Socio-Economic Realities of Sugarcane Migrant Workers in Maharashtra: A Quantitative Profile of Vulnerability and Resilience

Malaji Laxman Dudhalwad

Ph.D. Research Student, Department of Studies in Economics and Planning, Central University of Gujarat, Kundhela, Vadodara, Gujarat.

Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers from Beed district, Maharashtra, one of India's most migration-prone areas. Utilizing primary data, the research investigates critical aspects including age, gender, education, income-expenditure patterns, landholding, asset ownership, and awareness of rights. Findings reveal a predominantly rural, undereducated, debt-ridden population with low asset ownership and limited access to government welfare schemes. Gender disparities, poor financial inclusion, and lack of unionization further exacerbate their vulnerability. This paper argues for urgent policy intervention focusing on education, health, labor rights, and inclusive development to safeguard the dignity and livelihoods of migrant workers.

Keywords: Sugarcane migration, Maharashtra, Socio-economic conditions, Seasonal labour, Financial exclusion, Rural distress.

1. Introduction

Labour migration in India is a complex and enduring phenomenon, rooted in structural inequalities, regional economic disparities, and widespread agrarian distress. While the country's growth narrative emphasizes urbanization and industrial expansion, vast segments of the rural population continue to rely on seasonal migration as a means of survival. Among the most invisible and marginalized of these groups are the sugarcane migrant workers, particularly from the drought-prone districts of Maharashtra such as Beed. These workers, often entire families, migrate annually to sugar-producing regions within and outside the state, engaging in the physically taxing and economically exploitative task of sugarcane cutting.

Beed district has emerged as a prominent hub for such distress-driven migration due to repeated crop failures, erratic monsoons, shrinking landholdings, and absence of local employment opportunities. Migrants from this region are not only compelled to leave their homes but also to endure poor living conditions, health risks, debt bondage, and social exclusion at their destination worksites. Despite their crucial contribution to the sugar economy, which sustains one of Maharashtra's most politically powerful agro-industrial sectors, these workers remain largely excluded from national and state policy frameworks. They lack adequate labour rights, social security protections, and political voice. These migrant workers generally belong to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, and exhibit low literacy rates, high dependence on informal credit, and poor access to public

services such as healthcare, education, and housing. Their migratory status renders them ineligible for many government schemes, which are location-based and linked to permanent residence. Women in particular face double burdens: they contribute labour both in the fields and at home, while also suffering from wage discrimination, lack of reproductive healthcare, and exposure to gender-based violence.

This research paper seeks to bridge the knowledge and policy gap by offering a comprehensive, quantitative socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers in Beed. Using primary data collected through structured field surveys, the study examines a range of indicators including age, gender, marital status, education, housing, income, expenditure, savings, access to welfare schemes, landholding, and migration patterns. The objective is to assess the depth and nature of deprivation experienced by these workers and to highlight the structural factors that perpetuate their vulnerability.

By doing so, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive discourse on labour migration and rural development in India. It also seeks to generate insights for policy reforms that can improve the living standards, legal protections, and socio-economic resilience of seasonal migrant workers in the sugarcane sector.

2. Review of Literature

Migration has long been a subject of interest in Indian development discourse, particularly in relation to rural poverty, seasonal employment, and urbanization. Much of the existing literature focuses on push-pull factors, the dynamics of urban migration, and the economic role of remittances in rural households. Scholars have explored how droughts, land fragmentation, and lack of non-farm employment act as push factors, while wage differentials and labor demand in urban and peri-urban centers act as pull factors.

Breman (1978), this paper is based on the Khandeshi in western Maharashtra near sugar factories in the vicinity of Bardoli taluka in Gujarat, data taken during February to June 1977. This study covers both the intra-rural and seasonal movement of landless unskilled laborers. in this study, five sugar industries took form in Surat District and one from Valsad District, though they collected some data on these enterprises. also collected data from the members of the cooperative and farmers, all over the interview, conducted a total of 124 sugarcane cutters and 21 mukadams. These sugar factories is not 15-20 kilometers from each other. The paper was found in January 1976, minimum wage was 5.50 per day. This amount might not be considered reasonable for the work done. There are many sugarcane cutters who belong to the landless region, which is why are face minimum wages and other facilities provided by the sugar industry (Breman, 1978).

Kumar and Sindhu (2005), that the pull factor is more effective in migrating more people from rural to urban or industrial sectors. Data collected from three districts in Panjab state helped with 200 participants who were interviewed for data analysis SPSS package was used. This research paper found industrial development, comparatively higher wages, and better job opportunities pulling migration in Panjab (Kumar and Sidhu, 2005). Pull factors include poor economic condition, underemployment, lack of opportunities, natural climate, inadequate agricultural land, lack of development, and comparatively low wage rate. A study found that the migrant workers paid off their debt by earning money at Panjab state.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has consistently reported that a significant share of India's informal workforce including seasonal migrant laborers remain beyond the reach of legal protections, formal contracts, health coverage, or occupational safety. ILO's India Labour Market Updates have

emphasized the need for inclusive frameworks that extend labor rights and benefits to informal and seasonal workers.

However, most existing research tends to examine migration at a macro level, focusing on inter-state flows, remittances, or urban settlements. There is a notable lack of district-specific, sector-focused studies that investigate the lived realities of agricultural migrant workers, particularly in the sugarcane industry. The sugarcane belt of Maharashtra, despite being critical to the state's agro-economy, has received insufficient empirical scrutiny.

This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on Beed district, a drought-prone area that has emerged as an epicenter of sugarcane labor migration in Maharashtra. By offering a data-driven socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers, this research contributes to the growing body of literature seeking to understand migration not only as a livelihood strategy but also as a reflection of systemic rural distress and institutional neglect.

3. Research Gap

While extensive literature exists on internal migration in India, much of it concentrates on urban-bound migration, remittance flows, and macro-level economic trends. Existing studies primarily address push-pull dynamics or focus on urban informal labor markets. However, there is a significant lack of micro-level, region-specific research on seasonal migration within the agricultural sector especially concerning sugarcane-cutting migrant workers in rural Maharashtra.

Few empirical studies have explored the district-level socio-economic conditions of these migrants, particularly in Beed, a region disproportionately affected by drought, landlessness, and agrarian distress. The intersecting roles of caste, gender, housing insecurity, education, and financial exclusion among sugarcane migrants have remained largely under-investigated. Moreover, most national policies and surveys do not adequately capture the temporary, circular, and informal nature of this labor, resulting in an information vacuum that hinders effective policymaking.

This study fills that gap by offering a data-driven, field-based socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers from Beed district. It provides insights into their vulnerabilities and resilience strategies, as well as their limited access to welfare schemes and labor protections. By doing so, the research contributes to both academic scholarship and evidence-based policy intervention aimed at improving the lives of seasonal migrant workers.

4. Significance of the Study

The study of sugarcane migrant workers in Maharashtra, particularly from the Beed district, holds significant socio-economic and policy relevance. Despite their critical contribution to the state's sugar industry, these seasonal laborers remain invisible in official data, underrepresented in academic discourse, and overlooked in welfare policymaking. Their marginalization is compounded by factors such as caste-based exclusion, inadequate access to health and education, lack of legal protections, and chronic indebtedness.

This research provides a rare, field-based, quantitative profile of a highly vulnerable labor segment. By assessing demographic characteristics, housing conditions, income expenditure patterns, educational attainment, and integration with welfare schemes, the study highlights the systemic challenges these migrants face. It not only captures the depth of deprivation but also the resilience strategies employed by the workers.

The findings are expected to inform local and national stakeholders, government agencies, NGOs, researchers, and policymakers about the urgent need to redesign inclusive development frameworks that accommodate mobile, informal labor. Furthermore, the study bridges a major research gap by offering district-specific insights into the socio-economic realities of migrant laborers in the agricultural sector. In doing so, it contributes to the larger discourse on rural development, labor rights, and social justice in India.

5. Research Objective

The present study attempts to analyze and explore the socio-economic status of the migrant Sugarcane cutting workers in Maharashtra, particularly in Beed District. The present study aims at:

To assess the socio-demographic and economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers, with a focus on their educational attainment, housing conditions, income–expenditure patterns, and savings behavior.

6. Research Question

The following research questions were raised in the study:

1. What are the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of sugarcane migrant workers, and how do factors such as education, housing, income–expenditure patterns, and savings behavior reflect their overall vulnerability and resilience?

7. Research Methodology and Data Collection

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers in Beed district, Maharashtra. The research is primarily quantitative in nature, aiming to provide an empirical understanding of the living and working conditions of these seasonal migrants.

7.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in Beed district, a drought-prone region in Marathwada, known for its high rates of distress migration, especially during the sugarcane harvesting season. Beed was selected due to its recurring dependence on sugarcane migration and its representation of broader rural challenges in Maharashtra.

7.2. Sampling Method

A stratified random sampling method was used to select respondents to ensure representation across variables such as age, gender, caste, family structure, and employment type. A total of 250 respondents were surveyed, comprising both male and female sugarcane workers, either individually or as part of migrating families.

7.3. Data Collection Tools

Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions. The questionnaire covered aspects such as:

Table 1: Key Variables Covered in the Study

Category	Details/Indicators
1. Demographic Details	Age, gender, caste category (SC/ST/OBC/General), marital status
1. Educational Background	Literacy level, highest education attained (uneducated to post-graduate)

3. Housing & Family Conditions	Type of housing (kutcha/semi-pucca/pucca), family structure (joint/nuclear/single-parent/separated)
4. Landholding & Asset Ownership	Land size (if any), ownership of vehicles, electronic items, gold/silver
5. Income, Expenditure & Savings	Monthly/seasonal income, expenditure patterns, type of savings (if any)
6. Access to Banking & Welfare	Bank account types, BPL card, E-shram card, Jan Dhan Yojana, MGNREGA, ABHA access
7. Migration & Work Experience	Number of years in sugarcane cutting, migration distance, months of migration, union awareness

Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with respondents at their native villages and, in some cases, at migration destinations during off-season visits.

7.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. Visual tools such as bar graphs, pie charts, and tables were employed to interpret findings clearly and concisely. The analysis helped in identifying trends, disparities, and areas of acute vulnerability among the respondent group.

8. Results and Discussion

Table 2: Socio-Economic Profile of Sugarcane Migrant Workers

Section	Key Indicators & Findings
9.1 Demographic Characteristics	1. 44% of workers are aged 14–30, indicating youth-dominated migration. 2. The majority are male; women participate but are often unrecognized. 3. 69.6% are married, implying dependent responsibilities and health risks.
9.2 Family and Housing	1. 30% belong to single-parent families; 28% are separated, reflecting family instability. 2. 68% live in kutcha or semi-pucca homes, indicating poor infrastructure.
9.3 Education and Skill Profile	1. 42.8% are either uneducated or have only primary education. 2. Only 12% reached graduation or higher, limiting job mobility.
9.4 Caste and Social Identity	1. The majority are from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC).
9.5 Welfare Coverage	1. 84% hold Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration cards. 2. 86% have E-Shram cards. 3. Limited access to MGNREGA and ABHA schemes. 4. Only 6% lack electricity; electronic item ownership is just 5%.
9.6 Banking & Financial Inclusion	1. 94% have electricity, but only 5% own durable electronics. 2. 95% have bank accounts (mainly savings/recurring deposits). 3. High reliance on informal debt, indicating financial instability.
9.7 Landholding Patterns	1. Over 60% are landless or marginal farmers. 2. Many report expenditure exceeding income, indicating chronic economic vulnerability.

9.8 Migration Patterns	1. Most migrate over 250 km for work. 2. Peak migration period is from October to April. 3. Only 11% are aware of labor unions or their rights.

Source: Primary data was collected through field survey questionnaires by the investigator from 2022-2023.

9. Key Observations

Table 3: Key Observations from the Study

Observation	Description
1. **Intergenerational Poverty**	Limited education, marginal landholdings, and unstable income compel even the younger generation to continue migratory labor.
2. **Gendered Vulnerability**	Women face greater health risks, wage disparities, and gender-based violence, yet lack targeted legal and social protections.
3. **Weak Social Safety Net**	Despite owning identity and welfare documents, most workers do not effectively benefit from existing government schemes.
4. **Debt Trap**	Dependence on informal lenders and contractors often results in unmanageable debt, resembling bonded labor conditions.

Source: Primary data was collected through field survey questionnaires by the investigator from 2022-2023.

10. Policy Implications

Table 4: Policy Implications

Policy Area	Implication/Recommendation
1. **Strengthen Labour Rights**	Enforce legal protections and social security measures for seasonal and informal migrant workers.
2. **Educational Upliftment**	Implement targeted adult literacy and child education programs for migrant families.
3. **Financial Empowerment**	Expand access to affordable credit, promote Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and encourage cooperative banking.
4. **Gender-Focused Policies**	Provide women workers with tailored health services, workplace safety, and childcare support.
5. **Portability of Entitlements**	Ensure ration cards, health services, and welfare benefits are portable and accessible at migration sites.

Source: Primary data was collected through field survey questionnaires by the investigator from 2022-2023.
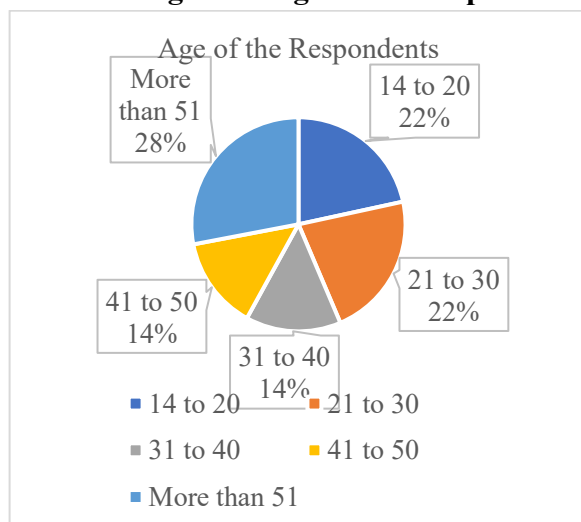
11. Conclusion

The socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers in Beed district, Maharashtra, reveals a grim reality of structural inequality, deep-rooted poverty, and exclusion from formal development processes. These workers, largely from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, are compelled by drought, landlessness, and lack of local employment to undertake seasonal migration for survival. Despite their indispensable contribution to the sugar economy, they are subjected to labor-intensive, exploitative conditions with limited access to social protection and public welfare schemes.
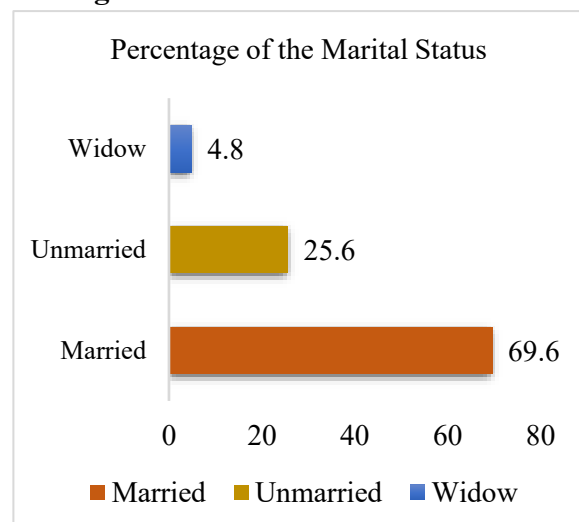
This study demonstrates that sugarcane migrant workers face multiple deprivation slow levels of education, poor housing, high debt dependency, financial exclusion, and minimal awareness of labor rights. Their migratory status further isolates them from consistent access to health services, education for their children, and portable welfare entitlements. Women, in particular, bear the brunt of both productive and reproductive labor without appropriate recognition or safeguards. The socio-economic profile of sugarcane migrant workers reflects structural inequality and persistent deprivation. These workers, often belonging to marginalized communities, engage in the most labor-intensive work under exploitative conditions, with minimal support. The study underscores the need for inclusive development policies that account for the seasonal and mobile nature of this workforce. Policymakers must prioritize the integration of migrant workers into formal systems of labor registration, social security, skill development, and financial inclusion. Reducing their vulnerability is not only a matter of justice but a prerequisite for sustainable rural development. If left unaddressed, the continuing neglect of this critical labor force will deepen rural distress and perpetuate cycles of poverty and migration.
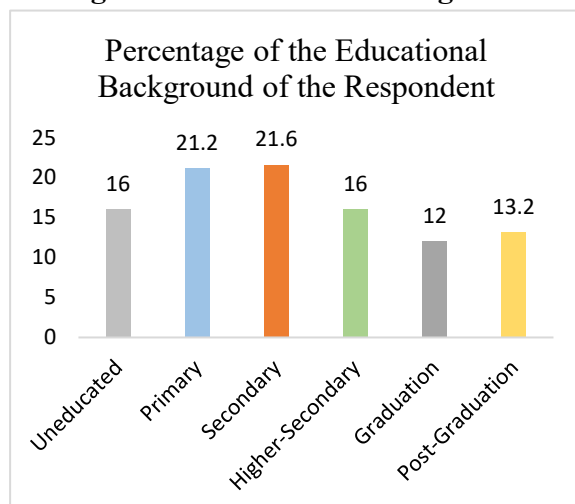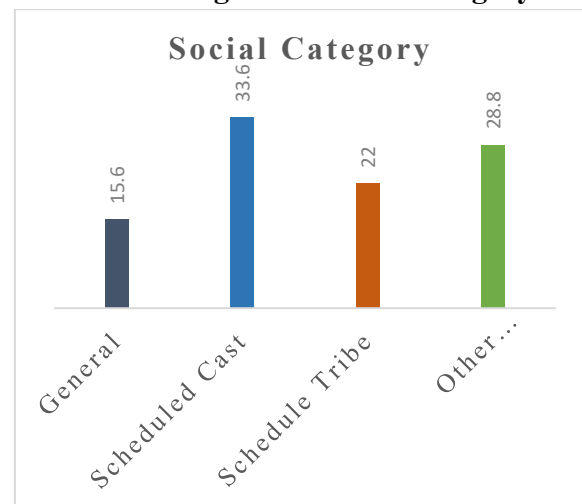
13. Appendix

Figure 1: Age of the Respondents

Figure 2: Marital Status

Figure 3: Educational Background

Figure 4: Social Category

Source: Primary data was collected through field survey questionnaires by the investigator from 2022-2023.

References

1. Breman, J. (1978) Seasonal Migration and Co-operative Capitalism: Crushing of Cane and of Labour by Sugar Factories of Bardoli Seasonal Migration and Co-operative Capitalism Crushing of Cane and of Labour by Sugar Factories of Bardoli. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume 13, no. 31/33, 1317-1360.

2. International Labour Organization. (2017). *India Labour Market Update*. ILO Country Office for India. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_568701/lang--en/index.htm

3. Kaur, A. (2010). Labour Migration Trends and Policy Challenges in Southeast Asia. *Policy and Society*, 29(4), 385-397.

4. Kendre, B. (2011). Socio-Economic Background and Seasonal Migration of Sugarcane Harvesting Workers. *International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 15-21.

5. Kendre, B. (2013). Right to Education (2009) and Children of Migrant Sugarcane Harvesting Labourers in Kolhapur. *Social Research*, 1(2), 58-72.

6. Keshri, K., & Bhagat, R. B. (2012). Temporary and Seasonal Migration: Regional Pattern, Characteristics and Associated Factors. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(4), 81-88. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41419769

7. Kumar, N., & Sidhu, A. S. (2005). Pull and Push Factors in Labour Migration: A Study of Brick-Kiln Workers in Punjab. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 221-232.

8. Pooja, K. J., Anilkumar, A., & Smitha, K. P. (2022), Push and Pull Factors Influencing Migration among Tribal Agricultural Labourers: A Critical Gender Analysis, *society of extension education,* 13-17. https://doi.org/10.54986/irjee/2022/dec_spl/13-17