

## Problem of Migrants in Maharashtra Sugar Fields

### Why in news?

The High Court of Bombay has recently taken suo motu cognisance of the intra-State workforce exploitation who have migrated from the drought-affected Marathwada to the sugar-belt region of western Maharashtra.

### Status of Sugarcane Production

- **Global level** - India is the world's top producer and consumer of sugar.
- India is the 2nd largest exporter of sugar in the world after Brazil.
- **National level** - Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh are the leading sugar producing States in India.
- **Maharashtra's status** - According to the Maharashtra Sugar Commissioner, in 2022-23, the net area under sugar cane was 1.487 million hectares.
- There were 203 crushing factories in the State that has the capacity to produce 138 lakh metric tons of sugar.
- Maharashtra has set a record for itself by producing 137.28 lakh tonnes of sugar in 2021-22, which is nearly 31 lakh tonnes more than the previous year.
- In 2022-23 the State stands next to Brazil in terms of production.

### Why there is significant migration in Maharashtra?

- **Prolonged unemployment**- After sowing rabi crops, millions of small and marginal peasants of the Marathwada region migrate to the sugar-belt districts to work in cane harvesting and factories.
- **Debt**- Due to unemployment, crop failure farmers get caught up in debt trap, they migrate for better employment opportunities to pay off the debt.
- **Prolonged drought** - Marathwada region is a water scarce region which forces the peasants to migrate.
- **Crop failure**- Due to drought conditions it results in repeated crop failure which makes the peasants to migrate.
- **Dependence on Mukadam**- It is an exploitative structure of *recruiting migrant workers* in the sugar cane industry.
- The Mukadam is a man with political influence who has a contract with sugar factories to supply '**Koytas**' (**labour couples**) and takes an advance to pay workers.
- The Mukadam system assures sugar factories a supply of a large volume of temporary, cheap, reliable, and efficient workforce.

- It is a technology aided application launched in 2022 by the Maharashtra Government.
- It is said to be the first of its kind initiative in the country which initially focused seasonal migrants in the tribal districts.
  - To enumerate and track children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers at source and destination areas.
  - To ensure nutrition, immunisation and early childhood care, and continuity of the Integrated Child Development Services

### What are the issues faced by interstate migrant workers?

- **Lack of awareness-** The interstate migrants are exploited by the mukadam with cheap wages, sexual abuse etc.,
- **Inadequate data-** The data especially of women and children is invisible and unenumerated and it blocks the framing of policies for seasonal migrants.
- **Failure of Migration Tracking System** - It failed to create a comprehensive picture of seasonally migrating families, their current employment status, wage structure and entitlement coverage.
- **Women health-** They are engaged in vigorous work such as headload cane bundles that adversely impacts their body, causing musculoskeletal disorders and several gynaecological issues.

*In the Beed district of Maharashtra, the women are forced to get a hysterectomy to avoid complications of pregnancies and periods while working in the fields.*

- **Early marriages-** At 12-13 years of age, girls are married off because the field employs only couples.
- **Gender based violence-** Many studies have reported recurring violence and sexual harassment cases linked to the Mukadam and male workers.
- **Child labour-** The children accompany their parents to sugar cane fields and there is no sufficient alternative schooling models.

### What lies ahead?

- **Periodic databank-** A time bound enumerating exercise is critical to create a databank for seasonal migrants that is credible.
- **Revise MTS-** Expand its scope that can be used in the State's sugar belt and other seasonal migration corridors.
- **Gender equality-** There is a need to address the plight of migrant women workers to ensuring their health, safety and employment in the sugar cane labour market.
- **Strict implementation of NEP 2020-** There should be strict adherence to National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which emphasises equitable and inclusive education for all.
- **Access to justice-** There is a need to guarantee safe and healthy working and living conditions.
- **Political will-** There is a need to create a favourable legal environment to protect the rights of migrants by strengthening the labour administration.
- Employment should be generated through schemes like MNRGA and the government

should find the solution to the problem of water scarcity in the drought prone region.

- **Promote Amrit Kal Vision-** Its aim is to an empowered and inclusive economy to fulfil all its humanitarian obligations.

*The sugar which sweetens the lives of people, in reality, bitters for those who toil in producing it.*

## References

1. [The Hindu| Bitter truth on Maharashtra cane field](#)
2. [Economic Times| Maharashtra sugarcane production](#)
3. [The Hindu| Sugar belt shocker](#)

