruation and their menstrual and reproductive health is affected.

Children are exposed to salt farming right from their childhood as their families cannot leave them in the villages alone. Since young children are in the desert for eight months, chances of education are none.



Manish Shala—Rann Shala Bus at Kharaghoda

In order to help children with education, 31 abandoned Gujarat State Road Transport Corporation (GSRTC) buses were converted into high-tech Rann Shalas in Kharaghoda, Santalpur, Morbi, Dhrangadhra, Halvad, Maniya and Zinzuwada areas of LRK for 751 students in November 2019. This was made possible by the efforts of the Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch along with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Janpath, and the Government of Gujarat. The buses are a unique model for recycling and innovative use of solar panels and LED lights. Each bus is equipped with 16 fans, six LED lights, one green board, one television and six soft boards. Eighteen to 24 students can sit inside a bus. With a water jug of 20 litres and a water tank of 700 litres, this eco-friendly school infrastructure is helping students to learn and live a better life (Parekh 2019).



Inside a Rann Shala: Along with a teacher, each school has a baal-mitra (children's friend) to look after the students.



Ronak returning home from Manish Shala. Students come from nearby areas and attend school from 9 am to 5 pm between Monday to Friday. The Rann Shala buses are placed at distances which students can traverse.

Since there are not many opportunities for the students to learn from new resources, a four-day children fair “Baal Mela” was organised between 9–10 January 2020 by CRISIL Mumbai as a part of their corporate social responsibility. This event was the first of its kind, and students were exposed to a variety of art, craft and scientific knowledge.

Students learnt the concepts of lenses and how to make a camera. A “scientific day” was conducted on 10 January with experts from Vikram A Sarabhai Community Science Centre, Ahmedabad.



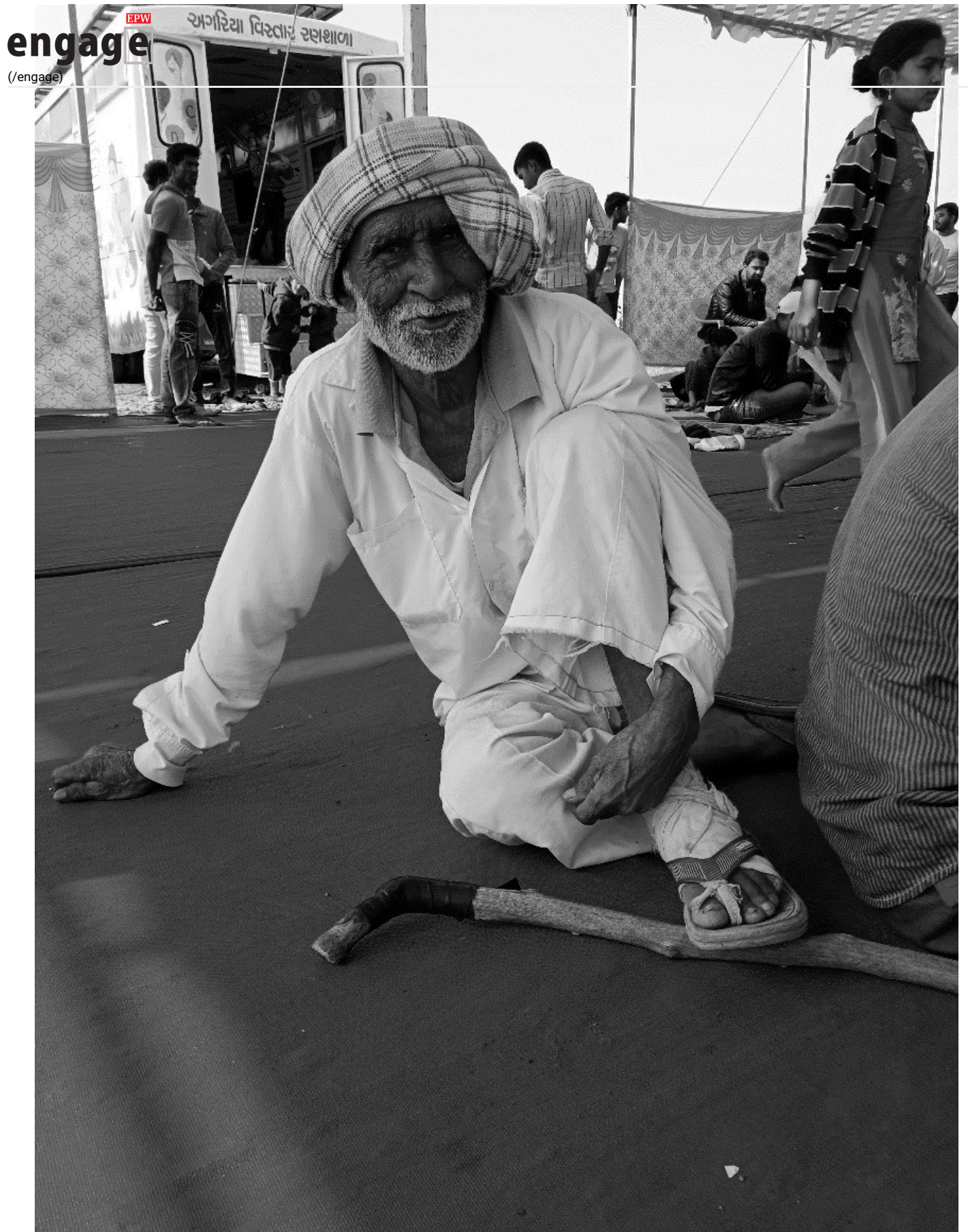


Agariya students learning the basics of science from team members of Vikram A Sarabhai Community Science Centre. Students learnt crafts such as kite making, clay modelling, puppet making, origami, painting and scientific experiments. Master students from C N Shah Arts College, Ahmedabad had participated to teach craft skills.

Midday meals are also provided to the students. Students are offered healthy and nutritious food to help them maintain good health since salt farming is notorious for causing major health illnesses such as tuberculosis, renal failure, severe ophthalmic conditions, skin ailments and bone issues. Since hospitals and primary health centres are not available in LRK, many health camps are conducted to create awareness and provide consultation to the Agariyas.



Children eating their lunch during the children fair at Kharaghoda.



Valjibhai, waiting for his turn at the health camp to get his eyes and blood pressure checked at Kharaghoda. The men often suffer from impaired vision and joint pains. The average lifespan of the Agariyas is affected due to their near-constant exposure to heat and salt.





Woman getting an eye check-up in a health camp, organised as a part of the fair at Kharaghoda. Agariya women complain of joint pains since they have to pull the leveller across the salt pan measuring 100 x 100 metres for long hours in the scorching heat.





Young girls are found to suffer from low haemoglobin levels and malnutrition. Constant exposure to heat and non-iodized salt also leads to iodine deficiency and poor thyroid function. At the fair, health checkups were done for children and their haemoglobin, weight and height were documented to keep a record. Mostly, the children were found to be either underweight or obese.

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Ronak capturing the sunset in his camera that he made during the fair.

The Agariyas exemplify the survival of a marginalised community residing in harsh conditions. They do not want to give up on their traditional occupation of salt making. Despite exploitation by traders, lack of occupational health facilities, living in a continuous cycle of debt with deplorable health conditions, they continue to hope for a better future. There is a need for initiatives anchored by civil society organisations and the government to ensure continuous support to the community and to help them live a decent life.





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The lives of the Agariyas are filled with trials and tribulations, and every day, the wake up with a hope for a better life.

Bhavna Harchandani (bhavna.h@iitgn.ac.in) is a doctoral student in Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT Gandhinagar. The author would like to thank Harinеш Pandya, Sadhana H Pandya, Pankti Jog, Dhvanit Pandya and the team members at Patadi (Bharat Somera, Anand and Pravin), the team of Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch and Janpath for their support. The author would also like to thank Bhavna Sharma for editing the pictures taken during the author's visit to LRK.

References

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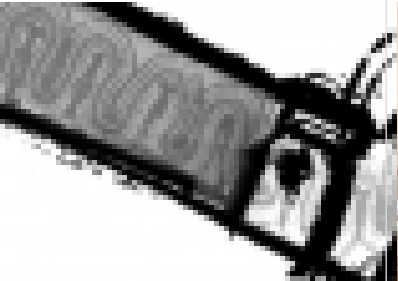







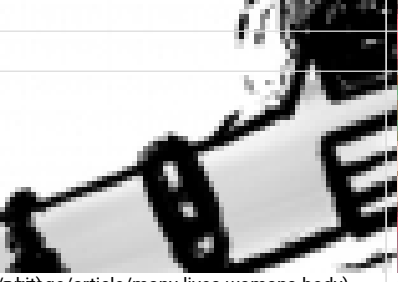

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