

The Detrimental Health Effects of Labor-Intensive Salt Making on Women of Nuniya Community of Gujarat

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Abstract

India is the third-largest producer of salt in the world, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra are the top five salt-producing states in India, in which Gujarat alone contributes 76% of India's total salt production. The Nuniya community of Gujarat is known for their expertise in salt production. Despite the worst weather, the Nuniya community performs rigorous labour. They include the labour of all family members in the salt-producing process, even the children. Men of the community migrate to towns for better work opportunities, women work in the frontline, and with the harsh climatic conditions they fall sick, especially when their hands and feet harden from the intense labour in the salt field, even after death, they do not burn on the funeral pyre. In this context, the current paper illuminates the numerous vectors of dispossession that Gujarat's Nuniya tribes face, and also aims to draw attention to the gendered effects and resource depletion that the Nuniya tribes are experiencing. The current article addresses the Nuniya community's labour issues and the historical implications for their degraded condition. Also, it examines gender dynamics, women's labour involvement, and socioeconomic conditions through historical and current aspects.

Keywords: Labour, Salt makers, Degradation, Health

1. Introduction

India is the third-largest producer of salt in the world, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra are the top five salt-producing states in India, according to B.C. Raval, the president of the Indian Salt Manufacturers' Association, Gujarat alone contributes 76% of India's total salt production. The Nuniya community of Gujarat, India, is known for their expertise in salt production. Apart from being located in Gujarat, this community also resides in some parts of Karnataka, Goa, and Maharashtra. The Nuniya community is known as 'Agariya', 'Aghadiya', 'Sambhri' and 'Loniya'. This community plays a significant role in the salt industry, they have involved themselves in salt production, 65 percent of the community's people are involved in salt-producing units; however, the production of salt even in harsh climatic conditions, poses a health risk. 76 percent of salt is produced in the region of Rann of Kutch at Gujrat by the Nuniya community. The salt produced by the Nuniya people is of high quality, and a significant portion of the salt exported from India is sourced from this area.

Historically, Nuniya people have been degraded, exploited, and undervalued, resulting in poor living conditions and limited economic opportunities. In the above context, the paper also looks at the historical and current causes of the Nuniya people's condition deteriorating, with a particular emphasis on women's health loss, environmental harm, socioeconomic change, changing status of women in the community and long-term health harm. On the other hand, the role of labourers in Indian society is consistently perceived as being degraded; earning a living through manual labour in dangerous environments brought in less money but rendered workers more susceptible to health problems, and women are becoming the major sufferers in this course.

There is ample historical evidence documenting the existence and importance of Nuniya, the salt makers, throughout various periods of history, their presence in salt production can be traced back centuries. The historical importance of the Nuniya community is evident in their role as key participants in salt production. However, the lack of textual documents on their salt trading, even today the community people find it difficult to assess the salt trade directly. However, they have a majority stake in the production of salt, even in the harsh climatic conditions. This situation raises health hazards among the community people. For the present degraded condition of the Nuniya community, one of the reasons is the treatment during the colonial period. Colonial period, the condition of, the Nuniya people was often degraded, they were subject to exploitation and their labour was undervalued, leading to poor living conditions and limited economic opportunities. Despite the adverse conditions they faced, the Nuniya community played a crucial role in sustaining the salt trade and providing this essential commodity to various communities. The Indian national movement also took a stake in salt production, through the Dandi march, to show disobedience toward the British government and to show resistance toward the levied tax on salt. It can be seen that the laborious work of the Nuniya people is not considered a matter of discussion, however, the Indian national movement got attention.

In post-independent India, the condition of the Nuniya people experienced some

improvements. However, the exploitation of the community has taken a new form in the name corporation business, and the salt producers are exploited. The Nuniya community is involved in heavy labour even in harsh climatic conditions. In terms of their health, it is degraded further with time. The Nuniya community involves the whole family in the production of the salt, even the children also stretch their labour into the process. As a result, the intensive labour in the salt field makes them ill particularly their hands and feet solidify as rock. Particularly the salt pan workers struggle with issues like unusually thin legs that grow so stiff that, even after death, they do not burn on the funeral pyre.

According to the CSIR study conducted in 2015, women make up a larger percentage of salt workers than men. This study exhibits that women's labour is exploited (Note 1). Men of the Nuniya community suffer from unemployment as salt production takes place for only a few months of the year alongside various health issues among the workforce involved in their jobs. They have few sources of income and little access to social or health security.

Gender roles are an important aspect of labour participation, this is emphasised by the women's labour participation and access to socio-economic amenities. Such as salt production and other producing units, especially in less-developed countries characterized by traditional gender norms, gendered divisions of labour position women as reproducers of life, subsistence farmers, and caregivers of children and the elderly (Austin & Banashek, 2018). The study conducted by Newman and Canagarajah in Uganda and Ghana found significant gender differences in participation in nonfarm activities compared to agriculture. This study reveals that women are more in to participate in nonfarm activities and combine agriculture with nonfarm activities than men. These studies bring out an important aspect of women's participation in work and elaborate that, women's labourers are more intensive and lower paid and also involved with the high risk of health hazards.

2. Historical Perspective

The history of salt makers is an intertwining narrative of cultivation, trade, and survival, inspired by the universal human need for this essential mineral, reflected in ancient practices from Mesoamerican cultures to the salt tax aversion that sparked the French Revolution. The salt makers' history is a fascinating journey that showcases the intricate connections between politics, economics, and culture.

The history of salt makers in India is intertwined with the development of the national salt industry. While India's economic background has primarily been agricultural, early industries like cotton and jute textiles also involved salt production, illustrating a timeline marked by significant socioeconomic and political influences that fostered the entrepreneurial spirit among salt manufacturers in the nation. The availability of land for salt agriculture has been a longstanding problem in the national salt industry. The history of salt manufacturing in Gujarat dates back centuries and is deeply rooted in the region's rich cultural heritage. This history includes key events such as the Dandi March led by Mahatma Gandhi during India's independence movement in 1930 was a testament to the significance of salt production in Indian society.

The Nuniya community of Gujarat as a salt producer has contributed to salt manufacturing in the past century. In adverse climates also they have worked with the indigenous technique to harvest the salt. Despite facing challenging working conditions, salt workers have played a crucial role in the production and export of salt, making Gujarat one of the largest producers in India and the world's second-largest exporter. However, the women of the community have been contributing to this field enormously. Women are working in the salt manufacturing field, and from a young age, their exposure to the harsh climate is the cause of various diseases including skin and oral diseases.

Gender inequalities persist in agricultural cooperatives, where women are often relegated to physically less demanding and lower-paying jobs, while men's roles are given priority. (Bhoi, 2015). This perpetuates patriarchal attitudes and creates a hierarchy system, reinforcing the gendered division of labour and further disadvantaging women. By highlighting the gender inequalities and hierarchies present in agricultural cooperatives, particularly within the context of salt production in the Nuniya community of Gujarat, it can be seen how patriarchal attitudes and structures continue to shape women's roles. However, the situation has changed drastically in recent times. Most of the men of the community are migrating to the town and city for better employment opportunities, while women and children of the community involve themselves in salt production in the harsh climatic conditions.

3. Health Adverse on Women Salt Maker

Salt producers from all over the world are facing various health hazards. However, developed countries are using new methods and technologies to reduce the risk. The Nuniya community are following the traditional way of salt cultivation, increasing the health issues among the salt workers. Among the manifold health risks associated with salt production, studies have found high prevalences of cuts and wounds in the hands of salt workers, stemming from direct contact with abrasive materials like glass dust and chemical colours in salt production. Historical deprivation of salt makers, especially in regions like Gujarat, is tied not only to the physically demanding nature of their work but also to systemic socio-economic challenges and health risks associated with constant exposure to harsh weather. The Nuniya women labourers are facing dangerous working conditions for less payment. This work also brought gender inequalities, women have been subjected to long working hours, low wages, and discrimination (Kumari & Ramana, 2001).

The study conducted on women salt makers in Gujarat, India revealed that their labour-intensive work in salt production has adverse effects on their health (Bhattacharya, 2017). These women often face physical strain and chronic pain and have exposure to lifelong skin diseases due to harsh environmental conditions, and respiratory problems caused by the inhalation of salt dust. The other health issues include musculoskeletal injuries, such as back pain and joint problems, due to the repetitive and strenuous nature of their work. Chronic exposure to a harsh, saline work environment has been linked to notable health issues among these women workers. The other major problem faced by these women is the lack of proper healthcare resources and facilities, to reach a primary health centre they have to travel long distances, and the medical treatment is not affordable, this puts women salt makers of the

Nuniya community at a higher risk for various health issues. Women give less concentration on their health, the burden of household work and caregiving responsibilities solely on women, leaving them with heavy workloads and little time for self-care.

The study on women salt makers in Gujarat, India underscores the urgent need for improved working conditions and access to healthcare services to mitigate the adverse health effects experienced by these women. The Nuniya community children are involved in salt cultivation due to their father's migration to another town, which causes the loss of educational opportunities for the Nuniya community children. Nuniya women work most of the time in salt fields due to the poor economic conditions and often have to prioritize work over ensuring their children receive a proper education. Limited opportunities for education and health contribute to the vulnerability of the children of the community. This vicious cycle of poverty and low health access in the Nuniya community has made its condition worsen in recent times.

The additional burden placed on women regarding fetching water, for the usage of household and drinking. Women have to bring water from far places, especially the girl child and women of the family are assigned to this work. This burden not only takes a toll on their physical health but also affects their time and energy, which could be utilized for other productive activities and self-care. These issues and concerns show that physical and well-being challenges faced by women salt makers in Gujarat, their work also reflect structural gender inequalities.

4. Suggestions for Improving the Nuniya Community Women's Labour Conditions

The Nuniya community of Gujarat is facing the issue of marginalisation in society and the problems women face in the house and at work, and their health condition making the situation worsen. To enhance their health condition, it is important to improve their labourers' work conditions. The government has to take initiatives for their betterment with government policies and benefits. Gujarat's salt-making industry, like many other sectors, is marked by gender inequalities that impact healthcare services for women workers. In order to tackle gender inequalities and discrimination in salt production, it is crucial to prioritise the provision of comprehensive healthcare services that are accessible and culturally sensitive. Access to health facilities and drinking water along with different employment opportunities are the need of the hour in these areas. Providing quality education to the Nuniya community children will positively impact their lives. Moreover, it is important to consider that the usage of technology in salt cultivation is important rather than sticking to the age-old traditional methods of salt cultivation.

New methods and tools reduce the health hazards and the usage of precaution at work will also reduce the health risk among women labourers of the Nuniya community. Interventions should be put in place to empower women workers and enhance their decision-making power in matters related to their health. Implementing policies and regulations that promote gender equality and protect the rights of women workers in the salt-making industry can also contribute to their upliftment. By addressing gender inequalities and improving access to healthcare services, women in the salt-making industry can receive the necessary support for

their maternal health needs. Another important aspect of promoting social empowerment for women labourers in the salt production industry is to address the gender pay gap and ensure equal remuneration for equal work.

5. Conclusion

The Nuniya community of Gujarat has been involved in salt making for many years. Their work is to cultivate salt in the saline regions, their work is very important for salt production and industries. However, this community is marginalised and the women of the community are facing problems of gender inequality, less pay at work, and most importantly health hazards at the workplace. The Nuniya Community Women were traditionally in salt production, however, the harsh climate at their workplace brought various health problems to the working women, it is important to understand the condition and the problems of the Nuniya community women, to know the issue regarding health gender role and some important solutions for their problems. The Govt initiatives and policies are very important aspects to change their working condition and improve their health situation. It emphasises that the double burden that women are facing in the Nunia community can be taken into consideration with the mindful discussion of government policies to Health other employment opportunities access to health and education and skill development and usage of new technology in their work field.

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Note

Note 1. CSIR 2015 Study conducted by Mayuri Banerjee Bhattacharya titled “Evaluating overall social and health status of the salt worker in experimental salt fields at Bhavnagar Gujrat, India, has been published in the year 2017.

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