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## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/16162  
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/16162>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### MARGINALIZATION OF THE MEAL MAKERS: ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS OF SALT FARMERS AND WORKERS OF THE LITTLE RANN OF KUTCH IN INDIA

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#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 30 November 2022

Final Accepted: 31 December 2022

Published: January 2023

##### Keywords:-

Little Rann of Kutchh, Ethnography,  
Saltpan Workers, Agariya,  
Marginalization, Situational Analysis

#### Abstract

India has witnessed inequalities despite making sustained developmental progress. The economically, socially, and ecologically marginalized communities are the worst affected by this skewed development. The Salt workers living inside the protected area of Wild Ass Sanctuary in Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) in India (Agariyas) experience such multi-dimensional marginality. Despite being the user of the common pool resource for decades, this community remains deprived of basic facilities and a range of public services during their stay inside the Rann. While their livelihood issues are well-documented, this research explored the complexities of their social, spatial, ecological, and political marginalization. An ethnographic study involving non-participant observations, in-depth interviews, and informal discussions with a range of different stakeholders was carried out during several short visits and a long stay. Data was collected in the form of field diaries, photos and videos, and audio recordings. For analysis, field notes and interview transcripts were read several times with a reflective mind. Situational and social arena maps were used for understanding the complexities of the lives of these populations. Despite the age-old association with the Rann, Agariyas became illegal residents of the LRK since it became a Wild Ass Sanctuary. While the ecological effects of climate change have affected the salt production cycles, increasing input prices, stagnant and decreasing output prices, increased occupational risk, and limited entrepreneur ability have resulted in grim economic prospects in an oligopolistic market. Carrying a historical stigma of belonging to the De-notified tribes, most Agariyas have poor social networks and remain politically invisible. They continue to remain excluded from most welfare entitlements of the public system. Agariyas face multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities that need policy attention. Ecological conservation to include economic, sociological, and anthropological viewpoints to appreciate the LRK as commons for the Agariyas who face unique challenges of sustaining and surviving.

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#### Introduction:-

While making sustained progress in development indicators, India witnessed rising inequalities, especially in economically better-off states like Gujarat. For example, rural Gujarat performs poorly in terms of access to safe

sanitation (63% and 89% for rural and urban Gujarat), and quality of cooking fuel (46% and 89% for rural and urban households). This disparity is also reflected in the health outcomes as Gujarat is among the five states with the highest rural-urban disparity in early childhood mortality (Under-five mortality rate of 44.2 and 37.6 per thousand live birth in rural and urban Gujarat) and child malnutrition (43.5% and 33% stunted children in rural and urban Gujarat). (IIPS 2020) The high level of malnutrition is connected to poor access to nutritional interventions among the socially marginalized population, especially in the dry and arid regions of north Gujarat and tribal-dominated south and east Gujarat. (Puri and Anand 2015, Rani 2015) The variation in outcome indicators within the state is also directly connected with the poor performance of the marginalized sub-sections of the population, especially the scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) groups. (Thorat and Mahamallik 2006, Ramaiah 2015)

People who are outside mainstream socio-economic and geographical systems because of their physical locations and societal positions remain the worst affected as a result of skewed development (Gatzweiler, Baumüller et al. 2011, Braun and Gatzweiler 2014). In addition to the co-existence, interaction, and overlap of societal and spatial marginality, certain communities residing in sensitive socio-ecological systems also face marginalization due to environmental factors. (Kirkby, O'Keefe et al. 2001, Gurung and Kollmair 2005, Gwatkin and Ergo 2011, Srivatsan and Shatrugna 2012). These communities are dependent on government-regulated natural resources and continue to experience interplay and overlap of such social, spatial, economic, political, and ecological marginalization, which restrict their access to resources and ultimately affect their opportunities and abilities (Brodwin 2003).

The Salt farmers and workers (locally known as Agariyas) living inside the protected area of Wild Ass Sanctuary in the Little Rann of Kutch (LRK) in Gujarat, experience such multi-dimensional marginality over generations. Agariyas are part of the biodiversity and ecology of the 5180 km<sup>2</sup> of flat, saline waste or salt-impregnated wildland mass of the LRK, which transforms into a wetland during monsoon and into dry saline landmass for the rest of the year. The Rann is a common pool resource that communities collectively use for salt farming for decades. Although the Rann remains a state-owned property, Agariyas access the embedded resource, i.e. groundwater brine, for salt production. This context of the land-use right of the 'commons' is crucial. (Parthasarathy 2011)

The LRK is quite rich in biodiversity and is famous for the last remaining population of Wild Ass (*Equus hemionus khur*), which is listed as endangered species under the Schedule-I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act. (Pardeshi, Gajera et al. 2010) Owing to the importance of the conservation of endangered species like the Wild Ass, the LRK was declared the Wild Ass Sanctuary in 1973. With the declaration, the state staked claim on geographic areas, which were initially the community spaces that the Agariyas shared with wildlife for ages, in absence of other rural occupations.

Agariyas from the 108 villages of five districts in the periphery of LRK have adopted salt production as an occupation for generations. The human movement inside the inhabitable Rann in the harsh climate - as the maximum temperature can be up to 50 degrees Celsius during extreme summer and a cold winter temperature below 1 degree Celsius - is solely for salt cultivation. An estimated 45,000 – 200,000 Agariyas and their family members, migrate to the LRK every year for over 6-7 months to live in the barren desert exacerbating their vulnerability. They live in makeshift shacks beside their salt pans for this entire period. As this is an un-surveyed protected area, the people living inside it are deprived of facilities like roads, electricity, and at times potable water. Their access to health, education, and other public services also remains limited (MALEKAR 2009, Doshi 2014). Most Agariyas do not have any influence over the salt value chain and face financial hardships. In addition to this economic deprivation, the community also faces social deprivation as most of the Agariyas belong to traditionally disadvantaged denotified tribes of Chunvalia Koli, Miyana, Sandhi, and Wagher communities (Braun and Gatzweiler 2014). Despite having Other Backward Castes (OBCs) status, the communities remain socially and economically excluded over generations. This social alienation adds to the intersections of economic and ecological marginalization emerging from the location of their occupation inside a wildlife-protected area.

Despite being the user of the common pool resource for decades, this community remains deprived of rights, basic facilities, and a range of public services during their stay inside the Rann. While the animal-human cohabitation and livelihood issues of Agariyas are well-documented (Bharwada and Mahajan 2008, Pandya 2010, Johnson and Zala 2012), there is a dearth of literature exploring the influence of the complexities of social, spatial, ecological, and political marginalization of the Agariyas. This study aimed to fill this gap.

**Methodology:-**

The research was an ethnography of the Saltpan workers of the LRK. The research used an inductive approach with open-ended methods such as non-participant observations and in-depth interviews to understand how the broader contexts of these communities influence their life. This emergent design also helped in ensuring the validity of the study. The study population included households who live inside the protected area of LRK during most of the year. They were visited during their stay inside the Rann and at their permanent houses in the villages when they returned to their villages after the end of the salt farming season during the monsoon.

Several short visits were undertaken to get familiar with locations and the communities before the prolonged data collection. The single-phase long-stay at LRK was conducted from April to August 2017. The researchers visited saltpans and adjoining houses of saltpan workers scattered inside the Rann through several daylong visits. This prolonged engagement provided opportunities to immerse in the community activities to get an emic perspective and space for reflexivity. The fieldwork also involved a daylong moving-in visit at the beginning of the salt farming season in early October 2017 to complete a comprehensive perspective of their lives inside and outside the Rann. The non-participant observations focused on active observation of activities, actions, and interactions in the form of conversations across different sex and age groups.

All the field notes and interview transcripts were read several times with a reflective mind to understand the current context of the life of Agariyas, their historical relationship and inter-dependence with the Rann, the declaration of the space as a wildlife sanctuary, and its repercussion on economic condition and the very fabric of their social life. The mapping techniques employed during analysis include the use of messy and ordered situational maps and social arena maps for understanding the complexities of the lives of these populations. (Clarke 2005) This technique helped in identifying the individual and collective actors, non-human actants, absent and implicated actors, economic and political elements, discourses about space, community, endangered animals whose conservation is central to the sanctuary, historical as well as temporal and spatial elements affecting the lives of the community. Separate social arena maps were developed for a) Rann, describing the natural eco-system, which has been the natural habitat for the Agariyas, B) State, describing the role of government with its multiple departments and the restrictions because of the declaration of the protected area and c) Market, providing details of the business and occupational networks of Agariyas. These different maps were then brought together to describe the geo-historical, politico-economic, and socio-economic intersections reinforcing and kind of institutionalizing marginalization of Agariyas.

While formal approval for the study was received from the Principal Chief Conservation of Forest (PCCF) (Wildlife), Gujarat, the ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Committee of the Indian Institute of Public Health Gandhinagar. Informal oral consent was obtained for ethnography and interviews. The interaction with local communities throughout the research period was carried out in the local language i.e. Gujarati.

**Results:-**

The researchers were able to construct a detailed account of context and complexities across three social arena maps describing Agariyas in the context of a) the natural ecosystem of the Rann (Figure 1), b) the declaration of the protected area (Figure 2), and c) market which involves powerful actors and actants (Figure 3).

**Agariyas in the context of the natural ecosystem of Rann**

Agariyas are confined to the LRK because the unique terrain provides them with free and unlimited access to brine forming Vadagaru salt with big granules, with no geographical alternative to their occupation. This geography-specific livelihood involves cyclical migration, wherein they are required to be present at the site during the salt cultivation season from October – May every year.

Salt farming involves a traditional approach with very few innovations to improve production efficiency. The poorly mechanized process involves manual tools with extensive use of hands and feet for digging wells, preparing saltpans, levelling mud surfaces, raking, and collecting salt. Being dependent on the ecosystem of the Rann as unorganized workers<sup>1</sup>, Agariyas survive through various uncertainties and risks. An important risk is associated with uncertain access to brine. Agariyas dig their well as soon as they settle down after entering the Rann after the monsoon. This involves re-opening the existing well, preserved and marked before their annual departure from the Rann. In case of low salinity or reduced brine, they dig a new well. They bear the risk and cost of digging additional

wells If the existing one goes dry mid-season. Over the years, Agariyas complain of reducing salinity and deepening of brine level inside the well. This depletion in the level of ground brine water and its quality affects the cost of production. Owing to the fluctuating quality of brine, Agariyas opt for the difficult option of moving early and deeper inside the Rann.

The digging or opening of the well involves risk of the exposure to the poisonous gas expelled. The identification of such acute exposure at 10-15 feet below ground level and its effect on the Agariya is difficult to ascertain owing to the difficulty in communicating with him. Not much is known about the composition of the gas but there have been instances of its lethal effects. Agariyas perform a matchstick test inside the well to check the presence of gas and observe the unusual movement of pigeons as a prevention measure.

Natural or manmade calamities affecting salt during production or collection pose additional risks. Various natural calamities include a) high-velocity winds/dust storms that can pollute salt and damage dwellings and solar panels, b) damp winter that can hamper evaporation, and c) untimely rain that can wash away the salt. The manmade calamities include the recent phenomenon of the release of Narmada canal water inside Rann that washes away the salt pans and makes the movement inside the Rann difficult.

Salt farming involves all family members at different stages of the salt production process and thus most family members stay inside the Rann. Living a frugal life amidst adverse weather conditions and with limited amenities, they are involved in the manual labour of many hours every day for a few months. Lack of education of children remains a major hurdle in escaping from poverty over generations. Running boarding schools for children of Agariyas at their permanent villages was inadequate for sustained and improved access to education for children. The vicious cycle of a child of Agariya becoming an Agariya could not be broken due to lack of education. Therefore, most families have at least one of their next-generation working in salt farming, and others are involved in manual labour in the fringe villages, with very limited opportunities of escaping multidimensional poverty.

To summarize, the life of Agariyas is caught in a primary sector occupation without any risk cover, and is deprived of basic services because of migrating in cycles inside the Rann where the government services are not able to reach. It involves the whole family, which further curtails various windows of opportunities for upward social movement through the education of future generations. Such circumstances have deteriorated further through the declaration of the LRK as a protected area (PA), as will be discussed below.

### **Agariyas in the context of the PA**

During the era of the British, i.e. before India's independence, salt farming was organized in the form of companies 'New Salt Works' and 'Hindustan Salt Works'. They hired Agariyas as labourers and provided them with social security such as housing in a township, and education and health services for their families. The Agariyas recall these as 'good times with more dignity as they were better positioned in the market as either producers or labourers with entitlements and rights. As these companies closed down for various reasons, the salt pan workers needed to work on their own and fend for themselves. The Rann thereafter became an ecological common pool resource for Agariyas for their livelihood dependence

The LRK was declared the Wild Ass Sanctuary through government notifications in 1973 and 1978. Under the provisions of the wildlife protection Act 1972, any activity in the sanctuary area of LRK is prohibited. Despite the age-old association with the Rann, Agariyas became illegal residents of the LRK since it became a Wild Ass Sanctuary. This conversion of community land into PA affected the social and economic aspects of the lives of Agariyas.

Historically, salt farming leases were issued to private companies, cooperatives, and individuals. As a small and marginal salt producer (one who produces salt in 10 acres or less area), Agariyas didn't need to register themselves with the salt department. Therefore, only a few got themselves registered. In the context of forest rights, this registration became government identity and thus, those who did not register before the announcement of the PA became unrecognized salt producers of the LRK.

The registered Agariyas hold their identity cards as prized possessions to claim their historical identity as salt farmers. However, since most of them do not own such identity cards, Agariyas through their community-based organizations have been fighting for customary rights for more than a few decades now. Their customary rights

over forestland have remained a contentious issue. Since the late 1990s, individual leases were stopped and eviction notices followed a decade later. Despite such notices, the Agariyas are left alone with no restrictions on their movement. However, there are two negative consequences viz. 1) the constant fear at the back of their minds of being illegal and being asked to leave the Rann, and 2) their right to ask for improvement in living conditions, welfare services, etc., as they are illegitimate occupants of LRK, which is not recognized as revenue land.

The vast land of LRK does not figure in government revenue records as no land survey has ever taken place in the LRK. The revenue department records refer to the area as Survey Number Zero. In addition, the LRK is not governed by any single entity. The Agariyas claim development services from the respective authorities of the five bordering districts when they are at their permanent residence surrounding the LRK. However, their stay of seven-odd months inside Rann remains unaccounted for. Their situation worsened after the declaration of PA as the alleged illegal activities reduced their negotiation in the open market. The unfavourable market condition, as explained in the next section, added to their already marginalized lives.

### **Agariyas and the market context**

The lack of negotiating power in the open market is the biggest contributor to the continuing marginalization of the Agariyas. The experience of economic marginalization varied among Agariyas depending on two broad aspects viz. a) salt farming as the only source of income, and b) risk and investment in salt farming. Agariya families with at least one household member working in a profession other than salt farming are relatively better off as compared to families with all members in the saltpan business. From a risk and investment perspective, Agariyas can be further classified as a) entrepreneurial Agariya families who invest their resources, b) families who take a loan from salt traders, c) families who work on salt pans of Zinzuwada Darbar and earn fixed rates on the salt production, and d) families who work as daily wage labourers on someone's salt pans. The first ones are better off and the last worst off of all.

Most Agariyas neither have the financial resources to invest in salt farming nor do they have access to formal credit systems through banks. Carrying a historical stigma of belonging to the "De-notified tribes", most Agariyas have poor social networks beyond community reducing their collective political and economic voice. This curtails their access to formal and informal financial institutions. While most Agariyas involved in the production of Vadagaru salt and take interest-free loans from salt traders, some Agariyas take a loan from moneylenders at high interest. They also keep taking advances to sustain their lives through the season. At the end of the season, they sell their salt produce to the same traders who have lent them money all through the year completing a vicious cycle of debt and repayment. This dependence on traders, who fix lower prices, reduces their negotiating ability in absence of a fair minimum price for the salt. For many years, the rate of salt has remained stagnant at Rs. 22-26 per metric ton of salt. The oligopoly of traders and truck owners ensures that Agariyas are unable to sell their products at competitive prices in an open market. This is especially true for the independent entrepreneurial Agariyas who get affected by the informal understanding between the truck owners and the salt traders. The salt can perish rapidly at the onset of monsoon, and thus, Agariyas are forced to sell their produce at lower prices. The Agariyas bear the consequences of all unforeseen risks in absence of insurance and fair minimum prices.

### **Summary And Conclusion:-**

The intersections of state, space, nature, society, and market resulted in the marginality of Agariyas. The effects of climate change have affected the salt production cycles. While Agariyas have not developed wider human-nature-wildlife interactions or an interdependent relationship with the barren land of Rann that does not offer them any other utilities in form of water, wood, or vegetables. Although Agariyas lament their life in the Rann, they continue to use the "commons" collectively as their only occupational choice. (Parthasarathy 2011) Making an optimal choice of becoming residents of wild spaces, Agariyas have found an equilibrium around circular and seasonal migration. However, the declaration of the LRK as PA altered the socio-politico-historical context of the space and jeopardized the right and legitimacy of Agariyas resulting in constant fear and uncertainties about their future. These conflicts have affected their access to various public entitlements through various departments of government. Agariyas were proud producers of the unique Vadagaru salt of LRK. Over time cheaper alternatives became available due to the expansion and penetration of outside markets. At the same time, the cost of production for salt has increased over time. Increasing input prices of crude oil, stagnant salt prices, increased occupational risk, limited entrepreneur ability, and an oligopolistic salt market have collectively resulted in grim prospects. The interplay of state restriction influenced the market imperfections and the marginalized communities could not negotiate for fair trade in a free market with a few powerful players. The lives of Agariyas, who are trapped in the vicious cycle of marginalization,

exclusion, and poverty for many years, needed to be nested in this larger context of these geographic, social, and economic realities.

Agariyas face multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities that need policy attention. Instead of posing ecological conservation as an anti-human activity for the co-habitants of the rann, the state can initiate dialogues to include the community as conservation partners. As India explores converting the LRK into a freshwater reservoir (Jodhani and Shah 2020), it is important to understand it beyond the lens of physical geography to incorporate sociological and anthropological viewpoints to appreciate the LRK as commons for the Agariyas who face unique challenges of sustaining and surviving.

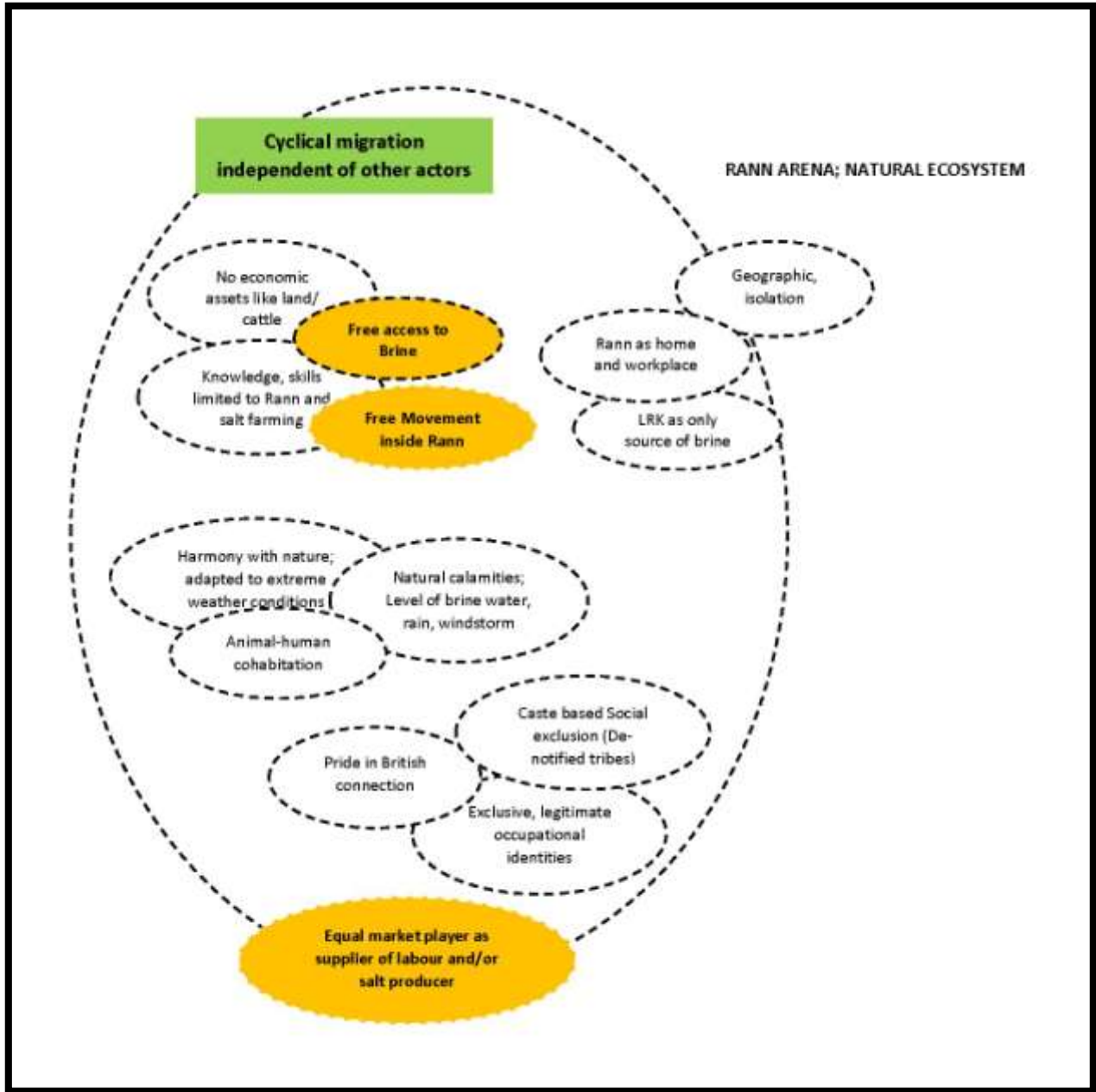


Figure 1:- Agariyas in relation to their natural ecosystem in Rann.

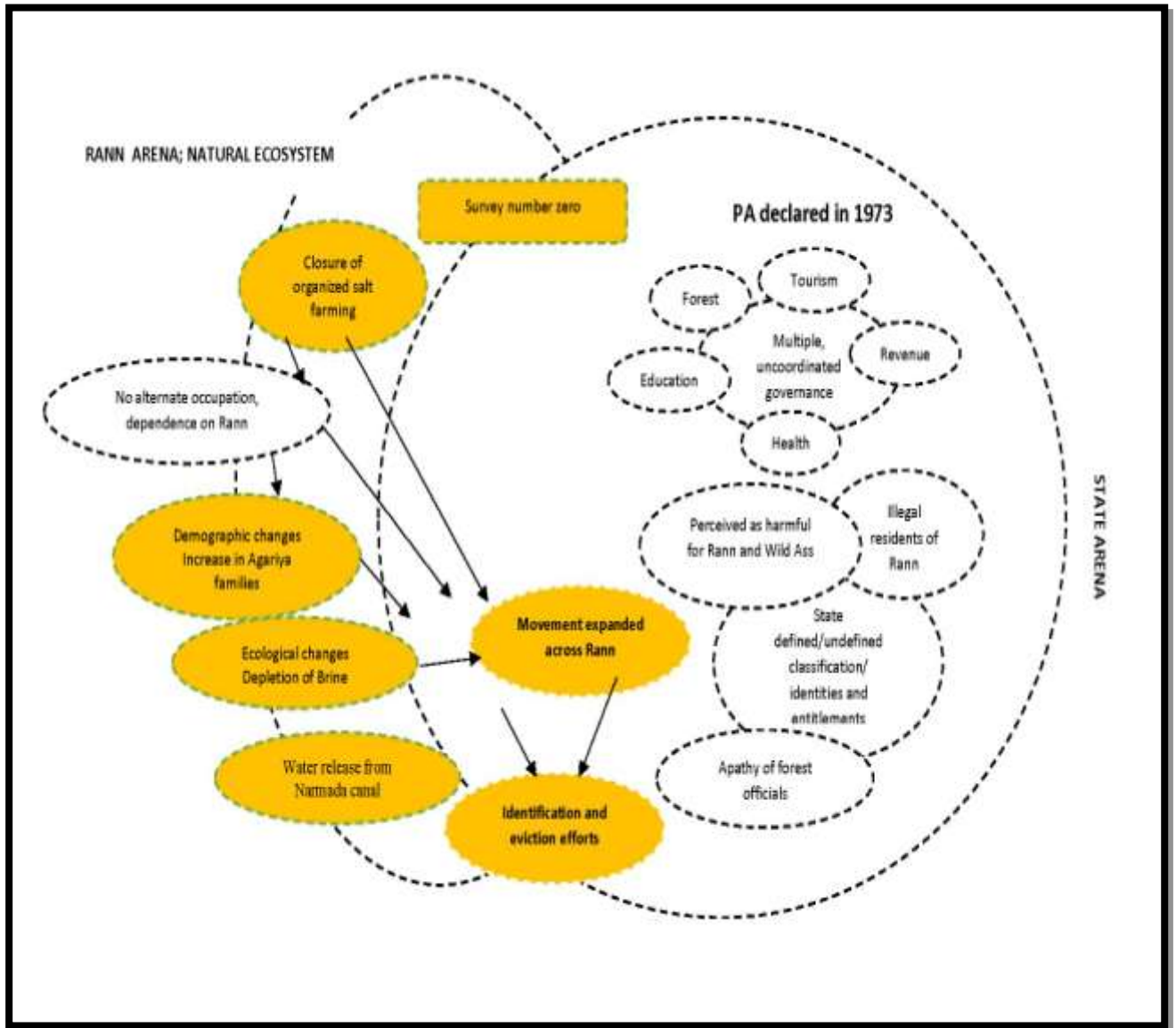


Figure 2:- Impact of the declaration of the protected area on the lives of Agariyas

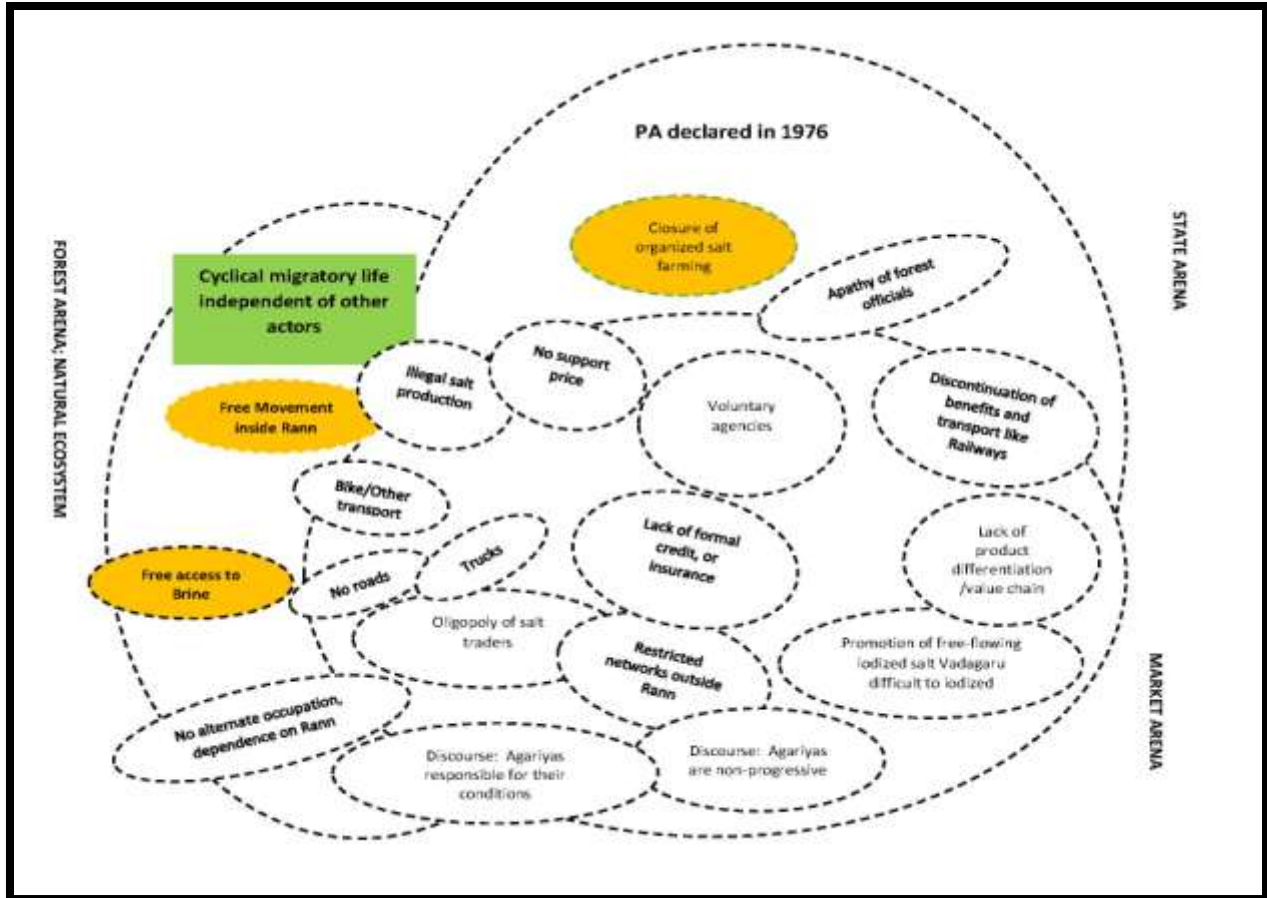


Figure 3:- Influence of market forces on the lives of the Agariya.

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