

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 22

Exactly 10 years ago, our team was commissioned by a voluntary organization to conduct a study on alternative livelihoods for fishermen households in Singarayakonda and its nearby fishing villages in Prakasam district.

The rationale of the organization behind commissioning the study was that in the context of increasing frequency of natural disasters, dependence on fishing alone for a living will become quite unsustainable in the future.

At that time, one among the numerous livelihoods that we had observed as part of our study was that of salt farming.

When it comes to salt, Andhra Pradesh is the second highest salt producing state in the country after Gujarat. In Andhra Pradesh, after Srikakulam district, Prakasam comes second under salt production with around 6000 acres (at that time) under salt farming. Most of the lands under salt farming were government lands taken on lease by salt farmers (though I am calling them as farmers, the government doesn't recognize them as such). As salt farming is considered an industry by the government, these farmers do not get any kind of financial aid from the government. Therefore, they have to knock on the doors of moneylenders for investment cost. We found that out of every kilo of salt these farmers produce, they manage to get only a rupee or so.

The moneylenders/middlemen, who had given loans earlier, buy the salt from the farmers. They charge higher interest on their loans and pay a meager amount for the salt. Ultimately, middlemen are the only ones making a profit on both sides. While salt farmers are eternally doomed on the losing side. Apart from this issue, there are too many problems plaguing these farmers. Salt farming can be taken up only for six months in a year leaving the farmers with no work for the rest of the year. Moreover, the farmers here weren't aware about the making of iodised salt that fetches more price.

To understand their situation from up close, we spent one full day with Nagireddy, a salt farmer. While he was working in the salt field, I and his wife, Latha, got talking about their lives while watching him work. Salt farming certainly wasn't easy! Not only do farmers have to continuously work under the hot sun and in the saltwater, it is hard to find drinkable water to quench your thirst in the fields. This livelihood is even more tough for women. But they have to do what they have to do. "We don't know any work other than this. Just take a look at my husband's cracked heels, a result of working in the saltwater", Latha pointed towards her husband's legs. But I couldn't dare to look at where she was pointing.

Alas, it is saddening to see that even after 10 years, the problems faced by the salt farmers continue to remain the same. They still don't have the facility of institutional credit. Salt, which gets spoilt even with a single, small rain, doesn't have insurance. Skin diseases, sight problems, TB, etc. are very prevalent among salt farmers due to working in this hazardous occupation; but, salt farmers don't have health insurance facilities. For a long time now, there has been a demand for the recognition of salt farmers as farmers, but their validation as farmers remains elusive.

Recently, I read somewhere that due to the government giving a lot of importance to saving the cow, the leather industry took a huge hit. This led to decrease in the demand for crystallized salt that is used for tanning the animal skins by the leather industry. This has pushed the salt industry further into crisis. While reading about this all I could remember was the meeting with Nagireddy. His wife Latha had told me that she had a miscarriage once due to working hard under the hot sun and in the saltwater. But whatever the problems might be with the livelihood, they have no other go but to continue it.

Just like air, water, food, salt also is also an essential item for us. But it is such a pity that there is no improvement in the life of those producing salt even now!

@ Bharathi Kode