

# Migrant workers in salt pans brace for uncertain season

TNN | May 29, 2017, 05.40 AM IST



MUMBAI: Hundreds of miles away from home, 70-year-old Manish Dada has been toiling away for hours under the blazing sun in the salt pans along Wadala. But now the man has a bigger problem on his hands.

With monsoon round the corner, this source of income too will soon be washed away. "This job is physically tough, but at least it is a steady source of income," said Dada. "I will have to go back home to my village in Dahanu, there it's a struggle to make ends meet." While the government eyes the salt pan lands to increase the city's affordable housing stock, the plight of migrant workers like Dada is rarely considered. There are about 40 of them including Dada in the Wadala stretch of the salt pans.

"I am from Dahanu which is around 135km from here, and have been working here from the past six years," said Dada. A marginal farmer, Dada earns his living for six months in a year working on fields that are rain-fed. In the summer when farming is not feasible, he migrates to the salt pans in Mumbai in search of work.

"I earn around Rs 10,000 a month. It is very hot and tedious to work in the salt pans, but to earn an income it is unavoidable," he said. "My hands and legs get rough while working, and due to which I have to wear socks on my hands as the salt scrapes the skin," he added.

Mumbai's 5,379 acres of salt pan lands are located at Dahisar, Goregaon, Mulund, Bhandup, Kanjurmarg, Nahur, Ghatkopar, Turbhe, Chembur, Wadala and Anik, and around 31 salt works operate in this area. Workers here toil for about seven hours a day, mostly in the mornings and mid-afternoons. Their day starts from 6.30 am, when they begin to pound the damp fields

where the sea water crystallizes into unrefined salt and extract it in the evening.

The salt is then gathered in large heaps before being transported to factories. The process of harvesting salt begins in November when sea water from the creeks is collected in small rectangular patches of land and ends in May before the monsoon arrives.

"I came here in search of employment this year and work around two hours a day and earn Rs 6,200 a month," said Arjit. 19, who is from Dadra and Nagar Haveli, a union territory 151km from Mumbai on the Maharashtra-Gujarat border.

Arjit, along with six to seven other youths from Dadra, stay in makeshift huts near the fields with no proper sanitation: in the absence of toilets, they use an open drain to urinate and defecate. There are health problems linked to the corrosive effects of salt. "The major problem these workers sustain while working is that small little granules of salt enter their lungs which can lead to breathing problems. Exposure to excessive salt can also lead to blood pressure and urination problem," said Dr Altaf Patel, former professor at J J Hospital, Mumbai.

But these are not concerns that weigh heavily on the workers. "I have to bear the heat, I have to earn money, I can't sit at home. I have two children; the elder is studying in the 9th and younger one in 7th," said Satya (35) from Dahanu, who works in the Mulund salt pans.

As the sky grows overcast, most of these workers look set to face a period of uncertainty in coming months.