

The crucial highlights on sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra: Unorganized seasonal migrant laborers

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Abstract

Background: Sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra are the seasonal migrants who migrate from the drought prone area to sugar belt of Maharashtra. Most of the time people from poor economic status, lower castes and illiterate or with low education levels are involved in this occupation and consequently are involved in the seasonal migration.

Methods: an exploratory study conducted by taking in depth interviews of 20 women sugarcane cutters, informal talks with Mukadam's (team leaders) wives and observations made during the sugarcane harvesting season 2019

Results: as per the existing push-pull factors theory of migration, the drought conditions and consequences of it at the native places are the push factors and work availability at the sugar belt is the pull factor for seasonal migration of sugar cane cutters. Despite having the entire work burden beyond their physical limits and living in the miserable circumstances, these workers are the victims of exploitation by many ways. Due to their migration status they are thrown off from accessing state resources and services and hence their citizenship status is at stake. More importantly, these workers are not directly associated with the sugar factories therefore are liable to get exploited by the meddlers like Mukadam and contractors.

Conclusion: The exploitation of sugarcane cutters by the meddlers like Mukadam, Contractor, vehicle owner, and ultimately sugar factories is prevalent. The sufferings of these workers in terms of livelihoods, health, and education are sharply visible and could be understood by considering the socio-ecological circumstances under which their livelihoods are laid. Therefore, labor issues of sugarcane cutters are needed to be solved by taking concerted endeavors at the policy level.

Keywords: Women sugarcane cutters, unorganized labours, seasonal migration, sugar factories

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the basic labour issues of sugarcane cutter who are the seasonal migrants. After understanding this prototype of unorganized labour, one will again comprehend the fact that India is one of the worst places in the world for the unorganized workers. There are several theoretical and practical perspectives on to whom we call as unorganized labours. However, in a simple manner, one could say that a labor force that does everything and deprived of everything is called as unorganized labor; however there are some exceptional cases for it. It is not a new argument since several cases are illustrating the exploitation of workers in the unorganized sectors in India. By considering the severe extent of exploitation of these workers, few unorganized sectors or the industries have been repeatedly highlighted. These sectors involved the workers of brick kiln industries, construction workers, domestic workers, migrants' workers like sugarcane cutters and more.

More significantly, while discussing labour in the unorganized sector, there is a need to have separate argument on each different segment. It is because there are intersectionalities even in the unorganized labor sectors in terms of nature of the occupation, working conditions and the consequences of involvement in the particular occupation ((Abbas 2016; Akinola 2014; Bagchi & Singh 2012; Bansode 2013; Betancourt 2013; Bhagat 2009) ^[1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8].

This paper particularly identifies the situation of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra and the form of exploitation of these labors who are the seasonal migrants. In February 2019 the issues of sugarcane cutter came on the discussion board

where concern of compulsion of hysterectomies to women sugarcane cutters in the Beed district of Maharashtra has been raised at many levels. However, while understanding the issues sugar cane cutter from the different perspectives one must consider the aspect of seasonal migration which is intensifying and influencing challenges of these workers.

This paper probably gives the answers of questions related with the seasonal migration of sugar cane cutters, nature of contracts and roles of *tolī mukhiya* (team leader) and tractor or truck owner (contractor), nature of work from the gender perspectives, working hours, work conditions and services provided by the sugar factories, livelihood conditions of these workers, wages and gender differences, and other issues etc.

2 Methods

A qualitative study has conducted by taking the in-depth interviews of 20 women sugarcane cutters, informal talks with Mukadam's wives (team leaders) and observations were made. The interviews were conducted in February 2019 during the sugarcane harvesting season (October to March).

The area where this study was conducted is a rural parts of Indapur tahsil of Pune district of Maharashtra, India. The women included in this study were working for both private as well as for the cooperative sugar factories. To conduct the interviews of women semi-structured interview guide was prepared that included the questions related to the process and reasons of migration, socioeconomic status, nature of contract with the sugar factories, role of Mukadam and tractor owner, nature of work, work and living conditions, wages and gender differences, benefits and other services to

these workers and their issues as a sugarcane worker and as a seasonal migrant. The data was conducted until the achievement of saturation in the information. Data were analyzed manually by making the themes as per the questions asked to the participants.

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study could be linked with the pull-push theory of migration and socio ecological theory. It is because drought conditions and its post consequences are the push factors and work availability at the sugar belt could be considered as pull factor for the seasonal migration of these workers. Further, after seasonal migration, the circumstances in which these workers are living are directly impacting their livelihoods, education, health and their citizenship status. Therefore, the status of sugarcane cutters at the destined places in terms of livelihoods, education and health could be seen through the framework of socio ecological theory.

2.2 Ethical considerations: All the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and consent was taken from every participant before conducting the interview. As almost all participants were illiterate, therefore well written consent was read out a loud in the local language of workers. Confidentiality and anonymity of the information was maintained by hiding the identities of the participants.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Socio demographic features

All the 20 women migrated with their families from the drought prone areas of Maharashtra for the sugarcane cutting season. They migrated from the districts such Beed, Dhule, Jalgoan, and Nashik. Among the 20 women 13 were from the *bhil* tribe of Maharashtra, and the rest were from the lower caste groups such as *matang*, *vanjari*, and *wadar*. Participants included in the study were from the age group 16 to 30. All the participants married before the age of 18 since early marriage is the common practice among the sugarcane cutters. Out of 20 women participants 16 were illiterate and rest attended school up to primary to secondary level of education. The reason why sugarcane cutters are delinked with education is the seasonal migration. No education or lack of education has an influence on their cultural practice of early marriage.

3.2 Seasonal migration and causes

In the state of Maharashtra, the division of western Maharashtra has a reorganization of the sugar belt of Maharashtra state. Sugarcane cutters are the people who are migrating to the sugar belt of Maharashtra from the drought-prone districts of Maharashtra. Many times it has been said that people migrating from the drought-prone areas are poor, landless and they migrate because of drought. This argument is true in the larger intellect but it can't be applied for all people involved in the sugarcane cutting. Rather it is required to include few more different perspectives of people on the reasons for migration to the sugar belt.

At the time of interviews what women have answered is very different and surprising. Most of them said that they migrated because of the consequences of drought conditions which are never been highlighted. For instance, "there is no drinking water in my village and can't afford to buy it. Or "have land but don't have a water irrigation system. Further,

the participants have answered that there is no work availability and they can't meet the hunger in their native place.

Overall study participants have mentioned drought, no drinking water, and work unavailability at the native places; therefore, they are migrating to the sugar belt. Along with these reasons, people also migrate to earn money to build houses, to gather amount for the marriage ceremony of sons and daughters or for any other execution of their aspiration. It does not mean that sugarcane cutting is benefitting them economically. It is all about getting the bulk of the money at once and in advance. Further, some people migrated to get the experience of sugarcane cutting just because they don't have anything to do in their native place.

3.3 Sugarcane cutting as a work

After migration, these people perform activities related to sugar cane harvesting. Those activities probably include cutting, collecting and binding the bundles, collecting the shoots, lifting and carrying the bundles of sugarcane. There are three types of groups/teams among the sugarcane cutters, i.e. head centric, bullock cart centric, and the personal group which probably involves pairs of relatives or husband-wife where they directly make a contract with sugar factory.

In case of head centric people have to perform cutting, binding the bundles, lifting, carrying the bundles on head towards the tractor and truck, climbing with the loads and more. While in the bullock cart centric groups people have to cut, bind the bundles, and lift in the cart. After that bullock are carrying sugarcane towards the truck or tractor or sometimes bullock cart is used to carry sugarcane towards the sugar factory. However, this work is extremely laborious and requires extensive energy. In the local language, one may say that the worker needs to pour his or her blood while harvesting sugarcane. Even after working so hard these workers are liable to get economically exploited by the Mukadums and contractors.

To understand their exploitation from labor's perspective, one needs to understand important threads that are involved and are responsible factors for the exploitation of these workers. In addition, high rate of illiteracy and low levels of education among these workers are also responsible for increasing their exploitation and vulnerabilities

3.4 Role of Mukadum and tractor owners and the contract

After the seasonal migration, these people are getting involved in the activities of sugarcane cutting. While comprehending the issues of sugarcane cutters one has to understand the role of two meddlers that are Mukadum and vehicle owner.

Before getting into the sugarcane cuttings there is need to form a group of pairs (*toli*). One group could be involved with 5 to 15 (*koyatas*) pairs of husband or wife. If there is a single person without a partner then that person will be called as half pair (*ardhe koyate*) and accordingly, people will be paid. Mukadum or contractor gives money in the bulk (50 thousand to one lakh) to each pair in advance. Before migrating towards the sugar belt, Mukadum forms a group and make deals with the tractor owner or with the sugar factory. Mukadum regulates and controls the whole group and plans the group's activities. For this work, he gets an extra amount (commission) 25 to 30 rupees per ton of

sugarcane. Even more, tractor owner and Mukadam decides rate to cut the tone of sugarcane. As per the deal, it varies from group to group.

In many cases, these workers are in debt and even after this rigorous work they are not able to come out of the debt taken from the lender (vehicle owner or Mukadam). Therefore, they have to come back for the next season regardless of their wish to work. More importantly, since these workers are illiterate then they are more prone to financial exploitation by the Mukadam and vehicle owner. The most important fact is this that these workers are only aware that Mukadam is regulating the team and they have to follow what he says. But they are not aware of the kind of contract he makes with the tractor or truck owner.

After understanding nature of work and groups of sugarcane cutters one can say that Mukadam and the owners of the tractor are taking the money from the toils of labors which is unjust and unfair to these workers. In some groups, it has been reported that there are some Mukadams (team leaders) who don't even migrate but make the groups and regulate the team from the native place. Still they are getting amount in form of commission which could be considered the economic exploitation of these workers. Therefore, instead of this Mukhiya system, there should be direct dealing of workers with the factory.

3.5 Citizenship status and experiences of women

A reality begins when Ratna says "what shall i tell you? Nobody considers that sugarcane cutters are also humans. Only we know what we are going through, no one is counting us when it comes to giving services. We don't know whether sugarcane cutting is good or bad but it is just about escaping from buying water at the native place during the drought conditions". Further, the situation becomes even more worsen when many women sugarcane cutters like Ratna say that "our poverty has no shame and our stomach or hunger has no shame and we can't control it".

From the above sentences of women sugarcane cutters, one could realize that it is very disturbing to hear people blaming their biological needs such as food and water. Therefore, seasonal migration is putting the citizenship of these people at risk by restricting them from accessing the state resources and the services.

3.6 Living conditions

Living conditions of the sugar cane cutters could be understood by looking at the circumstances in which they are living. There are few sugar factories that have provided kutchra or pakka houses to the few workers who are bullock cart centric and carrying sugarcane towards the factory. Although, the people who are head centric and some bullock cart centric have to live on the farm where there is no housing. They have to make the tent of plastic sheet or roof of the sugarcane shoots. Most of the time there is no electricity. In fewer cases, there is only one common electric bulb for the whole group. When it comes to drinking water they have to drink untreated drinking water from the farms. If they are fetching it from the other private tap then they have to face abuse over there. It highlights their struggle for the drinking water even after the migration. It will be worthy to mention that there is no provision of constructed toilets for these workers. Even if tractor owner and the sugar factories are aware of all the issues these workers still there have no major interventions been made to solve the issues

related to the living conditions of these workers.

3.7 Gender and sugarcane cutting

As per the responses of participants and observations, it could be said that there is no separate salary for men and women. It is for one pair (koyata). However, women are the victims of extra work pressure since they have to perform the activities such as binding the bundles, collecting the shoots, lifting and carrying the bundles on the head toward the parked vehicle sometimes cutting the sugarcane along with the domestic activities. While carrying the bundles sometimes they have to wait for a longer time with loads on their heads. Gender in this occupation is important because women are not getting their salary separately and they are just working with their partners. Whatever money a pair will receive will be in the hands of male or husband of that woman worker and she will not be able to become the decision-maker of money that she earned. The situation becomes worse when the partner is an alcoholic. This situation of women sugarcane cutters demands that woman should get her share of money as she is equally working for the sugarcane harvesting.

3.8 Health and the workers

It has been reported by the study participants that in case these workers need the health services there is only one choice in front of them which is a private doctor decided by the contractor. Tractor owner opens an account on the name of each pair in the private hospital in case of worker is unwell and needs health services. Therefore, it could be said that workers are expending on their health through their own pockets and it is economic burden on them. As the workers of the sugar factory, they should supposed to get health services free and on time or factory could help them to get access in the public health services at the destination since it is not easy for them to access public health services because of their migration status.

As informed by the women workers that tractor owner opens an account in the private hospital. Indirectly, it is a kind of enforcement on the worker to approach the particular hospital. At the end of sugarcane season, tractor owner and Mukadam are reducing the amount of that has been expended in the hospital for each worker from the salary of that particular workers. Now it could be questioned that why these people are not getting insurance or free health services. Why these workers have to pay from their own pockets? And why tractor owners are opening an account in the private hospital?.

More importantly, while discussing the interference of mukadam and tractor or truck owner in the health of workers, it is imperative to note that there are no fixed hours and timing for the work. It could be more than 12 hours. Even more, it has been said that there is the provision of the weekly holiday for these workers but it is not followed. Therefore, workers are not getting time to access the health services.

On the other side, in very critical conditions even if a worker or the pair of worker decides to take leave then Mukadam and tractor owners are taking benefit by reducing up to 600 for a person and 1000 to 1200 rupees from the salary of one pair. Now it's very unjust to cut that much amount from salary because one person can earn up to 300 to 350 per day. Therefore, there is need to put regulations on such kinds of unfair acts of Mukadam or contractors.

3.9 Other issues

Along with labour issues of sugarcane cutters it would be important to highlight that sugarcane cutters are migrating along with their children. This is the reason where sugar cane cutters are away from the education and the cycle continues in case of their children. To deal with this issue or to reduce the school dropout rate of these children Maharashtra government started the shakharshala for such kind of children but this model has failed. Still, the children of sugarcane cutters are missing their school, or they have to leave the school because of the seasonal migration along with their parents towards the sugar belt of Maharashtra.

4. Conclusion

Seasonal migration of sugarcane cutters is taking place because of Pull-push factors where drought conditions and the consequences of it are being the push factors and work availability at the sugar belt is the pull factor. Further after migration socio ecological factors at the destination are determining the status of sugar cane cutters in terms of economy, health, education.

The exploitation sugarcane cutter by the meddlers like Mukadam, Contractor, Vehicle owner, and ultimately sugar factories is prevalent. The suffering of these workers sharply visible and could be understood by considering the circumstances under which their livelihoods are laid. If labors are not getting their share of money even after the toil or hardship then it falls under the violation of basic labor rights. Further, there is need to conduct more research to answer the questions related to form of indebtedness, regulations of salaries and role of sugar factories, extent of exploitation of these workers and their other issues that are needed to be solved by taking concerted endeavors at the policy level.

5. Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge all the participants involved in the study even after their busy schedule of work. Special thanks to the guide Dr Bal Rakshase for the kind support and encouragement

6. References

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