

# Human Cost of Sugar

## Living and Working Conditions of Migrant Cane-cutters in Maharashtra



**Maharashtra is the second largest sugar producing state of India and is known for its high efficiency. The sector relies on informal workers, migrating from drought-prone Marathwada region, working as cane-cutters. Living and working conditions of these workers are exploitative, which keep them in a vicious circle of poverty and indebtedness. Women and children face the hardest brunt of these exploitative conditions with basic rights and dignity denied. This paper is an attempt to highlight the systemic issues in the Maharashtra sugar supply chain to trigger discussions and action from key stakeholders.**

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# INTRODUCTION

Sugarcane production in India is a microcosm of the many social and economic challenges faced by the country. Informal workers, labour rights' violations, social and economic inequality, gender discrimination, and water scarcity are issues that are associated with the sugar supply chain. In 2018, Oxfam India published a discussion paper based on a study of five sugarcane-producing districts of Uttar Pradesh. Based on the discussion paper, multi-stakeholder dialogues between food and beverage brands, sugar mills, certification agencies, civil society, and farmer unions have begun.

Maharashtra is the second largest sugar producing state after Uttar Pradesh. This paper aims to highlight the key issues faced by workers in the Maharashtra sugar supply chain. For details on the methodology and research process, please refer to the Methodology section.

Chapter 3 on Sugar Supply Chain maps the key stakeholders involved and their roles. It lays specific focus on the workers hired to harvest cane and the issues they face. In Maharashtra, approximately 1.5 million people migrate each year with their children. Of this, nearly 0.5 million people migrate from Beed district alone. Beed is the hub for hiring workers for harvesting cane.

Lack of alternative employment opportunities at source, unproductive agricultural land, and political conflicts over land, water and other resources, coupled with the deeply rooted foundations of the caste system and gender disparity, are some of the critical factors forcing people to migrate. Most of the workers take wage advances from contractors that push them in to a vicious debt trap.

Women workers face an additional burden, working on the sugarcane fields for 10-12 hours in addition to unpaid care work. Lack of sanitation facilities and public health facilities has led to a public health crisis in the region. Social norms around gender roles restrict women's participation in decision-making and control over wages.

The paper ends with a set of action points indicating a way forward inviting all key stakeholders to join hands and address the systemic issue.

# METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a combination of secondary and primary research methods. Literature review was conducted to understand the context, key stakeholders and key challenges underlying the sugar supply chain of Maharashtra. Telephonic interviews (6 nos.) were conducted with key informants identified during the literature review. This helped to better understand the dynamics and to select relevant districts and stakeholders for primary research. Based on the telephonic interviews in 6 villages of 3 districts – Beed, Osmanabad and Ahmednagar -

<b>District</b>	<b>Villages</b>
Beed	Nivadungwadi, Rajuri Ghodka and Arvi
Osmanabad	Jekekurwadi and Krishna Nagar Tanda
Ahmednagar	Laman Tanda

sugarcane cutters were identified to be interviewed in these villages through purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. These districts together contribute significantly to the total number of people who migrate seasonally within and outside of Maharashtra for cutting of cane. On average, every year 40 percent of migrants from Maharashtra are found to be from Beed alone, followed by Ahmednagar district (14-15%)<sup>1</sup>. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 75 migrant workers (majorly comprising of women).

In addition, other key stakeholders in the destination districts were identified comprising CSOs (17), academics (2), journalists (5), representatives from government department (2), doctor (1), farmer (1), and sugar mill representative (1). These interviews were conducted in Solapur, Kolhapur, Sangli and Pune districts of Maharashtra. These interviews helped corroborate field research findings through technical insights and underlying issues.

## BACKGROUND

Maharashtra is the second largest sugar producing state in India, after Uttar Pradesh.<sup>iii</sup> Harvesting sugarcane is a labour intensive process. In Maharashtra, 1.6 million farmers cultivate sugarcane on 0.7 million hectares of land<sup>iv</sup>. Maharashtra's sugarcane industry provides direct employment to about 0.16 million workers, besides 1.5 million workers engaged in harvesting and transport operations every year for six months<sup>v</sup>. A staggering 0.2 million children below 14 years of age also accompany their parents, every cutting season<sup>vi</sup>. Maharashtra produced approximately 10.07 million metric tonnes of sugar in fiscal year 2018-19. Cooperative sugar mills alone produce 60% of this<sup>vii</sup>.

*"The very first sugar cooperative, in Maharashtra was founded in response to the plight of cane-growing peasants who were trapped by landlessness, moneylenders and the exploitative policies of private sugar mills. The strength of the cooperative movement was the involvement of the farmers who were shareholders in the sugar mill regardless of the size of their holdings."<sup>ii</sup>*

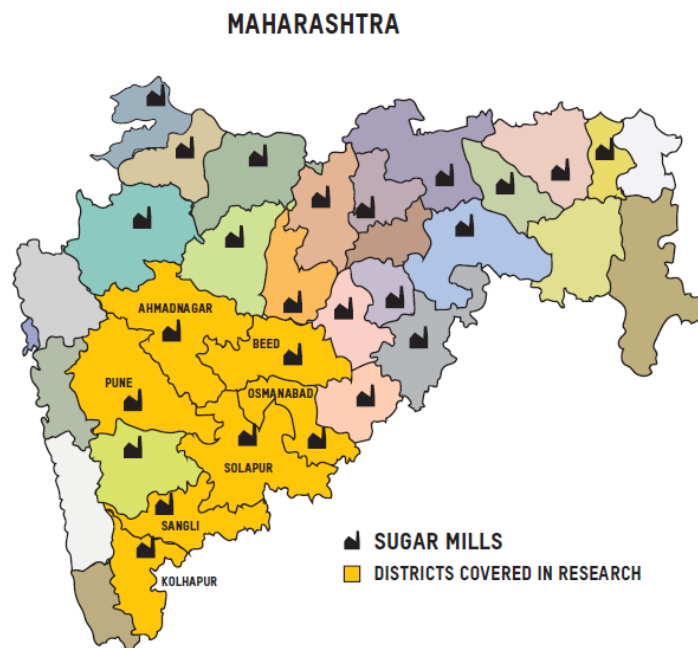


Figure 1: Maharashtra map showing regions where consultations for field research were conducted

Maharashtra not only has the largest number of sugar mills in India (36%, U.P. 23%),<sup>viii</sup> but also has the largest number of cooperative sugar mills in India. Social activist Vithalrao Vikhe Patil laid the foundation for the cooperative mills through a cooperative movement in 1948<sup>ix</sup>. This movement was a response to the plight of cane-growing farmers, who were trapped by landlessness, indebtedness and exploitative policies of private sugar mills.

Asia's first cooperative sugar mill was commissioned in 1950 in Maharashtra. Over the years, private sugar mills gained prominence over cooperative mills<sup>x</sup>.

**Table 1: Information of co-operative sugar factories (Source: Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2018-19)**

Particulars	2016	2017	2018
Factories (no.)	202	179	178
Registered members ('000)	<b>25,550</b>	<b>26,770</b>	<b>27,633</b>
Share capital of State Govt. (INR crores)	1,284.07	1,299.47	1,299.47
Average TCD (lakh MT) capacity	3.52	3.14	3.85
Sugarcane crushed (lakh MT)	483.49	268.2	573.35
Average extraction (per cent)	11.55	11.43	11.46
No. of factories having			
a.) Distillery plant	69	69	69
b) Co-gen	51	57	59
Installed capacity of co-generation (MW)	997.4	1,135.40	1,211.90
Factories in loss (no.)	102	117	80

Sugar mills, both cooperative and private ones, work closely with political parties raising allegations of collusion and conflict of interest<sup>xi</sup>. Allegations of politicians diverting cooperative mill funds for elections and for other purposes are well documented<sup>xii</sup>.

The cooperative sugar mills in Maharashtra owe an estimated Rs.3.35 billion cane arrears to the farmers as on 15 August 2019<sup>xiii</sup>. Declining sugar prices and a situation of oversupply has added to the troubles of the sector.

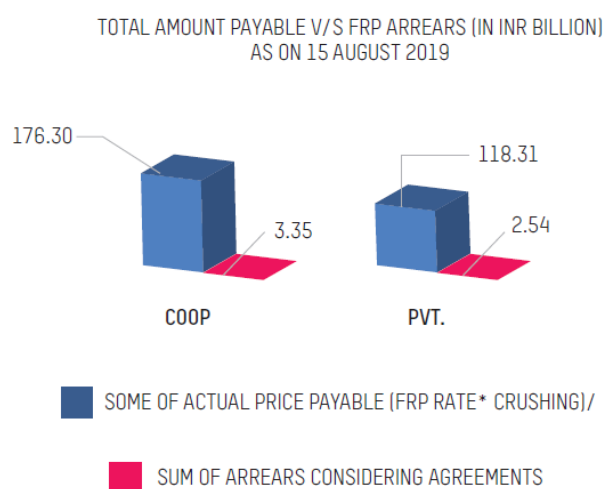


Figure 2: Sugarcane total amount payable v/s FRP arrears - Source: Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2019

# SUGARCANE SUPPLY CHAIN

Sowing of sugarcane in Maharashtra begins with the onset of monsoons in July or August, followed by harvesting that happens the following next year between October and March. Though cane is cultivated on only 4% of the total cropped area in Maharashtra, it consumes 71.5% of irrigated water in the state<sup>xv</sup>. The paradox is that 79% of sugarcane in Maharashtra is produced in the drought prone regions<sup>xvi</sup>.

*“Sugarcane consumes about 22.5 million liters of water per hectare during its 14-month long growing cycle compared to just four million liters over four months for chickpeas, commonly grown in India and called gram locally.”<sup>xiv</sup> -*

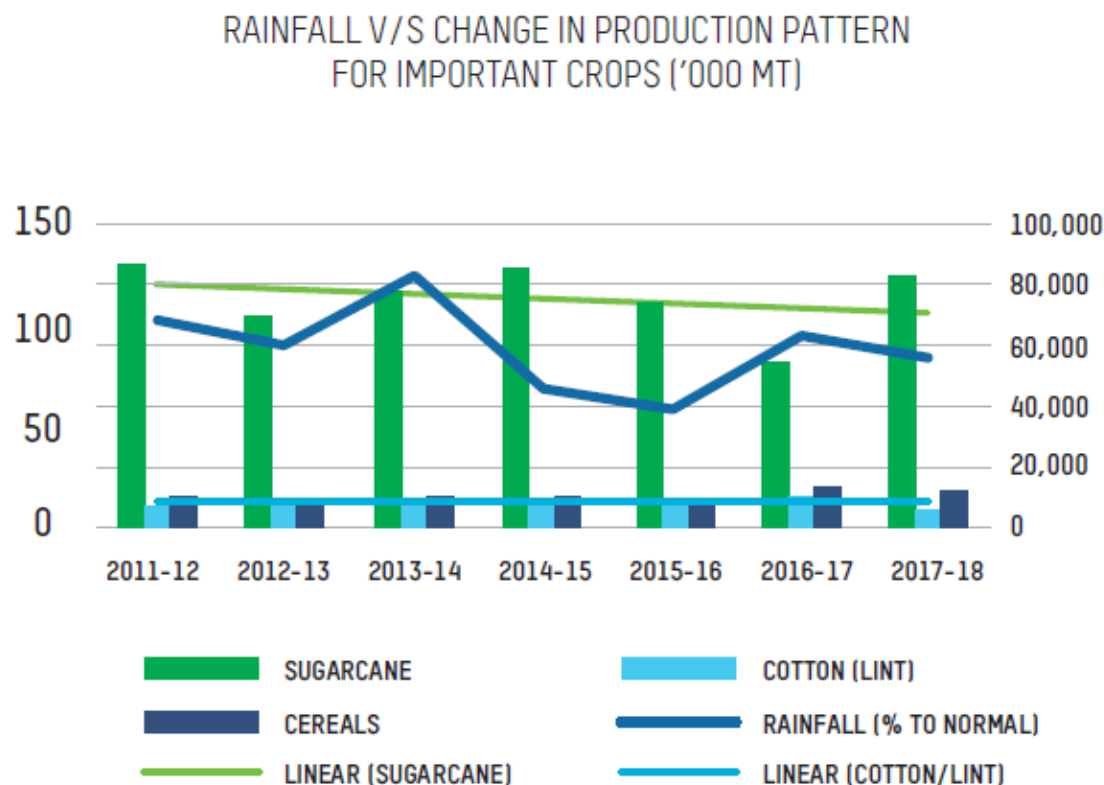
Marathwada is a drought prone region facing acute water shortages<sup>xvii</sup>. It has faced drought for four consecutive years from 2013 to 2016<sup>xviii</sup>. It rained well in 2017; similar situations however, prevailed in 2018 and 2019. Drought is not a new phenomenon in Marathwada, the condition of extreme poverty caused due to drought, is not uncommon either<sup>xix</sup>. Despite this, there is a high concentration of sugar mills in Marathwada region. In 2018-19, of the 195 sugar mills 54 were in Marathwada alone<sup>xx</sup>. In 2012-13, even when villages in Marathwada were being supplied drinking water through tankers, 20 new sugar mills started operations in the region. Despite 10% lesser rainfall in Maharashtra in the year 2017-18 as compared to previous year, and abysmally low irrigation coverage of only 18%, the area under cane cultivation in Maharashtra grew by 10% (over the previous year<sup>xxi</sup>) in 2017-18. Farmers kept pumping water out of water bodies for irrigating sugarcane<sup>xxii</sup>.

The greatest damage of this deep-rooted sugar politics is the acute water scarcity that it has caused and now suffers with. Sugarcane now coexists with tanker-fed villages with no alternative employment opportunities causing forced migration to western Maharashtra and other states, and even suicides in extreme cases<sup>xxiii</sup>.

## ***The ever-growing love for growing cane- the case of Marathwada***

*Marathwada has always been a drought prone area and therefore cultivation of drought resilient crops like Jowar, pulses and oil seeds would have made more sense. The region was consecutively under a drought spell for four years from 2013 to 2016. It rained well in 2017 (534 mm) but cane won over other crops because it requires lesser work and returns are sure and good. In June 2018, when there were insufficient rains, the farmers kept the crop alive by pumping water from the water bodies. The result was that there was no water left in the ground water table to pump out anymore; the dams had dried water level was only up to 20% of their capacity<sup>xxiv</sup>.*

Figure 3: Rainfall v/s change in production pattern for important crops ('000 MT); Source: Directorate of Economics and statistics 2019



Western Maharashtra region is politically dominant and developed in terms of irrigational facilities, loan availability, and other basic infrastructure in comparison to Vidharbha and Marathwada regions. The result is that every year lakhs of people from these drought-prone regions in Marathwada are forced to migrate to Western and Northern Maharashtra for their survival and further development.

Caste heterogeneity is reflected in the system that employs cane cutters. None among the higher caste, namely the Brahmins and Vaishya, are in the category of migrant sugarcane cutters and transporting labourers. The caste composition of migrant sugarcane cutters and transporting labourers is mainly made up of middle, lower, and lowest castes. Lower class comprises *Kumbhar*, *Nhavi* (middle class), *Vanjari*, *Dhangar*, *Hatkar*, and *Lamani*. The *Chambhar*, the *Mang*, the *Bhil*, and the *Mahar* comprise the lowest class. *Banjara* (~30%) and *Vanjari* communities (~32%) constitute a significant portion of sugarcane-cutters' population in Maharashtra<sup>xxv</sup>. In Beed and Ahmednagar alone, Vanjari community constitutes 50% and 67% of the total migrant sugarcane cutters' population. Income from harvesting cane sustains these communities. The emerging situation is such that apart from the *Vanjari* community, people from peasant castes and many other Nomadic/ Denotified Tribes such as *Banjara*, *Dhangar*, *Vadar*, *Paradhi*, *Bhamta*, *Kaikadi* etc. have also begun migrating as a coping mechanism for their survival and livelihood.<sup>xxvi</sup>



The key stakeholders in Maharashtra sugar supply chain are sugarcane farmers, workers or cane harvesters, labour contractors, sugar mills, unions, the Government and buyers of sugar. Data pertaining to institutional buying of sugar produced in Maharashtra is not easily available in the public domain. This is a significant constraint in mapping the supply chain to the companies and brands using sugar from Maharashtra as a raw material.

## GOVERNMENT

The Maharashtra sugar industry has primarily developed through a cooperative movement supported by the government<sup>xxvii</sup>. Government's role in the Maharashtra sugar industry is primarily linked to development, enforcement, and implementation of policies linked to production of cane, monitoring cane and sugar prices. The Commissionerate of Sugar<sup>xxviii</sup> is responsible for development of sugar sector regulating sugar factories.

## LABOUR UNIONS

Maharashtra Sugarcane Cutting and Transport Workers Union (MSCTWU), Sakhar Karkhana Mahasangh and Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) are the most prominent trade unions. These trade unions have been able to negotiate some benefits for the factory migrant workers in Maharashtra for example appointment of worker representatives on various committees to review unsettled problems of sugarcane workers (including increase in minimum wages)<sup>xxix</sup>. However, the engagement of these unions with the issues of migrant cane cutters has been very limited.

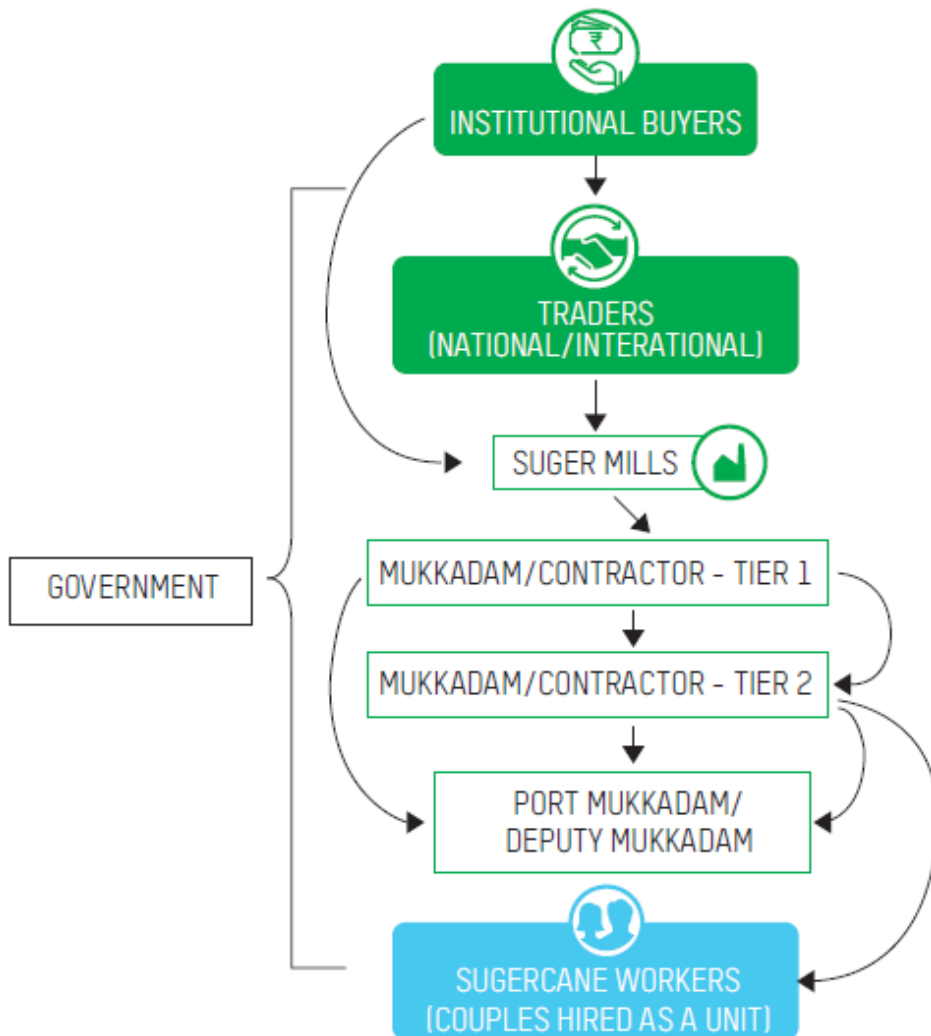


Figure 4: The Sugar Supply Chain of Maharashtra

## WORKERS

After the crop surveys are over in the month of July - August, sugar mills inform labour contractors called '*mukkadams*' about the number of workers that they would need during the harvest season.

Workers are hired through informal, unwritten contracts in work-pairs or *jodis* derogatorily called *koyata* usually comprising of a husband and a wife. 10-15 *jodis* make a *toli* or cane harvesting team. *Mukkadams* negotiate and inform workers about the wage rate and the terms of the work. When a *mukkadam* is certain of providing the requisite number of *jodis* to the factory, he enters into a written contract with the sugar mill. He receives an advance from the sugar mill against collateral pledged as security. Usually *mukkadams* earn a commission ranging between 15 – 25 per cent of couple's hiring amount.<sup>xxx</sup>

*Jodis* work as cane-cutters in sugarcane farms. *Mukkadams* pay an advance to the *jodis* to allow them to migrate for the work. The amount of advance varies depending on negotiation ability, imminent social obligations (marriage) or medical treatments.

The advance paid in one to three instalments, and is mostly handed over to the male member. However, *mukkadams* settle the advance based on per ton of cane harvested by the group of *jodis* in *toli*.

## MIGRATION

Depending on the location and the mode of transportation, workers have to travel anywhere between two to three days to reach the work site. Their migration is seasonal and they are away from their villages for a period of 5-6 months.

*Mukkadams* facilitate workers' travel via trucks, trolleys or bullock carts. *Mukkadams* often also facilitate small purchases like blankets, tarpaulins, clothes, etc. on credit.

Workers prefer to carry as much as they can so that their dependence on *mukkadams* for credit is minimum. Some workers even carry goats and cattle along with ration and fuel.

After the workers migrate, their villages are mostly deserted, comprising only the elderly, the infirm, and a few children. Occasionally, if the grandparents are unable to take care of the grandchildren in the village, workers take their children along with them. A staggering 0.2 million children below 14 years of age, accompany their parents every cutting season. Over half of them, in the age group of 6-14 years (54% boys and 46% girls), totalling 0.13 million end up being deprived of their right to education<sup>xxxii</sup>. The safety and security of girl children is a concern both at home and at the worksite. This has led to a very high rate of early child marriages in the community. In 2015-16, Maharashtra was one of the 12 states that ranked high in child marriages of girls in the age group of 15-19 (12.1%) with 67% of child marriages taking place in rural Maharashtra alone<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Districts in the Marathwada region are among the top 100 districts with highest prevalence of child marriage.

Districts	percentage
Beed	20.10%
Hingoli	27.70%
Jalna	31.30%
Latur	19.30%
Osmanabad	20.90%
Parbani	23.30%
Aurangabad	27.80%
Ahmednagar	24.0%
<i>Source: NCPDR 2015-16</i>	

## LIVING CONDITIONS

On reaching their destinations, workers live in large colonies of Self-constructed makeshift tents made of tarpaulin sheets. The tents are small and inadequate to give complete shelter. These workers' colonies do not have water, electricity supply or toilets.

Women and girls, who migrate for work, face added hardships. They have to fetch water from a public water supply for the entire family, and have no option but to bathe in the open.

Workers usually wake up between 3-4 a.m. Women get up earlier to get ready for work before sunrise (in the absence of toilets) and to prepare meals for the family before leaving for the work.

Children of workers are often engaged in activities such as weeding, collecting firewood and tying of sugarcane tops into bundles to sell. Adolescent girls have additional duties such as fetching water, and looking after their younger siblings and cattle.



*Figure 5: Temporary toilet constructed by a worker in the sugarcane field. This is a rare thing to see, as most of the workers defecate in the open. Photo credit: Ashamant Foundation*



*Figure 6: A photograph showing living conditions of migrant workers and young adolescent girls performing water duties and household duties while their parents are away for cutting of cane. Photo credit: Ashamant Foundation*



*Figure 7: Sharda and Kailas Salve from Parbhani are accompanied by their infant son and 12-year-old niece. Photo Credit: Parth M N/ People's Archive of Rural India*

## THE JOB DESCRIPTION AND WORK LIFE

Workers move to the place of work as communicated to them by the deputy *mukkadams* or the *mukkadams*, usually a day in advance.

Cane cutting is a daytime activity and workers usually work between 12-15 hours in a day, sometimes extending up to 18 hours. Loading of cane is contingent to the availability of the trolleys or trucks and can even take place at night.

*Tolis* of *jodis* are under the supervision on part/ deputy *mukkadams* (who is also a cane cutter but enjoys favoured status, he might also be a relative of the *mukkadams*) or a worker. Each *to*li is allocated specific work (cutting lines i.e. rows of cane to be harvested) that is to be completed during the day.

Male worker in a *jodi* usually cuts through the cane stalk and strips the leaves. Female worker on the other hand is responsible for cleaning, tying of the bundles (each bundle is approx. 40-45 kgs in weight) and loading of these bundles in the trollies. The loading is particularly strenuous, as women have to climb the stairs set against the trolley, often in the dark.

The practice of keeping minimum gap between cutting, loading and sending cane to sugar mills is one the reasons for high sugar recovery rate in the region. After harvesting cane in one farm, workers keep moving to other cane farms in the catchment area of a sugar mill. Workers usually stay at one farm between 15 – 30 days and the number of farms covered in one harvesting season goes up to 24.

# FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

This section of the report presents a qualitative assessment of the interviews and focus group discussions conducted on the field to validate findings of the literature review. The methodology section provides a more detailed description of the sample and research methods. The objective of this research is to highlight systemic issues that have an impact on workers in the sugar supply chain in Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

## POVERTY AND INDEBTEDNESS

Approximately 80% of the population in Marathwada is dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood.<sup>xxxiii</sup> These are the only sources of sustained earnings for the community. However, prolonged drought over the years has led to agrarian distress, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities forces people to migrate.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Crop insurance schemes have failed to cover these losses. Funds disbursed under the crop insurance scheme for drought prone areas of Marathwada were inadequate to cover the losses. The total amount disbursed under the scheme is limited to a few thousand rupees per person, compared to the loss incurred in hundreds of thousands per person/ per season on each crop.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Government's minimum employment guarantee scheme, MGNREGA, has not been effective to provide alternative livelihoods. Out of 0.9 million workers registered under MGNREGA in Beed, only 135,000 workers got jobs<sup>xxxvi</sup>. Furthermore, many of those who have worked under the scheme complained of delayed payment or no payments.

Agrarian distress coupled with absence of alternative livelihood options have resulted in widespread indebtedness. Indebtedness is highly prevalent in the region and workers borrow money from local moneylenders or labour contractors acting as moneylenders - to meet their daily expenses. In Beed district, 67% of the workers are indebted. Lenders charge interest rates as high as 3-5% per month and the borrowers' inability to repay in time, pushes them into a vicious cycle<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

People in the region are forced to migrate to find work in sugarcane growing areas in nearby districts. Due to their existing indebtedness, workers usually take cash advances against wages for repayment of the previous loans, marriage expenses, construction of houses, etc. Despite working for over 12-18 hours a day, the workers are often unable to clear their advances and end up in a vicious cycle of indebtedness. Most of the workers interviewed reported having dues ranging from INR 55,000 to 100,000 from the previous season.

## ACCESS TO LAND AND WATER

Land and water conflicts run hand in hand with the people belonging to historically marginalised castes in Maharashtra and having a separate neighbourhood in villages, known as Harijan or Dalit vasti. A large number of them do not own land or own a very small piece of uncultivable land<sup>xxxviii</sup>. They have limited water storage capacity, and lack resources to 'purchase' water from tanker suppliers or transport it from distant sources. They are the ones who are forced to stand last in the queue for

tanker water supply and face multiple atrocities, especially the women.<sup>xxxix</sup> For example there have been cases wherein drinking water in Dalit communities was polluted by human excreta in Konkan part of Maharashtra<sup>xl</sup>

They do not have access to unused public land for cattle grazing. There have been several steps taken by the government to regularise the unused public land occupied by the Dalit communities in Marathwada. However, water scarcity makes such land unusable even for cattle grazing and eventually forcing them to migrate<sup>xli</sup>.

During the study, workers shared that people living in Marathwada purchase water through private water tankers costing between Rs.700 - 1000 for 2000 - 2500 litres,<sup>xlii</sup> in the absence of reliable public water supply. Workers also shared that some areas receive water supplied through canals but the marginalised communities are excluded as the water often is diverted upstream towards more influential communities.

Water scarcity in the region also has an impact on livestock. Farmers with cattle depend on government fodder camps to prevent drought induced distress sale of cattle. Half of the fodder camps in Maharashtra are located in Marathwada with Beed having the largest number of fodder camps<sup>xliii</sup>. During the study respondents raised concerns about the quality and governance of fodder camps<sup>xliv</sup>.

## WAGES

Workers migrate from source to destination spending 2-3 days. Mukkadams usually hire people from different villages based on his negotiation power and prefers creating a random group often comprising people who are complete strangers to each other, thus limiting their collective bargaining power.

A *jodi* cuts approximately 2 - 3 tonnes of cane in a day for which they are paid between Rs. 200 - 250 (as a couple) per ton of cane harvested by them<sup>xlv</sup>. Wages vary between Rs. 200 – Rs. 375 per day. The minimum wage is at Rs. 300 per person for a day's work fixed by the Government of India for agricultural labour including those hired on contract in category C towns<sup>xlvi</sup>. Cane-cutters work for almost 12-15 hours in a day to earn an amount equivalent for 8 hours work.

Workers are not eligible for any leaves during their work and face unexplained wage deductions for any leaves. Wage deductions from a day or half-day's leave can vary from Rs. 500 - 1000 per day<sup>xlvii</sup>. Workers complain of unjustified adjustments to their wages and/or advances. Workers feel that their advances are never settled despite working hard to repay. Often the total amount of cane harvested by them gets underwritten leading to further deductions from their salary.

Sugar mills that are the original employers of contracted cane harvesters do not take the responsibility of overseeing wage payments; contractors never fully settle dues, by indulging in unexplained wage deductions. The only livelihood progression for workers is to switch to another contractor. However, this does not change their financial situation and continue being trapped in a debt cycle.



## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

The entire process of cane cutting and loading is a tedious one. Women workers head load cane bundles on trucks/ trolleys. The loading usually takes place at late evenings after sunset. Women workers climb a steep ladder set up against the trolley with a head load of cane in very little or no light. Accidents and injuries are common in this process, as the ground is slippery and with sharp objects or insects. Workers informed of several accidents that have happened during the loading process leading to fractures and even death in some cases. Workers do not get any insurance or compensation for such accidents and injuries. Contractors may provide a loan in such cases to be settled against future wages.

Young children who accompany their parents to the field often end up working. Children are found tying sugarcane tops into bundles (4 - 5 kgs each), which they sell to farmers. In a day, one child ties 20 - 25 such bundles. Instances of accidents involving children are common with some leading to deaths. However, workers feel that such accidents are never reported.

## IMPACT ON WOMEN

Female labour participation rate in the sugarcane farms of Maharashtra is high owing to the *jodi* practice of hiring worker couples. However, it makes it difficult for women without a male member in the family to find employment. Wage payments are calculated and paid as a couple rather than individual workers. Wages for the *jodi* are usually paid to the male member thereby diminishing women's control over finances and also reducing women's agency as a worker.

Childcare and care work responsibilities are borne by women or adolescent girls. Nursing mothers carry their children to the sugarcane farms in the absence of any crèche or Aanganwadi facilities. Safety concerns lead to young girls migrating with parents to work and help with care-work. This leads to a higher dropout of girls from schools. The ratio of drop out children from school (in 2009) was 41% and ratio of never enrolled children was 59 per cent for Maharashtra most of which are girls. 27 per cent of the total dropouts happen because of poverty. <sup>xlviii</sup>

This adds to the prevalence of early and child marriages of girls in these communities. Domestic violence, gender based violence, and verbal, physical, and sexual abuse is also common. Alcoholism and multiple sexual partners for men is also common adding to family conflict and violence.

Inter-generational abuse, exploitation and vulnerability of women and girls without agency and control over finance or property rights has led to a societal bias against girls. The average sex ratio for children below 6 years in Marathwada is 926 girls for 1000 boys, in Beed the ratio is 912 girls for 1000 boys<sup>xlix</sup>.

## SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Scarcity of water has made existing toilets in the Marathwada region unusable<sup>l</sup> leading to open defecation. For migrant cane harvesters, there are no toilets in the makeshift labour colonies. This is particularly unsafe and humiliating for women

workers, who have no option but to relieve themselves in the open, or take bath before sunrise or after sunset, when it is dark.

For women workers, the situation gets more undignified and humiliating during menstrual cycles. Awareness about menstrual hygiene and ability to use sanitary pads is non-existent. Women use dirty and damp cloths that increase the likelihood of infections.

Women workers informed that symptoms of Leucorrhoea are very common among them. This severely affects their work and to avoid unpaid sick leaves they go for over-the-counter medication at the time of migrating. Even young girls who have recently attained puberty complain of infections. Poor menstrual hygiene and care causes fungal and bacterial infections leading to Pelvic Inflammatory Diseases (PID), Vaginitis and uterine infections of several forms. In extreme cases this also leads to cervical cancer.

Local gynaecologists and CSOs working on public health shared that lack of awareness on menstrual hygiene and sexual and reproductive health is the primary reason for the health issues faced by women in Beed. Local public health professionals estimate that more than 90% women in these labour camps are anaemic because of a poor diet.

Public health facilities at the source villages are inadequate to address their ailments. Lack of medical facilities near labour camps makes follow-up medical treatments impossible, thereby prolonging their disease and making their conditions worse. It is common for women workers to consult private health practitioners for symptoms of PID, vaginitis and uterine infections. There is a widespread fear among women workers that such infections can lead to cancer.

Local public health professionals and social workers believe that private practitioners take advantage of this fear and recommend removal of uterus to those who complain of infections. This is particularly common for women having more than two children; it is believed that “the purpose of the uterus is over”. Over 85% of the hysterectomies were conducted at private hospitals in Beed.<sup>ii</sup>

Local social workers believe that a nexus exists between private health practitioners and hospitals that deceive the workers to go for hysterectomy. Workers usually take wage advances from their contractors for hysterectomy. The lean period of sugarcane cutting is often the season when large numbers of women opt for the surgeries.

## WORKER ENTITLEMENTS

Women workers are denied entitlement under Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017. Pregnant women work for the same number of working hours as others and under the same conditions. Often women workers go into labour on the farm itself, with little or no medical assistance from anyone except from fellow women workers. The post-partum recovery phase is considered leave without pay because of which new mothers rest for only 7-10 days compared to the recommended 6 weeks<sup>iii</sup>. New mothers get back to the cane cutting work along with their new-born child without any Aanganwadi or crèche facilities.

Sugarcane workers are not covered under social security benefits such as Employee Provident Fund (EPF) or Employee State Insurance Corporation (ESIC). In 2019, the Maharashtra government set up a welfare board for sugarcane workers to extend the benefits under EPF and ESIC to sugarcane workers. However, the labour department raised concerns about lack of funding and its sustainability<sup>liii</sup>.

## CHILD RIGHTS AND RIGHT TO EDUCATION

Nearly 200,000 children below the age of 14 accompany their parents when they migrate for cane harvesting in Maharashtra every year<sup>liv</sup>. Over half of them are in the age group of 6 - 14 years (54% boys and 46% girls)<sup>lv</sup>. Children are drawn into the labour force from the early age of 6 - 7 years and by the age of 11 - 12 years they are full-fledged labour. Their labour is subsumed under the category of “family labour”<sup>lvi</sup>.

Children of migrant cane cutters are among the most excluded from and deprived of their Right to Education<sup>lvii</sup>. Social workers working on child rights and education in the region believe that the nomadic lifestyle of cane-cutter parents further alienates their children from the education system.

Adolescent girls face more deprivation than that faced by boys as they have additional responsibilities of care work, fetching water and household chores. Water scarcity puts additional pressure and young children spend several hours fetching water. Reports of children in Beed dying while fetching water is an ‘annual affair’<sup>lviii</sup>.

Children of migrant cane-cutting workers are unable to restart school after returning to their villages after migration season due to non-attendance and discontinuation of studies for six months; this results in dropouts. Shakhari Shalas are temporary second semester schools set up by the sugar mills in Maharashtra that provides continued schooling during migration season so that the children can continue after going back to their village. However, Shakhari Shalas have faced criticism for not being functional and for sugar mills using these as a reputation building CSR activity<sup>lix</sup>.

## WAY FORWARD

Lack of education keeps cane-cutting workers trapped in a cycle of intergenerational poverty and exploitation. The migratory nature of their work keeps them outside of key policy interventions, including the Right to Education. It is thus important to have mechanisms to ensure that the Right to Education of migrant workers' children is not denied.

Labour contractors hire cane-cutting workers on behalf of sugar mills through informal contracts. This makes their relationship with the sugar mills opaque and outside the purview of the Factories Act and the Interstate Migrant Act. It is important to make the recruitment process transparent and formal so that due monitoring and accountability processes are established.

The scale and gravity of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues and the alarming rate of hysterectomies indicate a major public health crisis. There is an urgent need to create awareness about SRH and hygiene. Access to quality public and free healthcare at destination and source locations is crucial to address this issue. Stricter vigilance of private health practitioners and private hospitals with strict action for violations is important to stop medical malpractices.

Water scarcity in the region is the root cause leading to distress migration. Policies and mechanisms on water governance must be inclusive and take into account impact on the most marginal and vulnerable communities. It is important to monitor and address issues of excessive water scarcity and cropping pattern in the region.

Women workers must be protected under laws such as the 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. Women workers must get due benefits under the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017. Public awareness campaigns on social norms around gender and domestic violence are necessary to sensitise the community.

Human rights due diligence (HRDD) of sugarcane supply chain is an important step towards identifying and addressing these challenges. This calls for sugar mills, and food and beverage companies to come together and undertake HRDD in their supply chains as per the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Non-state or operational grievance mechanisms (OGM) are crucial to identify and redress grievances at an early stage. Food and beverage companies, sugar mills and standard bodies have a role to establish effective OGMs.

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