

## **Child labour in Gujarat's cottonseed farms**

Labour contractors and large landowners continue to employ children, often exposing them to vulnerable situations. Extreme poverty in Rajasthan's tribal districts fuels the practice.

Pradeep Baisakh reports.

**09 February 2010** - In 2006 July a group of 19 adolescent boys and girls from Kherwada block of Udaipur district were hired through a middleman to work in a cottonseed farm in Mehsana district of Gujarat. There, according to the older girls in the group, the owner of the farm and his partners sexually harassed three of them. When the girls resisted, some of the group members including one girl were severely beaten and thrown out of the field. With no money in their pockets, the group had to walk back for three days and two nights to reach home.

Approximately one lakh children from the tribal-dominated southern districts of Rajasthan are trafficked to northern Gujarat to work in cottonseed fields every year. For many years now, there have been reports of sexual harassment, physical and mental torture, long hours and harsh conditions of work, low wages, as well as unsafe and unhygienic living conditions on these farms. Every year there have been cases of deaths of children; in 2009 there were as many as 11 such reports. Some of these are from snake bites and exposure to pesticides; but more gruesome than these are the rape-and-murder reports.

### **High incidence of child labour**

India is the biggest cotton producing country in the world. Three states - Gujarat, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh - contribute three-fourths of the total cotton production in the country. Gujarat is also among the leading cottonseed producing states in the country. Since much of the work in cottonseed farms is carried out manually, a large workforce is engaged in the work, primarily cross-pollination of seeds. It is estimated that about 2.5 lakh labourers are employed in about 25,000 acres of farm under cottonseed production in the state.

In 2007, Dakshin Rajasthan Mazdoor Union (DRMU) conducted a study in cottonseed farms in Gujarat, and found that about one-third of the total workforce is below 14 years of age, and another 42 per cent in the age group of 15-18. A little less than half of these children, in both age groups, are girls. Children are also employed in other work in the cotton production chain i.e. in cotton farms and in ginning factories. As a result of mounting pressure from rights activists, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan have both accepted that children are employed in their farms, and promised steps to correct this. The Gujarat government, however, has yet to even accept the fact.

### **Recruitment by middlemen**

Cottonseed farming is carried out in the northern districts of Gujarat - Sabarkantha, Banaskantha, Mehsana and Gandhinagar - by a small number of farmers with very large land-holdings. Labourers in these farms are employed through a system of middlemen, who operate as labour contractors. A two-tier contractor system prevails; the bigger contractors are direct agents of the farmers. The smaller contractors, on the other hand, are members of the same community as the labourers.

These small contractors bring the children and adult labourers of their community to work in the farms. Both sets of contractors get their commissions for supplying labourers. Payment is made in advance to the middlemen, who then give it in turn to the labourers (or to the parents of the children, in the case of child labourers). This system has ensured the sustenance of the labour supply. By taking the advance money, the labourer makes an unwritten 'commitment of bondage' to stay in the field throughout the season.

About 80 per cent of the labourers are tribals, mostly Bhils, Grasias and others from Dungepur, Udaipur, Banswara and elsewhere in southern Rajasthan, while a small portion are from Gujarat itself.

Cross pollination generally takes place between July and October every year. The children are loaded in vehicles and transported from Rajasthan to Gujarat at night to evade the eyes of the law. At the workplace, the child has to work for about 10-12 hours a day. All children stay in the farm under open tents or make-shift houses, where they are susceptible to snake bites and other such risks. Generally both boys and girls stay in common accommodations. Due to this unsafe living condition, the adolescent girls have been subject to sexual harassment.

In two-thirds of the cases, the child is sent to work by parents against his/her will. The children therefore miss their homes and their education. The children are usually given roughly two-thirds of the daily minimum wage; they get about daily wages of 70-75 rupees against the statutory minimum wages of 100 rupees for eight hours of work. Several laws like the Inter State Migrant Workmen Act, Minimum Wages Act and Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, Bonded labour (Abolition) Act etc. are violated routinely.

### **Forced migration**

The tribal areas of Rajasthan are highly backward districts; the hilly terrain in these areas makes cultivation very difficult. Continuous drought also makes agriculture an unreliable and unsustainable occupation. Sudhir Katyal of DRMU says, "migration is a major means to livelihood for people here, who go to other states to work in cottonseed farming, cotton ginning industries and brick kilns. About two-thirds of their income comes from the work done outside."

During my interaction with the villagers of Paldeval Panchayat in Dungepur district, the villagers could not answer why they send their children to cottonseed fields in stead of the adults going to work, though they admitted that it's not a good practice. The poverty of people forces them to fall into the shrewd design developed over a period of time to attract and employ children in these farms.

At the workplace, the adolescent boys and girls can freely associate with each other; middlemen rely on this to entice the children to come to farms through 'peer group mobilisation'. In some cases the children leave their homes and come to work in farms even without the knowledge of the parents. Children are preferred over the adults in cottonseed farms for two reasons. The primary reason is that children are manipulable and can be made to work for lesser wages; also, some employers claim "the height of the cottonseed plants makes it easier for the children to do the pollination rather than the adults."

### **DRMU's intervention**

The intervention by DRMU began in 2006. The local middlemen, who hail from the community, were unionised and helped to bargain with the big contractors and landowners to stop child labour and raise wages. The transportation of children was highlighted in the media, and also found good support from the local administration, and the National Committee on Protection of Child Rights (NCPDR). They took the help of the police to start check gates on the routes used by the contractors to take the children to Gujarati farms, and succeeded in preventing some children from being taken out.

But gradually the union faced a backlash from the mighty landowning Seths of Gujarat, and by all those who stand to benefit from the child trafficking. There were instances of murderous attacks on the promoters of the union, like Madan Vaishnav. The small contractors also gradually withdrew their

cooperation from the union due to pressure from the big contractors and the Seths. Some parents also began opposing the union, as its position and activism hampered their income from child labour. Poverty in the area is high. In Dungepur district, the hundred days of work under NREGA is not sufficient for the people to stop sending their children to work.

Sudhir Katyal of the Union says "Unionising the small contractors was an anti-strategy. Initially that was the feasible strategy as one cannot unionise the children. Now we have to organise the parents and inculcate in them the concepts of child rights." Now the grassroots activists like Karolal from Dungepur and others like him organise meetings in the villages and convince parents not to send their children for work.

### **MNC seed companies**

With the introduction of BT hybrid seed in 2002 the cotton yields rose, and more farmers turned to cotton farming. The production, procurement and distribution of the cottonseed is closely controlled by a handful of private companies by a system of company-appointed organisers and agents, who distribute the parent seed to the farmers for production of cottonseed. The farmers have to sign contracts with the seed companies to return all their produce to them in lieu of getting the parent seed at a pre-decided price. This monopoly of the seed companies increased the demand for cheap labour, and correspondingly, the incidence of child labour also rose.

In recent years, research studies on child labour in the region have brought the spotlight on seed companies, in particular the multinational Monsanto and its Indian partners, in the production of cottonseed. Monsanto, in its human rights policy, mentions that it would not tolerate any form of exploitative child labour in line with standards of ILO conventions. Activists allege that although the company has acknowledged the presence of child labour in the cottonseed farms (particularly in Andhra Pradesh), it has done a precious little to address the situation. Other seed companies like Mahyco and Nuziveedu also face similar accusations of ignoring child labour on their farms.

### **What can be done?**

A multi-pronged approach may be needed for addressing the issue. The role of the seed companies and their impact on child labour should be probed, and necessary regulations adopted. The wider issue of seed policy also needs to be looked into. Intervention by both the Central and State governments is needed to address the economic conditions in the tribal belt of Rajasthan, including by increasing the entitlements under NREGA and bringing all families in these backward districts under the coverage of the Targeted Public Distribution System.

Other steps are also needed: strengthening the implementation of the child nutrition schemes like ICDS; making enough arrangements for the education of the children under the recently enacted Right to Education legislation; and stricter implementation of the child labour prohibition law.

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A joint study conducted by OECD Watch, the India Committee on Netherlands and others in 2007 suggests more than 4 lakh children are made to work in India in hybrid cottonseed production. The child labour in these farms first came to light towards the end of last century. (Above: Ramila 14, Hanju 14 and Deepak, 13 from Dungepur district worked in Cottonseed farms in Gujarat.)