Problem of Migrants in Maharashtra Sugar Fields

Why in news?

The High Court of Bombay has recently taken suo motu cognisance of the intra-State workforce exploitation who have migrated from the drought- affected Marathwada to the sugar-belt region of western Maharashtra.

Status of Sugarcane Production

- **Global level** - India is the world's top producer and consumer of sugar.
- India is the 2nd largest exporter of sugar in the world after Brazil.
- **National level -** Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh are the leading sugar producing States in India.
- **Maharashtra's status** - According to the Maharashtra Sugar Commissioner, in 2022-23, the net area under sugar cane was 1.487 million hectares.
- There were 203 crushing factories in the State that has the capacity to produce 138 lakh metric tons of sugar.
- Maharashtra has set a record for itself by producing 137.28 lakh tonnes of sugar in 2021-22, which is nearly 31 lakh tonnes more than the previous year.
- In 2022-23 the State stands next to Brazil in terms of production.

Why there is significant migration in Maharashtra?

- **Prolonged unemployment**- After sowing rabi crops, millions of small and marginal peasants of the Marathwada region migrate to the sugar-belt districts to work in cane harvesting and factories.
- **Debt-** Due to unemployment, crop failure farmers get caught up in debt trap, they migrate foe better employment opportunities to pay off the debt.
- **Prolonged drought** - Marthawada region is a water scarce region which forces the peasants to migrate.
- **Crop failure**- Due to drought conditions it results in repeated crop failure which makes the peasants to migrate.
- **Dependence on Mukadam-** It is an exploitative structure of *recruiting migrant workers* in the sugar cane industry.
- The Mukadam is a man with political influence who has a contract with sugar factories to supply ***'Koytas' (labour couples)*** and takes an advance to pay workers.
- The Mukadam system assures sugar factories a supply of a large volume of temporary, cheap, reliable, and efficient workforce.

Migration Tracking System (MTS)

• It is a technology aided application launched in 2022 by the Maharashtra Government.
• It is said to be the first of its kind initiative in the country which on initially focused seasonal migrants in the tribal districts.
- To enumerate and track children, pregnant women, and lactating mothers at source and destination areas.
- To ensure nutrition, immunisation and early childhood care, and continuity of the Integrated Child Development Services

What are the issues faced by interstate migrant workers?

- **Lack of awareness**- The interstate migrants are exploited by the mukadam with cheap wages, sexual abuse etc.,
- **Inadequate data-** The data especially of women and children is invisible and unenumerated and it blocks the framing of policies for seasonal migrants.
- **Failure of Migration Tracking System** - It failed to create a comprehensive picture of seasonally migrating families, their current employment status, wage structure and entitlement coverage.
- **Women health-** They are engaged in vigorous work such as headload cane bundles that adversely impacts their body, causing musculoskeletal disorders and several gynaecological issues.

  In the Beed district of Maharashtra, the women are forced to get a hysterectomy to avoid complications of pregnancies and periods while working in the fields.

- **Early marriages-** At 12-13 years of age, girls are married off because the field employs only couples.
- **Gender based violence-** Many studies have reported recurring violence and sexual harassment cases linked to the Mukadam and male workers.
- **Child labour**- The children accompany their parents to sugar cane fields and there is no sufficient alternative schooling models.

What lies ahead?

- **Periodic databank-** A time bound enumerating exercise is critical to create a databank for seasonal migrants that is credible.
- **Revise MTS-** Expand its scope that can be used in the State's sugar belt and other seasonal migration corridors.
- **Gender equality-** There is a need to address the plight of migrant women workers to ensuring their health, safety and employment in the sugar cane labour market.
- **Strict implementation of NEP 2020-** There should be strict adherence to National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 which emphasises equitable and inclusive education for all.
- **Access to justice**- There is a need to guarantee safe and healthy working and living conditions.
- **Political will-** There is a need to create a favourable legal environment to protect the rights of migrants by strengthening the labour administration.
- Employment should be generated through schemes like MNREGA and the government

should find the solution to the problem of water scarcity in the drought prone region.
- **Promote Amrit Kal Vision-** Its aim is to an empowered and inclusive economy to fulfil all its humanitarian obligations.

The sugar which sweetens the lives of people, in reality, bitters for those who toil in producing it.

References

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