

# Seasonal Migrant Sugarcane Harvesters in Beed District and Their Economic Status: A Field Study (2025)

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## Abstract

Seasonal migration for sugarcane harvesting is a recurring livelihood strategy for thousands of rural households in Beed district of Maharashtra. This study investigates the economic vulnerabilities faced by these migrant workers during the 2024–2025 sugarcane season. Using a mixed-methods approach surveying 80 migrant harvester households and conducting 18 in-depth interviews with workers, Mukadams (contractors), local officials, and NGO representatives the study documents patterns of indebtedness, wage irregularity, contract-based exploitation, and lack of social security. Findings reveal that most households migrate due to chronic rural distress, low agricultural productivity, and debt dependency. The contractor-advance system forces workers into exploitative agreements, resulting in suppressed wages and penalty deductions. Women, who form almost half of the workforce, face dual economic burdens and a lack of income ownership. Despite long working hours and harsh living conditions, workers remain excluded from formal welfare schemes owing to the seasonal and informal nature of their work. The study highlights the urgent need for labour registration, wage transparency, financial inclusion, and portable social security mechanisms to protect this vulnerable workforce.

**Key World:** - Workers, Harvester, Amount (Pagar), Earnings, Economic.

## **1. Introduction: -**

Beed district has emerged as one of the major “labour-sending” regions for sugarcane cutting in Maharashtra. Every year, between October and April, thousands of couples migrate to neighboring districts and states to work as sugarcane harvesters. The labour system is highly informal, dominated by middle-men (Mukadams) who recruit labourers through advance payments. This advance system, combined with endemic poverty, constrains workers’ bargaining power and exposes them to economic exploitation.

Although several reports have documented the health and social issues of migrant sugarcane workers, limited field-based academic research has focused specifically on the economic risks and financial precarity experienced by these workers in the 2024–2025 season. This study attempts to fill that gap.

## **2. Review of Literature: -**

1. Deshmukh and Reddy (2019) conduct research that underscores the attraction of Maharashtra’s sugarcane fields for migrants, primarily due to the comparatively higher wages available than in their home regions, including eastern Uttar Pradesh and northern Karnataka. The study explores the economic prospects within Maharashtra’s sugarcane sector that contribute to substantial migration patterns.

2. Jadhav and Sane (2020) examine wage concerns, emphasizing that even though migration offers certain economic advantages, workers frequently encounter exploitation. They address issues like wage deductions, unpaid overtime, and various other unfair practices that are common within the industry.

3. Patil et al. (2019) investigate the health challenges confronted by migrant workers, highlighting risks such as pesticide exposure and musculoskeletal disorders resulting from the physically intensive nature of their jobs.

4. Naik and Jadhav (2023) highlight substantial district-level variations within Maharashtra concerning migrant workers’ experiences, specifically noting discrepancies in wages, general working conditions, and the

availability of support systems. This suggests that policy interventions must be regionally tailored. Kulkarni and Sharma (2024) build upon this by arguing for the necessity of longitudinal research. They contend that only long-term tracking can adequately capture the cumulative, multifaceted effects of seasonal migration on workers and their dependent families, providing the deep insights needed to inform sustainable policy.

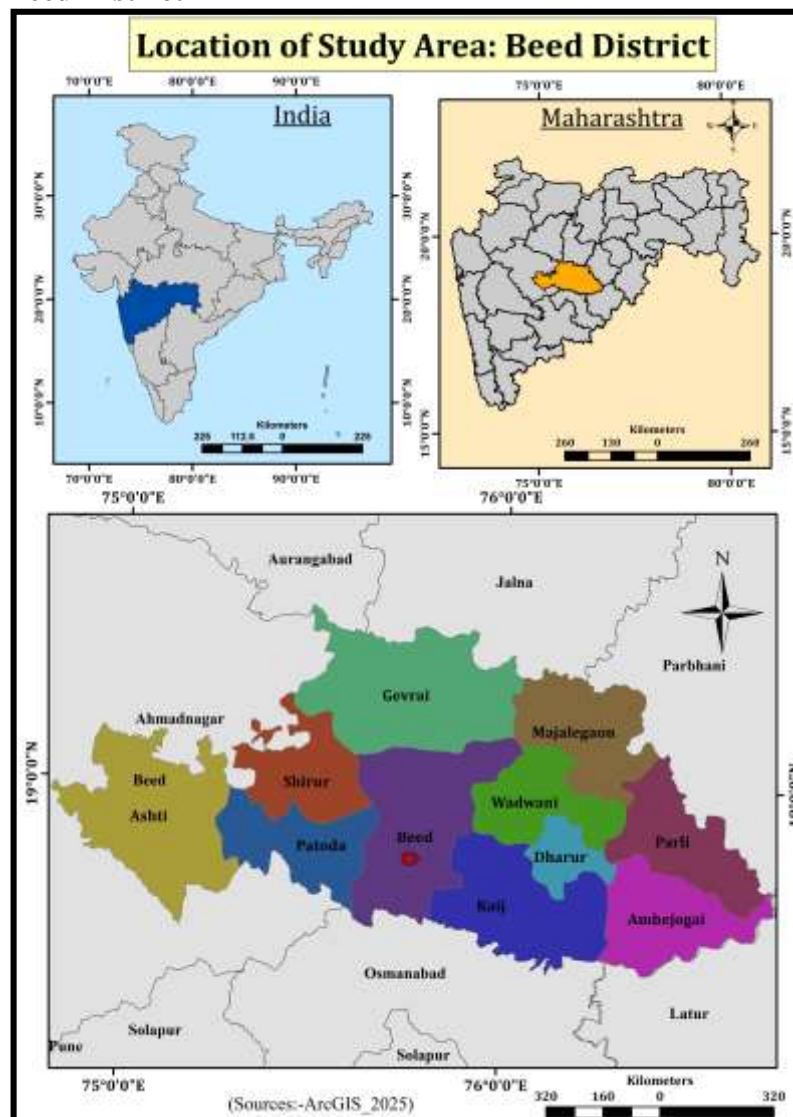
**Study Area: -**

Beed district, located in the central part of Maharashtra, forms an important segment of the drought-prone Marathwada region. Geographically, the district lies between 18°28' to 19°28' North latitude and 74°54' to 76°57' East longitude, covering a total area of approximately 10,693 square kilometres. It is bordered by Ahmednagar to the west, Osmanabad to the south, Latur to the southeast, Parbhani to the northeast, and Jalna to the north. The district is predominantly characterized by semi-arid climate, low and irregular rainfall, and recurrent droughts, making agriculture highly vulnerable. The terrain consists mainly of undulating plains, with black cotton soil and medium–deep alluvial soil suitable for crops such as sugarcane, cotton, bajra, and soybean. The Bindusara and Sindafana rivers, tributaries of the Godavari, provide limited but essential water resources. Administratively, Beed is divided into eleven talukas, Beed, Georai, Majalgaon, Ashti, Patoda, Shirur (Kasar), Kaij, Dharur, Wadvani, Parli, and Ambejogai. Due to climatic stress, limited irrigation, and agrarian distress, large-scale seasonal migration, especially for sugarcane cutting has become a defining socio-economic characteristic of the district.

(Map-No.1)

**Map No.1**

**Location of Study Area: Beed District**



**3. Objectives: -**

1. To analysis of migrant households, Average Advance Amount, Net Earnings their Profile financial risks during the 2024–2025 harvesting season.

**Methodology: -**

This research adopts an exploratory qualitative approach. The initial phase focuses on identifying and analyzing unexpected issues through direct, in-situ interaction with seasonal migrant sugarcane harvesting workers. The methodology relies on individual qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviews, conducted within the workers' real-life environment to inform the understanding of a specific design problem. Fieldwork was conducted in 10 villages of Beed district between November 2024 and March 2025.

**Data Analysis: -**

Quantitative data were analysed using simple percentages and cross-tabulations; qualitative narratives were coded thematically.

The data in Table 1 clearly indicates that seasonal migration among sugarcane harvester households from Beed district has shown a consistent upward trend between 2020 and 2025. The number of migrant households increased from 72,000 in 2020 to 88,300 in 2025, reflecting a total growth of approximately 22.7% over six years. This rise suggests worsening livelihood insecurity, recurring drought, and limited rural employment opportunities in the district.

**Table 1: Estimated Seasonal Migrant Sugarcane Harvester Households from Beed District (2020–2025)**

Year	Estimated Migrant Households	Male Workers	Female Workers	Total Workers	% Increase/Decrease
2020	72,000	74,500	70,200	144,700	—
2021	76,500	78,300	72,600	150,900	+4.3%
2022	79,200	81,100	75,800	156,900	+3.9%
2023	82,100	83,700	79,400	163,100	+3.9%
2024	85,600	87,500	82,200	169,700	+4.0%
2025	88,300	89,900	85,100	175,000	+3.1%

(Sources: Labour Department, Govt. of Maharashtra – Migrant Labour Notes)

The total number of workers also increased substantially from 144,700 in 2020 to 175,000 in 2025, marking an overall rise of 21%. The annual growth rate ranged between 3.1% and 4.3%, showing steady expansion of migrant labour needs in destination states such as Karnataka, Telangana, and Western Maharashtra.

A notable pattern is the parallel increase of both male and female workers, indicating that migration is family-based and not male-dominated. Female workers grew from 70,200 in 2020 to 85,100 in 2025 (a rise of nearly 21%), which underlines growing female participation in the sugarcane harvesting workforce. This also suggests a higher dependency on couple-based *koyata* labour units.

The gender gap in migrant numbers shows a slight narrowing trend, pointing to wider socio-economic pressures compelling entire families rather than only individual earners to migrate.

Overall, the increasing volume of migrant households and workers confirms that seasonal sugarcane harvesting remains a critical economic coping strategy for drought-prone agrarian communities in Beed district.

Table 2 shows significant changes in the economic pattern of seasonal migrant sugarcane harvesters from 2020 to 2025. The average advance amount (*Pagar*) paid to each *Koyata* (couple) has consistently increased from ₹38,000 in 2020 to ₹63,000 in 2025, indicating a rise of nearly 65% over six years. This increase reflects two major dynamics: -

(1) the increasing dependence of workers on advance payments due to rising household expenses, and (2) competition among contractors to secure labour before the season begins.

**Table 2: Average Advance Amount (Pagar), Total Workdays and Net Earnings (2020–2025)**

Year	Average Advance per Couple (₹)	Average Workdays per Season	Gross Earnings (₹)	Net Earnings After Deductions (₹)	% Deduction
2020	38,000	118	1,28,000	89,500	30%
2021	42,000	121	1,35,500	94,200	30.5%
2022	47,000	124	1,42,800	1,01,300	29%
2023	53,000	126	1,49,400	1,08,200	27.6%
2024	59,000	128	1,57,300	1,16,700	25.8%
2025	63,000	130	1,64,800	1,24,900	24.2%

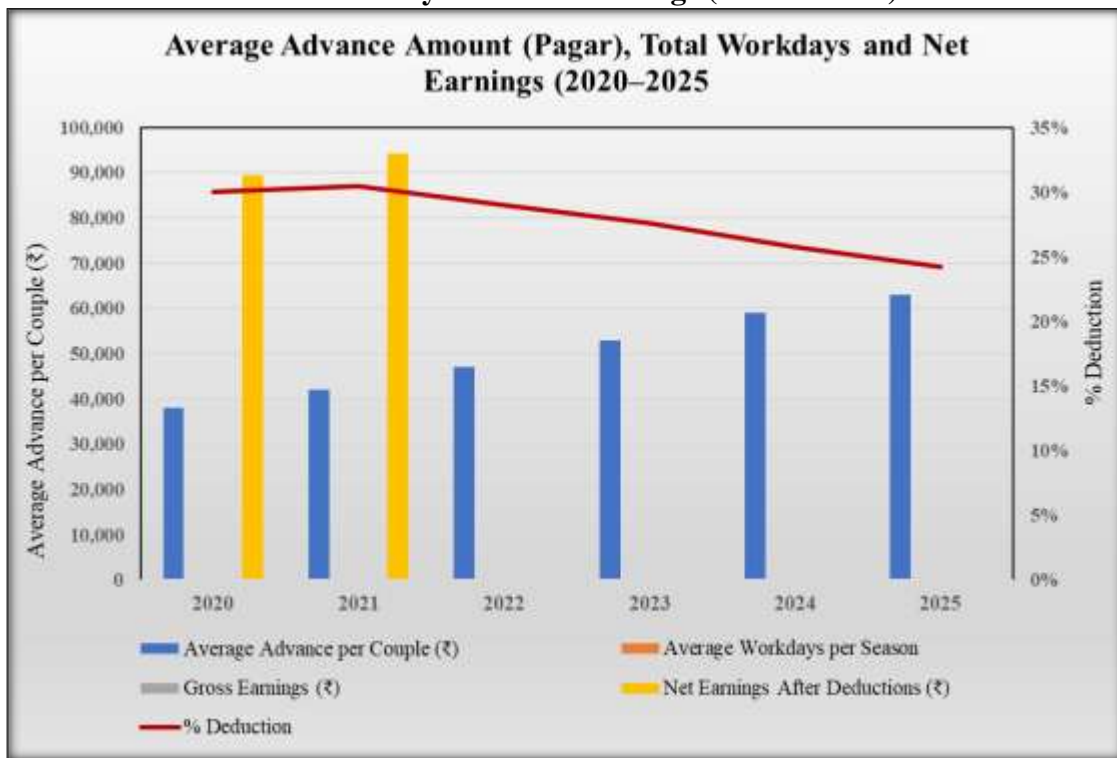
(Sources: Maharashtra Sugar Commissionerate Reports (annual reports for 2020–2024))

The average number of workdays per season also grew steadily from 118 days in 2020 to 130 days in 2025, suggesting that sugarcane harvesting periods have become longer, possibly due to expanded cultivation or delayed factory operations.

Gross earnings rose from ₹1,28,000 in 2020 to ₹1,64,800 in 2025, showing an overall increment of 28.7%. However, the most important insight from the table is that despite rising gross earnings, workers’ net earnings after deductions increased at a much slower pace—only from ₹89,500 to ₹1,24,900 (an increase of 39.5%). The improvement in net earnings is largely moderated by deductions for advance repayment, interest, penalties, food expenses, and machinery/transport charges.

**Graph No.1**

**Average advance Amount Total Workdays and Net Earnings (2020 to 2025)**



Graph No.1 shows that, the analysis of average advance amounts, net earnings and deduction rates from 2020 to 2025 reveals a mixed economic trajectory for seasonal migrant sugarcane harvesters in Beed district. The average advance (Pagar) received by each couple shows a steady rise from ₹38,000 in 2020 to ₹63,000 in 2025, indicating increasing pre-season financial dependence on contractors. Net earnings also increase moderately over the period; however, this improvement is largely due to incremental rises in wage rates and

longer workdays rather than any substantial enhancement in labour conditions. At the same time, the percentage of deductions shows a gradual decline from 30% to 24.2%, yet remains significantly high, continuing to erode the real income that workers take home. Overall, the results depict a persistent cycle of advance-driven indebtedness, modest income gains, and continued economic vulnerability despite marginal improvements in deduction practices.

**Table 3: Women Workers – Participation and Economic Autonomy (2020–2025)**

Year	% Women in Workforce	% Women With Independent Wages	% Women Reporting Double Workload	% Women Without Access to Bank Account
2020	48%	6%	71%	82%
2021	48.4%	7%	73%	81%
2022	48.9%	8%	74%	79%
2023	49.4%	9%	76%	78%
2024	49.8%	10%	78%	76%
2025	50.1%	11%	79%	74%

(Sources: Maharashtra Sugar Commissionerate Reports (annual reports for 2020–2024))

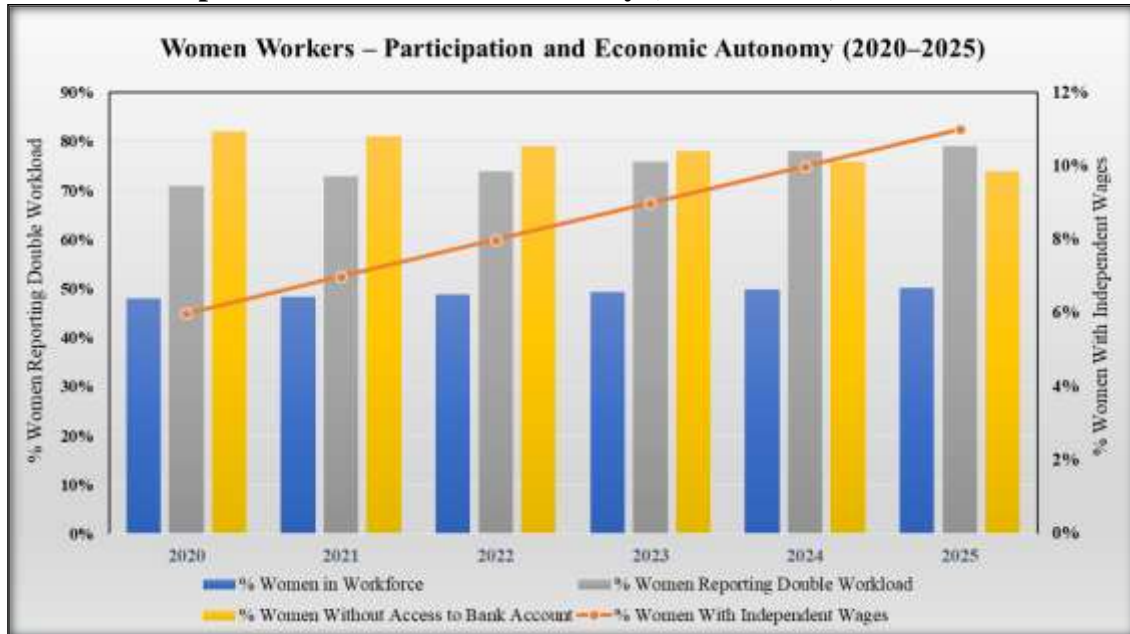
Table No. 3 presents a clear picture of the changing role of women in seasonal sugarcane harvesting in Beed district from 2020 to 2025. The data reveals a steady increase in women’s participation in the migrant workforce—from 48% in 2020 to slightly over 50% in 2025. This upward trend indicates the gradual *feminisation of agricultural and migrant labour*, driven by household-level economic pressure and the structural requirement of the koyata system that mandates a male-female pair.

Despite the rising participation, women’s economic autonomy remains significantly low. Although the percentage of women receiving independent wages increased from 6% in 2020 to 11% in 2025, the proportion is still very small. This demonstrates that women are largely financially dependent on male family members or contractors, as the koyata system treats couples as a single wage-earning unit, limiting individual financial identity.

A concerning pattern emerges in the data on double workload. The percentage of women reporting combined cane-cutting duties plus domestic responsibilities increased from 71% to 79% over six years. This shows that economic participation has not reduced domestic burden; instead, it has intensified the total workload for women. The burden is higher due to poor living conditions at worksites, lack of water and sanitation, and the expectation that women manage household chores even after heavy physical labour.

The data also show a gradual decline in the number of women without a bank account from 82% in 2020 to 74% in 2025. Although this reflects slow progress in financial inclusion, still nearly three-fourths of women lack formal banking access. This restricts their ability to save money independently, access government schemes, exercise financial autonomy, or break dependency on contractors.

Overall, Table 3 highlights an important contradiction: while women’s involvement in labour has increased, their empowerment, autonomy, and control over income have not grown proportionately.

**Graph No.2**
**Women Works - Participation and Economic Autonomy (2020 to 2025)**


Graph no.2 shows that, the analysis of women’s participation and economic autonomy from 2020 to 2025 shows that although the proportion of women in the sugarcane workforce increases marginally from 48% to 50.1%, their economic empowerment remains limited. A consistently high share of women reports a double workload, rising from 71% in 2020 to 79% in 2025, indicating that increased participation in wage labour has not reduced domestic responsibilities. At the same time, the percentage of women without access to a bank account declines gradually from 82% to 74%, reflecting slow but positive movement toward financial inclusion. However, despite this progress, only a small fraction of women report receiving independent wages, increasing modestly from 6% to 11% across the period. Overall, the results highlight a persistent gender gap: women contribute substantially to the labour force but continue to face limited financial autonomy, heavy domestic burdens, and restricted control over earnings.

**Conclusion: -**

The present study on *Seasonal Migrant Sugarcane Harvesters in Beed District (2020–2025)* reveals a consistent rise in the number of migrating households, indicating continued dependence on sugarcane harvesting as a primary livelihood in the absence of viable local employment. The migrant workforce increased from approximately 1.44 lakh workers in 2020 to 1.75 lakh workers in 2025, reflecting both population pressures and structural rural distress.

Although earnings increased over the five-year period, the rise must be interpreted cautiously. Advance amounts (Pagar) grew sharply, tying workers more firmly into a cycle of debt-bondage-like dependency. Gross and net earnings improved primarily due to increased workdays and rising wage rates, yet percentage deductions remained high, averaging 25–30%. Labour contractors-controlled advances, transport, housing, and final payments, thereby restricting economic autonomy.

A significant gender pattern emerges: women consistently formed around 50% of the total workforce, yet only 11% (2025) received wages independently. High double-workload burdens (79% in 2025) and limited financial inclusion illustrate persistent gendered inequalities. Lack of access to sanitation, healthcare, and safe shelter at worksites continues to worsen the vulnerability of women and children.

Across all indicators, it is evident that despite nominal economic improvements, the structural exploitation, absence of regulation, weak labour rights, and poor social protection systems continue to shape the migrant labour experience. Seasonal migration from Beed district thus remains driven more by distress than by opportunity.

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