

# *Arogya Sakhi* ('Health Companion') in the sugarcane fields: A unique initiative of Women Cane Cutters Organization



The *Mahila Ustod Kamgar Sanghatana* (Women Cane Cutters Organization), an organisation of women cane cutters, facilitated by *Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch* (MAKAAM), has been active in 80 villages of Beed and Hingoli districts for the past four years. The union seeks to focus attention on issues such as recognition for women as sugarcane workers, basic amenities during seasonal migration, ration, livelihood options in the home villages, and health. Special efforts are being made to obtain health care facilities for women sugarcane workers, both at the work site and in their home villages. Experiencing both successes and failures, the Women Cane Cutters Organization, along with SOPPECOM, has been experimenting with different initiatives, and is consistently striving in the hope that they will eventually be universalised by the administration.

## **ASHA<sup>1</sup> 'Arogya Sakhi' at the sugarcane fields**

Sugarcane workers face the most dire and hostile conditions in the location they migrate to. Shortage of drinking water, unhygienic environment, extreme physical labour, inadequate rest, and absence of health support services result in a high incidence of illness amongst them. Often they have no choice
























but to go to a private clinic, or buy medicines from local private medical stores. This results in a huge financial outlay.

To address these issues, SOPPECOM launched the innovative *Arogya Sakhi* (Health companion) experiment. These *Arogya Sakhis* were trained by experienced trainers from Anusandhan Trust – SATHI, an organisation working in public health. The aim of the training was to teach these women how to handle common ailments, so that they could support the sugarcane workers in their own *toli* (labour gang) and other nearby *tolis* and save their money too. Around 20 women who had at least basic literacy skills, and were surely migrating in the upcoming cane cutting season were selected from amongst sugarcane workers in Beed and Hingoli district, and trained as *Arogya Sakhis*. All the women are in the 25-35 age group.

In order to make it easy for the women to understand the content, illustrated modules were used for this training. The topics covered in the training were: treatment of common ailments like body ache, headache, fever, diarrhoea and vomiting; care of wounds, hygiene and purification of water; managing menstruation, guidance for pregnant women, toilet facilities at the work site; and referral

<sup>1</sup> (ASHA, or Accredited Social Health Activist is a government appointed health volunteer scheme already functioning in many villages across the country. The ASHA is, however, village based only. ASHA also means 'hope' in Hindi and Marathi)

## औषधांचा तक्ता

गोळीचे नाव	केव्हा घ्यावी?	दिवसातून किती वेळा				किती दिवस	मोठामाणूस १२ वर्ष पुढे	मोठे मूल ८ ते १२ वर्ष	मध्यम मूल ४ ते ७ वर्ष	लहान मूल १ ते ३ वर्ष
										
पॅरा 	ताप / अंगदुखी	✓	✓	✓	✓	१ 				
फ्युरा 	२ दिवसापेक्षा जास्त जुलाब	✓	✓		✓	३   				
डोम 	उलटीसाठी		✓			१ 				

and liaison with local health authorities like ASHA, Anganwadi worker, ANM, doctor at PHC, etc. and information on government health schemes.

After completion of the training, the *Arogya Sakhis* were given a medicine kit, containing medicines and other supplies needed for a basic level of health care support. A pictorial chart with clear text and illustrations was pasted on to the kit, to ensure that the women could easily give the right medicines safely. To further ensure the correct and safe use of the medicine, a booklet describing the step-by-step treatment through pictures and text was also supplied.

The women then began to treat sugarcane workers at the work sites. Some limited their work to their own *tolis*, while others even reached out to nearby *tolis*. At a conservative estimate, these *Arogya Sakhis* have been able to reach 500 workers.

12 of the 20 trained *Arogya Sakhis* kept records of their interventions, including details of the patient, treatment given, dosage etc. An analysis of the data showed that the *Arogya Sakhi* experiment has been a success. Their records show that between

November 2023 and March 2024, the *Arogya Sakhis* treated 349 patients, through 855 interactions, for various ailments. Normally, for any illness, the workers need to go to a hospital, and cover the expense of going there, paying for treatment and medicines, which costs them a minimum of Rs.500. Besides, due to absence from work, the sugarcane worker has to pay a fine, which can amount to around Rs.600 per head to the *toli*. Excluding this fine amount, the experiment has been able to achieve a saving of around Rs. 4.27 lakhs for the sugarcane workers.

The work of these *Arogya Sakhis* has helped sugarcane workers to get free and timely treatment for minor ailments. It is notable that the health department of Beed district has supported this experiment by providing medicines and medical supplies to the *Arogya Sakhis*, including paracetamol, domperidone, furazolidone, cotton wool, bandages, and calcium tablets, among other medicines. This helped the *Arogya Sakhis* to support the sugarcane workers more effectively. The health department in Hingoli has also promised similar support in the next sugarcane cutting season.

The CEO of Beed had organised a meeting on March 27 2025, in the presence of District Women and Child Development Officer, District Maternal and Child Health Officer and District Health Officer to understand the *Arogya Sakhi* experiment. Representatives from SOPPECOM, health experts, and representatives of the cane cutter organisation presented how the pilot was implemented, its benefits, the advantages of scaling it up at the government level, the operational mechanism and the financial aspects. The CEO took note of this experiment in the meeting and responded positively to the possibility of implementing this scheme as an innovative and model program in Beed district through the Government.

Implementing such a program through the government would provide health care support for workers at the work site, provide information about the *tolis* to the government and provide support to pregnant and nursing mothers in the *tolis*.

Based on the success of this experiment, the Women Cane Cutters organization demands that this program be implemented by the Government. The organization will give all required support.

It is essential that this scheme is implemented across all districts from where sugarcane workers migrate. If the state government and Loknete Gopinath Munde Sugarcane Workers Welfare Association take note of this model and work towards its universalization, it will, to a great extent solve the health issues of sugarcane workers.

It will also help build people's trust in the government health system, as it can effectively reach sugarcane workers through these *Arogya Sakhis*, who would function as ASHA workers in the sugarcane harvest areas. It will not only help in improving the healthcare services, but also raise awareness among workers about the importance of hygiene and the use of government services.

Among migrant sugarcane workers, the number of pregnant women, nursing mothers and small children is quite substantial. The *Arogya Sakhis* would be able to focus on mother and child health services. Training, medical kits, and digital aids would further enhance their effectiveness.

## A proposal for implementing the *Arogya Sakhi* model at a governmental level

The administrative system encounters many difficulties in addressing the health issues of sugarcane workers due to their regular migration. But if the trained *Arogya Sakhi* is a part of the *toli* and migrates with them, many of these difficulties will get solved. Therefore, the women cane cutters organization demands that the government implement the *Arogya Sakhi* initiative as outlined below:

- In the source districts<sup>2</sup>, one woman cane cutter from each *toli* with a minimum education level of 7th standard should be selected as an *Arogya Sakhi*. She can be trained through the Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs).
- She can be given a certification as Community Health Worker, which will make her an official member of the local health system.
- She can be supervised by the CHO and the ASHA supervisor.
- The health department should provide her with replenishments for medicines, referral services and a helpline.
- The model should be given recognition by the National Health Mission, labour department, Loknete Gopinath Munde Sugarcane Workers' Welfare Board, and sugar factories.
- Costs for training, kits and honorarium can be met through Public Private Partnerships (PPP) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds. Companies that purchase sugar too can contribute through CSR. A task force consisting of representatives of the Health Department, Department of Women and Child Development, Loknete Gopinath Munde Sugarcane Workers' Welfare Board, Zilla Parishad, local health organisations and NGOs, can have oversight on the work of the *Arogya Sakhis* and help in sorting out any issues they may face.
- It is estimated that the scheme would require Rs.2500 per *Arogya Sakhi*, which includes training, module preparation, stationery, training venue and travel expenses. Similarly, an honorarium should be fixed for the *Arogya Sakhis*, on the lines of the Governments ASHA initiative, so that these women can take some time off from cane cutting work to provide basic health support.

<sup>2</sup> Villages from where the cane cutters migrate





"People used to call me ASHA of the sugarcane field, and that used to feel very good. I treated 57 people in my *toli*. The nearest hospital was very far from the place we had settled in, so people would come to me even in the middle

of the night. Women commonly suffered from body ache and headaches because of working so hard all day. Paracetamol tablets and bandages would get depleted often and I would have to keep asking for replenishments."

**- Arogya Sakhi Aruna Ghongade**

Village Jalaldabha, block Aundha Nagnath, district Hingoli

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"Everyone in the *toli* would come to me for treatment, since I was an *Arogya Sakhi*. I treated 47 people. Each one came to me at least two or three times. This must have saved at least 10 to 12 thousand rupees in medical expenses. My daughter used to suffer from

stomach pain during her menstrual cycle. Earlier, when we went for sugarcane cutting, I had to often leave my work and visit a clinic during such times, which used to cost us around 10 to 15 thousand rupees. But this time, I treated her myself at home, and I was happy that we saved a lot of money."

**- Arogya Sakhi Sadhana Waghmare**

Village Kathoda, block and district Beed

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"People in the *toli* used to call me 'Madam'. 'Madam, I am much obliged to you, if you hadn't bandaged the wound quickly, I would have lost a lot of blood,' they would say. The water in the well near our settlement was not good, everyone used to get diarrhoea.

I spent my own money, bought chlorine and alum and showed them how to purify the water. I had learned this at the *Arogya Sakhi* training. This year, everyone built temporary bathrooms according to my suggestion."

**- Arogya Sakhi Kalpana Thorat**

Village Pimpalwadi, block and district Beed

"I treated around 49 people and helped them save on medical expenses. So people in the *toli* saw me as a support. Most of them came to me with fever. So I kept running out of paracetamol tablets. They used to call me 'doctor'. If anyone fell ill, they would say, 'We have our own doctor.'"

**- Arogya Sakhi Suvarna Asole**

Village Pimpaldari, block and district Hingoli

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"We had gone to Karnataka for sugarcane cutting. During that period, I treated 65 people. I gave women paracetamol for period pains, and taught them about hygiene and cleanliness. I called up the ASHA worker to arrange immunisation and nutrition for the children, but she said she could not do anything as we were in another state. We should be able to access health services in other states too. I hope that the *Arogya Sakhi* programme will continue."

**- Arogya Sakhi Jyoti Thorat**

Village Kathoda, block and district Beed

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"As an *Arogya Sakhi*, I migrated for cane cutting with my medicine kit. The people in my *toli* used to drink water from the bore well and river, and many suffered from diarrhoea. I treated them with furazolidone, and told them to use chlorine to purify the water. I treated 80 patients for fever, diarrhea and body ache. That consumed a lot of paracetamol and furazolidone tablets. There is a great need to provide clean drinking water during the migration period."

**- Arogya Sakhi Amrapali Dongre**

Village Chardari, block Dharur, district Beed

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"Everyone was very happy to see my medicine kit. I treated 16 people and saved 15 to 20 thousand rupees. I tried to contact the ASHA worker for the children's immunisation, but did not manage to meet her. Then I sent my husband to her house, and got the message across to her. She informed us about the time and place, and we got the children immunised."

**- Arogya Sakhi Alka Kapate**

Village Mauja, block and district Hingoli



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