

# Sugarcane Workers in Maharashtra



Source : [www.theleaders-online.com](http://www.theleaders-online.com)

- Sugar industry is the second largest agro-based industry in India. India's share in world sugar production is around 15%. In India, Maharashtra produces about one third of India's sugar production. The sugar industry in Maharashtra has mainly developed in the co-operative sector. Government has played an important role in the development of co-operative sugar industry (Jadhav 2016).
- Nearly 80% of the sugarcane harvesting and transport workers are migrant workers. These workers are seasonal migrants who migrate mainly from the drought prone areas of Maharashtra, Marathwada region. A sizeable number of sugarcane workers from the tribal areas of Dhule and Nandurbar, one of the sugarcane belts, migrate to sugar factories in Gujarat (Jadhav 2016).
- In contradistinction to the general short-duration pattern of seasonal agricultural migration, is that of sugar cane cutters in western India (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka), where the annual spell of migration is of a longer duration covering the major part of the year- generally from November to June.
- Almost 50% of the migrant sugarcane workers are women who migrate with their children. Majority of these workers come from scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and minority sections. Similarly, poor sections from OBCs and even so called upper caste- Marathas work as sugarcane harvesting and transport workers.
- The other major sugar cane belt in north India (Uttar Pradesh) does not draw on female migrant workers.
- Cane cutters move like nomads across a wide set of fields, and all importantly, they are employed, not by the farmers whose fields they harvest, but by the managements of sugar mills (cooperatives as well as others privately owned) through agents/contractors.
- Recruitment is not of individuals, but of groups or gangs of workers. What distinguishes the particular pattern of recruitment is that the gangs are composed of units of pairs of workers (each comprising of a male and a female and generally a team of husband and wife) called *koytas*. Koyta is the local name for the tool used

to cut sugarcane.

- The sugar industry in Maharashtra expanded rapidly after 1980-81. The total number of operating sugar factories was 77 in 1980-81, which reached 177 in 2015-16. Total sugar production in 2015-16 reached to 70.40 lakh tonnes at the end of February 2016. This tremendous growth of industry naturally led to increased demand for sugarcane harvesting and transport workers.
- According to a Govt. appointed committee, Panditrao Daund committee, the total number of these workers was more than 7 lakh in Maharashtra in the year 2003-2004. At present the total size of these workers in Maharashtra is approximately 9 lakh and nearly one lakh of these workers migrate to other States, particularly, Karnataka and Gujarat (Jadhav 2016).



## Structure of the workforce

- **Sugarcane harvesting workers are classified into three categories:**
  - a) The bullock cart owners and their assistants who are assigned the work of sugarcane harvesting and transporting within the radius of 10 kms from the factory site. These workers are known as bullock cart workers.
  - b) The workers who have to harvest the sugarcane and load it in tractors/trucks carrying it on their head.
  - c) The workers who have to harvest the sugarcane, load it in their bullock cart, transport it up to the truck/tractor and reload it in the vehicle for carrying it to the factory site. These workers are known as cart centre workers.



## Labour process, work conditions and exploitation

- Wages are piece rated, i.e., paid by the tonne, and labour is mobilized through a system of advances that are given before the season begins. Advances effectively tie the gangs of koytas to particular factories/employers/contractors.
- The division of labour within koyta gangs assumes that the men cut the cane, clean the stalks of leaves, while the women arrange the cane in rows and make bundles that can be loaded, although it has been observed that women may also participate in the cutting of cane. Output demands per day are particularly onerous, driven by the demand to keep the factory machines fully supplied.
- The work gangs are mobilized by *mukaddams* (intermediaries). Most mukaddams, like the *sardars* in Bengal and the 'mates' in Rajasthan, are from the villages and communities of the labourers.
- Advances come from factory officials or from another intermediate tier of non-labouring contractors and are paid out to the mukaddams, who disburse them to

each koyta. Mukaddams are responsible for supervision of the work of their gang and many of them (with their wives) are themselves labourers.

- Work conditions are extremely precarious and vulnerable for the workers. Work hours are not fixed and definite, and there is no provision for vacation.

### **Villages of womb-less women, The Hindu BusinessLine, 8 April 2019**

“You will hardly find women with wombs in these villages. These are villages of womb-less women”, says Manda Ugale. Sitting in her tiny house in Hajipur village, she struggles to talk about the painful topic. Women in Vanjarwadi, where 50% of the women have had hysterectomies, say that it is the ‘norm’ in villages to remove the uterus after having 2-3 children. Cane cutting is a rigorous process and if the husband or wife takes a break for a day, the couple has to pay a fine of Rs. 500 per day to the contractor for every break.

- There is no compensation for accidental injuries, death of worker/bullock (exceptions are the factories where union is strong). Harvesting, loading and transporting being hard work requires good health, but due to poverty and backwardness workers face ill-health and back pain, skin irritation, wounds etc. They also face many illnesses on account of unsafe drinking water and absence of cleanliness in the worksites.

## **Labour law and migrant sugarcane workers**

- Majority of the migrant workers are employed through the contractors, so the Contract Labour Act is applicable in their case. But in most cases the contractors are not registered under the Act, and therefore the workers are deprived of the benefits and protection of the Act.
- A large number of these workers migrate to other states particularly Karnataka and Gujarat. The sugar factories in these states have been employing hundreds of migrant workers and therefore the Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Services) Act, 1979 is applicable to the sugar factories. But no serious attempts are made to implement this Act either by the factories or the concerned state governments.

## **The struggle for wage revisions**

- In the early decades of independence, neither were minimum wages declared for sugarcane workers, nor was any government machinery developed for determining wages of sugarcane harvesting and transport workers in Maharashtra. The workers were paid wages on the basis of piece-rate.

- The harvesting and transport rates fixed in 1968 were not revised in the subsequent 10 years. The first revision of wages took place in 1979 after which revision of wages for every three years was started. However, no strict time schedule for wage revision was followed and every revision was made only after prolonged struggles by the workers.
- It is argued that the most striking feature of these wage revision tripartite agreements is that there is complete absence of any scientific wage revision formula despite the consistent demand for it by the union.

### **Revision of harvesting and transport rates in Maharashtra :**

Sr. No.	Period of Agreement	% increase in existing rates	Date of Agreement
1	1992-93 to 1994-95		
2	1995-96 to 1997-98,1998-99		11/10/1995
3	1999-2000 to 2001-02	25	08/05/1999
4	2002-03 to 2003-04	No increment	-----
5	2004-05 to 2007-08	35	30/10/2005
6	2008-09	20	30/06/2009
7	2009-10 to 2011-12	25	30/06/2009
8	2010-11	23 incentive increase	23/09/2010
9	2011-12 to 2013-14	70 (including incentive)	15/10/211
10	2014-15	No increment	-----
11	2015-16 to 2019-20	20	17/11/2015

Source : Tripartite wage Agreements.

- The Bombay Industrial Relations Act 1946 is applicable to the sugar industry. According to BIR Act 1946, the farm sector workers are employees of the sugar factories. It is, however, implemented only for factory workers of sugar industry and farm sector workers are left outside the provisions of the Act.
- The struggles of these workers compelled the Government to appoint various committees in this respect. According to the award of 1980, a committee under the chairmanship of S.B. Patil was appointed to review the unsettled problems of all sugar workers, but no concrete measures were suggested by this committee.
- A state wide strike of these workers compelled the Maharashtra government to appoint a committee under the chairmanship of Shri. Dadasaheb Rupwate in 1988 for permanent solution to the problem of wages and other facilities for sugarcane harvesting and transport workers in Maharashtra.
- The Maharashtra Sugarcane harvesting and Transport Workers Union called a strike of sugarcane workers in Maharashtra in September 2002 for implementation of Rupwate committee report and revision of sugarcane harvesting and transport rates.
- The Commissioner of Labour, Mumbai has circulated Maharashtra Government's decision regarding the extension of the Mathadi Hamal and other Shramjivi Kamgar Act to the migrant sugarcane workers in sugar factories. The Mathadi welfare boards are working in almost all the districts in Maharashtra.