

Upliftment of the lives of Sugarcane-Cutters

Background:

Arts and Science College, Shivajinagar, Gadhi is situated in Beed district which is one of the most severe drought-hit districts in the country.

On October 31, 2018, the government of Maharashtra declared Beed as one of the most severe drought-hit districts in the country based on indicators such as rainfall deficit, low soil quality and decline in groundwater index.

Due to prolonged drought conditions, a large number of farmers in the region are pushed to the verge of suicide.

In such conditions, workers and farmers are forced to migrate. Since migration takes place for a temporary period of 7 to 8 months, labourers working as cane-cutters reside in small makeshift huts, or cane fields or sugar mills. Since these are temporary shelters, there is a lack of toilets, clean drinking water and proper sanitation facilities. Such poor living conditions adversely impact the health of these labourers, especially women who are forced to practice unsafe menstrual hygiene practices that lead to rashes and infections, causing severe reproductive health-related problems.

Moreover, the district is infamous for its startling hysterectomy records, rampant sex determination, female foeticide, malnutrition, child marriage, and lack of education.

A District of Womb-Less Women:

As per a survey conducted it was found that around 13,861 women had undergone hysterectomy in the past decade. In June 2019, the Health Minister of Maharashtra stated in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly that, in the last three years, 4,605 female sugarcane cutters underwent hysterectomies.

Child marriages rampant in Cane-Cutter Community:

At 12-13 years of age, girls are married off and the young couples set out together to the fields from the next season on. This is because sugarcane is the sole employment and the field employs only couples.

Sexual abuse and human trafficking:

In 2019, around 4,000-5,000 young girls were sexually abused in Beed district and around 1,000 girls and women are trafficked every year.

Maharashtra's female foeticide capital:

The 2011 census showed a sharp decline in the population of the girl child in Beed. Beed district has the lowest male-female sex ratio among children under the age of 6 in Maharashtra at 801 female against 1000 male children.

Initiatives by the College

The college has undertaken a series of proactive initiatives aimed at addressing the challenges faced by sugarcane workers in Georai Taluka:

Socio-Economic Survey: Our college conducted a comprehensive socio-economic survey of sugarcane laborers in Georai Taluka. The survey revealed severe socio-economic conditions of sugarcane cutters.

Guest Lecture on Sugarcane Worker Issues: A guest lecture addressing the problems faced by sugarcane laborers, highlighted issues such as poverty, illiteracy, alcoholism, and health-related concerns among women and child education.

Financial Contribution for Community Marriage Ceremony: Collaborating with Sharda Pratishtan, Georai, our college has been organizing a Community Marriage Ceremony for sugarcane workers for the past 18 years. College employees contributed Rs. 3,90,955 from 2020 - 2023.

Guidance in Sugar Schools: Recognizing the deprivation of primary education among the children of sugarcane workers who frequently migrate, the college-initiated efforts to emphasize the importance of education. Faculty members actively engage in guiding these children.

Distribution of Sanitary Napkins: Female faculties and students of our college actively participated in distributing sanitary napkins to female sugarcane workers, promoting health awareness. They played a crucial role in creating awareness about health issues and hygiene among female workers.

Stationary and Book Distribution: College faculties contributed to the encouragement of literacy among children of sugarcane workers by distributing stationary and story books to them.

Distribution of Fruits & Nutrient Food: Our College provided fruits and nutrient-rich food to female sugarcane workers and their children, acknowledging the importance of nutrition.

Parent Meet: The college organized parent meetings specifically for sugarcane cutters, fostering better interaction regarding their wards' learning and other issues.

Other Activities: The college engaged sugarcane workers through various activities, including essay competitions covering different aspects of their lives and rangoli competitions, contributing to a holistic approach in addressing their challenges.

These initiatives reflect the college's commitment to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by sugarcane workers in Beed district, fostering positive change through education, health awareness, and community support.

Positive Outcomes of the Initiatives:

1. The socio-economic survey provided crucial insights into the living conditions of sugarcane laborers in Georai Taluka. Identification of severe socio-economic challenges in some families allowed for targeted intervention strategies, while the success stories of families with improved conditions highlighted the potential impact of education on breaking the cycle of poverty.
2. The guest lecture facilitated a deeper understanding of the issues plaguing sugarcane workers.
3. The long-standing tradition of organizing the Community Marriage Ceremony has not only provided a platform for celebrating unions but has also contributed to a sense of community and support among sugarcane workers.
4. The efforts to guide the children of sugarcane workers in pursuing education have likely played a role in promoting literacy and fostering a positive attitude towards learning. This initiative may contribute to breaking the educational barriers faced by these children due to frequent migration.
5. The distribution of sanitary napkins, coupled with health awareness initiatives, has likely improved the overall well-being of female sugarcane workers. By addressing menstrual hygiene practices, this initiative contributes to reducing health-related issues among women.
6. The distribution of books to the children of sugarcane workers serves as a commendable step toward encouraging literacy. Access to educational materials enhances the learning experience and supports the educational development of these children.
7. The provision of fruits and nutrient-rich food contributes to addressing nutritional deficiencies in a vulnerable population.

8. The organized parent meetings allow for a better grasp of the challenges faced by both workers and their children, facilitating more targeted and effective support.
9. In summary, the college's initiatives have made noteworthy strides in addressing the socio-economic challenges faced by sugarcane workers. By focusing on education, health, and community building, these efforts have contributed to positive outcomes and laid the groundwork for continued support and improvement in the lives of the sugarcane workers in Georai Taluka.