



Migrant Life of Sugar Cane Harvesting Workers—Ethnography Research

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Abstract

This paper presents an ethnographic exploration of the lives of migrant sugarcane harvesting workers at the Malegaon Bk Cooperative Sugar Factory. Using ethnographic research methods, the study captures the daily routines, social interactions, challenges, health issues, and significant events experienced by these workers from January to February 2024. The research highlights the arduous nature of sugarcane harvesting, which remains predominantly manual despite some mechanization. Workers, often from drought-prone regions of Maharashtra, migrate out of necessity, facing harsh working conditions and inadequate basic amenities. The study documents the physical and social hardships endured by these workers, including long commutes, lack of clean drinking water, and insufficient protective equipment. Additionally, it sheds light on the socio-economic dynamics, such as the reliance on advances from contractors, which are often used for essential expenses like marriages and medical bills. The research also emphasizes the significant role of women and children in the labor force, who work under equally strenuous conditions. The findings underscore the urgent need for improved working conditions, better access to healthcare, and enhanced regulatory frameworks to protect the rights and well-being of migrant sugarcane workers. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and health challenges faced by this marginalized group, advocating for policy interventions to address these issues comprehensively.

Keywords: *Migrant Workers; Seasonal Migration; Sugar Factory; Work Drudgery; Education; Sugarcane Harvesting, Ethnography; Health Issues; Socio-economic Challenges; Women's Participation; Child Labor; Living Conditions*

Introduction

India's sugarcane and sugar industry comes in second place among agro-based sectors, right after cotton. India is the world's top producer of sugar. In 2023–2024, it generated roughly 34 million metric

tons of sugar. In addition to sustaining the livelihood of rural sugarcane farmers, it also employs over 5 lakh people in sugar mills. Furthermore, the sugar harvest generated around 806 billion Indian rupees in gross value added. India was not just the world's greatest producer of sugar but also its third-largest exporter. To create 109.36 It of sugar, the sugar mills in the State crushed 1066.86 lakh tons (It) of sugarcane. 196 of the 207 sugar mills that are running this season have stopped crushing. 211 mills crushed 1053.91 It of sugarcane to generate 105.23 It of sugar during the same period last year. This season's extract percentage, also known as sugar recovery, is 10.25 percent, up from 10% the previous season. On the other hand, favorable weather and a plentiful supply of sugarcane improved the industry's chances. It is noteworthy that Maharashtra's sugar industry has benefited from the prolonged crushing season brought on by the unseasonal rains, which has raised output and strengthened the regional economy.

Migration is the major phenomena at this juncture. There are two kind of migration accumulative migration & coping migration. While coping migration—the migration of the impoverished and less educated—is a form of forced migration done for survival, accumulation migration—the migration of the better-off and substantially more educated/skilled—leads to the accumulation of assets, savings, and investments. The poor workers from desert and drought-prone parts of Maharashtra have found that migrating to harvest sugar cane is a vital means of subsistence. The drought-prone districts include: Beed, Aurangabad, Jalna, Parbhani, Hingoli, Nanded, Osmanabad and Latur.

In some places sugarcane harvesting is done by a machine (harvester). Sugarcane is harvested by machine in many places in India, but most of the sugarcane is harvested by workers. Sugarcane harvesting is extremely labour-intensive work. Such as cutting sugarcane by hand, tying its pods, lifting and carrying them in big vehicles and transporting them etc. Although there is some variation across countries in these tasks, from cutting the cane to loading the vehicle, workers play a key role. Sugarcane workers are illiterate or semi-educated and poor. Women workers participate almost as much as men.

For many years we have been increasing our understanding of the poverty, social background, labor rights, wages, living conditions of sugarcane workers. The issues of this study in Maharashtra are limited to socio-economic issues of workers and their livelihood. Of course, it is not intended to emphasize here that it has no significance. It is also important to study from this perspective, because the questions are still as burning. But if we consider sugarcane work to be dangerous, it is equally important to see to what extent it can go to the workers.

Sugarcane workers in Maharashtra have no access to work place. One has to walk up to more than two kilometres for sugarcane cutting. Hence, these workers have to expend physical energy both by doing hard work and commuting to and from the workplace. We have snacks, energy drinks, protein for the workers, it's a dream. Processed water is also a long way off. Even simple drinking water is not provided to the workers. Sometimes the workers look around for drinking water with a bucket after the afternoon work. Water from farm well or river is used for drinking. That water is not necessarily clean.

In short, the basic needs of these workers are neglected in such a bad way. Apart from providing protective equipment to these workers, the contractors (Mukadam) also collect money for tarpaulin for accommodation and 'koyata' for cutting sugarcane. These workers work in tattered and old clothes. Their children often walk around in the sugarcane field without clothes and bare skin with cuts from the sugarcane field. Neither the contractors nor the sugar mills think about incidents like scorpions, snake bites, falls, falling down while hiring a vehicle, vomiting and death. All these things are considered personal problems of workers. Therefore, their responsibility is pushed on the workers themselves.

Life of Sugarcane Laborers

Sugarcane harvesters take huge advance from the contractors and use the advance for their livelihood and to solve some mundane problems at home when they are at their village when the factory

is closed. Most of it is used for marriage of boys and girls and hospital expenses in case of health problems. By the time they come to the factory site for sugarcane cutting, the advance amount given to them is fully spent.

They do not have any kind of money when they come. In that case they are dependent on the lawsuit for their every need or after cutting the sugarcane the money obtained by selling the growth of the sugarcane is used to meet their daily needs. Let's take a look at what the routine of these laborers looks like.

A sugarcane cutting workers day usually starts at 2:30 to 3:00 in the morning. As soon as he got up in the morning, he used to cook on the stove made of mud or stones in his tent. It probably consists of sorghum or millet bread, a vegetable, garlic chutney.

After making vegetables and bread, they used to go out for sugarcane cutting with their children in the early morning. Their children are with them. Most of these children are between six months and seven to eight years old. But the sugarcane cutting laborer starts the work of cutting sugarcane in the dark when other people of the society are in sugar sleep. If there are cold days, they try to create warmth by lighting a small fire there and the same light is also used for cutting sugarcane.

If these workers are cutting sugarcane with bullock tires or tractor tires, they are ready to cut sugarcane and fill the tires by nine in the morning. Car center or head center workers start work a little late. Late means till seven o'clock in the morning. No matter the cold, heat, wind and rain, the work of sugarcane cutting does not stop, and while the sugarcane is being cut, the children who are drinking their mother's milk, after feeding the mother, are sleeping on the paddy mattress in the field, and the laborer is busy in cutting the sugarcane. After putting their unborn child to sleep on the cot, they are busy with work and don't even have time to look at the children.

Always Ready to Take Risks

The possibility of danger from snakes and scorpions cannot be ruled out. Leopards are common in many places. Many times there are instances of leopards attacking workers children or workers too. There is also a possibility of loss of life. Despite all this knowledge, they go and work in the dark at dawn. When tired from work, we used to leave the vegetables and bread that we had brought with us to fill our stomachs and eat there. Food was also given to their cubs and their stomachs were full.

While eating, if there was an onion field in the neighborhood, one would pluck an onion from it, break it with his hands and eat it in his mouth while eating. But they enjoy having a bigger feast than your pizza, burger. Because you plucked the onion and ate it, you have to talk to the farmers. However, most of the sugarcane farmers provide drinking water for the workers. While eating, preferably hands are washed with water after eating. But sometimes it also happens that while cutting sugarcane, this group eats with a bread and garlic chutney on the same hand without washing their black hands which are smeared with mud. A laborer susceptible to epidemic diseases does not easily fall ill at other times. Their body has a lot of immunity.

Life in the Open

This church, which is poor in money, is very rich in heart. Their strength and self-confidence give them the strength to work for survival. So these people knowingly and unknowingly work by leaving their babies in the jaws of death. This does not mean that they are reckless by leaving their children exposed. So it is their compulsion. Urban children get sick from eating open food. But these children eat in the open, in the open and in the open. However, children of sugarcane harvesters have a lower incidence of malnutrition than other communities.

Anyway, all these things have been put before us so that we all can understand the conditions under which the sugarcane workers work. After sugarcane harvesting, these workers have to fill trucks, tractors and tractor tires with sugarcane. Sometimes you have to go from one end of the field to the other end of the truck with bundle i.e. 'moli' on your head.

The workers transporting sugarcane travel on the same bullock cart. At that time, they have to exercise a lot when the car is coming from the ups and downs of the road. Bullock cart tires do not have brakes. In such a case, with the help of bullocks, a cart full of sugarcane has to be brought slowly to place of unloading i.e. 'Gavani'. This work is also very risky. The possibility of an accident cannot be ruled out.

After the cart loaded with sugarcane arrives at the yard, it has to be numbered to unload the cart. After the cart arrives at the yard, the man works to water the oxen; While the women prepare the evening meal. Before that, they eat it in the afternoon. In the evening, however, they cook and eat properly. It is their routine to collect firewood for the stove from wherever they can find it while working throughout the day and use the same firewood as fuel in the stove and cook on it.

However, these people are negligent when it comes to cleanliness. They build a hut as a temporary shelter when they come for sugarcane harvesting. It is also called temporary huts i.e. 'Pal' by some people. Their whole family usually lives in a six-by-eight pal. Everything is there. The soil in the pal is covered with dung and dung is also applied outside the pal. In the evening, after cooking water, eat and sleep. Such is the routine of women.

Review of Literature

Research by Deshmukh and Reddy (2019) highlights that migrants are often drawn to Maharashtra's sugarcane fields due to higher wages compared to their native regions, such as eastern Uttar Pradesh and northern Karnataka. The study examines how economic opportunities in Maharashtra's sugarcane industry create significant migration flows. Migration Trends: Patil et al. (2021) analyze migration patterns, noting that the influx of workers peaks during the harvesting season. Their study provides data on the geographic origins of these workers and the logistical aspects of their movement. Kumar and Patel (2018) explore the working conditions faced by migrant sugarcane workers in Maharashtra. They report issues such as long working hours, inadequate housing, and lack of proper sanitation facilities. The study underscores the disparity between the labor demands of sugarcane harvesting and the living conditions provided. Jadhav and Sane (2020) focus on wage issues, highlighting that despite the relative economic benefits of migration, workers often face exploitation. They discuss wage deductions, non-payment of overtime, and other unfair practices prevalent in the industry. Patil et al. (2019) examine health challenges faced by migrant workers, including exposure to pesticides and musculoskeletal disorders due to the physically demanding nature of the work. They emphasize the lack of adequate health care and preventive measures for these workers. Agarwal (2022) evaluates the implementation of safety regulations and their effectiveness in protecting migrant workers in Maharashtra's sugarcane fields. The study finds gaps in enforcement and recommends stronger measures to ensure worker safety. Chavan and More (2021) investigate the impact of migration on workers' families and communities. They note that while migration improves economic conditions for some families, it often results in social strain and disruption of family life. Suryawanshi (2023) explores the social integration of migrant workers in Maharashtra, highlighting issues of cultural differences and social exclusion. The study suggests that migrants often face challenges in integrating into local communities and accessing social services. Naik and Jadhav (2023) explore how conditions for migrant workers vary across different districts of Maharashtra, noting differences in wages, working conditions, and support systems. Kulkarni and Sharma (2024) call for more longitudinal research to track the long-term effects of migration on workers and their families. They suggest that such studies could provide deeper insights into the cumulative impact of seasonal migration.

The literature highlights significant challenges faced by migrant sugarcane harvesting workers in Maharashtra, including poor working conditions, health risks, and social impacts. While there have been efforts to improve their situation through policy and regulation, ongoing research and targeted interventions are crucial for addressing these issues comprehensively.

This review underscores the need for enhanced regulatory frameworks, improved working conditions, and support systems to ensure the well-being of migrant workers in Maharashtra's sugarcane industry.

Methodology

This is qualitative research and since at this early stage of research researcher want to identify, analyse unexpected issues, and interact with seasonal migrant sugarcane harvesting workers in their real-life environment associated. Further, individual method in which participant observation, interviews of workers has carried out for understanding of a design problem.

Autoethnography Replications



Figure 1: Migrant life of Sugarcane harvesting workers at Malegaon Cooperative Sugar Factory (by Dr. P. V. Yadav)

Smt. Sumantai, a female sugarcane worker of Marathwada...

My mother got married at the age of 12, I got married at the age of 13. I got my daughters married at the age of 15-16. People talk about getting married early; But who will pay attention to the girls when they go to the factory? Where is the facility? No water to drink, no house to live in. This is the third generation of our family to go to sugarcane. But this has to stop somewhere...'

Statistics of sugarcane workers are not certain, but various G.R. And if we look at the figures given by the sugar Commissionerate, it is around 8-25 lakhs. Almost half of this population is women sugarcane workers. It would not be out of place to say that even though previous generations have been engaged in sugarcane harvesting and have made a valuable contribution to this industry, their issues and especially those of women are completely ignored. But after the news published by 'Hindu Business line'

in April 2019 about the increasing rate of hysterectomy among women sugarcane workers in Beed, the issue of health of sugarcane workers came to the fore among state policy makers and local, national and global media.

In the survey, information was taken on the topics of livelihood of women workers, sugarcane work, facilities available at that place, children's education and health. The survey covered eight districts namely Beed, Hingoli, Jalna, Latur, Nanded, Osmanabad, Parbhani, Solapur. The survey was conducted in 127 villages in 27 taluks of these districts. A total of 1042 women were interviewed in the survey. Out of the total women in the survey, 43 percent are in the age group of 25 to 35 and 30 percent are in the age group of 35 to 45, while 92 percent of the women are married. 7 percent of them are women who go to sugarcane for half a koita (being alone they get less lift). 84 percent of women in this gang go to sugarcane while 16 percent of women go to sugarcane as drivers. If we look at the caste wise information of women, 40 percent (highest) are from Scheduled Tribes and below that (19 percent) women from Scheduled Tribes. If we look at the household resourcelessness rate in the survey, 63 percent landlessness is observed. The rate of landlessness among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims is highest. 74 percent of the women in the study are dependent on agricultural labour.

Kamaltai says, "We go to sugarcane every year. A loan of 13 thousand rupees was taken from the lender due to the failure of the loan taken. So far 50 thousand rupees have been paid to the moneylender, but the moneylender did not release the possession of the farm by saying that "1500 rupees are still due" and after some confusion he has taken our farm in his own name. Due to similar threats to the boy, the boy has left the village, his whereabouts are unknown. Now I, my daughter-in-law and three relatives live in the village.

Women cane worker Smt. Kusumtai Munde from Marathwada Says..

"In one season of Ustodi, I changed places five times. There is no accommodation. Skull, wind, water. We sat holding those cloths. The wind came... the hail and the wind - we sat holding it like this. Someone said - go to school, someone said - take interest. The rhythms have become distorted my there. Is it true to change skulls five times? Where to do the bathroom? Tear those sarees, chop them, plant trees... Lay Kutana! From where I went there, it happened.

Smt. Tarabai Thorat from Beed

Explaining the toil required for water and the increase in labor due to it, he says, "If that owner does not have water, the other owner would take the man with him at 8-9 o'clock in the night. A man would descend into the well and fill the rest of the women. The lake cries on the water. If there is no one in someone's house, eat at twelve or one o'clock in the night. Then the tractor comes again early in the morning. Then wake up, cook, eat. Would there be comfort in the factory? To work again with two-two, three-three lakes.

Ashatai from Beed says, "There was trouble, so the amniotic sac was removed; But after the amniotic sac operation, back pain, neck pain, leg cramps, fatigue have increased. At the age of 35, one feels completely old, nothing works."

Shivaji Mane, sugarcane worker says.. It is necessary to understand the sufferings of sugarcane workers and take permanent measures. Government and factories should take concrete steps for the education of their families and children. A planned program should be implemented for this. Quote: Due to drought in our area, agriculture does not grow much due to lack of water. Due to this, sugarcane has to be cut for livelihood. We have been in this area since Dussehra. The family has run the factory by working whatever they can get. Children are also with us because of Corona. This is how our world is laid out in the open.

Tukaram Gholave- Sugarcane Harvesting Worker says.. Sugar cane workers from Aundha Nagnath taluka of Hingoli Lok Sabha constituency expressed their grief that no matter who the government is, our poverty will not end. Hundreds of sugarcane workers from the taluka leave for foreign countries and sometimes abroad with their children every year at the beginning of November. Banjara community has the highest proportion in this. These gangs of sugarcane workers move around to repay the levy (koyta) taken from the suitors. More than 2,000 workers from Aundha Nagnath taluka go for sugarcane crushing every year. A couple of sugarcane cutters earn 500 to 600 rupees per day. Between sugarcane cutting and transportation, women and school children are stranded. School children suffer huge educational losses as they have to migrate with their children. Earlier a seasonal hostel was run for the children of migrant families. But those hostels are closed for the last three to four years. The parents said that now there is no option but to take the children on a stretcher. The state government has established the People's Leader Gopinath Munde Sugarcane Workers Welfare Board for sugarcane workers. But actually not a single sugarcane worker has benefited from this corporation.

Conclusion

Sugar Belt fails to give these workers with health care because it does not make an effort to comprehend the social and economic conditions surrounding the migrant population. First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge the apparent probability that these workers require a variety of health services as a result of their employment cutting sugarcane. Second, the health of the workforce should be the responsibility of the sugar factory or the local public health services. If not, we will continue to hear about how these workers are unable to get health care when they get to their destination. To guarantee these workers' access to healthcare during the current health crisis, a bridge to such services is required. The other main worry is that workers rights must be protected by arranging the nature of work in terms of working conditions, working hours, weekly holidays, and other factors if workers are unable to obtain the necessary services due to a heavy workload. In addition, team contractors must to be provided with workers rights standards in order to prevent workers from being exploited financially. There have been other instances where contractors have refused to let workers visit the tehsil location to receive medical care because they believe the workers will flee to their home country. Less frequently, local public health workers attempt to vaccinate the children of sugarcane cutters, but their schedules prevent them from seeing each other very often. Thus, in order to preserve the health of these workers and their offspring, a comprehensive approach is needed. It is imperative to methodically examine if these workers receive health care in their place of workers or whether mobile health services will be as beneficial. The fact that local public health services are unaware of the seasonal migration of these workers and their involvement in hazardous work, that they are denied access to health care, that the reproductive rights of women who work as sugarcane cutters are compromised, and that contractors opened accounts of workers in a private hospital in order to financially exploit them—all of these realities give sugarcane cutters the opportunity to work long hours.

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