

# The Rann of the Agariyas

The nomadic tribe extracts a basic element of life — salt — in the harsh desert

TEXT AND IMAGES BY VIJAY SONJE

The Agariyas start arriving by October, when the monsoon leaves behind the Little Rann of Kutch as a mud desert. They keep coming till April to mine salt in this 5,000-sq. km marsh in the west of Gujarat, the State which produces roughly three-fourths of the salt that India consumes. Thakashi Babubhai Sankhalpura, 55, of the nomadic tribe says they arrive from places such as Banaskantha, Patan, Surendranagar, Rajkot, Morbi, Anand and Kutch. The Agariya families now number 12,000 to 15,000 in Gujarat.

With temperatures ranging from five to 50 degrees Celsius, high wind velocity and high soil salinity, the Little Rann of Kutch is an ideal place to mine salt. Using traditional knowledge, the Agariyas dig a salt-rich area and then dig a hole to draw out the saline water and channel it to a bed that becomes the salt pan. From 6 a.m., they start work using diesel pumps for 18 hours to draw water and maintain the water level of the pan. Then they drop a type of grass in

the water to help crystallisation. After a week or so, expert workers like Thakashi Babubhai use a wooden implement, called *dantalo* in Kutchi, to comb the water for two hours each in the morning and afternoon so that the salt does not harden into slabs. Small and medium factories buy salt from the Agariyas. As the summer peaks and the temperatures soar to above 50 degrees Celsius, they stop work and leave.

The tribe derives its name from the word *agar*, meaning salt farms. Their staple food is *bajri* (millet roti) and *mug ni dal* (green whole moong), washed down with buttermilk. Conditions in the desert are harsh without electricity and water. Home to a rare breed of wild ass and visiting flamingos, the desert has been designated a wildlife sanctuary by the Gujarat government. Voluntary organisations such as the Agariya Heer Bakshish Manch strive to protect the interests of these workers. Harinath Pandya of the organisation says it helps out with solar panels for power supply and facilities such as internet vans for the Agariyas to stay connected with the outside world.

**The Kutchi way:** The *dantalo* in action. Agariya nomads use the wooden tool to comb through salt pans in the Little Rann of Kutch to allow crystallisation of salt in the brine pumped out of the desert earth.



**Right plumbing:** Diesel pumps are used to draw water from deep down and channel it to the salt pans — a process lasting 18 hours a day.



**Grass in the desert:** A type of grass is introduced into the salt pan to allow for proper crystallisation of salt.



**Salt of the earth:** Out flows the goodness of the desert.

**Falling through the cracks:** Children of Agariyas find it difficult to get an education. NGOs are, however, coming to their help.



**Crystal clear:** The final product.

## RUBRIC

# The salt farmers of wild ass country

Under a searing sun, the Agariyas continue to make salt in the Little Rann of Kutch just as their ancestors have done down the ages

BY KAVITA KANAN CHANDRA

A pair of black gum boots stands in the corner of Dhirubhai's temporary shack, his home for eight months in the Little Rann of Kutch. The shack, built entirely of jute bags and plastic sheets and propped up by bamboo poles, houses nine members of his family. It is shaded a little by a babul tree from which hangs a rope swing.

Adjacent to the shack stretch the salt pans, beyond which lie miles and miles of barren, saline, cracked mudflats. These mudflats are intermittently broken by more salt pans, each with a solitary shack under a lone tree.

I am in the Dhrangadhra salt zone of the Wild Ass Sanctuary inside Little Rann, which has five other concentrated salt zones: Kharaghoda, Halvad, Santalpur, Adesar and Malla. Scattered in these zones are 8,000 to 10,000 families of Agariyas or salt farmers ('agar' is a salt farm). The majority are Hindus, belonging to the Chunvaliya Koli community while the Miyana and Sandhi are Muslim. They are a Denotified Tribe, united by their shared occupation, their culture, folk songs and the hardships of salt farming.

As we sit on the string cots outside the shack, sipping black tea—milk is unavailable here—Dhirubhai and his wife Liliben introduce us to their family. They are dressed like city-dwellers, the women in sarees and *salwar kameez* and the men in shirts and trousers. The older son Vikram is married with three young children. Their daughters Bhavna and Aarti have been able to attend school up to Class VIII, even though most Agariyas are illiterate.

## Cuts like salt

As we talk, my eyes keep drifting back to their bare feet speckled with salt granules sticking to the chapped skin. Dhirubhai explains that their feet are perpetually exposed to the highly-saturated brine in the salt pans. "A salt worker's hands and feet stiffen and at times water oozes out of our legs," says Dhirubhai. All the work is done barefoot—that's the indigenous way salt has been made for centuries. "The gum boots can be used only when the salt crystals are hardened. They were gifted by an NGO and spared my feet from cuts and bruises while levelling the salt pan and shoving and cutting the salt crystals. This has to be done every day under the scorching sun, and when the salt hardens like marble, our feet are prone to blisters," says Dhirubhai.

The older generations of Agariyas didn't have this accessory. A popular story goes around in the Rann that after an Agariya's death, their stiffened legs do not burn in the funeral pyre and have to be buried separately. Today, life looks a little more promising. "The Gujarat government is distributing safety kits with gum boots, caps, dark glasses and hand gloves," says Harinsh Pandya, an activist with Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch in Ahmedabad. Schools, student hostels, mobile health vans and drinking water are made available to them. But these efforts are miniscule. The Little Rann is vast and the salt pans are so spread out that commuting takes a lot of time. "We receive 1,000 litres of water every 15 days," says



**White desert** An estimated 200,000 people work barefoot in extreme hardship, exposed to a relentless sun and a host of occupational dangers. (Below, left to right) Dhirubhai flattens the salt pans, a woman holds up the salt she has gathered, and Dhirubhai's family prepares a meal. APP & KAVITA KANAN CHANDRA



Bhavna. This scarce amount is just enough for drinking and cooking for her family of nine. Obviously, hygiene and sanitation are compromised. "We go every alternate day to Navagaon village, some 8 km away, to bathe."

The sun and salt also take a toll on their health. The searing blaze of the sun reflected by the salt pans causes early cataract and skin problems. When a group of Bengaluru school children visited here, accompanied by Chirag Munjani, founder of a responsible tourism initiative called Rural Pleasure, they carried with them sunglasses and winter cream, among other things. "Most Agariyas suffer from malnutrition, as they subsist on millets and garlic chutney, which is their staple diet," says Munjani. Bhavna describes a typical day. They start at 5 a.m. with black tea and *bajra rotlo* (pearl millet flatbread). After work in the salt pans, they have an early lunch at 11 a.m. consisting of *kichdi*, buttermilk and sometimes

**I am invited into their kitchen and given quick lessons in making bajra rotlo amid much giggling.**

potato or brinjal curry. After a break, they head back to the pans and work till 6 p.m. Later in the evening, a cup of black tea is followed by dinner at 7 p.m., which consists of *bajra rotlo*, chilli-garlic chutney and white jaggery.

I am invited into their kitchen and given lessons in making *bajra rotlo* amid much giggling. This breaks the ice. "I like the silence and solitude here more than the four months we spend in the village," says Bhavna. She sighs about her marriage in August, which will take her to an agricultural village. Her father has been desperately seek-

ing a groom for Aarti as well, so that both sisters might be married in a single ceremony, an expensive affair that could cost as much as ₹50,000.

## Business is bad

Dhirubhai is a worried man—the price of salt this season is a measly 20 paise per kilo as fixed by his salt trader. The price varies every year between 18 paise to 28 paise depending on the quality of salt and the market demand. "They have been dealing with this uncertainty for generations," says Chirag.

The Agariyas are forced to make an advance trading of salt before the start of a fresh season each year. They migrate in September to Little Rann of Kutch and return to the villages by April-May. Every month, they take *dhiraan* or credit from traders for food, fuel and daily expenses," says Pandya. With no access to formal credit, support prices or insurance, the Agariyas are at the mercy of the salt traders.

Last year, Dhirubhai incurred losses. The price fixed was ₹215 per tonne and he produced 800 tonnes of salt, so he got ₹1,72,000, while his expenses were ₹1,87,400. He could not make more salt because he was short of ground water. Dhirubhai's biggest expense—₹77,400—was on the nine barrels of diesel he needed to pump brine from the well. This cost him more than food for the eight months. Electricity he gets from a generator that also powers the TV, their only entertainment.

## Seasoned in brine

"This season looks bleak too; the price of diesel has escalated," he says. "It will only be in Janmashtami that I will know if I will make a profit or loss." Janmashtami is the biggest festival of the Agariyas. The accounts are settled after the salt production cycle with *chheko chukavo*, the final payment after deducting all credit.

Work starts just after the monsoon,

when the Agariyas take their few possessions on camel carts or *chhakdas* and migrate to the Little Rann to lay out the salt pans. The important tools are *dantaala* and *faantiya* (fourteen- and seven-toothed rakes) and *pavdo*, *pavdi*, *kodali* (types of spades) to dig a new well or repair an old one. The depth depends on the availability of brine.

In Dhirubhai's salt pans, the diesel pumps roar as the brine gushes from the pipe into flat square salt pans called *ganda* (condensers). The brine passes through several condensers and is allowed to concentrate through a natural process of evaporation. The concentrated brine is fed into larger salt pans called crystallisers. "It is very important that these are levelled well, that they have a slight slope for the brine to flow, and that the bed is hard and impervious," says Dhirubhai. For this, a salt farmer rhythmically and softly tamps down every inch of the crystalliser with his feet in a process called *pagli paadwani*. "Otherwise, soil can mix with salt while raking," explains Vikram.

I roll up my trousers and get into the salt pan with Dhirubhai and his children. It is hard work. Within a few hours my feet are itching with the clinging salt particles and the drying mud is stretching my skin.

The Agariyas continue work well into summer when the temperature soars above 50 degree centigrade. The continuous raking and scraping has to be done when the layer of salt crystals reaches a thickness of seven to nine inches. Just before the dust-laden winds called *udaan* (and intense *vaavar*) begin in summer, the salt crop is harvested. Salt is taken by trucks to the periphery of the Little Rann to open storage sites called *ganjaas*. From here, it will be taken to market by truck or train.

"Salt farming in most of Little Rann is a dying industry," says Manish Shah, a salt trader from Dhrangadhra, who has suffered heavy losses over the past three years and has quit salt trading. "Diversification from 'vadagaru' salt (larger crystals) to 'karkach' salt (fine-grained) and a shift from traditional to scientific methods of salt farming is required for its survival," says Bharat C. Raval, president of the Indian Salt Manufacturers Association in Ahmedabad.

The Agariyas and activists are also demanding Forest Rights Act that will assure them traditional user rights for salt farming. "They have no farm land and no other skills. Salt farming is their sole livelihood," says Devjibhai Dhamecha, a naturalist who hails from a salt family. "And there is absolutely no threat to wildlife by the Agariyas. In fact, the population of endangered wild asses has increased from 320 to 5,000 in just 50 years," he adds.

As the fading sun casts an orange glow, Dhirubhai shows me the place where the railway lines used to be before Independence—just next to their ancestral salt pans. It was salt that triggered Gandhi's Dandi March, setting the course of the freedom struggle. As I leave the Little Rann, I wonder if this community will be able to chart a new course for its ancient way of life.

The writer is a freelance journalist and travel writer who searches for positive stories across the country.