



AN ECONOMICS ANALYSIS OF HEALTH PROBLEMS OF SALT WORKERS IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT

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Abstract- The salt produced in Thoothukudi has gained a national and International market. Salt workers are engaged in various process of salt manufacturing in Thoothukudi District. The salt workers are exposed to adversities of environmental conditions as well as in the environment. The reallocation of sufficient resources, should guide the re orientation of health care service delivery. This is likely assure to essential health services and better quality of care to the salt workers. The greater focus on prevention and the early management of health problems is likely to reduce the need for complicated specialist care and also potentially promote health equity by improving economic and social, reducing discrimination, and empowering communities to improve their health conditions. The present conditions of salt workers are no better than other industrial workers. Working in saltpan is hazardous occupation. The study reveals that go per cent of salt workers are affected by occupational diseases, 37.77 per cent of them are suffering from eye and skin diseases. The salt workers are of the view that they do not have good medical facility for treading occupational diseases.

Key words: Salt workers, saltpan, health care service, health problems, Occupational diseases.

I. INTRODUCTION

About 51,647 salt workers are engaged in the production of salt in Thoothukudi, which is an important unorganized sector. Salt workers engage in various processes of salt manufacturing – viz., sweeping the salt crystals with a wooden spade; heaping of salt crystals at the edges of pans; loading weighing, milling, packing or transportation of salt. The workers are exposed to adversities of environmental conditions as well as in the environment.

A strong primary health care approach, backed by the reallocation of sufficient resources, should guide the reorientation of health care service delivery. This is likely to assure citizens greater access to essential health services and better quality of care. The greater focus on prevention and the early management of health problems is likely to reduce the need for complicated specialist care teams can also potentially promote health equity by improving social cohesion, reducing discrimination, and empowering communities to improve their health conditions.

1.1 Salt Industry at Thoothukudi

The salt produced in Thoothukudi has gained a national and international market. In the study area, salt is manufactured by Private entrepreneurs, State Government, Central Government and Co-operative Societies. In 2019, Private units witnessed a total production of 25 lakhs tonnes of salt, of which 82,300 tonnes were exported to Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The salt producing area located in and around Thoothukudi is about 30,000 acres. Depending upon the monsoon, salt production is carried out for about 9 months in a year.

1.2 Salt Production Trend in Thoothukudi District

Normally, salt manufacturers would rely heavily on export market, which saw a declining trend over the past few years. The quality of processed salt was not up to mark and the manufacturers paid the price for not being quality – conscious. Despite lack of quality market price of salt was soaring, and the export market shifted to Gujarat.

Countries such as Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore had a constant market demand for Thoothukudi salt some years ago, but now they turned their concentration on Gujarat due to the quality of salt and affordable price.

Sourced in Salt Department said in July 2015, 11,500 tonnes of salt were exported from Thoothukudi Seaport, but the export for July this year came down to 9,857 tonnes. During 2014-15, 71,084 tonnes of salt was shipped from Thoothukudi, but there was a sharp fall in 2015-16, which recorded expor of only 36,918 tonnes, the source added (The Hindu, 2016).

1.3 Objective of the Research

The following are the objectives of the study,

1. The nature of employment in salt pans and salt production in Thoothukudi District.
2. The occupational diseases health hazards, if any, and the workers welfare schemes.
3. Measures to solve the problem of salt workers and their diseases.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of the study is to have a critical view of the problems of the workers in Salt Pan and Industry. Therefore, emphasis is laid more on the information supplied by the workers supplemented by the secondary data. Thus the present study is based on both primary and secondary data.

Period of the Study

The survey was conducted in several stages from July 2020 to December 2020 covering a period of six months.

Problem Focus

The occupational health camps were organized at Thoothukudi in collaboration with owners of salt-manufacturing units and the Department of Salt, Government of India. The sites were selected on the basis of total production of salt at different sites. Workers of nearby salt manufacturing units were invited for their free health examination. The workers who were absent on the days of the health camp were excluded from the study. The salt workers are exposed to adversities of environmental conditions as well as salt in the environment. There is a lack of information about their occupational health problems.

The economic conditions of salt workers were deplorable during the pre-independence period. They spent the day between slush and mud with a starving stomach and with a half-appeased appetite. They possessed no comfortable dwelling and had no rest. Even after independence their progress was not satisfactory as was planned and expected. The reason was that little importance was attached to the welfare of the salt labour. The Government of India is directly responsible for the welfare of labour employed in pans. The responsibility to enforce the labour welfare legislation in the private salt work rests with the State Governments. They have so far taken very little interest in the matter. As the industry is seasonal and the labour is generally local, the manufacturers have not cared much for the provision of labour in salt factories.

The present conditions of salt workers are no better than other industrial workers. They have been always under the clutches of the money lenders and employers. They are not able to find enough work throughout the year. In fact, poverty is rampant among the salt workers. Due to very low income, they are not only ill fed but also ill clothes and ill housed.

Problems faced by salt workers

The salt workers are seen to migrate to other salt pans in order to earn their livelihoods, as they lack other employment opportunity. In addition to this, the salt workers also lack skills for doing any other work. Child and adolescent labour are on the rise in the salt pans as children also migrate with their parents and are engaged as salt workers. So, while facing these problems, some of female salt workers stop the work with the employer and migrate to somewhere else in this district.

Majority of the salt workers are facing some problems such as wage, working hours etc. In some salt pans, the female salt workers face sexual problems with the employers. These type of problems with employers of salt workers are classified in the following table.

Table 1.1 **Types of problems with Employers**

S.No.	Problems	No. of Respondents
1.	Sexual Problems	13
2.	Problems Related to Wages	33
3.	Working Hours Problems	18
4.	Hazardous Work	27
5.	Bonus Problem	8
	Total	100

It is clear that problems related to wages was the main problem faced by the salt workers. Then hazardous work was the second most important problem. Bonus problem was the least important problem faced by the salt workers.

Health Problems

Working in salt pan is hazardous occupation. Some of the salt workers inhale the salt powder which cause nasal problems. Some may have problems in lungs. The salt workers sustain minor occupational injuries on their feet and hands, which result in formation of Ulcers. Haldiya et al..., (p1139) report higher prevalence of hypertension (15.6%) in workers having Ulcers compared to 4.3% in those without Ulcers. There is likelihood absorption of salt through these Ulcers which in turn might affect their blood pressure.

Salt workers do not use boots or other safety measures. As a result, their skin is often damaged by salt crystals and the spade used for sweeping them. During data collection, the investigator observed the fact of Hypertension, Ulcer, Blood Pressure etc.

One of the major problems of female salt workers is frequent and persistent back pain. Since women workers are mostly engaged on shifting of salt to platform and loading activities. While among the female salt workers, more common problems are that of irritation of eyes and injuries in arms and legs.

Table 1.2 **Male and Female workers and the category of works**

Type of work	Male Workers	Female Workers	Total
Watering	10	24	34
Scraping	20	16	36
Removing	10	14	24
Others	6	0	6
Total	46	54	100

Since there is sex-discrimination in payment of wages and the female workers are paid low wages, the manufacturers tend to hire more female workers.

Occupational Diseases

Occupational disease is disease common among workers engaged in a particular occupation. They are caused by the conditions of that occupation. They are slow and generally cumulative in their effects. Some time occupational disease are serious enough that might cause even death.

In salt industry the workers suffer from two kinds of occupational diseases that are eye diseases and skin diseases. The researchers on their personal visits to various salt manufacturing units in the study area have observed that most of the workers are not using cooling eye-glasses and sandals. Since the salt workers are directly exposed to sodium chloride during the working hours, they are easily prone to health hazards. To start with they suffer from photophobia, and Dimness of vision: Due to negligence on the part of workers and lack of good medical facility they will have to lose their eye sight in the long run.

The salt workers very often complain that one pair of sandals supplied by the employer to every worker in a year is inadequate. Moreover, the owners are not providing them with gloves. As the salt workers are in constant contact with salt throughout their working period, they are more prone to 'Tines', a skin disease caused by fungus. Needless to stress, the salt workers are doing their work standing all the time. Because of this a few of our respondents complain about 'back pain'.

The extent to which the salt workers suffer from occupational diseases, their opinion about good medical facility and the agency through which they get medical treatment for such diseases are analysed in the study.

Table 1.3 Nature of Occupational Diseases

Nature of Occupational Disease	Years			Total
	Below 3	3 - 6	6 & above	
Skin	18 (20.00)	8 (8.89)	8 (8.89)	34 (37.77)
Eye	6 (6.69)	10 (11.12)	8 (8.89)	24 (26.66)
Back Pain	14 (15.57)	6 (6.67)	2 (2.38)	22 (24.45)
Skin and Eye	4 (4.45)	4 (4.45)	2 (2.38)	10 (11.12)
Total	42 (46.67)	28 (21.11)	20 (22.22)	90 (100)

Note: Figures in brackets show percentage to total

Among the 90 workers suffering occupational disease 37.77 per cent are afflicted by skin disease, 26.66 per cent have eye defects. 22.22 per cent are suffering for six years and above 21.11 per cent for three to six years and 47 per cent for three years. Thus, it can be inferred that occupational disease attacking salt workers are found to be chronic.

III. CONCLUSION

The result of the study reveals that 90 percent of salt workers are afflicted by occupational diseases. Among the salt workers who suffer from occupational diseases, 37.77 per cent of them are

suffering from eye and skin diseases. It is observed that most of them are not using cooling eyeglasses and sandals supplied by the employer to every worker in a year are inadequate. Moreover, the owners are not providing them with gloves. Since the salt workers have been suffering for many years, the occupational disease is found to be chronic.

The salt workers are of the view that they do not have good medical facility for treating occupational diseases. It is found that one third of them go to government hospital for getting medical treatment. They complain that they will have to cut the work and consequently lose wages for getting medical treatment for occupational diseases.

According to the opinion of most workers, there is no provision of separate urinals and latrines for male and female in their working place.

Prevalence of work-related symptoms was 55.1% among salt workers. Prevalence of ophthalmic symptoms was 40.6% that of dermatological symptoms was 31.3% and symptoms like headache, giddiness, breathlessness, muscular and joint pains were present in 52.8% of salt workers. The common ophthalmic symptoms were glare 40.5% redness of eyes 37.6% and burning sensation in eyes 30.3%. Smaller number of workers also complained of excessive watering in eyes dimness of vision, photophobia and pain in eyes. Among dermatological symptoms, itching ulceration thickness of skin cracks in skin and burning sensation in skin were complained of by the salt workers. Thickness of skin was complained of mainly over palms of male workers. Symptoms pertaining to other systems like giddiness, headache, pain in joints, pain in muscles and general weakness were more prevalent in females than in males at 10%. Giddiness was particularly complained of while standing up from sitting posture during working hours. Headache, joint pain and muscular pain were other work-related symptoms and the severity if these symptoms reduced after taking some rest.

IV. SUGGESTIONS

- Since the salt workers remain unemployed for eight to nine months without getting other alternative works in the off season, subsistence allowance and retaining fee may be given to the salt workers during off-seasons for 15 weeks.
- Since a vast majority of the salt workers are prone to occupational diseases, a separate hospital with all facilities should be established for their benefit on Thoothukudi.
- The employers should be statutorily asked to make provision for medical facilities. Such medical facilities should be made available to the salt workers at a nearby place.
- Separate toilet facilities for male and female workers should be provided in the salt pans.
- The Government should provide welfare measures and health's one assures to all the workers.

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