

# **Child Labour in Production of Cotton Seeds on Monsanto Plots in District Sabarkantha of Gujarat**



Child in school dress working on Monsanto seed plot of Damore Arvind Shankar, Village Galisebro, Meghraj taluka, Sabarkantha district

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## **Rationale for Study**

Introduction of the first genetically modified crop in India Bt cotton has led to a white revolution. India has become a major exporter of cotton from a net importer some years back. This success story has a dark lining though. Hybrid seed technology has been always been an employer of child labour<sup>1</sup>. However the success of the Bt technology has meant a spiraling demand for hybrid seeds that in turn has meant a spiraling demand for child labour. North Gujarat has emerged as the major production area for Bt cottonseeds, situated as it is on the border of a vast tribal hinterland that is a ready source of cheap child labour. With rapid increase in area under seed production, the catchment area for recruiting children has made deep inroads in South Rajasthan.

Prayas Center for Labour Research & Action and Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor Union (DRMU) have been working for the last five years to eradicate child labour in production of BT cotton seeds in North Gujarat. DRMU has documented child labour and taken steps to stop trafficking of children. The issue has been taken note of by different agencies and a number of initiatives have been launched to address the problem. However the incidence of child labour continues. What has happened over this period of time is that the cotton seed production plots have become a no go area for civil society activists.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of studies by Davuluri Ventasteswarlu capture the incidence of child labour on cottonseed farms all over the country. Most recent is the report 'Seeds of Child Labour - Signs of Hope (<http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/signsofhope.pdf>) that was released in 2010. There are also reports from other agencies / authors on the issue – most notable being Dakshin Rajasthan Majdoor Union and Sewa Mandir studies.

Nearly all of cotton seed production is sponsored by seed companies. Monsanto Mahyco Private Limited (MMPL), a joint venture between American MNC Monsanto and MAHYCO, an Indian seed company, has the license for production of Bt cottonseed, a genetically modified crop. Monsanto also has equity shareholding in MAHYCO. MMPL in turn has given licenses to a large number of Indian seed companies for production of cottonseed. It charges a royalty<sup>2</sup> on each packet of seed sold in the market by these seed companies. In addition, Monsanto also has a small area under its own direct production. The company has off late been trying to increase area under direct production.

Monsanto is clearly the major stakeholder and chief beneficiary in cotton seed production. It therefore also needs to be held responsible for prevalence of child labour in the industry. Monsanto has reacted in various ways to evidence of child labour in the industry. It has refused to acknowledge responsibility for prevalence of child labour on farms of Indian seed companies sub licensed by it. For its own farms, it has undertaken an anti child labour program that it claims has reduced child labour. This study was mounted to check the efficacy of this second claim. The study sought to observe 50 cottonseed farms where production was undertaken by Monsanto to find out if indeed child labour has been eradicated on Monsanto farms.

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<sup>2</sup> According to trade sources, this constitutes up to 15 percent of the market price of cottonseed.

## **Summary**

The study shows that there is extensive child labour on cottonseed plots of Monsanto. If we consider children between the age group of 6 to 18 years, then child labour comprises of 52 percent of the total labour force. Of these, 28 percent are in the age group of less than 14 years while 24 percent are in the age group of 15-18 years. Every plot had a child labour if the children are defined to be below 18 year. If we define children to be between 6-14 years, then 74 percent farms had children working on the farms.

The experiences during the study indicate that the production machinery has become very sensitive to entry of outsiders to cottonseed farms. At the slightest suspicion, the outsiders can be obstructed and harassed. The vigilance machinery employed by Monsanto to detect and remove child labour is ineffective. The local inspectors have clear understanding that they must not be too enthusiastic about their task. The incentive offered by the Company has not proved effective to prevent child labour. Often it does not reach farmers and is instead pocketed by the middlemen agents.

The strategy adopted by the company to shift seed production to tribal areas has reduced child migration. But child labour persists.

## **Objectives of the study:**

1. To know the number of plots and villages where seed production is being directly undertaken by Monsanto.
2. To prepare a profile (age, caste, sex) of child labourers working on seed farms of Monsanto
3. To capture through audio visual means the spread and depth of child labour on Monsanto seed plots.

**Methodology:** Following methods were used to compile data

- Personal visit to seed farms
- Observations
- Interviews
- Video shooting mostly through a hidden cam

This study was undertaken by visiting personally the seed plots and by discussions with farmers and adult labourers. Due to shortage of time and resources, it was decided to carry out the study in 50 seed plots of three talukas - Khedbrahma, Bhiloda and Meghraj - of Sabarkantha District in North Gujarat. Attempts were made to study cottonseed plots in Rajasthan also. However these could not succeed as the farmers resisted the visit by outsiders to their fields.

During the study, the field investigator faced many difficulties. The farmers were not willing to talk about child labour. The farmers would not provide real information and try to hide children working on farms as soon as an outsider would approach. If the children could not be hidden, they would not give the real age of the child. Thus at the visit of each plot the field investigator had to hide the real reason of the visit. It was not possible to do shooting in the open. So a hidden camera was used. One person would talk to the farmer while another person would undertake shooting.

## **Duration of study**

The study was carried from 20 September to 30 October when the work of cross pollination of cotton flowers was at its peak. In Gujarat the season of cross pollination starts from July-August and continues till October-November.

## **Limitation of Study**

The main limitation of the study is that the video shooting had to be done secretly. Farmers were very sensitive about the very mention of child labour. It is noteworthy that the State Labour Department carries out extensive inspections to detect child labour. The field work had to be in the absence of Agents<sup>3</sup> who discouraged visits of any outsider to seed farms. While the study team could get access to list of tribal farmers, it could not secure the list of non tribal farmers given plots by the Company. It was difficult to get the area of the plot as the farmers would not give the correct area. The study team did not get to see any written agreement between company and farmer. The agents handling seed distribution did their best to obstruct the study. In one instance, video shots of 14 plots were removed by farmers on instruction of the agent from the camera of the researcher.



Child labor on plot of Khokharia Prakash Mohan village Nava Mota, Taluka Khedbrahma

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<sup>3</sup> Agents control the seed production for the company. They locate plot owners and provide the parent seed. All company transactions are mostly routed through the agent. They are often big farmers and sometimes own the ginning factories where cottonseed is processed.

## Study Findings

### Distribution of Monsanto Plots in North Gujarat

Monsanto has given a total of 1339 plots in 191 villages of Sabarkantha district. Most of the plots fall in the two talukas of Bhiloda and Khedbrahma. These two talukas have a significant proportion of tribal population. This is revealing as this reflects a conscious strategy on part of the company. The company has given most of its plots to tribal farmers on both sides of the Gujarat - Rajasthan border. This has been done in response to the campaign against employment of children in cottonseed farming. Normally the tribal children from this belt are trafficked to cottonseed farms of North Gujarat. Monsanto has now given seed plots in this very area to tribal farmers. Thus the children need not migrate and can be employed locally.

The taluka wise list of Monsanto villages and number of plots is given in the Table below.

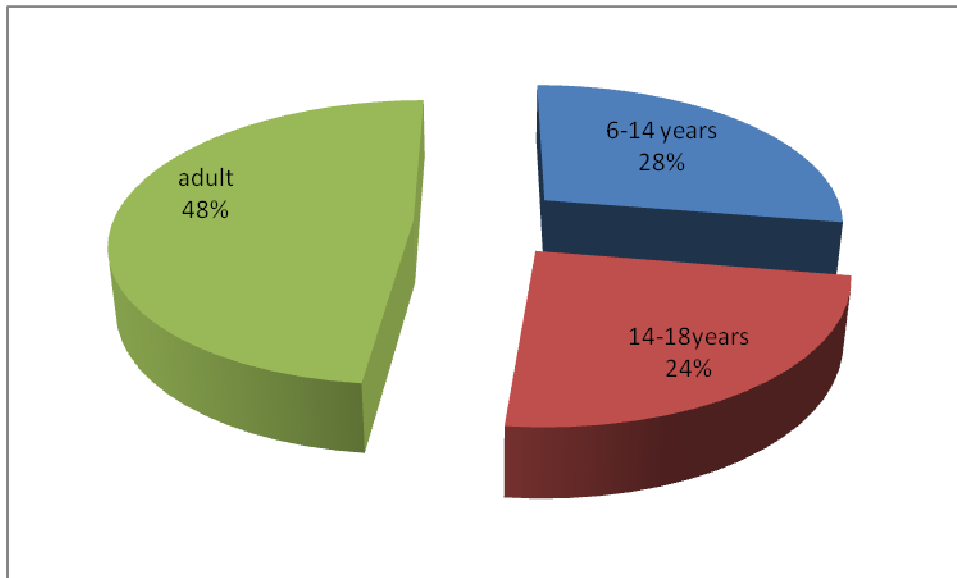
**Table: List of Monsanto Plots in Sabarkantha District of Gujarat**

| <b>Sr. No.</b> | <b>Taluka</b> | <b>Total Villages</b> | <b>No. of plots.</b> |
|----------------|---------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| 1              | Khedbrahma    | 102                   | 843                  |
| 2              | Vijaynagar    | 4                     | 20                   |
| 3              | Bhiloda       | 46                    | 294                  |
| 4              | Meghraj       | 2                     | 14                   |
| 5              | Idar          | 29                    | 136                  |
| 6              | Vadali        | 6                     | 30                   |
| 7              | Kheralu       | 2                     | 12                   |
| <b>Total</b>   |               | <b>191</b>            | <b>1339</b>          |

## Depth and Spread of Child Labour

The main objective of the study was to study the magnitude of child labour. It shows that there is extensive child labour on cottonseed plots of Monsanto. If we consider children between the age group of 6 to 18 years, then child labour comprises of 52 percent of the total labour force. Of these, 28 percent are in the age group of less than 14 years while 24 percent are in the age group of 15-18 years. Every plot had a child labour if the children are defined to be below 18 year. If we define children to be between 6-14 years, then 74 percent farms had children working on the farms.

**Chart: Child Labour on 38 Cottonseed Plots of Monsanto**



The detailed list of plot wise observations is given in Annexure at the end.

## Social Profile of Child Workers

- Majority of the children working on seed farms were tribal. Only two farms had non tribal children working on them.
- Of the total workforce, 36 percent workers were female.
- The children employed on the farms were mostly locals. Migrant tribal children were detected on only one farm. The local children belonged to two categories – household children and also wage labour recruited from the same or neighboring village.
- Children working on the farms were enrolled in schools. However they were found



working on seed farms during school hours. The working hours at seed farms overlap the school hours (8 AM to 12.30 PM for morning shift and 12.30 PM to 5 PM for afternoon shift).

## **Role performed by Monsanto's Human Rights Teams to Detect and Remove Child Labour**

Monsanto has set up an elaborate program to detect and remove child labour. This comprises of inspectors who visit the farms. The farmers who do not employ child labour are given a monetary incentive. The study provided an opportunity to test out the efficacy of these mechanisms.

The study team met three employees of Monsanto Company's Human Rights Cell. Of these two were field workers and one research person. When the study team requested the researcher during informal discussions to provide a list of company plots, he said that it was not possible to share this. The study team then established contact with a field worker to understand the modus operandi of the Human Rights Cell. When asked if he had observed child labour in the seed plots, he replied in the affirmative. However he said that they do not report all the cases as doing so would be construed as the Human Rights Team not having performed its work. Even if the case is filed, the only punishment the company may impose is non-payment of bonus, which is not a big amount anyway. When enquired about the number of cases reported by him, he said three. He said that the modus operandi of the team is to inform the plot owner of the visit and ask him to remove children if they are on the field.

The Study team also enquired from farmers about the visit of the Human Rights Team. The farmers said that the team visits to give directions about water, pesticide, and fertilizer use so that quality and production of seeds may improve.

## **Case Study – Seed Farms can be Danger Zones**

On 21 October, the field investigator visited Naya Mota village in Khedbrahma taluka in the morning at eleven o'clock. This village is at distance of 16 km from the taluka center. The Monsanto company has given many plots in this village. The investigator was carrying his digital camera. He visited about 13 plots and was able to do the recording. He found children from 6 to 18 years working on each plot. By this time it was time for lunch break when the work stops for two to three hours. The investigator visited Khedbrahma during lunch break. A local youth told him that the village has many more seed plots. When the investigator went back to the village, he was confronted by a crowd of seed farmers. It seems that a farmer had got in touch with the company agent, who had got suspicious and asked the farmers to engage the investigator if he comes back. The farmers forced the investigator to speak to the company agent to establish his bona fide. They allowed him to go only after deleting all the shooting recorded in the camera.



A child working on a Monsanto seed plot in Sabarkantha District

## Conclusion

It is clear that the anti child labour program of Monsanto on its seed farms has had very limited impact. While the strategy to shift production base to tribal pockets has resulted in reduction of child migration, child labour continues on Monsanto seed farms. The children employed on the farms are missing out on their education. Further the high degree of secrecy surrounding seed production operations is worrying. The cottonseed plots have become almost a no go area for civil society activists. This shows that the seed company has a lot to hide.



## Annexure

**Table: Plot wise list of children on cottonseed plots of Monsanto**

| SI no | Taluka      | Village    | Farm owner              | No of workers | 6 to14 years | 15 to18 years | Female |
|-------|-------------|------------|-------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------|
| 1     | khed brahma | didhiya    | songra popat bhikha     | 7             | 2            | 3             | 3      |
| 2     | khedbrahma  | didhiya    | dabhi jana lasu         | 3             | 1            | 1             |        |
| 3     | khedbrahma  | Sitol      | chauhan homa maka       | 4             | 1            | 1             | 1      |
| 4     | khedbrahma  | Bordi      | gamar dita homira       | 5             | 2            | 1             |        |
| 5     | khedbrahma  | Bordi      | khant naran sena        | 3             | 1            |               | 1      |
| 6     | khedbrahma  | Bordi      | khant havji rata        | 4             | 1            | 1             |        |
| 7     | khedbrahma  | Bordi      | khant ishwar vaghji     | 2             | 1            | 1             | 1      |
| 8     | khedbrahma  | khedva     | tarar reshma ragha      | 3             | 1            | 1             | 2      |
| 9     | khedbrahma  | khedva     | tarar sankara ragha     | 4             |              | 2             | 2      |
| 10    | khedbrahma  | bahediaya  | nandu raja              | 2             | 1            | 0             | 1      |
| 11    | khedbrahma  | bahediaya  | kalu raja               | 3             | 1            | 1             | 1      |
| 12    | khedbrahma  | bahediaya  | samat raja              | 4             | 2            | 0             | 1      |
| 13    | khedbrahma  | bahediaya  | kanu ranmal             | 3             |              | 2             | 2      |
| 14    | khredbrahma | bahediaya  | raja ranmol             | 2             | 1            | 0             | 1      |
| 15    | meghraj     | galisebaro | damor arvind Shankar    | 3             | 1            |               | 1      |
| 16    | meghraj     | galisebaro | damor madta rakji       | 4             | 2            | 1             | 2      |
| 17    | meghraj     | galisebaro | fanat ramesh khatra     | 2             |              | 1             |        |
| 18    | bhiloda     | Aod        | ninama arjan babu       | 2             | 1            |               |        |
| 19    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokhriya hari hona     | 3             | 1            |               | 1      |
| 20    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokhriya babu hona     | 5             | 2            | 1             |        |
| 21    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokheriya hari rupa    | 3             |              | 1             | 2      |
| 22    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokheriya deepak rupa  | 3             | 1            |               | 2      |
| 23    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokheriya meha rupa    | 2             |              | 2             |        |
| 24    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokhriya sayba rupa    | 3             |              | 1             | 1      |
| 25    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokhriya satis hari    | 4             | 2            |               | 2      |
| 26    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokhariya prakas mohan | 4             | 2            | 1             | 1      |
| 27    | khedbrahma  | mahudi     | khokheriya fata kanti   | 7             | 1            | 2             | 2      |
| 28    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | taral rasik bhura       | 3             | 1            |               | 2      |
| 29    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | taral gujara kumbah     | 3             | 2            |               | 1      |
| 30    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar fagna gujra       | 3             | 1            |               | 1      |
| 31    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar dilip fagna       | 5             |              | 2             | 2      |
| 32    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar ravji fagna       | 3             |              | 1             | 1      |
| 33    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | tarar sankar raman      | 7             | 2            |               | 2      |
| 34    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | lakha limba             | 5             | 1            | 2             | 2      |
| 35    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar kodar joga        | 3             |              | 1             | 1      |
| 36    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar teja kodar        | 4             | 2            | 1             | 2      |
| 37    | khedbrahma  | navamota   | gamar ramesh kasha      | 2             |              | 1             | 1      |
| 38    | khedbrahma  |            | gamar manish chandu     | 5             | 1            | 2             | 3      |
|       | TOTAL       |            |                         | 174           | 48           | 42            | 63     |