

# MIGRANT WORKERS OF SUGAR INDUSTRY IN MAHARASHTRA

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*Sugar industry is mostly dependent on unorganised farm sector, almost known as cane harvesters and transport workers. These workers are migrating from drought zone of Maharashtra, particularly from Latur, Beed, Barshi and Parbhani districts of the state. Since, last season i.e. 2009-10, the rate of migration is declining due to the development activities in the original places and better monsoon too at the original places of migrants. Consequently, the harvesting was delayed in the last season. The cane crushing was continued even after its less recovery in the cane up to May end. The rates of wages are also not revised since last five year. The agitations are held occasionally for the demand of hike in their wages. During the season (2010-11) the problem is further becoming momentous, because of remunerative price paid for sugarcane during the last season. Consequently, the area under cane plantation has increased. Migration depends on the degree of push factors in drought districts of the Maharashtra state and the pull factors available in the sugarcane belt. This paper illustrates the role of migration in the development of the sugar sector in the western Maharashtra. The inference caused brings vital challenge to the migration models.*

**Keyword:** Harvest and transport workers, Sugar industry, Migration, Farm sector workers, Tripartite agreement.

## INTRODUCTION

Sugar industry in Maharashtra is one of the organised industries in rural area. The sugar sector has changed the agricultural life styles and outlook of agricultural development. Sugar industry is totally dependent on sugarcane economy. Sugarcane economy has a more than hundred years of history in Maharashtra. It has changed the socio-economic and political ethos of the rural life. It brings income of more than 23,000 crores in the form of sugarcane price. Sugar industry is 2<sup>nd</sup> largest industry after cotton and sugarcane is the largest crop grown in western Maharashtra after paddy and soya. Half of soya area in Maharashtra belongs to sugarcane area, which is alternative crop. More than 7.5% of rural population in India is engaged in sugarcane cultivation, along with 50 million cane growers and 5 million women workers engaged in the industry.

Sugar industry is mostly dependent on unorganised farm sector, almost known as cane harvesters and transport workers. These workers are migrating from drought zone of Maharashtra, particularly from Latur, Beed, Barshi and Parbhani districts of the state. Since, last season i.e. 2009-10, the rate of migration is declining due to the development activities in the original places and better monsoon too at the original places of migrants. Consequently, the harvesting was delayed in the last season. The cane crushing was continued even after its less recovery in the cane up to May end. The rates of wages are also not revised since last five year. The agitations are held occasionally for the demand of hike in their wages. During the season (2010-11) the problem is further becoming momentous, because of remunerative price paid for sugarcane during the last season. Consequently, the area under cane plantation has increased. Migration depends on the degree of push factors in drought districts of the Maharashtra state and the pull factors available in the sugarcane belt. This paper illustrates the role of migration in the development of the sugar sector in the western Maharashtra. The inference caused brings vital challenge to the migration models.

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## **Objectives of the Study**

Following are the main objectives of the study.

- 1) To estimate the migrant sugarcane harvest workers and bullock-cart workers in Sangli and Kolhapur districts during the sugar season comprising from October to April for the season 2010-11.
- 2) To study the wage rates of the migrant workers.
- 3) To study the changing industrial relations of the migrant workers in sugar factories and the role of state government.

The sugar industry in western Maharashtra is facing the problem of shortage of harvest and transport workers since the last two sugar seasons. There are various reasons of migration like; pull and push factors existing in the original and the place of work. The sustainable livelihood of these workers is totally disturbed due to institutional reasons in the original and work places. This brings threat to the sugar industry vis-à-vis sugarcane economy of Western Maharashtra.

## **Types of Migrant Workers**

Generally, there are two types of migrant workers viz cane harvester and cane transporters, which includes, bullock carts, tractors and truck or lorries, etc. For the convenience they can be categorised in to; (a) direct centre harvest workers, linked to tractors and trucks. These workers are also known as head centred workers as they are carrying the cane loads on their heads from farm to the vehicle stationed nearby the farm. These workers are the contract workers of the vehicle owners. The contractors make a contract for the supply of the harvest workers during the sugar season. The wages are fixed by the sugar factories' federation on tripartite agreements and (b) hired helping workers associated with the bullock cart owners engaged in assisting the nourishment of the bullocks and owners' households and their child rearing; mostly women and child workers and also for assisting the services to the dairy animals etc. The hiring rates are fixed by the transports / bullock cart workers. Mostly, these rates are fixed on the basis of their original places.

Now-a-days group of workers purchases or hires the vehicles (mostly the tractors) from its owners and make a contract with the sugar factories to supply the sugarcane from farm to factory.

## **Rate of Migration**

The drought conditions in 1970s were the main push factors for the migration from drought zone to sugarcane belt in Maharashtra. On an average every sugar factory had a migrated the cane centred harvest workers to the tune of 2373 workers during the season. The number of bullock carts migrated was 664 with cart workers of 2 each in 1970-71. The average growth rate of these averages is continuously increasing during the corresponding period. (See Table 1)

The average number of HCW in each sugar factory was 4163 and the average number of bullock carts migrated to each sugar factory was 738 in 1990-91 seasons. This number has decelerating from 2001-02. This fall of migration is due to the growth (inclusive) activities in drought zone of the state and good monsoon during the period.

The aggregate cane plantation since last two years has phenomenally increased due to remunerative price for sugarcane.

**Table No. 1 : Average Migration of Head-Centred Workers and Bullock Carts**

Year	Average migration of workers (%)	Migrated bullock carts
1971-72	3676	758
1975-76	3336	829
1980-81	3469	637
1985-86	394	503
1990-91	4163	738
1-95-96	4218	802
2000-01	4308	849
2005-06	3809	727
2009-10	3150	660

Source: Field data of 25 sugar factories average from 1971-72 to 1990-91 (see Jugale V. B., ISLE Vol.38, No.4, 1995) and The data from 1995-96 related to the cooperative sugar factories in Kolhapur and Sangli districts – Author's survey.

Table No. 2 indicate the position of estimated migration in Kolhapur and Sangli district during the sugar season 2010-11. This kind of estimation helps the sugar factories to plan for sugarcane harvesting period to the season.

### Shortage of Workers

The sugarcane crushing capacity of the sugar factories in Sangli and Kolhapur is around 1.15 thousand tonnes per day. During the season 2010-11, the total sugar season available in number of days is around 180 days. The overall sugarcane crushing during the season is estimated to 206.91 lakh tonnes.

The expected sugarcane production is estimated to 271.16 lakh tonnes of sugarcane during the sugar season 2010-11. The cane available for sugar production is estimated to 222.29 lakh tonnes. Consequently, the surplus of 15.38 lakh tonnes of sugarcane may remain uncrushed. There is need to increase sugar season by 14-15 days, whose sugar recovery during the period remains very less. Consequently, it renders a loss of 20 to 25 Kg of sugar for a tone of sugarcane. This loss is being borne by the sugar factories. The farmers are paid the sugarcane price on the basis of weight not on sugar recovery.

When we divide this data to that of the available migrant work force, it is estimated that for the season of 180 days, each worker has to harvest and transport the sugarcane at the rate of 0.87 tonnes per day. This is a very difficult on the part of the workers and crushing of sugarcane to a sugar factory. The industry has to face the problem of shortage of workers to the tune of 9850 workers in two districts.

The rate of migration has come down due to the following weak push factors.

- 1) Better monsoon in drought zones of Maharashtra.
- 2) Development activities in the zone by way of integrated watershed development and infrastructural development activities.
- 3) Higher literacy rate in the drought zone. The workforce has diverted to industrial sector.

- 4) Rise in local wages.
- 5) Employment Guarantee Scheme in the drought area.
- 6) Educational incentives to the children at their original places motivated the workers to remain in their original places.

**Table No. 2 : No. of Contracts Signed as on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2010**

**Kolhapur District**

Sr. No.	Name of factory	Contracts with			No. of Workers associated to	
		Bullock carts	Tractors	Trucks/Lorries	Tractors	Trucks/Lorries
1	Warana	200	343	27	5145	405
2	Shri Datt Aasurle	397	180	75	2160	900
3	Bhogavati Parite	200	250	70	3500	1400
4	Dudhganga Bidri	450	270	80	3280	1440
5	K.Kasari Kuditre	260	167	74	2004	1036
6	A.N.Gadhinglaj	500	175	50	2625	600
7	Chh.Rajaram K.Bavada	721	448	85	1896	1020
8	D.Y.Patil	0	146	178	1575	2340
9	Gaikwad Sonvade	10	22	187	220	1870
10	Sharad Narande	600	164	61	1485	600
11	S.Mandlik Hamidwada	720	185	320	2940	600
12	I.Gandhi Tambale	0	0	200	0	4000
13	D.R.K.Panchganga	1110	234	73	4300	1200
14	Shri Datt Shirol	500	398	67	3980	670
15	Doulat Halkarni	70	45	23	900	460
16	Jawahar Hupri	1008	79	405	6000	950
17	Ch. Shahu Kagal	563	181	34	2800	980
18	Aajra Shet Gavase	20	140	74	2100	1480
19	Gurudatt Company	625	227	10	5448	240
20	Nalawade Sugars Co.	200	45	155	900	2790
21	Hemras Tech Rajgoli	0	200	50	4000	800
<b>Kolhapur Total</b>		<b>8,150</b>	<b>3,900</b>	<b>2,298</b>	<b>57,258</b>	<b>25,481</b>

**Sangli District**

Sr. No.	Name of factory	Contracts with			No. of Workers associated to	
		Bullock carts	Tractors	Trucks/Lorries	Tractors	Trucks/Lorries
1	Vasantdada Sangli	1188	221	38	3315	456
2	Vishwas Chikhli	200	138	35	1380	350
3	R.B.Patil Sakhrale	1100	473	28	0	0
4	Sarvoday Karandvadi	58	203	26	0	0
5	Hutatma Ahir	787	201	25	2211	250
6	Manganga Aatpadi	70	60	100	1400	2000
7	Mahakali K.Mahakal	100	45	145	500	1450
8	Sonhira Vangi	500	140	70	1400	700
9	Kranti Kundal	1170	196	22	3920	440
10	M.Shinde/Renuka Co	180	275	50	1000	6600
11	Dograi / Ken Agro Co.	437	118	48	1180	480
12	Tasgao Turchi	--	-	-	-	-
13	Yashvant Nagevadi	-	-	-	-	-
14	R.V.Dafale Jat	-	-	-	-	-
15	Ninaidevi Kokarud	50	80	47	1360	564
<b>Sangli Total</b>		<b>5,840</b>	<b>2,150</b>	<b>634</b>	<b>17,666</b>	<b>13,290</b>

Following are some of the weak pull factors for the migration of the workers at the work places.

- 1) Low wages paid to the harvest workers. The agitations are held recently. The workers' union has cautioned the industry not to start the crushing unless their wages are revised. But due to their weak impact this slogan aborted. There is a possibility of extending the sugar season even during the low recovery period i.e. March, April. Consequently the state treasury will be burdened by addition compensation to the farmers.
- 2) Due to rise in temperature, the workers are reluctant to harvest the cane. The workforce at such situations goes back to their original places.
- 3) Hazardous sustainable livelihood at the destinations.
- 4) Rise in the prices of bullocks, rise in the costs of sicknesses of the bullocks and rise in the prices of fodder. etc.

## **MIGRANT WORKERS AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS**

The industrial relations of the farm sector workers can be classified into two phases. In the first phase, the practice of appointing through labour brokers was adopted by almost all private and co-operative sugar factories. In the second phase, the appointment of farm sector workers (migrant workers) is done through labour societies, trusts and other types of institutions, which are specially established by the factory management. This change took place due to the verdicts of the Labour Court, Industrial Court, High Court and Supreme Court (See a note below). According to the BIR Act, 1946 Section 3 (13), the farm sector workers are the employees of the sugar factories. But the factory sector refuses to accept it on the grounds that these workers are 'Mazdoors' (temporary and seasonal) and not the 'Kamagars' (permanent employees). This verdict indirectly compelled the factory management to go for such trusts and societies so that they (workers) will be treated as employees of the trust and societies and not the sugar factories. Thereby the direct link of factory management with farm sector workers is avoided.

Some co-operative sugar factories have changed their bye-law. The earlier bye-laws state that, cane harvesting and transporting is the duty of the factory management. Now the new bye-law reads that cane harvesting and transporting is the duty of the cane field owners, and not the sugar factories.

Some sugar factories have stated to make a contract with the bullock cart owners and vehicle owners, whereby cane harvesting and transporting to factory gate becomes the exclusive duty of the vehicle owners. The cane fields to be harvested are allocated to each vehicle owner by the factory and not to the workers directly. Similarly, the payment of harvesting and transport charges is paid to the vehicle owners by the sugar factories and not directly to the workers. Therefore, most of contractors and supervisors (leaders of workers' team (10)) who is known as *Mukadama* become the vehicle owners. Due to easy loan facility with the factory guarantee, the vehicles can be brought on instalment basis.

The farm sector workers on their part basically concentrate on the increase in their wage rates i.e. cane harvesting rates and transport rates. They are not interested in whether they are the seasonal employees of the industry (i.e. the factory sector) or not. The factory sector workers and their trade unions have bothered to explore the fact that the factory sector workers are the employees of sugar factories according to the BIR Act, 1946. They have organised a few strikes. But no farm sector workers are really interested in either the BIR Act, 1946 or the verdicts of different courts due to their migratory and seasonal nature.

### **Wage Negotiations**

The severe droughts of 1972-73 propelled these workers to migrate towards the sugarcane belt for survival of their life and survival of their livestock. The harvesting and transport rate (fixed in 1968) prevailing during that period were Rs.4.20 per tonne for cane harvesting to be paid to the HCW and Rs.3.20 per tonne for the first mile with Rs.0.75 for every additional mile of cane transport through bullock cart.

The factory sector workers' representatives were very aggressive in implementing the wage revisions of farm sector workers in the process of sorting out their own problems. This at last compelled the Government to make a Wage Award on November 26, 1979, and the wages were revised. Since then the declaration of Awards once in three years is a routine practice. Table 3 illustrates the rates of cane-cutting and cane transport since 1979.

A decision was made on the 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1979 to authorise the Chief Minister and Labour Minister to declare the wage rate for 1978-79 season. Accordingly on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1980 the rates were declared and were made applicable from April 1977-78 to the corresponding three crushing seasons. The wage differences if any were agreed to be paid before January 1981 in the presence of trade union leaders concerned so as to avoid paltry payments.

Meanwhile as decided in the Award of 30<sup>th</sup> October, 1980, a Committee under the Chairmanship of S. B. Patil was appointed to overview the unsettled problems of all sugar workers (farm and factory). The Committee's recommendations concerning to the farm sector workers were:

**Table No. 3 : Rate of Cane-Harvesting and Transport (Rs.)**

Categories of workers	1992-93 to 1994-95	2000 to 2005	2009 to 2010
1. Direct Bullock cart Workers		} 36 % increase Cane harvest- ing rate was Rs. 111 per tonne of sugarcane	} 19 % interim increase Cane harvest- ing rate was Rs. 133 per tonne of sugarcane
a. Cane Cutting	36.00		
b. Cane transporting up to 1 km	17.08		
c. Rate for each extra 1 km of cane transport	3.66		
2. HCWs	42.09		
3. TCWs	46.97		

- i) A fresh list of all farm sector workers should be prepared by a 'Mukadams' (a supervisor or head of a workers' team) every fortnight,
- ii) Factory management should look into the problems of the farm sector workers,
- iii) The Government should grant financial assistance for construction of roads, and
- iv) The factory management should look into the provision of all basic amenities for the farm sector workers.

The wage rates fixed in October, 1980 continued up to the end of 1985. Following the two strikes of 1980 and 1986, on September 22, 1987 another Award was signed. New wage rates were introduced for crushing seasons from 1986-87 to 1988-89. Two other important decisions were taken in this award, viz.

- i) 50 per cent of leafy green head of the sugarcane stalk was allowed to be used by the workers and the remaining 50 per cent should be retained by the field owners, and
- ii) A committee headed by Dadasaheb Rupwate was appointed to overview the all round problems of the workers.

The Rupwate Committee could only submit the revised wage rates in terms of an Interim Report on 28th June 1990. No final report was submitted by the Committee because of the non-consensus among the Committee members to accept the farm sector workers as the employees of the sugar industry as per the verdict of different Courts according to the BIR Act, 1946.

The current prevailing wage rates were fixed in 2005-06. The period of this award ended in 2008. The next Award was expected to be declared at the beginning of the 2010-11 seasons. Meanwhile an interim increase of 19% was declared, which is not accepted by the workers.

On an average a two workers of bullock cart can harvest one tonne of sugarcane every day. But the capacity of work of the workforce is not fully utilised due to faulty harvesting schedules of the sugar factories. Every worker is getting half of the work done every day as compared to his working capacity.

## **Opera of Contract Labour**

Labour contractors and sugar factories there is a link of their operations. Labour contractors with the team of their workers register the labour society or trust. The society office moves along with the contractors. Contractors have again chain of links e.g. big contractors, small contractors, vehicle owner cum labour contractors, bullock cart contractors, etc.

The contractors or labour brokers have a direct personal interest in maintaining this workforce. Most of them have developed this as a profession. Commission is the major source of their income (normally 10 to 15 per cent of the earnings). The labour brokers have good relations with the factory management and vehicle owners. Some labour brokers even keep a fleet of vehicles in the changing scenario of industrial relations. The head gang man known as Mukadams is the closest friend of the labour brokers. This gang man keeps the harvesters under his control. He is paid for his service a commission from the earnings of harvester workers. The advances ranging from Rs.5 to 7 thousand per worker associated with truck and tractors and Rs. 8 to 10 thousand to a bullock cart owners are paid by the labour contractors through Mukadams. They charge certain (which is not institutional rate of interest) rate of interest on such advances. However, this depends on the will of the labour brokers. In some cases the rate of interest is higher than that of the commercial banks. The rate of interest varies from broker to broker. Indebtedness in the form of advances is indirectly binding on the workers to response for the contractor's agreement for cane harvesting, and perpetuates their vulnerability and submission. Paying such advances keeps the brokers very safe, because thereby the workers' migration towards destination is confirmed. Further, there have been unaccountable frauds made by contractors and Mukadams at the time of distribution of wage differences dues for periodic wage revisions.

## **Exploitation of Farm Sector Workers**

The exploitation of these workers can be further stated as follows:

- 1) No bonus is paid and no provident fund is contributed. There are no social security measures. No schooling facility is made available to the children of these workers;
- 2) The workers have no convenient, sufficient and protective shelter at their camps. They have to decamp frequently. Any damages of the material given by the sugar factory are recovered after the season;
- 3) The hours of work are not fixed and definite. There is no provision of vacation. There is no payment during the disturbances in the working of the sugar factory;
- 4) Cane harvesting, loading and transporting requires sufficient good health and experience in the job, but the workers face ill-health because of poverty and backwardness. They undergo pains, stains, irritations, wounds and many other physical ailments for which no protection is provided;
- 5) The bullock cart workers have to face the problems of health of bullocks, traffic troubles and damages of bullock carts, etc. Further, the hiring charges on tyre carts have to be paid even if the cart waiting for unloads. A couple of hours go waste in waiting for weighing and unloading;
- 6) There is no immediate implementation of the Awards; and
- 7) There is no compensation for death of bullocks, damaged carts, huts catching fire, etc. However, it depends upon the contractor's links with sugar factories.

## **Exploitation of the Cane Farmers by Workers**

The shortage of workers for harvesting and transporting of the cane from field to the factory leads to exploitation of cane farmers. These H and T workers in farm exploits the farmers by charging additional

cane harvesting charges at the rate of Rs.100 to Rs. 150 per tonne additional other than the factory payment for the work during the shortage of workforce (Author's survey during 2009-10 seasons). Besides, the farmers were paid extra Rs.50-100 per vehicle as driver's allowances during 2009-10 seasons. This has now become a routine procedure in the cane belt. If any trouble takes place to the lorry or tractor in their transition, the whole cost of it has to be borne by the cane growers. The additional charge for refilling the scattered cane in a lorry or tractor ranges from Rs 500 to 1000. The vim and vigour of the workers has to be sustained by the cane growers.

### **Role of Trade Union**

The foundation of the trade union movement in sugar industry was laid during 1936-1950. There were 12 private sugar factories when the Communist Part and other leftist fronts had begun to organise the trade union movement and agitate for the welfare of the sugar workers. Vinayakrao Mahadev Bhuskute of Haregaon (Shrirampur taluka) was the first to lead the agitation in 1936 against the Belapur Sugar Company. In 1946-47 the Kolhapur Mill workers under the leadership of Santaram Patil led an agitation of sugar workers. During the same period a strike was organised by Madhukar Bhise at Phaltan. In 1946, the Communist Part leaders of Ahmednagar district like D B Kulkarni, Vasantrao Tulphule, Dhole, and Dhumane initiated organising the workers of Godavari Sugar Mills, Sakharwadi and Laxmiwadi and Changdev Sugar Mills. The socialist leader Gangadharro Ogale began to reorganise the trade union of sugar workers in Shrirampur taluka in 1944. Ravasaheb and Achutrao Patwardhan, with the help of Kishor Pawar, organised a trade union movement in Kopergaon taluka in 1946. The Ravalgaon agitation, Tilak Nagar strike, Belwandi *gherao*, Killari strikes, Vasantdada Kalvan strike, and Terna strike are some of the examples of unit level role of trade unionisation. In 1980 and 1986 the State level strikes were declared by the factory sector trade unions as pointed out earlier and because of this the farm sector workers have gained a bit. The trade unions have knocked the doors of Judiciary and decisions and verdicts of which are in favour of the trade union. But the workers are still not united. However, some efforts have been made by some of the trade unions at the factory level. They are successful in their endeavours. The leaders like Subhash Jadhav and Anil Chougule have set their unionism in Bhogavati Sugar Factory with the help of unionisation of local cane harvesters and transport workers. They do not have any occasion of taking the help of migrants. The unemployed youth of Konkan region is being used for the farm sector activities.

### **CONCLUSION**

Following are the persistent causes of non-unionisation of the farm sector workers in the region.

- 1) They are seasonal migrant workers;
- 2) They are handled through labour brokers or contractors;
- 3) They always change the sugar factories as their work places;
- 4) Indebtedness, ignorance and illiteracy overwhelm them;
- 5) They are neglected by all user agencies and organisations; and
- 6) They need more orientation to get united.

Trade unionisation is possible through labour brokers, but labour brokers are not interested to do so. They can only initiate unionisation for wage rate hikes. Two notable strikes in 1980 and 1986 were successful, because of the initiative of the labour brokers. Consequently, the unionisation of these workers is a real challenge indeed, for any organising agency.

The major cause of migration is local economic distress caused by drought prone area and the drought conditions during the season. Some pull and push factors have weakened the migration rate. The industry is in turbulence no doubt but it has caused the farmers' distress too.

## Notes

1. Kolhapur Sugar Mills Vs. It's Workers, High Court Verdict, LLJ, 1, 1986;
2. Six Sugar Factories of Ahmednagar District Vs. Their Workmen, Industrial Court Verdict, Government of Maharashtra, Part-I, L, Sept1971, p. 4703;
3. Malegaon and Someshwar Sugar Factories of Baramati Taluka Vs. Their workmen, Industrial court verdict;
4. Govt. of Maharashtra Notification No. 1131/46, BIR 1946, A-10-1952, and
5. Govt. of Maharashtra's Notification No. BIR 1878/2976/Lab/9, December 3, 1981.

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