

Women show solar power is worth its salt

Author - Niyati Parikh, Published on - 9.3.2018



DHRANGADHRA: Manjuben Pagi, a 45-year-old saltpan worker from [Little Rann of Kutch](#) (LRK), recalled her daily routine two years ago, when she slogged under the scorching sun in summer. She began her day as early as 4am and worked through the night, operating [diesel-run water pumps](#), ensuring adequate diesel is available and tossing up [salt crystals](#) in the salt pans – all in a day to ensure her salt yield doesn't go down. After all, it was her only source of income and ensured she could repay her [debts](#) and raise her family.

Two years ago, Manjuben installed a solar powered water pump to draw saline water for extracting salt. "Against 1,500 litre diesel used up through the season to pump out water for salt pans earlier, I use barely 550 litre diesel now. It reduces my production costs significantly," she said, adding that life changed for the better over these two years, though not her working conditions. "Labouring under the merciless sun of peak summer months is the nature of our job. That doesn't change. But additional savings of around Rs 50,000 per annum are good. It helps me pay back debts and save for emergencies."

There are some Agariya women who have brought down their diesel use to zero.

"Since groundwater level in the patch of the Rann near Halvad is good, I haven't used diesel in the past four years, since I installed a solar pump. Our yield is around 2,500 tonne of salt against some 1,700 to 1,800 tonne previously. We earn around Rs 140 per tonne of salt," said Meenaben Surela, 30. She added, "We were able to save up and contribute towards my brother-in-law's wedding last year. It is a major reduction in our cost of production."

Some other women, however, use diesel pumps at night when solar pumps don't work as the groundwater level isn't as high. Despite this, clean energy nearly halves their production costs.

Salt production in salt pans essentially involves drawing saline water from the ground using pumps and spreading it in different salt pans, where water evaporates leaving behind salt crystals. More than 35,000 saltpan workers across LRK produce salt from October to May, staying in temporary shelters in the desert over these eight months including peak summers.

The shift towards clean energy among Agariyas began in 2013, when Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) kicked off its pilot project to help them install solar-powered pumps. As on today, Grassroot Trading Network for Women (GTNfW), a not-for-profit firm set afloat by SEWA, facilitated installation of over 1,100 solar-powered pumps over four years.

This helped the women increase salt yield while bringing down production costs. Gujarat accounts for 70% of India's total production of salt – a basic commodity used as a raw material in various industries and the most common ingredient in a household. However, at the bottom of the salt production pyramid are saltpan workers – a marginalized and economically backward community that forms the core salt production workforce.



Reema Nanavati, director, Sewa, said, "Despite being poor, they don't want anything for free or in charity. If you give them access to finance at an affordable rate and access to energy, it will help them move out of poverty and aid their economic empowerment."

Given the adverse working conditions, hardships remain in the life of Agariyas. However, clean energy adoption has significantly improved their yields, giving them better returns on their efforts. Saltpan workers purchased solar pumps worth Rs 1.75 lakh without any government subsidy.

"We convinced women to seek loans and adopt solar-powered pumps. Sewa Bank provided them loans through priority sector lending. Special loan products with seasonal repayment options to suit their needs were launched too. We also facilitated collaborations through corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes to enable interest subsidy," said Palak Patel, operations manager – GTNfW, SEWA.

GTNfW also helped identify ministry of new and renewable energy (MNRE) approved vendors for purchasing pumps, so that when subsidies are announced by government, saltpan workers can easily avail them. Recently, NABARD had rolled out a subsidy on solar pumps from which a few Agariyas had benefited, said Patel. Hina Dave, SEWA district coordinator – Surendranagar, said, "In October 2017, state government issued a resolution proposing 80% subsidy on solar pumps for saltpan workers. When implemented, the cost of the pump will reduce significantly."

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