

Sugarcane cutters: Organizing an exploited community Maharashtra Fellowship (Jeewan Rathod)

Deep in the Beed district of Maharashtra, a Banajara community has made sugarcane cutting its main livelihood, at least for the 5-6 months in the year that this work is available. Since the work nearby is limited, they migrate every year to other parts of Maharashtra or Karnataka. They earn equivalent of around 3 dollars for up to 16 hours of work, have no social security, and no facilities at work. They have to leave their children at home whose education is very unsatisfactory as the government schools are dysfunctional or non-existent and the private schools are beyond their reach. Lastly, when the cutting season is over, they have little means of livelihood. Alcoholism, crime, and other maladies stalk them.

It is with this background that IFA has chosen its newest Fellow, Jeewan Rathod, in the Majalgaon taluka of Beed district. Belonging to the same community, Jeewan was able to get education and received an MA degree. He chose to dedicate his life for the upliftment of his community and has established an organization, **Shramik Ustod Kaamgar Sangathana**, that also functions as a union. It has a current membership of 5,000.

Main interventions

Better wages: Improved to Rs. 273 per person for a ton of sugarcane cut, hauled, and loaded which is 12 to 16 hours of work. The government funded MGNREGA wage is Rs. 240 for 8 hours of work with a one hour break! The Sangathan is striving to increase wages by linking them to hours.

Insurance: The work is hazardous and a worker losing a limb or life can be catastrophic for the family. They have managed to increase the life/injury insurance from 1 to 3 lakh rupees. Around 2,000 workers have gotten insurance so far. It was to be funded by Rs. 20 per ton of the workers labor with the state and the sugarcane industry chipping in Rs. 10 each. However so far, the government has reneged and the money is coming out of the workers wages. They are striving to change that and also to raise the insurance to 10 lakh rupees. Jeewan provides critical help in obtaining the insurance benefits if a tragedy occurs.

Education: Having seen the benefits of education, Jeewan is very keen to help educate the children of his community. He runs a primary school with local donations and help from organizations such as Asha for Education. It has around 100 students. He is working with the community and the government to establish hostels for the children when their parents migrate for work. Two hostels have already been set up.

Alternative livelihoods (MGNREGA promotion):

- Bavadis (wells) constructed: 15 at Rs. 300,000 each
- Shet tal (Ponds) constructed: 6 at Rs. 400,000 each
- Silk worm breeding plants: 20 at Rs. 400,000 each

Farmers groups: Small scale farmers are being organized for innovative and organic farming for moving away from the debt trap of the cash crops. Presently they have 4 farmer groups of 12 each.

Future Plans (expectation for the next three years):

- Expand the Sangathana from 6 to 30 villages and 6,000 members with direct benefit to 2000 families
- Awareness of NREGA in 30 villages with benefits to 1,200 families
- Expand the school to cover 15 villages and 170 students
- Expand the Farmer Groups to 12 with 150 farmers.

IFA member Prithvi Sharma visited this work in January of 2023 and was impressed by the significant gains made by the work of a single individual. Jeewan is excited about the IFA Fellowship and has already made significant progress. He is constrained by lack of additional workers and is grooming some promising local youth for leadership role. IFA will definitely consider providing additional Fellowship support if the work progresses well and if suitable candidates are found.

-- IFA Liaison: Hema and Rakesh Bansal



Jeewan with families who have received NREGA help



One of the frequent meetings with the State Sugar Board to lobby for the sugar cutters



Farmer owned organic daal (pulses) mill established with Jeewan's assistance