

Welfare of salt-pan workers: Gujarat govt set to implement law panel suggestions

Written by Parimal Dabhi | Rajkot | Published: April 26, 2016 8:15 am

The Gujarat government has decided to implement the recommendations of the State Law Commission, headed by Justice (retd) M B Shah, which had suo motu taken up the study on the condition of salt-pan workers and suggested enactment of a special legislation for their welfare.

Minister for Labour and Employment Vijay Rupani — also president of BJP's state unit — would likely announce some steps towards the welfare of salt-pan workers on May 1, the International Labour Day, sources said. They also revealed that the government has initiated the process to enact a special law for their uplift and the Bill in this regard could be tabled in the Assembly in September.

Justice Shah, who also heads the Supreme Court-appointed SIT on black money, had submitted the law commission's two-volume report to the state government in May 2014. [The Indian Express](#) had carried the details of the report — obtained through an RTI application — last year. In his report, Justice Shah stated salt-pan workers have been leading lives in which their fundamental rights were violated.

India is the third largest producer of salt after the United States and China. And, a significant portion comes from the salt-pans in Little Rann of Kutch (LRK), spread over 4,953 sqkm.

Gujarat is the largest salt producer of India, accounting for nearly 70 per cent production. The state government gives land on lease to individuals or companies who in turn keep contractors to hire salt-pan workers.

As per an estimate by the commission, around 1.12 lakh labourers are employed in the salt industry in Gujarat. Salt-pan workers are involved in the work between October and June.

In the report, the commission depicted the pitiable condition of these workers. It said: "Basic amenities for living such as housing, regular supply of essential commodities like drinking water and food are practically non-existent in these remote areas." The report said the primary healthcare facilities were not available to the salt workers.

"In Rann of Kutch, districts Surendranagar, Rajkot, Bhavnagar, Jamnagar, Junagadh, Porbandar, etc.. where the salt is produced, working conditions are hazardous... which affect the health of agariyas (salt workers) and their position is precarious. Admittedly, the labourers are totally unorganised and they are exposed to adversity of environmental conditions," the panel said. "The absence of health facilities creates severe damage to quality of human life which itself violates Article 21 of the Constitution of India."

The children of the salt-pan workers, the commission report noted, were devoid of quality education during the salt-production season and also prone to a number of diseases.

Recommending financial assistance through nationalised banks and other government financial institutions, the report depicted the financial exploitation of the salt workers at the hands of contractors, money lenders and fair-price shop owners.

It said labour laws like Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, and Minimum Wages Act are applicable to salt-pan workers, but they are being openly violated.

In the suggested legislation, the commission recommended to frame duties of the lessee and the government, mechanism to implement the law and penalty. For implementation of the Act, it suggested a committee headed by the principal civil judge of the concerned block with a member from the salt-pan workers.