

COMMENT

Bitter Sugar

THAT SUGAR LOBBY PLAYS A BIG role in Indian parliamentary game is a fact of life. They can make or break governments in a number of sugar-producing states. And sugar has a special position in the politics of Uttar Pradesh. Also, sugarcane being the most sought after cash crop in UP, it has traditionally influenced the peasantry and politicians associated with peasant-organising. Sugarcane to UP farmers is what jute is to Bengal farmers. But sugar industry in UP is declining for wrong policies pursued by the successive governments in the state. A lot of noises is made during the harvesting season about the inadequate minimum support price announced by the centre and machinations utilised by the industry to force the sugarcane growers to live in perpetual anxiety and debt. After the harvesting season, heat subsidies but basic ills that plague the sugarcane farming remain.

In truth Uttar Pradesh does not have a long term sugarcane area reservation policy, discouraging parties from investing in farm extension activities. This has resulted in a decline in yields. With a long term sugarcane area reservation policy in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra, data show an increasing yield, vis-a-vis the decline in UP, which is however India's biggest sugarcane producing state. Even with the regular annual rise in cane prices, the UP based farmers are disadvantaged. Mills in UP do not enjoy any incentive in developing the area around them, as area reservation is done every year. There is also an absence of certainty if all the area allotted to a particular mill in one year will return to it in the following year. Sugar Mills in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka happily make regular investments in facilitating and investing in development activities, such as introduction of new varieties of sugarcane and farm mechanisation. The sugar mills in South India spend about 20% of profits earned annually in cane support activities.

Indian left has no specific policy on major cash crops. They mainly focus on the peasant question in relation to land-holding and distribution of vested land. Nor has the government played any positive role in developing and modernising cash-crop based industry. Jute is a case in point. So is cotton. And Left does hardly matter in the economic and political lives of people in the cotton belt. Once upon a time they used to have substantial presence among textile workers but even in those hey days in labour movement their role in organising cotton growers was negligible. Quick profit is their motto. They don't bother about the future. Mulayam Singhs and Mayawatis are busy to solve mathematical puzzles in caste equation. They are literally backward in their outlook. Their world revolves around quota and reverse casteism but the major cash crop of UP—sugarcane—is increasingly becoming bitter for UP farmers. □