

10 December 2024

>>> NEWSLETTER <<<<
SOCIETY OF THE SACRED
HEART
PROVINCE OF INDIA



NEWS FROM THE BHOKAR
COMMUNITY

The Truth Behind the Tough Life of the Sugarcane Cutters



One fine day I was on my way to Shrirampur and I saw a long queue of bullock carts coming along with families of sugarcane cutters and their children. They had along with them logs to make huts, vessels, sheets, pet dogs, goats etc. While I was stopping my scooty, one child waved out to me. I asked her “where are you going?” She said “to the Ashoknagar sugar factory”. I didn’t know them; at that moment I was confused and questions started rising in my mind as to what do the people do in the severe cold with their families, their children and regarding their work.

After returning from Shrirampur, I told the directress of Ashankur, Sr. Prisca, about this and at once she said “Oh I have forgotten that this is the month we have to go for a survey, because we have a project for sugarcane cutter’s children. Tomorrow, I will send you along with the staff to do the survey of the sugarcane cutter’s children.” The very next day I accompanied the staff for the survey. While conducting the survey I noticed that there was no toilet for them, they relieve themselves in the open ground. They have no electricity, no drinking water, no proper food, no cleanliness and there were a lot of children. In one place there were about 80 to 90 children. Some children were regular about school going; whereas some were drop outs. According to the survey, the children were from the age group of 4 to 13. The Government is giving opportunity to the children to attend classes in a school near to their camp, but children do not go because they are kept outside in the school veranda, and not getting equal treatment with regard to their education; hence, they feel left out.

I started assisting our teacher who goes to teach the sugarcane cutters children. They were very distracted and showed no interest towards education. On the first day only four to five children were present. It was nearly 3 o’clock in the evening; after 3 o’clock I saw the bullock carts coming back in which there were children. They go along with their parents as helping hands and also the parents feel secure when the children are with them. They go early morning around 4 o’clock and return at 2:30 p.m. or by 4 p.m. I was just observing their time table. After reaching their temporary camp, the women were busy with their household work. Most of the men consume alcohol; hence there are fights in the vicinity every day. One of the men told me that they drink in order to get rid of their tiredness and have sound sleep, the women too take tobacco as a mouth freshener.



After spending two/three hours for some days in the camp of the sugarcane cutters, I came to know them and saw things such as their life-style, their difficulties and struggles. It is now 3 years that I have been closely dealing with the sugarcane cutters and their children. They come to this area for 5 to 6 months and then return back to their villages. Most of these labourers are from different parts of Maharashtra, because in Maharashtra sugarcane cultivation is very high. They belong to SC, ST, NT and VJNT communities. Almost 50% of the respondents were from ST (Scheduled Tribe) communities - belonging to tribes such as Bhil, Pavra, Vanjara, Varli and Vadari. The others are from other different social groups who are considered very low. Their economic condition is very poor, and most of the workers are below poverty line. Some of them are without identity cards. The workers are from different districts of Maharashtra such as Dhule, Jalgaon, Nandurbar, Beed, Nashik, Aurangabad and Jalna. Many of the women got married at an early age, and they have no basic education. A few of the workers were educated up to the secondary level.

Sugarcane cutting is extremely intensively skillful and risky too; it includes cutting, binding the bundles, loading, and transporting sugarcane to the factories by bullock carts, trucks and tractors; it is one of the most difficult works. Labourers have to bend down for hours to pick up very heavy bundles of sugar cane and heave them up onto the carts. They work in the harsh cold; they work for 12 to 14 hours a day. The workers are hired through informal, unwritten contracts. They come in pairs of husband and wife or a whole family. At times, the sugar factory owners give them the money later; hence they have to work without getting a pie in the working place; often there are wage deductions that are not explained to them. At times, the wages are paid as a lump sum in advance, usually Rs 80000 to 100000 per season, which makes this work more attractive for these labourers over other work that is locally available.

At times, untimely rains affect the living of the labourers a lot, and they suffer much. Once it rained in mid-February which affected the sugarcane cutters very badly. The workers could not stay in their huts and they disappeared for a few days. They were not compensated for this by the sugar mill or the contractors. They lack safe drinking water, and live in unhygienic conditions due to which there are mosquitoes which lead to various illnesses. While the living and working conditions of the sugarcane harvesting labourers are harsh, we see the

great fortune of those who own the sugar industry in our locality. The contrast is heart wrenching. Women, child labourers and elderly labourers are exploited to the fullest.



On observing all this I was very sad and I thought we should do something for them. I expressed this to the principal of the Sacred Heart Convent, Ahmednagar, asking the school to provide some towels, toilet articles etc. The sisters from St. Teresa's School, Haregaon, also helped by providing rice, grains and pulses.

As I reflect on the conditions of the sugarcane cutters, I realise that behind the sweetness that comes on to our tables, there is the hard labour of the people who work in very bad conditions in order to provide the sugarcane for the factories that produce sugar. I would like to thank the Ashankur institution for working for the sugarcane cutters' children and the opportunity given to me to work along with them. Thank You.

Sr. Sabita CCR (Congregation of the Carmelite Religious)

My Experience in Ashankur

Christians acknowledge the care of creation as an act of discipleship. We are stewards of the earth, summoned by God to "work for it and take care of it". (Genesis 2:1)



My life at Ashankur is very interesting with new activities, such as looking after the Nursery of Medicinal Plants, Biodiversity Studies, Self Help Group activities, Organic farming etc. I am a nature loving person, so I enjoy being with the nature. Whenever I visit the Self Help Groups in the villages or engage in Biodiversity Studies I collect lots of medicinal and rare plants, and flowers and I plant them in our nursery and take good care of them.

Since the past two years in Ashankur, Mr. Viren Lobo and Dr. Sunil Dubey (Scientist and environmentalist) have been visiting us and giving us knowledge about different species of plants, native, invasive, rare plants etc. and also the benefits and harmful effects for the native plants and the environment. Since I joined Ashankur in June 2024 I got the chance twice to attend these sessions and field studies.

I am keen learner and observer of micro-differences of the variety of the species. So, it makes my work easier and fun-filled. I feel that I have inherited this interest from my father. He used to make ayurvedic medicines and treat himself and others for small diseases. After his retirement, most of his time he spent making ayurvedic medicines. In the past, I did not value what he used to do; but now on looking back, I feel it had taken root within me more than I can imagine. In my childhood I do not remember going to doctors for any small sicknesses.

Torpa was a second cradle for my interests in medicinal plants, as I used to visit interiors villages; and now in Ashankur this interest continues. Whenever I get chance to share the knowledge about the local ayurvedic

medicines, I happily share it with the ones who are interested to know about it. I would like to dedicate my little work to my father who practiced it for the service of others.

Agnes Guria RSCJ

Organic Farming

Ashankur through its various outreach and awareness programmes from the time of its inception, has focused on Organic Farming in view of the various health issues that are coming to light. The Cancer Train that has started in Punjab and Haryana in North India is a classic example of the health hazards raised by the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in agriculture.

The women of our Self-Help Groups have taken a lot of time to get convinced to give up the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The beneficiaries were also given the insight on their ill effects as it drastically reduces the soil health. They also realised that every year they have to use more fertilisers and pesticides for the same area of land.

Our constant and persistent efforts, through awareness programmes, organic methods of farming trainings, exposure visits to the Mahatma Phule Agriculture University, Rahuri, and hands on experience of preparing the Organic Fertilizers (Jeevamrut) and Organic Pesticides (Dashparniarak), and Vermicompost, have borne fruit. The women have realised the importance of organic methods of farming and are now slowly changing their way of cultivation. Ashankur also helps them in promoting Kitchen Gardens by giving them seeds, by which they now are able to enjoy fresh and chemical free vegetables. In addition, their savings have increased and they are enjoying good health.



Ms Rita D'souza

Save Water, Save Fish and Save Fisher People

In the days of Jesus, fishermen weren't considered to be members of high society. The occupation of a fisherman was considered among the lowest of the low in society.



After a night of fishing, which resulted in empty nets, Jesus told Simon to row into deep waters and let down the nets. Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish their nets began to break. (Luke 5:5-6)

“Because you say so,” was good enough. I grew up and lived with a small-scale fishing community, so I have seen their lives. They survive on their daily catch. Their livelihood depends on fish. No fish – no livelihood. Fishermen are dedicated. Fishing requires a great deal of patience. Fishermen might go hours, perhaps days, without even a mouthful of food. But, giving up is not an option. Their dedication pushes them to keep on fishing.

“Life under water” (related to small-scale fisheries) is Sustainable Development Goal No. 14. November 21 is observed as World Fisheries Day to ‘Save Water, Save Fish and Save Fisher People’.

Ashankur resolved to connect with the small-scale fish workers, who are left behind and live in miserable conditions despite contributing significantly to the economy of Ahmednagar district. Our Ashankur staff participated in a regional meeting organised by the National Platform for Small-Scale Fish Workers at Mumbai, where the issue of invasion of Tilapia and its impact on the local fish diversity was discussed in depth. The aim was to promote women's leadership and sustainable development in food, nutrition, health education and biodiversity.

The meeting of the National Conference of small-scale fish workers forum was organized on November 15-16, 2024, at Seva Kendra, Kolkata. Fishermen representatives from several states, including Maharashtra participated. Two fishermen, an Ashankur staff member and I, attended this conference and reported on the work being done in Ashankur for the fishermen of the area. Fishermen affected by the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat and Ghargi Dam of Madhya Pradesh were also present. The Conference addressed various issues of small-scale of fish workers like the right to sustainable fishing and fish farming, right to protect water bodies and fish resources, right to finance, infrastructure, knowledge and training, right to have climate justice and right to have gender justice.



The Conference gave me a deeper insight into the life of the small-scale fish workers. Fish need water; good fish need good water. Fishers and fish farmers need the right to water. It is as members of communities that fishers acquire the knowledge, energy, motivation, and meaning they need to carry out their work.

The fish workers face a host of problems due to climate change with fluctuations in rainfall. This impacts inland water bodies and fisheries with unpredicted erratic droughts and floods. The livelihood of fishermen is in danger due to big development projects like sea ports.

Ashankur focuses on fisher women, as we are working for the empowerment of marginalized women in the Ahmednagar district. We made an initial visit to the fisher folk community in the Mula Dam area of Rahuri taluka to identify their issues and the status of fisher women. Their living conditions are poor. They lack awareness about the importance of education. The fisherwomen are neglected, poor and marginalized. They are not able to access social security schemes meant for fish workers that include housing, health, old age and widow pensions as they do not have required documents, like Aadhar cards. We had several meetings with fishing communities in the villages around Ashankur. These fisherwomen have little or no income. Both the Central and State governments need to address the concerns of the fishing community.

One very serious issue that needs to be addressed is the leasing of fishing rights by contractors and the restrictions imposed on fishing activities of the local, primarily Adivasi, communities. The second issue is about how the communities can overcome the challenge of the invasive Tilapia fish and the consequences. The third issue which is most pressing is the absence of any organisation amongst the fishing communities in the locality. There are, however, some organizational efforts being made in one of the villages which needs support. The fourth issue is the level of education of the community, which needs urgent attention.

We have made some headway in this direction and few e-shram cards have been made and distributed to fisher workers. Two fishermen attended the National Conference of Small-Scale Fish Workers at Kolkata. The Ashankur team had a meeting with the fisher community at Baragaon Nandur, near Mula Dam. The occasion was used to commemorate the World Wetlands Day and point to the larger issues facing the fish workers in the region, and the need to organise themselves for collective realisation. At a meeting conducted for fisherwomen in Taklibhan, they were informed about the government schemes and were encouraged to form Self-Help

Groups. Ashankur is playing a catalytic role in empowering the fisherwomen, supported by resources from the members of National Platform Small Scale fish workers. The Ashankur team is committed to further strengthen the self-reliance of the small-scale fishing communities in days to come, by developing their capacity and competencies for fishing.

Prisca Tirkey RSCJ