

INDIANS

MARCH FOR

SALT

By Angela Castellanos

For the first time ever, Indians in Bogota, Columbia may strike up a business partnership with the government. And if the deal works out, it will be largely due to the untiring efforts of a 35-year-old Wayuu Indian woman, Rosario Epiyeu. Rosario, who belongs to the minority Wayuu indigenous group, whose 100,000 people live along the Guajira peninsula in northern Colombia, is representing her community in negotiations with the state-owned salt mining company, 'Ifi-Conseccion-Salinas.'

Salt production which has always been the economic mainstay of the Wayuu, was something they had developed to perfection long before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century. For Wayuu Indians, salt is the very basis of their existence. According to local folklore, Mareiwa, the creator of humans, also made the land and the sea. The Wayuu are here to harvest the salt. But this traditional belief received a shaking in September 1991 when the government of the South American country launched a salt production project and contracted the Colombian army to extend the dykes along the sea. Alarm spread throughout the Wayuu community because this project affected the 'ponds' or pools where the salt crystallizes, flooding the areas where the Wayuus work, extracting the salt.

The Indians were not going to take this lying down. They organized two protest marches to the town of Manaure, in which 4,000 women (and not a single man) took part. "But then we heard about the proposed privatization of the salt flats," recalls Rosario. "And this included our lands which are considered to be wasteland, despite the fact that we used this land long before they came along. So we decided to go to the capital to talk to the government."

The Indians' loss of control over the salt flats in the region has been very gradual. Even during the Spanish colonial period, some of the salt flats were appropriated by the Spanish crown. Much later, in 1968, the Colombian government took these over and established the Ifi-Conseccion-Salinas company to exploit the salt

deposits. The Wayuu were left high and dry, with just a few small ponds to harvest. "We've had problems with the company for years," complains Rosario. "About 20 years ago, they destroyed two marshes of nearly 4,000 hectares by turning them into artificial pools where sea water is collected for salt extraction. As a result of this we cannot fish anymore. They also damaged two freshwater streams and destroyed the forest."

Evidence of the ecological imbalance caused in the region is ample. Ten kilometers of a mangrove swamp were cleared, forcing the migration of many fish and bird species, including the stately flamingo. And over the last decade, the coast has visibly eroded. The local Indians - about 3,000 of them - who were hired by the state-owned company, were disgruntled. "They didn't even give us the necessary working tools and they paid us a pittance," Rosario recalls. But when the Wayuu Indians began to exploit their own salt pools, the company called in the police. "They would suddenly arrive, snatch our bags and throw them into the sea," say the Indians. In 1988, the company accused the Indians of competing against them, the Wayuu struck work and the company finally gave in to some of their demands of tools, drinking water and health services. "But now we have tuberculosis and the health centers don't have enough doctors or equipment to cope," Indian spokespersons point out.

The Ifi-Conseccion-Salinas salt production covers not only the needs of the 70 per cent of Colombia's domestic requirements and meets the demand of the country's chemical industry, but also leaves enough for export. Authorities admit that the Wayuu extract 200,000 tons of salt a year - half the amount registered by the state-owned company. So the Indians felt that they could work out some sort of a deal with the authorities. But there are several obstacles in the way. "We don't want to let go of our own traditions, and salt production is an integral part of it," explains Rosario. "Our argument is that the company owes us a debt for the marshes it took away from us which deprived us of income. So we're asking them to repay us by

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making us partners in the business." The Wayuu are also demanding property and ownership rights on the salt flats, compensation for "cultural damage" and a percentage of the profits from the salt exploitation.

"I've spent years working to help the community. I've even tried working with local politicians. But they only wanted votes. I would get them votes but they never helped us once the elections were over. Now Wayuu landowners have placed their trust in me to represent them," says Rosario. While they wait for the next round of negotiations, the Wayuu hope the government will realize that Indian groups and natural resources should not be sacrificed for economic development. But they also hope that salt can once more become the common resource it was before the Spanish came.

Source: *The Power to Change: Women in the Third World Redefine Their Environment*, the Women's Feature Service, 1992. Published by Kali for Women, A 36 Gulmohar Park, New Delhi 110 049, India.