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**THE FUTURE OF SALT WORKERS AND FINANCING FOR  
SOLAR PANELS**

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The Agariyas are unable to seek for a bank loan since they lack land rights in the region. NGOs first developed a number of financial plans to promote the use of solar pumps.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) developed a loan from their own bank, while the Vikas Centre for Development (VCD) coordinated loans for Agariyas from various financing agencies and businesses under its corporate social responsibility project.

"So far, we have erected 3,000 pumps in the Rann with the aid of a SEWA Bank plan that is just for our female members. According to Heena Dave, the SEWA district coordinator for Surendranagar, "We made sure that the EMI does not exceed the savings the Agariyas save on diesel. Later, SEWA collaborated with Bank of Baroda, NABARD, and Agariyas to provide financial aid.

With a goal of 5,000 solar pumps in five years, the Gujarat Industries Department introduced an 80 percent subsidy programme for solar pumps in 2017. It is a back-end subsidy that requires the Agariyas to purchase a solar pump before submitting an application for funding to the office of the District Industries Commissioner (DIC). The DIC then approves the subsidy after personally inspecting the pump. The processing of the application then takes six to eight months.

According to Rajesh Shah from VCD, the Agariyas still require a bridge loan to pay the supplier of the solar pump in order to receive the subsidy. "We give pre-identified Agariyas bridge loans from VCD's revolving fund so they can purchase pumps from SAVE," he continued. Additionally, we assist them in obtaining clearance for their subsidies, which are then refunded by the Agariya.

In the area around LRK, the programme launched a renewable energy sector, and as of now, about 3,000 pumps have been erected as a result of it. In addition to NGOs, there are nine private solar pump suppliers from Surat, Rajkot, Morbi, and the area around Patdi.

Sandeep Ramji Sadaria from Patdi, whose company Maruti Nandan has installed 250 pumps in LRK, said: "We take the panels, controller, and pumps on credit from different companies



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and sell them to the Agariyas." The farmers reimburse the firm after they receive their subsidy. "Up until then, we must pay the interest. We never divulge this curiosity to the Agariyas, though.

Since 2018, 150 pumps from Surat-based Kashyap Infraprojects have been installed at LRK. The Rann's geography makes it difficult to maintain the equipment, according to the owner, Hiren Bhavasar. Additionally, the subsidy is late, which affects our goals because we need working money. For forty of our pumps, it is still pending, according to Bhavasar.

Bhavasar noted that in certain instances, even after two years, the subsidy has still not been paid out.

In 2019, Nimaknagar resident Gopal Nagji Tretia purchased a pump from SEWA. He paid SEWA four instalments of Rs 6,000 each to cover 20% of the cost. Under the agreement between Bank of Baroda and SEWA, the remaining sum was lent in his name. He talked about his encounter: "Even though all of my paperwork is in order, two years after installation, I still haven't received a subsidy and the debt is still in place. Despite numerous calls, when my controller or motor aren't working, nobody shows up for maintenance and repairs. We are getting by with another solar pump that my nephew owns, but we haven't been able to completely wean ourselves off of diesel as we had hoped to do with two solar pumps between us."

In 2017, Gunawant Ramji Koli also received a pump as a result of SEWA's partnership with the Bank of Baroda. After two years, he stopped making instalment payments after paying Rs 30,000. "I only purchased the solar because SEWA assured me that I would receive a subsidy; otherwise, I could not have afforded it," he claimed.

However, his subsidy has not yet been authorised. While he has not yet encountered any difficulties, the bank loan in his name is a constant source of concern, he continued. "Because we are uneducated, we have no idea how to handle these problems."



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The Gujarat Industries Department did not return calls or emails regarding the delay in the distribution of subsidies. However, after speaking with the Agariyas about the matter, it was discovered that the SEWA solar pump model provided up until 2018 did not meet the requirements of the Union Ministry of New & Renewable Energy, including those for the stand, therefore no subsidies were paid out.

However, SEWA disputes this assertion. According to Devesh Shah, CEO of Grassroots Trading Network for Women, which handles funding for SEWA, "Till 2017–18 we erected 500 pumps with fixed stands and our members have gotten subsidy for them."

The authorities approved the subsidies for the stationary stands up until that year in a meeting with the DIC of Surendranagar in 2018, following which SEWA also began making rotating stands in accordance with the necessary requirements, he continued.

According to the SEWA official, "in any case, with tiny pumps of 1-3 kilowatts, it does not really matter whether the stand is stationary or rotational, because the consequent energy need is identical."

In addition to other credentials, the Agariyas must possess a card proving that he is the owner of a salt pan and not a labourer in order to be eligible for the subsidy. However, many Agariyas who have been working in LRK for three to four years or as salt pan labourers lack the necessary card, forcing them to continue using diesel.

The subsidy programme also prohibits registering more than one pump under a family's name. Vinod Kalsi Koli, an Agariya from Odu village in nearby Patdi block, claimed that if he acquired a second pump, he would not require any diesel at all to do his tasks because he would be able to use water from other wells during the day.

Agariyas have aspired to produce more in the previous two years by drilling new wells, but older Agariyas, like 65-year-old Danabai Makwana, warn of decreasing brine reserves. According to him, there is just clay and sweet water below 60 feet in LRK and no brine. "Last year, a village neighbour dug 17 borewells but was unable to find water.



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Without brine, there won't be any salt, and the effectiveness of solar pumps will only last a limited time, according to Makwana. If there is no brine, everything will perish, including the agariyas, our songs, and our traditions.

According to Harinеш Pandya, managing trustee of the Agariya Hitrakshak Manch, the Rann serves numerous biological roles in addition to being home to the endangered wild ass, fishermen during the monsoon, pastoralists, and farmers nearby. Making salt is an essential, albeit small, component of this ecosystem.