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The Bitter Aftertaste of Sugar

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Sugar is a commodity in high demand all over the world, and sweets are often associated with good tidings and celebration. In the production of this much-coveted substance, however, there are a great deal of labor violations taking place. Sugar production [historically](#) has had well-documented links to slavery. According to Prof. Ben Richardson of the University of Warwick, many of the management practices employed by this industry now [hark back to the time of slavery](#). These include the use of migrant or bonded labor, and paying a piece rate (that is, paying the worker in terms of quantity of output produced) instead of a daily wage. Similar conditions prevail in plantations across Central and South America, especially [Nicaragua](#), Brazil, [El Salvador](#), and the [Dominican Republic](#).

This has a deleterious effect on the health and well-being of the workers, who are at times [literally working themselves to death](#); kidney disease, known (among its many names) as the 'malady of the sugar cane', has been killing workers in Central America. Though its causes have not been pinned down, there is a strong correlation between the working conditions on these sugar plantations and this mysterious illness. A recent study conducted at Boston University finds that given the decline in kidney function during harvest and the differences in terms of job category and employment duration, the risk factor of CKD (chronic kidney disease) is [occupational](#).

But this is only one of the problems facing sugar workers in this part of the world. The boom of the bio-fuel industry (sugarcane being a chief commodity in this industry) has resulted in Brazil becoming a reference for how to cut carbon emissions and oil imports [simultaneously](#). However, these accolades rest on the shoulders of migrant and destitute laborers. This workforce is constituted of men who are fleeing poverty, and have migrated from the impoverished northeast. In 2007, when the conditions of these ['ethanol slaves'](#) gained international attention, they were paid 400 reias (100 pounds) a month for the backbreaking work they did, which often included twelve-hour shifts. The nation is still grappling with forced labor conditions in rural areas, including on sugar plantations, and has been reported to be using [drones](#) to tackle this issue.

It is important to note that this problem is not restricted to Latin America. Parallels are seen in Marathwada, an important sugar producing part of India. Here, [migrant workers](#) live in temporary hutments, without doors, electricity or running water. Even though the migration of workers during the harvest season is an annual phenomenon, the state does little to provide them with the [basic infrastructure](#) that they require to live with dignity. There is also a component of caste and social exclusion at play here. Supervisors on the plantations in Marathwada generally belong to upper castes while the workers belong to so-called lower caste communities such as [Dalit, Banjara and Pardhi](#). Facing the double discrimination of caste and poverty (sometimes coupled with migrant status), the workers in sugar plantations in Marathwada are open to [considerable exploitation](#), with some of them narrating incidents of severe beatings, being underpaid and overworked.

How can this state of affairs change? Well, unionization is one obvious step. The South African sugar industry bears the distinction of being unionized, and has been described as about ["as 'ethical' as sugar gets"](#). This springs from the fact that there has been a strong labor movement in South Africa, many of whose icons ([Jay Naidoo and Chris Dlamini](#)) began their work in the sugar industry. However, even in South Africa, this unionization exists only on the milling side and not on the agricultural side. This leaves the agricultural workers open to exploitation. A similar pattern can be seen in Marathwada, India, where it is the mill workers who are unionized and not the plantation workers. This means that the plantation workers bear the brunt of the mill owners' desire to keep the production costs down and profit margins high. This lack of unionization can be explained by the fact that agricultural workers are generally very hard to organize. This is because in Indian agriculture is still characterized by small and fragmented land holdings, and a large number of migrant/landless laborers who only receive [irregular employment](#). None of these factors are conducive to the formation of unions. Adding to this is that a large number of the agricultural labor belongs to [scheduled castes and scheduled tribes](#), and the asymmetrical power equations make organizing labor more difficult. But given the differences in the benefits that the mill workers and agricultural laborers enjoy, unionization may be a pivotal step towards stemming the exploitation of sugar plantation workers.

Another solution to combating exploitative working conditions could be the use of technology. As mentioned earlier, Brazil has tried as interesting experiment, where they use [drones](#) to monitor slave labor like conditions in rural areas. This is being hailed as an improved means of monitoring areas that are remote, and can supplement the physical inspection by labor inspectors. However, not everyone sees the use of drones for monitoring as a good thing. When Kevin Bales (a prominent anti-slavery activist) announced such a measure in 2013 in the Indian context, several other prominent activists decied it as a ['publicity stunt'](#). According to those criticizing this move, the real need in India was for government departments and law enforcement bodies to act together with civil society groups to end the slave-like labor conditions. Of course, drones are often seen in a

negative light at present, since unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are currently used for [spying and to carry out airstrikes](#), among other uses. Thus, it is natural to assume that NGOs, particularly foreign-funded NGOs using drones to document slave labor practices, can alarm the government. However, this does not mean that the idea needs to be discarded entirely.

At this juncture, it may be useful to look at the body of international law protecting these workers. Article 7 of [the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) promises workers a safe and healthy working environment, as well as adequate rest and reasonable working hours. The right to freedom of association and collective bargaining are also ensured by ILO Conventions [No 87](#) and [No 98](#). Both these fundamental Conventions have been ratified by more than 150 countries, yet India has ratified neither. Further, the workers in sugar plantations across the world are also afforded protection by the [Plantations Convention of 1958](#), which provides that the workers on plantations have a right to organize, have freedom of association, and that female workers have the right to maternity leave. It also provides for workers compensation in the case of an injury and obliges the state to inform the worker of the minimum wages in force in that country. These obligations are binding on countries that have ratified the convention; India, however, has not ratified this convention, though it enjoys [twelve ratifications](#) from countries like Nicaragua and Ecuador. The [Labor Inspection \(Agriculture\) Convention of 1969](#) may also be a useful tool for ensuring that labor inspections occur, yet neither Brazil or India have ratified this. Thus we see that international law has certain limitations that cause it to have a very circuitous impact on the politics of sugar.

Exploitative labor conditions in sugar plantations worldwide are a cause for concern. While our insatiable need for sugar is not going to be quenched any time soon, we must become more aware, as consumers, of the politics behind an item we cherish. Consumer awareness and calling for strong governmental action can go a long way in changing the nature of the sugar industry. In this context we cannot discount the role of new technologies and supply chain management styles, as well as tried and tested organisation methods like unionization. However, a lot of the problems plaguing the sugar industry originate from the society in which they exist. These include caste systems, unequal power structures, the impoverishment of migrants and repressive conditions of workers not conducive to unionization. To bring about any kind of lasting change, these problems have to be tackled both inside and outside our sugar-bowls.

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