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India: bitter sugar

The recent article produced and published by the Fuller Project, in collaboration with the New York Times, on 'The Brutality of Sugar: Debt, Child, Marriage and Hysterectomies' [[read](#)] was widely covered and commented by the international press. It caused a strong emotional reaction because of the violence it described, particularly against women.



Sugar production in Western India

The article describes the everyday reality of sugar production in Western India (Maharashtra) and the conditions imposed on local workers (particularly women) by the subcontractors of large multinationals like [Coca-Cola](#) and [PepsiCo](#).

The lives of these workers have nothing to do with what Coca-Cola advertises on their global website (**Refreshingly local: The Coca-Cola system contributes to the local economy, supporting value...**) or what PepsiCo claims on their page (**PepsiCo positive: we are taking action to inspire positive change for people and planet...**)

working to build a more diverse, inclusive workplace while promoting what we call ‘courageous engagement’)¹. Courageous engagement...

Both statements leave us with a taste of bitter that no quantity whatsoever of sugar could eliminate...

The authors of the article show that workers live a daily life full of violence and contempt. It is characterised by

- child work,
- illegal forced marriage (so that young girls can work as a team with a husband in the sugarcane fields, adopting the ‘koyta’ system which helps them to make twice as much money as a man alone),
- working to payback advances from employers (often around \$1,800 per couple, or roughly \$5 a day per person for a six-month season) who charge a fee when workers miss work even when it is to consult a doctor, and,
- by widespread sterilisation of working-age women.

On this last point, says the article, women are ‘encouraged’ to undergo hysterectomy so they can work uninterruptedly. (Does that correspond to PepsiCo’s webpage’s ‘courageous engagement’?) This practice is quite frequent: for example, in Beed area², between 2015 and 2018, more than 4,500 women have had their uterus evacuated [\[read\]](#) and, according to a government report quoted by the article, approximately one out of five of the 82,000 female sugarcane workers from Beed had had hysterectomy.



Saumya Khandelwal for The New York Times

Here, it is important to recall that sugarcane harvest is seasonal, as cane cutting occurs between October and March, a period during which these women earn

¹ Both websites were accessed on 29 March 2024.

² According to the 2011 census, Beed district had 2.6 million inhabitants [\[read\]](#).

what may very well be their only earnings for a year, making any day lost an important financial loss for them. It is also important to say here that in the area concerned, two thirds of the population lives under the poverty line. Dr C.V. Dongrikar presents a hair-raising description of women distress in Beed District [\[read\]](#).

When they 'decide' to go for surgery, women are provided with a loan by labour brokers or contractors, and they have to pay it back through their work of cutting and assembling sugarcane.

After surgery, these women often suffer serious health consequences (heart disease, osteoporosis and other ailments) due to induced early menopause. All in all, working conditions in sugarcane fields can be defined as forced labour [\[read\]](#).

Sugar has been at the heart of the political system in Maharashtra for decades

This type of situation is not recent. India has been known for massive forced sterilisation programmes, particularly in the 1970s, during the 'Emergency' period imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi [\[read\]](#), and violence is widely present, particularly, but not exclusively, in rural areas of the country.³

Sugar production has been present in Western India for time immemorial.⁴ With 439 million tons in 2022, India is the second producer of sugarcane in the world, after Brazil⁵, and the first exporter of refined sugar (5.8 million tons, 22% of total world exports). Maharashtra alone weighs around 40% of the Indian sugar. For long, sugar has been surrounded by violence [read for example [here](#) and [here](#)].

Pallavi Roy [\[read\]](#) explains how, after India's independence in 1947, Maharashtra became a state governed by a coalition led by businessmen and large farmers who are part of the sugar lobby. For several decades, the sugar cooperatives were used by politicians who controlled banks and distributed government subsidies to secure votes by paying high sugar prices to producers, while also helping the rapid development of industries in urban area. In fact, many of the investors in industry are actually big sugarcane producers who, in this way, recycled the sugar rent resulting from favourable policies and subsidies granted by local politicians [\[read\]](#). This systems helped to turn Maharashtra into one of the most industrialised states of India.

Around year 2000, this system of political patronage collapsed, as more than one third of sugar cooperatives met with financial difficulties, leaving the ground open to the private sector, while politicians developed closer links with the underworld.

³ See for example Rohinton Mistry's famous novel 'A fine balance' (McClelland & Steward, 1995) that gives a good idea of the level of violence in India's urban and rural areas in the mid 1970s.

⁴ Sugarcane and sugar production are mentioned in ancien Indian literature [\[read\]](#).

⁵ World production of sugarcane is estimated at 1,922 million tons for 2022.

Socially and ecological responsible multinationals?

This collapse and the taking over by the private sector led to the involvement of Coca-Cola and PepsiCo who contributed to further expand sugar production in the region by creating new market opportunities.

However, representatives of these two multinationals only visit very rarely the field, according to the Fuller Project authors, and these companies don't seem to worry much about the monitoring of conditions that are in total contradiction with their claimed code of conduct. In this they are no exceptions and, like many others, they use their foundations and claims of socially and ecologically responsible behaviour as a mask of the real nature of a system from which they draw huge profits, a reality that, beyond violence against people, also involves depleting water resources from rural communities [read [here](#) and [here pp. 6–8](#)].

Conclusion

The example of sugar in Maharashtra is just another case of how multinationals try to gain a positive image and mask a reality made of violence and exploitation. There are many other such occurrences (e.g. strawberries in Spain [[read](#)] or tea in Kenya [[read](#)]).

Claims are made of good practices and responsible behaviour, websites are full of eloquent but misleading and wrong statements, all this with the objective of fooling the public.

To support these allegations, a 'certifying industry' has developed that is designed to provide supposedly 'independent' assessments [[read](#)]. Moreover, a complex system of subcontracting has been built to make it all but impossible to establish the link between field-level misconduct and human rights violations by local partners and sub-contractors, on the one hand, and sponsoring multinationals, on the other. This architecture makes it also very difficult to create effective legal frameworks to combat these practices.

Spectacular events like the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, almost exactly 11 years ago, demonstrated how developed this type of system is in the garment industry. The situation is comparable in food and agriculture, but it is not as well known in the public at large.

This is why the work by the Fuller Project and the New York Times must be highly commended.

To know more:

- Rajagopalan, M. and Q. Inzamam, [The Brutality of Sugar: Debt, Child, Marriage and Hysterectomies](#), The Fuller project, 2024

- Crowley, T., [“Land Is the New Sugar”: A Review of Sai Balakrishnan’s Shareholder Cities](#), metropolitics, 2020.
- Dongrikar, C. V., [Health Issues and Causes of Women Distress in Beed District](#), Think India (Quarterly Journal) Vol-22, Special Issue-13, 2019.
- K. Shara, [Corporate Social Responsibility in Beverage Industry A Comparative Study of Coca Cola and PepsiCo](#), 2018.
- Roy, P., [India’s Vulnerable Maturity: Experiences of Maharashtra and West Bengal](#) in North, Wallis, Webb. and Weingast, In the Shadow of Violence: The Problem of Development in Limited Access Societies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 198–232, 2012.
- Goyal, S. and N. Linthoingambi, [Coca-Cola India: Losing Its Fizz](#), Case study, Market Forces Vol. 5 No. 3, 2009.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [Responsible businesses or greenwashing? The certification industry in support of multinationals](#), 2021
- [Spain: strawberries with a strong taste of sex and pesticides...](#) 2019.
- [The wheelings and dealings of the sugar industry revealed by three Californian researchers](#), 2017.
- [The large multinational corporations in charge of our agri-food system : how they try to earn themselves an ethical, pro-development image](#), 2015.

and other articles on our thematic page [Multinationals and their image](#).