

## PROCESS OF SUGARCANE HARVESTING BY MIGRANT LABOURERS

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*Abstract: Migration plays an important role in the distribution of population of any society and influences the growth of work force or laoburers. It bears influence on the socio-economic changes among the migrated workers. Most of these workers migrate because of necessity rather than a choice. These migrated labourers can earn more and might get better education for their children. Moreover, large number of children are being affected by seasonal labour migration. Children who are left behind or who migrate with their parents face many problems in terms of education and health care. They also suffer from various psycho-social issues are exposed to exploitation. Seasonal migration and employment of destination have a number of effects on the sugarcane harvesters as well as on their dependents. Such consequences have both positive as well as negative effects on them. The consequence on sugarcane harvesters is both economic and social in nature. From social viewpoint seasonal migration can spark off social and educational changes in the family of sugarcane harvesters. To meet their needs and achieve better future they have to work longer and harder. These workers are not covered by any of the existing labour laws and legislations. Hence they face the problem of job security and social protection. They do not have stable employment and employee and employer relationship does not exist formerly.*

### **Introduction**

In the factory areas we cannot find large number of sugarcane harvesting labourers to work. Consequently innumerable sugarcane harvest labourers are being migrated from the state of Maharashtra. They migrate seasonally during crushing period every year and work in different sugar factory areas. These labourers suffer from cycles of excessive seasonality of employment, who do not have stable and durable avenues of employment. These sugarcane harvesters receive

poor working conditions and get wages much below. These workers do not receive sufficient attention from the Trade Unions, which normally act in favour of regular workers.

Most of the agricultural labourers, have either no land or very little land derives livelihood by wage employment. Most of them live in rural areas and came from the lower rung and represents an unorganized part of rural population. They are unorganized and live without any stable means of livelihood. They are socially and economically backward and poorest section of the rural hierarchy. Their basic problems are low income and lack of continuous employment. As a result every year towards the end of monsoon season so many landless labourers and small farmers with their family leave their poorly irrigated land behind and travel to the places where sugarcane grown in abundance. Arriving near the places of the factories, each family setup a shelter, farming tent village that will remain for months while harvesting continues. The cycle of seasonal and informal work of sugarcane harvesters seems to be perpetuating.

Harvesting is a process of cutting and gathering of mature crop from the field. Today as a result of technological advancement we find various kinds of harvesting machines in the market viz., onion harvester, paddy harvester, crop harvester, potato harvester, tea harvester, wheat harvester and sugarcane harvester. These machines are highly efficient and can work at a high speed. It can harvest the crop without damaging the crop. Sugarcane harvesting is an agricultural machinery use to harvest and process sugarcane.

But in India rural conditions harvesting of sugarcane is done manually with the help of human labour. It is called manual harvesting, which is dominant in developing countries like India. It is more intensive as compared to machine harvesting. This manual harvesting is time consuming, and the cost required for harvesting is also more. But the machine method cannot be evitable for small scale cultivators as it is financially not feasible. Therefore the present study focused on manual sugarcane harvesting in Gokak taluk of Karnataka.

### **Review of Literature**

Teerink (1995) studied the seasonal migrants from Maharashtra, who migrated to work in sugar factories in Gujarat. For them prior commitment to seasonal work in Gujarat sugar harvest provided a means of subsistence, through the advances paid, which contributed to their indebtedness and dependency on the employer. Seasonal migrants usually leave their home after

harvesting rain crops and sowing winter crops and return villages before the next summer season. They are of lower education level and lower income from agriculture.

Sundari S. (2005) is of the opinion that the main push factor for migration is lack of employment opportunities in the place of origin and pull factor was a favourable employment environment in the destination areas. Hence, seasonal migration has helped migrant households to avoid hunger, starvation and death. This is true with sugarcane harvesters who seasonally migrate for work.

Kasar D.V. (1992) studied the seasonal migration of agricultural labourers. He has identified the important factors behind the seasonal migration, engaged in cutting and transport of sugarcane during crushing time of sugar factories. Such seasonal migration depends upon the involvement of middleman, who normally exploits poor, illiterate and fragmented agricultural labourers. The problems are aggravated by involvement of children and women, who are deprived of the basic facilities of education and health. The seasonal migration has significant affect on the annual gross family employment of migrant households, as the migrants were indebted than the non-migrants.

Chatterjee C.B. (2006) said that seasonal migration normally suffers from various risks or vulnerability like low socio-economic status with no access to health care or social service, mental and emotional vulnerability and low lack of provision of education, and health etc. These migrants spend several months every year at work sites under difficult conditions. Their children also put to employment.

Bagachi S. and Singh, M.K., (2012) said that “Labour contractors viz., Mukudams provide cash advances to poor families in villages during the lean post-monsoon months, in return for which families pledge their labour for the coming season. Migration begin around October-November, with migrants spending the next 6-11 months at the work rites and then returning to their villages before the next monsoon. Once the monsoon is over they again prepare to leave their homes. This cyclical migration is typical for thousands of poor rural families in many parts of India”. Particularly the women and children suffer in lot in this migration pattern. They develop a greater fright of discontinuity and transition, which results in various negative psychological consequences. They are not paid full wages, because contractors or Mukudams deduct a part of wage.

**Objectives**

1. To evaluate the situation of the seasonally migrated sugarcane harvesters.
2. To study the process of recruitment of seasonally migrating sugarcane harvesters.
3. To examine the problems and difficulties faced by seasonally migrated sugarcane harvesters.

**Methodology**

The present study is conducted according to the methods of sociological investigation among seasonally migrated sugarcane harvesters of Gokak taluka of Belagavi of Karnataka state. This article is prepared on the basis of primary data collected from various respondents through field work. This study is conducted in the year 2022 February and March along with the 25 final year Sociology Department students of Government First Grade College, Ramdurg of Belagavi district. Each student interviewed 05 migrated sugar cane harvesters.

**Results and Analysis****Migration and recruitment to the factory**

The reasons of migration are embedded with lack of employment opportunities and poor condition of agricultural labourers. These agricultural labourers perceive that seasonal migration is a tool, which can solve their financial problems. They think that seasonal migration can escape them from poverty and unemployment. Therefore every years majority of the sugarcane harvesters migrate from Maharashtra state to this region. Migration of workers is mainly due to either the 'push' factors or 'pull' factors. Most of them opined that lack of employment opportunities at their place of origin and surrounding places is the most important reason for their seasonal migration to this area. The poor migrant labourers initially suffered with unemployment problem at their place of origin and then they have consulted their peers, friends, relatives and brokers for pursuing employment opportunity. Their main aim is to get any type of employment to earn money. Hence information regarding reasons for recruiting to the present factory area is also presented.

**Table 1****Distribution of the harvesters by migration and recruitment to the factory**

| Basis of selection of factory | Migration   |              | Total       |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|                               | Migrated    | Not migrated |             |
| Self decision                 | 03 (2.5)    | -            | 03 (2.4)    |
| Factory officers offered      | 35 (29.1)   | 03 (60.0)    | 38 (30.4)   |
| By brokers (Mukudams)         | 80 (66.7)   | 02 (40.0)    | 82 (65.6)   |
| Co-workers suggested          | 02 (1.7)    | -            | 02 (1.6)    |
| Other reasons                 | -           | -            | -           |
| Total                         | 120 (100.0) | 05 (100.0)   | 125 (100.0) |

From the above table it is understood that large number of sugarcane harvesters are migrated from other places. The labour requirement for the factory depends upon its crushing capacity, duration of crushing season etc. Hence sugar factories employ seasonal workers for harvesting and transport of sugarcane from the field to the sugar factories. This work is labour intensive and needs large number of workers during the crushing season. Hence, of all the harvesters 120 (96.0) workers are migrated and only 05 (4.0) harvesters are local labourers.

Further an attempt is made to understand motivational aspect of recruitment to this factory in relation with migration. The study revealed that there is no significant relation between the migration and motivational aspect of recruitment of the sugarcane harvesters to the present factory. Among all the sugarcane harvesters some of the harvesters came to the study area on the call of factory officers i.e. 38 (30.4), 82 (65.6) sugarcane harvesters reported that they are being joined to the present factory by the brokers or Mukudams. However, 03 (2.4) sugarcane harvesters came to work here with own interest, whereas 02 (1.6) workers came to this place with the help of other co-workers.

In this way during the harvest season the sugarcane factories either independently or with the help of Mukudams have to go through. The representatives or officials of the sugar factories go to the native places of sugarcane harvesters and pay them advance money independently or through Mukudams. With the payment of this advance money the recruiting procedure is fulfilled by the factories.

### Reasons for selection of this factory

Sugarcane harvesters are neglected workers in the sugar industry. In most of the sugar factories there is no direct relation between sugarcane harvesters and sugar factories. It is because most of the sugar factories procure sugarcane harvesters through the Mukudams or contractors. Therefore here an attempt is made to know the reasons for selection of sugar factories by the sugarcane harvesters.

**Table 2**

**Distribution of the harvesters by reasons of selection of the particular factory**

| Reasons                    | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Good salary                | 20        | 16.0       |
| Other facilities           | 01        | 0.8        |
| Permanent working factory  | 38        | 30.4       |
| Don't know other factories | 02        | 1.6        |
| Brokers (Mukudams) joined  | 64        | 51.2       |
| Others                     | -         | -          |
| Total                      | 125       | 100.0      |

The data in the above table showed the various reasons of joining the present sugar factory. Some of the sugarcane harvesters of the present study have been working in the area of particular factory permanently since many years. Therefore they have selected this factory, i.e. 38 (30.4). Other 84 (51.2) sugarcane harvesters joined this factory area only because of interest of the Mukudams. These migrant sugarcane harvesters took advance money from these Mukudams for sustaining agriculture in their native places and other purposes. Hence, they joined this factory as per Mukudams' wish. 20 (16.0) sugarcane harvesters opined that only because of better wages they joined the particular factory. Remaining 02 (1.6) respondents don't know other factories to work and 01 (0.8) respondents said some other facilities provided by the factory and land owners of the factory area, which made them to join this sugar factory to work as sugarcane harvester.

### Getting advance amount

Many times these sugarcane harvesters are forced to spend more amount than their earnings. Burdened with their old loans and advances increase in expenses of children's

education, marriage, large number of dependents seeped themselves deep in debts. At that time they borrow Money from various sources. To repay this type of borrowed loans and for agricultural purpose these sugarcane harvesters take advance money from the Mukudams and factory officials. Therefore the major factor responsible for the seasonal migration of these sugarcane harvesters is to repay advance to Mukudams and factory.

**Table 3**

**Distribution of the harvesters by getting advance amount and source of advance**

| Sources               | Advance     |                       | Total       |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|
|                       | Got advance | Not taken any advance |             |
| By factory            | 55 (45.5)   | -                     | 55 (44.0)   |
| By brokers (Mukudams) | 66 (54.5)   | -                     | 66 (52.8)   |
| Others                | -           | -                     | -           |
| Not applicable        | -           | 04 (100.0)            | 04 (3.8)    |
| Total                 | 121 (100.0) | 04 (100.0)            | 125 (100.0) |

The above Table 3 provides information regarding getting advance amount by the sugarcane harvesters in relation to sources of advances. Most of the sugarcane harvesters think that seasonal migration to sugarcane farms is an alternative source of extra income. They opined that they have no any other ways but to migrate for sugarcane harvesting to repay the advances they have taken from factories and Mukudams. After the monsoon harvesting in their native places, they migrate towards factory areas for additional income. Of all the sugarcane harvesters in the study 121 (96.8) have taken advance money. Only 04 (3.2) sugarcane harvesters have not taken any advance amount by factories and Mukudams.

Among all the sugarcane harvesters 55 (44.0) have taken advance money from the factory, whereas 66 (52.8) sugarcane harvesters obtained advance amount from Mukudams. For these sugarcane harvesters seasonal migration towards sugarcane forms is for better remuneration. For these sugarcane harvesters the decision to migrate is another mechanism to earn a living for the whole family owing to various economic crises in their native areas and bringing their children to the place of work is economically inevitable also.

### Years of experience as sugarcane harvesters

Harvesting is a process of cutting and gathering of mature sugarcane crop from the field. In the present study sugarcane harvesting is done manually with the help of the labourers. The experience of sugarcane harvesting by the workers proves their talent in doing the work. Quality of work can be identified through the professionalism, which accrued by virtue of doing the same work repeatedly. For the purpose of this study, the experience gained by the sugarcane harvesters has been classified into four categories viz., below 5 years experience, 6-8 years experience, and 9-10 years and above 10 years experience.

**Table 4**

**Distribution of the harvesters by migration and years of experience**

| Years of experience | Migration   |              | Total       |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
|                     | Migrated    | Not migrated |             |
| 1-5 Years           | 19 (15.7)   | 01 (25.0)    | 20 (16.0)   |
| 6-8 Years           | 64 (52.9)   | 03 (75.0)    | 67 (53.4)   |
| 9-10 Years          | 37 (30.6)   | -            | 37 (29.6)   |
| Above 10 years      | 01 (0.8)    | -            | 01 (0.8)    |
| Total               | 121 (100.0) | 04 (100.0)   | 125 (100.0) |

The Table 4 indicated the experience of the sugarcane harvesters as sugarcane cutters. From the above table it is understood that most of the workers are experienced. The sample of sugarcane harvesters consists 30 (16.6) had below 05 years experience. 67 (53.6) sugarcane harvesting workers had 6-8 years experience. 37 (23.6) labourers had 9-10 years experience and only 01 (0.8) respondents had more than 10 years of experience. These workers are satisfied with their work in the farm.

### Nature of work

Generally these migratory sugarcane harvesters are of three categories.

- i. These are the labourers cutting and transporting cane directly to the sugar factories, who are known as 'cartmen'.



- ii. These are the sugarcane harvesters cutting and transporting cane in bullock carts to a centre from where it is further transported to the factories by trucks and tractors. They are called 'cart centre'.
- iii. The third type of sugarcane harvesters is cutting the sugarcane and loading the trucks and tractors, who are called 'Koyata's'.

The transportation of sugarcane through bullock carts takes place within the radius of ten miles from the factory. The harvesters are living instruments working for the factory to handle the dead instrument called Koyata. But here in sugarcane harvesting these living workers themselves are known as Koyatas. Keeping these aspects in mind it is tried to know nature of work of the present sugarcane harvesters.

**Table 5**

**Distribution of the respondents by nature of work**

| Nature of work  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Cutting sugarcane and carrying on own vehicle         | 14        | 11.2       |
| Cutting sugarcane and carrying on up to nearest place | 20        | 16.0       |
| Cutting sugarcane and loading only                    | 91        | 72.8       |
| Total   | 125       | 100.0      |

The data in the above table revealed the nature of work of the sugarcane harvesters. Majority of the sugarcane harvesters in the study area are working as Koyatas, i.e. cutting the sugarcane and loading to the vehicles. 91 (72.8), other 30 (16.0) sugarcane harvesters work is cutting the sugarcane in the farms and carrying that cane on bullock carts upto roadside, where trucks and tractors awaiting for loading. Remaining 14 (11.2) sugarcane harvesters are cutting the sugarcane and directly transporting to the sugar factories on their own carts, who harvest very near to sugar factories.

In this way the cartmen have to participate in sugarcane cutting, sugarcane leaves cleaning, binding of bundles of cane and cane is transported by their bullock carts from sugarcane farm to factory site. Similarly, cart centre labourers also participate in all sugarcane harvesting activities and carrying the bundles either on their heads or bullock carts from

sugarcane farms to specific distance according to the opinions of the drivers and mukudams. Remaining sugarcane harvesters, who are called Koyatas, engage in sugarcane cutting, cleaning the dry leaves and binding the bundle of canes.

### Average working hours

When the sugarcane harvesting work is observed few of the sugarcane harvesters are also working during the night. It includes bundling of cane and loading to trucks and tractors. Generally these sugarcane harvesters wakeup early morning between 4 and 5 am. The women workers prepare food before leaving their huts for work. Most of the harvesters do not take even a cup of tea or having eaten nothing before leaving their huts. Moreover they don't have time to take morning bath also. These sugarcane harvesters reach the place of work before 7 am and going to work during the day. On arrival each Toli is allotted particular work to be done during the day. The Mukudam observes that each Toli gets equal share of the work. Such equal distribution of work is strictly observed because the daily output of the Koyata is determined per Toli and not for each unit separately. The total wages are divided evenly among all the Tolis of the day. Therefore information regarding average working hours of the workers per day is collected.

**Table 6**

**Distribution of the harvesters by average working hour per day**

| Hours per day     | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| Less than 6 hours | -         | -          |
| 6-8 hrs           | 29        | 23.2       |
| 8-12 hrs          | 96        | 76.8       |
| More than 12 hrs  | -         | -          |
| Total             | 125       | 100.0      |

The cutting of sugarcane takes place only during the day time. But so far as transportation is concerned there are no fixed hours of work for loading. The loading of vehicle can take place at any time of day or night. Sometimes the labourers return to the field to load sugarcane even in the night. Thus the sugarcane cutting work goes on for 6-8 hours continuously during each day. After that only they take bath at noon and take their meals which are brought with them. Sometimes breakfast is being provided by land owners. In the present study 96 (76.8) sugarcane

harvesters reported that they work 8-12 hours per day, whereas other 29 (23.2) workers average working hours per day are 6-8 hours. No respondent works more than 12 hours per day. After the work they return to their huts and sleep in front of these huts. The next morning, the working day begins a usual.

### Criteria for fixation of payment

In sugarcane harvesting the payment of the workers is fixed on various aspects like number of Koyata, number of gangs, number of tons harvesting, number of workers in Toli, workers' physical ability etc. Therefore it is tried to understand the criteria for fixation of payments of sugarcane harvesters.

**Table 7**

#### Distribution of the harvesters by opinion regarding criteria for fixation of payment

| Criteria                  | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Number of Koyata          | 03        | 2.4        |
| Number of gangs           | -         | -          |
| Number of tons harvesting | 122       | 91.6       |
| Number of workers         | -         | -          |
| Workers' physical ability | -         | -          |
| Total                     | 125       | 100.0      |

The data in the above table indicated that the wage is fixed on the basis of number of tons sugarcane harvest. The total amount is distributed among all the workers involved. Of all the sugarcane harvesters 122 (97.6) workers opined that their wage is fixed on the basis of tons of sugarcane harvested in the field. But only 03 (2.4) harvesters said that their payment is fixed on the basis of Koyata. However the quantity of sugarcane cutting is the main criteria for fixation of labours payment.

### Mode of payment

A contractor or Mukudam has to pay the wages to each sugarcane harvester employed by him as seasonal worker. The Mukudams or officials shall fix wage periods in respect of which wage shall be payable and no wage period shall exceed one month. Wages of every worker must be given within three days from the end of the wage period, which may be one week or a fortnight and a month. All payments shall be paid on a working day at the worksite and during

working time. If the work is completed before the expected period, final payment shall be paid within 48 hours of the lost working day.

**Table 8**

**Distribution of the harvesters by the mode of their payment**

| Mode of payment  | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|-----------|------------|
| Daily            | -         | -          |
| Weekly           | 120       | 96.0       |
| Monthly          | 03        | 2.4        |
| Whenever we need | 02        | 1.6        |
| Total            | 125       | 100.0      |

The above Table 8 gives information pertaining to the mode of wage payment to the sugarcane harvesters. An attempt is here made to know the mode of payments i.e. whether the wages are paid regularly or not by the Mukudams or officials of the factory. Information about the different pay periods collected during field work appears in the above table revealed that as many as 120 (96.0) sugarcane harvesters are found to be receiving their wages every week. 03 (2.4) respondents received wage payment on the end of the month. Then only a negligible proportion of the sugarcane harvesters 02 (1.6) reported they get payment whenever they need. However, these seasonal sugarcane workers were already paid advances, weekly that were adjusted at the wage period.

**Frequent change of factory**

Change of factory refers to change of employer or mukudam only without any corresponding change in the nature of work. The reason for change of factory indicates his level of aspiration or ambition in his work and a negative attitude towards factory or mukudam. Most of the workers reported low wages as the reason for changing a factory. Hence an attempt is made here to understand frequent change of factory by sugarcane harvesters.

**Table 9**

**Distribution of the harvesters by frequent change of factory**

| Change of factory | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| Once              | 27        | 21.6       |
| Twice             | 74        | 59.2       |

|                                   |     |       |
|-----------------------------------|-----|-------|
| Three times                       | 15  | 12.0  |
| This is permanent factory         | 06  | 4.8   |
| For the first time I came to work | 03  | 2.4   |
| Total                             | 125 | 100.0 |

The study revealed that most of the sugarcane harvesters of the present study have changed working factories for two times. Among all the sample harvesters 74 (50.2) harvesters said that they have changed their working two times. Since last few years they are working in Karnataka only. Other 27 (21.6) harvesters said that they have changed their working factory one time. 15 (12.0) sugarcane harvesters have changed their working factory three times. 06 (4.8) harvesters have not changed their factory. They are working in the same factory since the beginning. Other 03 (2.4) sugarcane harvesters came for this work for the first time.

### Conclusion

Thus there seems to be no end to sugarcane grower's misery. Karnataka state has been witnessing frequent agitations by cane growers. The state has yet to see a sugarcane policy on a scientific basis for fixing the minimum support price. The sugarcane growers blame the sugar factories, the owners of factories in turn blame the government, and the government feels that the owners of the factories and the growers are both are at fault or not coming to consensus. Hence, it completes a vicious circle. Thus it has created discontentment between cane farmers, sugar factories and the state government. The elected representatives on their part keep using the sugarcane pricing issue to fuel anger among the sugarcane growers to keep the vote bank intact. Hence, there seems to be no permanent solution in sight.

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