AGARIYAS AND WILD ASS SANCTUARY IN THE LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH, GUJARAT: A BRIEF NOTE

Harinesh Pandya

Harinesh Pandya is a senior social activist working with Janpath – the well known Ahmedabad based NGO. AHRM – Agariya Hit Rakshak Manch is an undertaking of Janpath.

To most of us living away from the Little Rann of Kutch it is known for its wilderness and wild asses. But to thousands of people living on the edge of the Rann, it is the only source of their livelihood. These are the agariyas, salt pan workers and producers. Scorching heat, extreme physical labour and isolated life away from human habitats and social interactions mark the lives of these agariyas who are struggling to prove their rights to produce salt in this land.

Background

It is believed that once upon a time, the little Rann of Kutch was part of the sea. Rivers like Saraswati, Banas, Rupen and many others were meeting the sea here. These rivers brought sediments which got deposited over a period of time to form the Little Rann of Kutch. During the monsoon, the little Rann of Kutch converts into a huge water body.

The Little Rann of Kutch is known for its traditional salt production and various references mention this to be a 600 years old activity. During the British period, this activity increased manifold. There is mention in many documents about having railways, water services and even schools in the Little Rann of Kutch during British period. Income from salt was used to meet a substantial part of military expenses of the British government. Salt produced in the Little Rann is known as ‘Vadagaru’ salt. It is believed that the British used to call the large salt pans of Rann as ‘Bada Agar’ which became vada agar and from there the name ‘Vadagaru’.

The brine (salty water with concentration up to 17° to 23°) is available at the depth of 80 to 120 ft, which, upon evaporation, forms crystal salt called as “Vadagaru salt”. The communities involved in salt production are mainly Chunvaliya Koli, Ahir and Miyana (Muslim), residing in 107 villages in the periphery of LRK. These communities are traditionally known to have the skills of salt production and are known as ‘Agariyas’. Water quality in 107 villages of LRK is saline, thus agricultural production is very low. In the absence of any other strong alternative for livelihood, salt production is the only livelihood option for Agariyas! As per the Salt Commission’s report there are about 45,000 agariyas working in the salt pans of Little Rann.

After the monsoon, the Agariyas migrate to the Rann and stay there in extremely poor living conditions with almost no facility for eight months up to mid-summer. Just before the onset of monsoon, they sell their entire produce to traders and return to their native villages. Education is very low among them. They migrate with families to salt pans as the salt making process is highly labour intensive and each of the family member shares some work. This does not let their children access the village schools. In an innovative initiative a local organization Ganatar has started schools near the salt pans where more than 700 students have been studying presently.

The Little Rann of Kutch spreads over 5000 sq. km., consisting of many islands or oases with rich biodiversity. It was put on the world map due to the Wild Ass, locally known as Ghudkhar, as this is the only home in Asia to this species.

The Issue

In 1973, the government issued a notification (under the Wild Animal and Bird Protection Act) about its intension to declare 4840.469 sq. km area (3569.363 km of LRK and 1271.106 sq. km from areas surrounding LRK) as Wild Ass Sanctuary. Through another notification in 1978, another 112.81 sq. km was added to this.

In the year 1993, ‘Dhangadhra Prakrut Mandali’ and ‘Gondal Forest Youth club’ jointly filed a public interest litigation. During the hearing of this petition, it was suggested that Geer Foundation shall undertake an Ecological Study of the Little Rann of Kutch, in the context of salt production activity. Geer Foundation conducted the above mentioned study and submitted its report. Two multi-stakeholder consultations were held during this study. In addition to this, a high level committee was constituted which consisted of Additional Secretaries of Dept. of Forest and Environment, Revenue department and Dept. of Industries. The committee accepted the recommendation of “demarcating salt zones within the Sanctuary areas and allow salt production” but the clearance from the government is still awaited.

As per wild Life Protection Act 1972, the additional collector was appointed for verification of rights (customary) of local people in the proposed Sanctuary area. The collector office, (wild ass Sanctuary) survey and settlement, Survey Bhuvan, Surendranagar issued a Notification dated 25th September 1997 to Agariyas for representing their entitlements in the Sanctuary area within a period of 60 days from the issuance of the notice. It was also mentioned that this notification shall be widely published in all the Panchayats of the villages surrounding LRK and daily progress shall be intimated to the additional collector’s office (wild ass sanctuary). When this notice was issued Agariyas were inside the Rann for salt production which is outside the boundary of any revenue village. This notification never reached many of them and only very few could apply in those 60 days.

10 no Sp. CA No: 8487/96.

11 In response to an application dated 12th Dec 2006, put up under the Right To Information Act 2005, the Public Information Officer of Additional Collector (wild Ass) Office has clearly said that the office has
AHRM & its Effort

Meanwhile, around 2001-02 some of the organizations, individuals and community members committed to work on the issues of Agariyas, got together to form a forum called Agariya Heet Rakshak Manch (AHRM). AHRM focused on effective implementation of various welfare schemes meant for Agariyas and started representing the grass root issues at state level. AHRM was also invited to become a member of the State Empowered committee headed by Dept. of Industries. AHRM played a key role in bringing effectiveness to state’s welfare efforts for Agariyas. When AHRM came to know about the ongoing process of verification of rights in the sanctuary area, it began discussions with the community and it was soon realized that the Agariyas were completely unaware of such a notification and the process of representing their claims for establishment of their rights. It was not easy to reach the Agariyas working in different parts of the Rann and thus a weekly radio program ‘Gangdo Lage Vhalo’ was started to give voice to their concerns and to communicate with them.

Once aware, a large sammelan was organized in December 2006 to demand their rights in the sanctuary. As a result, from December 2006 to June 2007, about 4800 Agariyas have applied for granting their claims and have made several representations to get their customary rights approved. They have also demanded that the verification of rights shall be done through Gramsabhas. In addition to this the government may also visit Agariyas at their workplace to verify her/his rights. The issue however is that in the coming one month whether the settlement commissioner will consider this issue and include their rights in his report due in this month end or the voice of Agariyas will go unheard like in many other protected areas of the country?

Agariya and the wild asses have co-existed in this Rann for centuries. There are instances where Wild Ass has taken the shelter near salt pans to protect itself from poachers. Agariyas have a strong role in protecting and conserving Wild Ass, why can they not co-exist?

received only 1776 individual claims and 77 representations within the stipulated time of 60 days from the date of notification. Out of this 268 individual applications and 14 claims from co-operative societies are being approved. As per the annual report of Department of Industries, 45,439 families are engaged in salt production in the districts Suredranagar, Patan, Rajkot (maliya) & Kutch, surrounding sanctuary area. The question comes, that if 45,000 Agariyas were aware of the process for verification of rights in the proposed sanctuary area (LRK), why only 1776 gave their representation before the collector?