

Bumper sugarcane crop in Maharashtra, bitter harvest for many

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• *Vitthal Pujari (35), a marginal farmer from Gangapur near Latur, was banking on Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh's Vikas and Manjira Co-operative Sugar factories to buy the sugarcane grown on his 1.25 -acre farm to repay his loan of Rs 50,000. The factory did not pick up his cane for crushing. He committed suicide on March 20.*

• *Nagnath Aradwad (32) of Wanjarwada village in Ahmedpur taluka hanged himself to death on March 25 after the Indo-Sugar factory controlled by Deshmukh's son, Amit, did not crush his cane. Unable to service debts worth over Rs 1.50 lakh, he committed suicide.*

Both these farmer suicides, among the seven officially counted this year, are in the prosperous sugar-growing regions of Marathwada and western Maharashtra where a glut in production is leaving farmers with huge stocks of uncrushed cane.

The Marathwada region is among the worst-affected in the state which has had a record production of 751 lakh metric tons (LMT) of cane. And the 11 local factories are unable to cope with this. So far in Latur, 33 LMT of cane has been crushed — 8 LMT remains, of which around 3.95 LMT may be left uncrushed by May end.

Prices have already dipped to around Rs 1,150 per quintal, compared to around Rs 1,700 last year. Next year promises to be worse, with an expected cane production of around 900 LMT.

The glut has forced factories to pick and choose farmers whose cane is to be crushed. Often, caste and politics play a role in the decision. For instance, Pujari's family members — he has left behind a wife, two children and 75-year-old mother — claim he had asked Vikas and Manjira Cooperative Sugar factories to buy his cane. But they refused saying he wasn't a cooperative member.

Similarly with Aradwad. The private Indo Sugar factory controlled by Deshmukh's son Amit — it took over the sick Balaghat sugar factory — refused to crush his cane. Amit, who is the Chairman of the Vikas Sugar Factory and also controls Indo Sugar, says that neither Pujari nor Aradwad were members of the sugar factory.

The sugarcane of members has to be taken for crushing first. The region has seen a sugarcane glut and factories are unable to cope up with it. Hence, we are unable to do anything despite our wishes," he said.

In Latur, records with the state cooperation department reveal that since January 2006, 24 farmers have committed suicide. Seven of these have occurred this year when the sugarcane cane crisis began. At least three of these seven were marginal sugarcane farmers. Since 2004, Latur has recorded 28 farmer suicides — five in

2004, six in 2005 and 17 in 2006.

Ironically, sugarcane farmers have always been considered the pampered lot, thanks to the politically influential sugar lobby. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) report on farmers suicides in Vidarbha in 2005 had noted how the minimum support price for crops announced by the government did not meet the cost of cultivation. The only exception was sugarcane, where the loss to the farmer was minimised at 12 per cent. "Is sugarcane being cross-subsidised at the expense of cash crops," the study had asked.

Now farmers are getting desperate. In Ujed village in nearby Shirol Anantpal taluka, Kisan Dadarao Dobale (51) sold off part of his land and house to grow sugarcane on a 4-acre farm in the hope of a good harvest. But local sugar factories, including the one controlled by former chief minister Shivajirao Patil Nilangekar, refused to crush his cane.

After my daughter's marriage on May 14, I am a free man, I could do anything," said the visually impaired farmer. "I decided to grow cane only after the district central cooperative bank controlled by Deshmukh gave out loans," he said pointing to his crop wilting away in the sun.

Experts attribute the crisis to poor planning on the part of the government. The Centre's decision to stop mixing ethanol in petrol and the ban on sugar exports imposed in mid-2006 when global sugar prices were high, only to be lifted in March this year when the prices had fallen, are behind the mess, he said.

To add to that, the state hasn't restarted sick sugar factories for crushing the excess cane. Although the state government has extended the crushing season, the 163 cooperative and private factories are not in a position to crush the excess cane. Incidentally, the state has announced that it will ensure factories run till the cane in their areas has been crushed.

It has also announced Rs 25,000 as compensation per hectare of uncrushed cane and allowed factories to crush cane sourced from a 250-km radius. But around 50 factories have closed down after crushing cane in the area.