

Migrant Labour in Maharashtra's Sugar Industry

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This article summarises the scenario of migration of sugar cane harvesting workers from Beed, a drought-prone district from Marathwada region, Maharashtra. Seasonal and distressed migration of the sugar cane harvesting workers, which happens to be the most vulnerable section of the sugar industry in Maharashtra, remains a largely overlooked arena in scholarly discussions as well as policy circles. Hence this article, based on a study conducted by the Unique Foundation, Pune, seeks to unravel this phenomenon by looking into the socio-economic profile of the migrants, causal factors behind migration and ramifications of the same.

Circulatory migration has been recognised as a significant part of livelihood strategies of the rural population in India. Contemporary forms of circulatory migration in India can be divided into two types—"accumulative migration" and "coping migration" (Deshingkar and Farrington 2009). Accumulative migration is referred to as the migration by the better-off and relatively more educated/skilled ones, which results in accumulation of assets, savings and investment, whereas coping migration by the poor and least educated is a kind of forced migration for the sake of survival. Migration for sugar cane harvesting has been a major coping livelihood strategy for the poor labourers from arid and drought-prone areas of Maharashtra. These cane harvesters are considered to be one of the most exploited sections among circulatory seasonal migrants. Inadequate wages, lack of facilities, such as clean drinking water, fuel and sanitation, lack of social security and unorganised nature make their position all the more vulnerable. The poor working conditions of sugar cane workers have prompted renowned researcher Jan Breman (1990) to comment that "even dogs are better off" than the cane harvesters.

Maharashtra is one of the leading sugar producing states in India. According to the *Economic Survey of Maharashtra* (2016–17), the state has 34% of the total sugar factories in India. Maharashtra was on the top contributing 33.5% of the total sugar production in India in the year 2015–16. It is important to note that although Maharashtra's sugar factories started as the private venture they were subsequently taken over by the cooperative sector. "The first ever-successful sugar cooperative in India was set up in 1951–52 in Ahmednagar district with the initiative of V E Vikhe Patil and D R Gadgil" (Baviskar 2007). However, the private sugar industry in the state has also shown a surge in recent years. Out of the total 188 operating sugar factories in the state, 101 are in the cooperative sector and 87 are in the private sector (Sugar Commissionerate of Maharashtra 2017–18).

The sugar industry, especially in the cooperative sector, though plagued by severe glitches in recent times, has played a vital role in the social and economic development of rural Maharashtra. Its role in ensuring political dominance of the Maratha caste and the Congress party in the state has been highlighted by various studies (Sirsikar 1970; Baviskar 1980; Lele 1982; Chousalkar 1992, 1995; Vora and Palshikar 1996; Palshikar and Birmal 2004; Desai 2010). The subsequent degeneration of the cooperative sector as reflected in growing sickness of sugar cooperatives and solutions for reviving the same have also been adequately analysed by various committees as well as a battery of scholars (Gadgil 1974; Baviskar and Attwood 1987; Baviskar 2007; Godbole 2000).

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However, the issues, problems and plight of the sugar cane harvesting labourers have remained largely unaddressed in the scholarly discussions. Nonetheless, there are a few notable exceptions to this gap in the study of the sugar industry (Guru 1989, 1990, 1992; Jugale 1997, 2012; Bansode 2013). These studies have sought to focus on the problems that these factory workers and cane harvesters have to face. Building upon these scholarly works, the present study sought to unravel the migratory life of the cane harvesters by taking Beed district as a case study. The salience of the study stems from the fact that the proportion of cane harvesters is on the rise due to persistent draught in the state, which is forcing even those sections of the rural population to take up sugar cane harvesting, which were not involved in this work earlier. It has been estimated that in the current sugar season the sugar cane harvesting labour force has gone up by about 3 lakh (eSakal 2018). Another disturbing fact is the sizeable share of educated youth amongst these new entrants. Hence, the present study seeks to shed light on the issues being faced by this most vulnerable section, which is at the bottom-end of the pyramid of the sugar industry in the state.

The sugar industry thrives on the basis of three types of labour. One is the sugar cane producing farmers, who make the raw material available for the factories. Second, the sugar cane harvesters and transporters, who harvest the sugar cane and transport it to the factories. Third is the one who works on monthly wages at the sugar factories. Out of these three sections, the sugar cane harvesters are seasonally migrating unorganised labourers.

Out of 1.20 crore landowning farmers in Maharashtra, 30 lakh are sugar cane producers. The skilled, unskilled and contract labourers working at sugar factories on monthly wages are estimated to be around 2 lakh. But the most crucial components of the sugar industry are the cane harvester and cane transporter. They form the crucial component in the supply chain of cane to the factory, in the sense that the efficiency of sugar production directly depends on the time saved between the cane harvesting and transportation to the factory. The delay in transport would lead to inversion of cane juice, which in effect would adversely affect the sugar recovery rate.

Generally, the cane harvesting labourers can be classified into two categories: (i) Bullock-cart workers, (ii) truck or tractor based workers (also known as Toli workers).

The bullock-cart workers have to harvest as well as transport (including loading/unloading) the sugar cane. The truck/tractor-based workers just have to harvest the sugar cane, but they do not have to transport and download it. The bullock-cart labourers are mainly small farmers, whereas Toli workers are found to be landless labourers.

Along with the unorganised nature and lack of bargaining power of the sugar cane harvesters, another major factor adding to their vulnerability is the ambiguity about their exact number in the state. For the formulation of pro-labour policies it is imperative to ascertain the total number of sugar cane harvesters. However, the state does not have official statistics that could give their exact number. This is also the case with official data

on circular/seasonal migration even at the national level. Neither the national census data nor the National Sample Survey data provide us sufficient information regarding short term/seasonal/circulatory migration (Deshingkar and Farrington 2009).

In the absence of any reliable data, the number of sugar cane harvesting labour is roughly estimated to be around 10 to 12 lakh. But this estimate seems to be much smaller in the context where sugar cane harvesting is a labour-intensive activity. Due to the small size of operational sugar fields the mechanisation of cane harvesting could not be taken up on a larger scale. The late Gopinath Munde (former member of Parliament), who sought to organise the sugar cane harvesters in the state, had estimated their number to be around 16 lakh (ABP Maza Live, 8 October 2011). It can be inferred from this that the actual number of the sugar cane harvesters would be much higher than the rough estimate of 10 lakh–12 lakh.

The difficulty to produce the exact number of the harvesters is also linked to the ambiguous character of their identity. As has been observed in our fieldwork, there is no neat division of harvesters from sugar cane producing farmers. This overlap tends to enmesh their identity into ambiguity.

Undoubtedly, the sugar industry in Maharashtra offers four to five months of assured employment in the form of sugar cane harvesting and transport to more than 12 lakh poor farmers and landless labourers, especially from the arid and drought-prone areas of the state. But the sheer neglect and apathy at the level of the sugar factory owners and the political establishment towards this marginalised unorganised section at the bottom-end of the sugar industry has prompted the Unique Foundation, Pune to study their condition.

Sugar Cane Cutting Workers from Beed

The Unique Foundation, Pune had undertaken a study of the sugar cane cutting workers from Beed district, Maharashtra. The fieldwork for the study was conducted in 2015–16. The estimated number of workers involved in sugar cane cutting in the state is 12 lakh (Sugar Commissionerate 2018). The sugar cane harvesting workers comprise small landholding farmers and landless labourers, who come from 52 tehsils spread over 16 districts in the state. They are concentrated in various drought-prone districts and Marathwada region has many such districts. Especially Beed district is known to be a prominent supplier of sugar cane workers, where the number of sugar cane harvesters goes up to 5 lakh to 6 lakh. The sugar cane harvesters migrate to different parts of the state, especially the sugar belt in western Maharashtra. However, a trend of interstate migration to Karnataka has also been noted by the study.

The present study attempts to understand why a large number of labourers are migrating along with their families for such arduous work as sugar cane harvesting. It also tries to understand why schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which have been designed to provide employment in the village itself so as to reduce migration, are failing in the case of sugar cane cutting workers. In a bid to understand who are migrating, the study tries to analyse the social background of the migrants. Moreover,

in an attempt to unravel where they are migrating, the study strives to unearth the factors behind the phenomenon of interstate migration of these workers. And most importantly, it underscores the consequences of migration on the lives of these workers, their families and the source villages and how they are coping with migration. Thus, the present report focuses on the phenomenon and logic of migration of the sugar cane cutting workers with Beed district as a case study.

Beed: A Case Study

Sugar cane workers are found almost in all drought-prone districts of Maharashtra, but Beed is considered to be the hub due to the maximum number of people involved in this sector. In Beed district alone, it is estimated to be around 5 lakh to 6 lakh and during the present study, the respondents asserted that their number is much more than this.

According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Beed district is 25,85,049, out of which 81.96% reside in rural areas. Even though agriculture has been the primary occupation, the geographical position of this district, being surrounded by Balaghat hills, is not very conducive for agriculture. Hilly area, rain shadow region, inadequate irrigation facilities, small landholdings and persistent drought have seriously hampered agricultural productivity in the district. Beed district is industrially backward as well. There is a Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation in Beed, in which 75% factories remain closed. The unsustainable nature of agriculture and lack of alternative employment opportunities have been the prime factors behind large-scale migration for sugar cane cutting in Beed district.

Methodology

For the present study, six tehsils from the district and one village from every tehsil were chosen. The six villages—Karewadi (Parali tehsil), Vadvani (Vadvani tehsil), Imampur (Beed tehsil), Ladevadgaon (Kajj tehsil), Jategaon (Georai tehsil) and Nitrud (Majalgaon tehsil)—were chosen on the basis of different criteria such as varied geographical locations, caste compositions of the villages, varied socio-economic conditions and proximity to sugar factories, etc. As part of this study, a household survey of 2,092 families from these six villages was conducted.

This study was carried out with the combination of qualitative, quantitative and observation method. In-depth interviews of the workers, *mukadams* (jobbers) and office-bearers of the workers' organisations were taken, along with the household survey. Moreover, investigators visited the villages and workplaces and keenly observed the conditions of the workers.

Socio-economic Profile of the Sugar Cane Cutting Workers

Rupavate Committee (1993) has noted the prominent presence of Vanjaris in sugar cane harvesting and transportation in Maharashtra. The same fact was underlined by this study. Forty-three percent of the sugar cane workers in our study belong to Vanjari community. This proportion is much higher as compared to other communities. "Willingness to go wherever the work is available and capacity to work persistently" is

the important characteristic of this community, as pointed out during the interviews.

The Vanjari community from Beed, Ahmednagar and Nashik districts has been traditionally engaged in large proportion in sugar cane harvesting. According to some of the elders from Vanjaris, they are involved in sugar cane cutting since the establishment of the first sugar factory in Maharashtra and now the same occupation has been taken up by their children. In a way, caste solidarity acts as an important factor here, as the mukadams primarily belong to this community. Moreover, the efforts to organise these workers by Vanjari leaders, such as Babanrao Dhakane since the 1970s and Gopinath Munde since the 1990s, also add to their feeling of solidarity.

Apart from the Vanjaris, many other Nomadic/Denotified Tribes such as Banjara, Dhargar, Vadar, Paradhi, Bhamta Rajput, Kaikadi, etc, work as sugar cane labourers. Their proportion in the sugar cane harvesting is about 19% as per this study.

Vanjari, Banjara and Dhanagars own some land and hence these are known as peasant castes. However, the other castes such as Vadar, Paradhi, Bhamta Rajput and Kaikadi are completely landless living on the outskirts of the village. As they do not own any bullocks, they cannot work as bullock-cart workers and therefore they have to work as Toli workers. It has also been observed that the mukadams under whom they work as Toli workers also come from the same castes.

The present study found that 17% of the sugar cane cutting workers belong to Scheduled Castes (scs) (Dalits). In short, 80% of the sugar cane harvesters in our study of Beed district come from lower castes such as nomadic-denotified tribes and Dalit communities. As this study focuses on the Marathwada region, the number of workers from the Scheduled Tribes is negligible.

However, a rather curious element highlighted by this study is a significant proportion of Marathas (20%) among the sugar cane harvesting labourers. The study by Bansode (2013) has also noted a significant proportion of Marathas (25%) among the sugar cane harvesters. The growing agricultural distress has forced a section from this landowning "dominant caste" to enter into sugar cane harvesting labour. This fact points towards the glaring internal stratification within the community, a section of which still enjoys a considerable command over economy and polity of the state (Table 1).

Marginal farmers and landless labourers: According to this study, the proportion of small/marginal farmers and landless labourers is the highest among the sugar cane cutting workers. Their aggregate proportion is 95% (Table 2). In the six villages

Table 1: Caste-wise Proportion of Sugar Cane Cutting Workers

No	Caste/Caste Group	Percentage
1	Vanjari	43
2	Other Nomads and Denotified Tribes	19.6
3	Maratha	20
4	Dalits	17
5	Not disclosed	0.4
Total		100

Source: Household survey.

Table 2: The Proportion of the Land Owned by Sugar Cane Labourers

No	Proportion of the Land	Percentage
1	Landless	46.4
2	Small landholding (1–5 acres)	48.9
3	Middle landholding (6–15 acres)	3.4
4	Big landholding (more than 15 acres)	1.3
Total		100

Source: Household survey.

under study, 46% of the sugar cane cutting workers do not own any land and 49% workers are marginal farmers.

Women: According to the information shared by the interviewees during the study, women constitute almost 50% of the sugar cane harvesters. This trend has been visible across castes, including in the dominant Maratha caste. The system of employment in sugar cane cutting is such that a woman and a man (generally a husband and a wife) are together considered a single “koyata” (sickle) and the wages are given per koyata. This work structure itself makes women an invariably significant part of the sugar cane cutting workforce.

Migration: Seasonal migration comes across as an integral feature of this occupation. The labourers migrate from drought-affected areas to the irrigated areas such as western Maharashtra or Karnataka. From the villages under study, 74% families are into sugar cane harvesting and among them 67%

Table 3: Migration Timeline

Years of Migration	No of Families	Percentage
Since more than 30 years	65	4.2
Since 21 to 30 years	147	9.5
Since 16 to 20 years	209	13.5
Since 11 to 15 years	275	17.8
Since 6 to 10 years	458	29.6
Since 5 years	393	25.4
Total	1,547	100

Source: Household survey.

workers migrate outside Beed district. The proportion of migration has increased in the last 10 years (Table 3). The sugar cane cutting workers under study told that many families have been doing this work for the last three to four generations. Among the migrating workers, the proportion of the youth ranging from 15 year-old to 35 year-old is higher (74%), as this study reveals. It has been observed that even though migration for sugar cane cutting takes place during the months from October to April, a trend of not returning to the village after the end of the sugar season and instead work in cities or work at brick kilns, jaggery-making units or on the land of big farmers to earn a living, has also been noted.

Why Migration?

Agricultural crisis: It becomes evident that the growing agricultural crisis is at the root of large-scale migration, as agriculture is not in a position to provide livelihood for a large chunk of population dependent on it. The growing agricultural distress is a result of various factors such as neglect of the agriculture sector by the state and lack of comprehensive agricultural policy; capricious monsoons and inadequate irrigation facilities; rising input prices of agriculture-related commodities; the espousal of neo-liberal policies by the state; the process of integration with the international market resulting in volatile crop prices and failure of the state to ensure minimum support prices for agricultural products, etc. The agricultural crisis has been aggravated by the increasing fragmentation of landholding. Due to all these factors, agriculture cannot guarantee sustainable livelihood to a large section of the labouring population and hence, there is a growing tide of migration in search of other options that are available outside the natal place.

Failure of MGNREGS to retain workers in the villages: Providing basic employment opportunities within the village to all those seeking work and thereby limiting migration has been one of the motives behind the MGNREGS. However, this scheme has not been successful in restricting the flow of migration of the sugar cane harvesters. Some of the sugar cane workers, who were interviewed during the study, have noted that they used to work under this scheme in large numbers in the 1980s. Since then, the number of people opting for Employment Guarantee Scheme (EGS) work has been declining. This study found that 89% of the sugar cane cutting workers do not go for EGS work at all. Only 1.5% workers have an EGS job card. People prefer sugar cane harvesting than EGS. The following points elaborate the reasons behind their choice:

(i) Wages for sugar cane harvesting are higher as compared to the EGS. One day of labour under EGS can enable the worker to get ₹100–₹150 as wages, but for a day's work in sugar cane harvesting can provide more money in the range of ₹200–₹250. Outside Maharashtra, they can even earn around ₹300 a day.

(ii) There is no guarantee that EGS work will commence on time in the villages, as some have noted that it never begins in some villages while it starts very late in the case of some other villages.

(iii) In sugar cane harvesting, there is provision for advance payment from the mukadam, which is crucial for sustenance of the workers. EGS does not offer any such advance payment, because there is no provision for it in the law.

(iv) In EGS, there is guarantee of work only for 100 days, while for a sugar cane labourer there is guaranteed work till the sugar season lasts, which is a minimum of 180 days.

(v) In some villages, workers get lower wages than the officially determined rate by the EGS.

(vi) Although according to the rules, wages should be paid after every 15 days, in reality the wage payment is kept pending for many days. According to a report published in *India Spend*, pending payments, as a percentage of MGNREGA expenditure, rose from 39% to 56% between 2012–13 and 2016–17 (Kulkarni (2018)). Thus, failure of the MGNREGS to provide adequate and guaranteed livelihood opportunities within the village has induced migration of sugar cane harvesters.

Increasing Interstate Migration

In our survey of 2,092 families, 1,547 families have been migrating for sugar cane harvesting. Compared to the arid Marathwada region, more work for the sugar cane harvesters is available in the “sugar belt” of Pune, Kolhapur, Sangli, Satara, Ahmednagar and Solapur. Hence, it has been noted by many studies that cane workers from Beed and other parts of Marathwada have been migrating to western Maharashtra. But the present study highlights the increasing proportion of migration to the neighbouring Karnataka. As can be seen from Table 4, 49% of the workers are

Table 4: Migration to Which Place?

The Place of Migration	Number of Families	Proportion (%)
Within Beed district	151	9.8
Rest of Marathwada	103	6.7
Western Maharashtra	385	24.9
North Maharashtra	55	3.6
Rest of Maharashtra	94	6.1
Karnataka	759	49.1
Total	1,547	100

Source: Household survey.

migrating to Karnataka, thus making their number twofold than those who travel to western Maharashtra. In Karnataka, mainly Belgaum, Gulbarga, Dharwad, Bijapur, and Bidar districts are known for inward migration.

Large-scale Migration to Karnataka

Until 1990–95, the labourers from Marathwada used to migrate for sugar cane harvesting to western Maharashtra. But since the last two decades, there has been a growing number of sugar cane workers coming from some of the drought-prone areas in western Maharashtra itself, thus cutting into the demand for labourers from Marathwada. Hence, migration to neighbouring Karnataka has been given more preference by the mukadams and labourers.

In Karnataka, there are a total of 71 sugar cooperatives, out of which only 22 are in cooperative sector and remaining 49 are in the private sector. Sugar cane harvesters from Beed district migrate to Belgaum and Bagalkot districts from Karnataka in large numbers. There are total 37 sugar factories in these districts, out of which 13 are cooperative and 24 are in private factories. Other districts from Karnataka, which attract sugar cane harvesters from Beed district, are Bidar, Bellar and Bijapur. Out of the total of 20 sugar factories from these three districts, five are cooperative and 15 are private.

(a) The factories in Karnataka offer higher advance payment and wages as compared to Maharashtra. For example, they offer 75% as advance payment while factories in Maharashtra offer 50% as advance payment. The wages offered in Maharashtra are around ₹192 to ₹200 per tonne, whereas in Karnataka, they get around ₹300 per tonne.

(b) The sugar cane farmers in Karnataka give around ₹500 to ₹1,000 to the bullock-cart-based sugar cane harvesters for some extra expenditure. Hence these workers do not have to depend on the mukadam for petty expenses.

(c) Some workers and mukadams noted that Karnataka has more flexible rules and laws as compared to Maharashtra, which is beneficial for the labourers.

(d) It has also been observed that the mukadam gets a higher commission in Karnataka than Maharashtra, so he is also more interested in taking the labourers to Karnataka. As pointed out by Vishnupant Jaybhaye (secretary, Maharashtra sugar cane Harvesters and Contractors Organisation) the mukadams in Maharashtra get 18% commission, while they are offered 24% commission in Karnataka.

(e) The sugar factories in Karnataka are mostly located on the banks of Panchganga and Krishna rivers. As the sugar cane crop there gets ample river water, the sugar cane crop is heavier to weigh. Drip irrigation is also practised on a large scale. The higher weight of the sugar cane ensures more remuneration for the harvesters with the same amount of labour.

Ramifications of Migration

As has been noted by Mishra (2016), there is a new body of literature with reference to seasonal migration in India, suggesting that periodic migration opens up new opportunities for the poor to get out of the poverty trap. It emphasises the

beneficial outcomes of such migration in terms of reducing poverty in less developed, remote and ecologically fragile regions. The rural areas get the benefits of increased employment opportunities that are compatible with local agricultural cycle, inflow of remittances, asset creation and associated shifts in outlooks, knowledge and information flows as a result of outmigration. It is argued that even the urban areas enjoy the fruits of cheap labour, without bearing the social and economic cost of creating a labour force. This situation is portrayed as a win-win situation, in which benefits of globalisation percolate down to the rural areas and poor through the mediating influence of labour market. On the other hand, there is another view, which highlights the debilitating impact of migration, especially seasonal/circular migration, on the lives of migrants as well as the rural economy.

The present study has found out that the migration of sugar cane cutting workers to rest of Maharashtra and Karnataka is a distress-induced and coping migration and it just provides bare minimum livelihood to the migrant families. It neither promotes a positive economic change in terms of poverty reduction, nor does it guarantee any better future for the upcoming generations of these workers. The encumbering impact of migration becomes evident from the following observations.

Exploitation of migratory labour and debt-trap: Maharashtra is a leading sugar producing state in the country, but the workers who toil hard for sugar cane harvesting and transporting it to the factories do not get fair remuneration for their hard work. In Maharashtra, a woman and a man—jointly known as a *koyata* (sickle)—gets joint remuneration of around ₹200 for harvesting 1 tonne of sugar cane. Together they can harvest around 3 tonnes a day. Harvesting machine requires ₹400 as rent per tonne. It means that mechanised labour gets more remuneration than the human labour. In the neighbouring Karnataka, sugar cane cutting workers get up to ₹300 per tonne. Therefore, we observed an increasing tendency to migrate to Karnataka. However, even this amount is inadequate to meet their basic needs and hence these workers are pushed towards debt-trap.

Parmeshvar Katke, Pandhari Pawar, Vijay Batte belong to Jategaon, but they go to Chikodi in Belgaum for work. They say that before the work started they had borrowed ₹60,000 to ₹80,000 from the mukadam. The workers cut around 2 to 3 tonnes of sugar cane daily. They work for 12–13 hours a day.

Laxman Londhe, Ramesh Londhe and Parmeshwar Londhe who migrated from Ladegaon to Belgaum say that they have borrowed ₹70,000 to ₹75,000. They cut 3 tonnes of sugar cane daily and get ₹199 per tonne. But, as they were unable to repay the borrowings of the last year, they are still paying the interest for that amount. Although they work for 12 hours a day they cannot repay the borrowings.

The sugar cane harvesting work is seasonal in nature, so the workers have to borrow some advance payment from the mukadam in order to sustain throughout the year. It has been observed that 90% workers take advance payment. These borrowings make the sugar cane workers indebted as they do not get enough remuneration to pay off the debt and earn a decent

livelihood for the entire family. They get remuneration per koyata (that is, the unit of a female and a male sugar cane worker). But they migrate for work along with their children, siblings and other dependent family members. Hence, the remuneration falls short of even the basic needs of the family. Also, when the wages paid to a worker do not equal his borrowings, the balance is computed as debt on which he has to pay an interest to the mukadam. This borrowing and repayment turns into a never-ending vicious cycle. Lack of credit facilities from banks, societies and credit institutions forces them to borrow from private moneylenders. The present study has found that 67% of the workers are indebted. Sometimes the worker has to mortgage his belongings or agricultural land until the debt is repaid.

In all, the workers do not get adequate remuneration for their labour and the borrowings or advance amounts turn into a debt-trap, resulting in the dual exploitation of the labour of the sugar cane harvesting workers.

Poor working conditions and lack of basic facilities:

Instability and insecurity caused by opportunity-induced migration is internal to the very process of sugar cane harvesting. The sugar cane cutting workers stay in miserable conditions at their workplaces. They have to stay in makeshift shanty huts, as there is no provision of pukka houses for them within any factory campus. The only notable exception being the Hutatmta Cooperative sugar factory at Walwa in Sangli district.

The Hutatmta Kisan Ahir Sugar Factory, Walwa, Sangli is an Exemplary Effort

The sugar factory was established in 1984 by Nagnathanna Nayakawadi at Walwa in Sangli district and has been providing very good facilities for sugar cane cutting workers. They have made decent provision for accommodation, free meals, drinking water, electricity, compensation for accident, etc, for the cane cutting workers. Since November 1986, the factory has voluntarily implemented a very important decision of giving wages according to the price index. These facilities which were started by the late Nagnathanna Naikwadi continue to exist till today. If other factories also decide to follow on these footsteps, it would lead to some betterment in the lives of sugar cane harvesters.

The stay at one harvesting site is maximum of one month, as has been informed by the cane workers. The frequency of shifting can go up to 24 times during one sugar season (six to seven months). However, those workers who work with the help of bullock carts stay at one place provided by the sugar factories. They remain deprived of basic facilities such as drinking water at the workplaces. When they go to any sugar cane farm they have to fetch drinking water from the rivers, wells, borewells or canals. It was noticed during the study that 85% of the labourers do not have access to potable drinking water. The proportion of children and elders getting ill due to lack of pure drinking water and unavailability of toilets is high.

It has been widely observed during the present study that migratory workers do not get any social security benefits from the factories, neither do they get any cover in the case of emergencies or accidents. The worker has to pay from his own pocket in the case of even serious injuries. The crass apathy of the factories towards the cane workers also gets reflected in their attitude towards the bullocks, which are used for the arduous task of sugar cane transportation. The tendency to overload the bullock-carts hampers the overall health of the

bullocks. In the absence of proper veterinary facilities from the factories, the bullock-cart-based workers are left on their own.

Neither the government nor the sugar factories are keen on providing basic health facilities or services to these poor migrant workers, despite working conditions having an adverse impact on their health. Therefore, access to health facilities, at least provision of a well-equipped mobile ambulance with trained nurses and doctors by the sugar factories, has been a long pending demand by the sugar cane workers' organisations, which still remains unaddressed.

Gender issue: Women are in equal proportion to men in the sugar cane cutting workforce. Technically speaking, there is "equal pay for equal work" as far as sugar cane cutting is concerned. A woman and a man (generally a husband and a wife) are together considered a single labouring unit, which is called "koyata" in Marathi and it is not the individual labour but this unit that is considered for the payment of wages. However, the women bear the double burden of domestic work as well as the physical labour on the field. They have to wake up very early and take care of household chores such as cleaning of house, fetching water, cooking, and then proceed to harvest cane. Women cannot rest even after coming back home from the drudgery of the whole day, as they again have to take care of the children, cook and clean. This part of her labour is not accounted for in her wages, which is actually a pan-India phenomenon in the case of working women. Moreover, the ultimate control over the earned wages and the right to spend remains with the man. Hence "equality of wages" remains an illusion. Due to their double hardships coupled with lack of rest and affordable medical facilities, women face severe health issues. They also suffer from physical and sexual abuse. The issues of women have been persistently neglected even by sugar cane workers' organisations.

Education: Although the government has declared the right to education as a fundamental right, the realisation of this right is still a far cry from the children of sugar cane harvesting workers. Around 54% of the sugar cane workers are illiterate (Table 5, p 42). So, there is lack of awareness about the importance of education among them. Many children have to go to the farms with their parents to collect the litter. Poverty-stricken parents think that taking help of children in their work is more rewarding than educating them. Gender discrimination is also at work here, as generally the boys get the opportunity to at least matriculate, but girls from the age of seven–eight years have to look after the domestic work and also take care of their younger siblings. Due to the migratory nature of their work, the question of education of the children of sugar cane cutting workers has become really grave. Presently, the government has been dealing with this issue at two levels:

(i) The government has instructed that every district council should start a Sakhar Shala, that is, a school for children of the sugar cane labourers in the campuses of the factories with the help of management. But, such schools are being run only at a few places. At some places such schools were started but they

are now either closed or in a state of disarray with no facilities. The existing schools are facing serious issues such as lack of proper classrooms, inadequate governmental grants, and no regular salaries for teachers. Apathy of the government is exacerbated by unconcern of the factory owners.

(ii) Hostel scheme (residential schools) was initiated with the objective of preventing the migration of children with their parents and facilitating the education of these children in their villages. In Beed district, 360 residential schools were started in 2013. But these schools closed down due to reduction in the grant and other facilities. The spread of education among these children can bring in better job opportunities for the next generation of the sugar cane cutting workers. There are some positive examples where education has helped them to move beyond sugar cane cutting.

My brother has done PhD and is doing a good job and hence our family is proud of him. My children are inspired by him and are getting educated. I have stopped going for sugar cane cutting since last two years. Similarly those families where some members have got educated and are doing jobs elsewhere are getting out of this occupation gradually.

— Navnath Gholawe, Mundhewadi

The above account seems to be exceptional cases as most of the children of the sugar cane cutting workers have been forced to undertake the same occupation due to lack of adequate education facilities for them.

Impact on the source villages: The migration of sugar cane harvesters affects the rural life in multiple ways. As the younger population from the villages leave for work, old women and men, ailing and handicapped family members are left to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the house. As the sugar cane harvesting season coincides with the rabi season, the migratory workers have to assign the harvesting of the rabi crops to somebody else. This seems to be the case in about 60% to 70% villages under study, as per the observations shared during the interviews. This leads to neglect of their rabi crops further increasing their economic burden. Shops, transportation and many other economic as well as social transactions in the village come to a standstill. Weekly markets are deserted, commercial turnover slackens, the implementation of governmental schemes which is already

lackadaisical gets completely stalled. The EGS finds no takers, the allotted ration to the migrated labourer family is openly sold in the black market. The vibrant village turns gloomy and desolate.

The proportion of migration from the villages under study ranges from 50% to about 89%.

Table 5: Educational Profile of Sugar Cane Harvesters

No	Level of Education	Percentage
1	Illiterate	53.6
2	Primary	11.7
3	Secondary	17.9
4	10th	7.9
5	12th	6.3
6	Graduation	1.9
7	Post-graduation	0.7
8	Total	100

Source: Household survey.

Karewadi noted 50% migration, while Imampur has shown the highest proportion of migration, that is, 88.9% (Table 6). The loss of vibrant village becomes all the more glaring in villages having higher proportion of migrant population.

Alienation among the workers: The migratory workers have to remain out of their village for about six–seven months in a year, which not only hampers the transactions in the village but also cuts off the workers from their sociocultural milieu, thus creating a feeling of alienation among them. They get isolated from the festivals/cultural exchanges/yatras/celebrations in the village, which further reinforces their estrangement. While being uprooted from their own soil, they have to toil in an alien land, where there is hardly any sociocultural bonding or sense of belongingness. The loss of sense of community and lack of social support intensifies their economic and physical exploitation.

Summing Up

The present study has brought to the fore some paradoxical processes. At one level, there seems to be reinforcement of the link between caste and occupation, as found in the case of Vanjaris, who continue to be the largest group involved in the arduous work of sugar cane cutting. Similarly, significant presence of other lower castes such as Banjaras and scs in sugar cane harvesting also points towards the perpetuation of caste inequalities. Lack of alternative livelihood and opportunities for education force the lower castes to remain in the same toilsome occupation for generations. However, on the other hand, there are new entrants to the labour force in sugar harvesting activities in the form of Marathas. This points towards the crisis of the development trajectory in general and that of agriculture in particular, which has compelled the poor sections from the dominant caste Marathas to opt for sugar cane harvesting, which was considered to be the livelihood option only for the lower castes.

Thus, a keen look at the socio-economic profile of the sugar cane harvesters underscores the tendency of capitalism in India (which inherently leads to uneven/imbalanced regional development) to perpetuate traditional caste hierarchies as well as gender inequalities, while also giving rise to newer inequalities. This can be established from the fact that around 80% of the sugar cane harvesters come from the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, which also happen to be the most marginalised section in terms of landowning. It also reflects the failure of the development trajectory of the state, 70 years after independence.

The gender aspect of the exploitation of the sugar cane workers has also been highlighted by the study, as women have to shoulder the double burden of sugar cutting with their husbands on the field and domestic work. The lack of health facilities, dearth of any kind of social security net owing to unorganised nature of employment and the looming risk of sexual assault make their position all the more precarious.

Table 6: Village-wise Proportion of Migrants

No	Villages	Percentage of Migration
1	Karewadi	50
2	Ladevadgaon	61.7
3	Vadavani	76.2
4	Nitrud	83.7
5	Jategaon	84.1
6	Imampur	88.9

Source: Household survey.

Moreover, the debilitating implications of migration on the lives of the workers, their families, especially the children and elders as well as on the sociocultural and economic life in the source villages have been brought to fore by the study. The uprooted, isolated and alienated life of the workers exposes the grim reality of migration.

The phenomenon of migration studied here makes it clear that the seasonal migration of the sugar cane workers contributes neither to reduction of poverty among the workers, nor to the lessening of the burden on agriculture by integrating this labour force into the industrial sector. Despite lack of basic facilities, absence of accident cover, negligence of health and education, the sugar cane workers still continue to engage in this arduous labour, simply because, in the face of agricultural distress and dearth of alternate employment opportunities in the village, this is the only way out for them to sustain. There does not seem to be any reduction in their poverty or improvement of their economic conditions. The present study of Beed district found that 53% of the sugar cane cutting workers stay in kaccha houses. Eleven percent of the workers stay in mud houses with thatched roof. In all of this, the only assuring finding observed by this study is that 94% of sugar cane cutting workers are staying in their own homes and not rented ones, though 48% of the respondents were living in homes that had only a single room. This testifies the fact that migration for sugar cane cutting has not helped them better their economic status.

Neither have these workers been assimilated as part of sugar industry because the sugar factories have always refused to accept them as their workers. The workers have been continuously demanding that they be recognised as “workers of the factory,” but the factory owners have never accepted this demand. Even the Maharashtra State Federation of

Co-operative Sugar Factories (Sakhar Sangh) has continued to reiterate the position that the sugar cane harvesting and transporting workers are workers of the sugar cane producing farmers, and not of the factories. In reality, it is the factories, which call the cane workers through the mukadams, which decide on whose farm the workers will go and harvest the cane, which get the harvested cane weighed at the factory’s weighing scale and which pay the workers through the mukadams accordingly. The sugar cane producing farmers get the sugar cane harvested from the workers on their own very rarely and that is known as “private harvesting.” Therefore, it is a well-established fact that the sugar cane harvesters are the workers of the sugar factories. But the factories deny this out of the fear of having to grant them all the benefits of labour laws if they recognise them to be their workers. Hence, they pretend that they are workers of the farmers or mukadams. According to labour laws and industrial court, sugar cane harvesting and transporting workers are the workers of sugar factories. In the case against Kolhapur Sugar Mill filed by the concerned trade unions, the industrial court had ruled (1986) that “Mumbai Industrial Relations Act, 1946” applies to sugar cane workers. Similar decision has been given in the case of six sugar factories in Kopergaon taluka, Ahmednagar district versus the labour unions. The industrial court has also ruled that the sugar cane harvesting workers be given wages and other facilities similar to those that are availed of by sugar factory workers. But the Commissionate of Sugar and sugar factories are not ready to abide by these decisions. Thus, it becomes clear that migration of the sugar cane harvesters does not amount to a positive step in the direction of assimilation of labourers in the industrial economy, as these workers are not being given the status of industrial workers.

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