

Of sugarcane, power and security

As west UP gears up for the first phase of polls, these three factors may decide the outcome

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Ajay Kumar Raihi is a middle-aged farmer from Shahjampur village in Bagpat district of Uttar Pradesh. He cultivates sugarcane in his 6-acre farm, and in non-cane season, he grows wheat.

For years he has been selling his sugarcane to a sugar mill in Modinagar. But, the last time he received payment was May 2018, and in the 2018-19 sugarcane crushing season, which started in October, nothing has been paid to him so far.

"I owe almost ₹400,000 from last year and an equal amount this year," Kumar said and also complained that farm costs haven't gone down despite promises by the government.

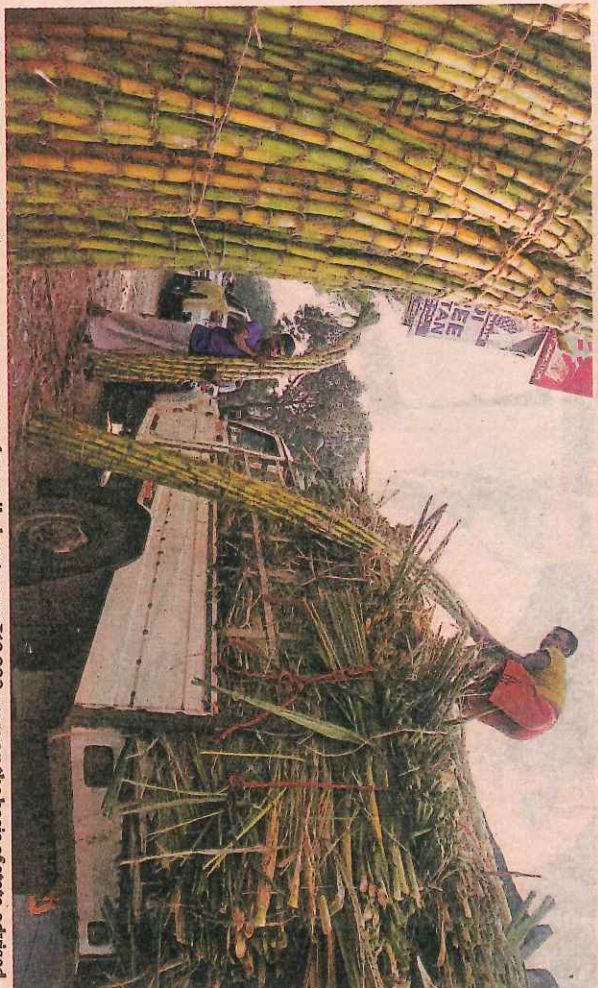
Back of envelope calculations show that sugar- and sugarcane-related issues can impact the outcome in 38 Lok Sabha constituencies in UP out of the 80 in varying degrees. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the ruling BJP swept in all these seats.

The latest data shows that the net sugarcane arrears have piled up to over ₹10,000 crore on the basis of state advised price (SAP) this season as against ₹7,222 crore in 2017-18, while the sugarcane payments ratio in the state has dipped by almost 20 percentage points in the ongoing crushing season, compared to 2017-18.

While the aggregate sugarcane payments notched up to more than 71 per cent at the end of March 2018, the payments ratio logged a massive dip to about 57 per cent in the current sugarcane 2018-19 season. In fact, the current outstanding is close to ₹12,700 crore and the payments ratio is at 52 per cent.

"We had grown sugarcane in around 80 bigha, but haven't been paid anything since last year," rued Narendra Kumar of Lalitpur Thira village in Modinagar.

A former *pradhan* (village head), Kumar said that instead of loan waivers and minor dolles of ₹2,000



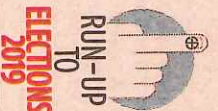
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PHOTO: REUTERS

(that the Centre has started under the PM-KISAN), the government should expedite the payment of sugarcane arrears. "You go to any village, be it Sheerpur, Nangla or even Kadana (all in the Bagpat Lok Sabha constituency), people from my community who are primarily sugarcane farmers are extremely agitated due to pending sugarcane dues," Kumar said.

As Kumar was listing his grievances, starting from rising electricity bills and the increasing cost of diammonia phosphate (DAP), Ajit Rai from Nivara village interrupted him. "For the last 4-5 years, this (local) mill has defaulted in payment every year but because of our compulsion, we can't go anywhere else," Rai said.

He said sugarcane payment was a big issue, but so are the other issues of law and order and power supply.



"Five years back, transformer theft was rampant in our villages and power supply was extremely erratic, but now the situation has improved a lot," said Vikas Tyagi, another villager. He, too, has outstanding sugarcane dues of almost ₹200,000, but that might not be the only consideration for him as he goes out to vote on April 11.

In the state, according to official figures, between April 2014 and February 2015, the peak power deficit was 17 per cent. But it narrowed to 2.1 per cent between April 2018 and February 2019.

In fact, in village after village all along this primarily sugarcane growing belt of western UP, the entire electricity discourse is over 'kanon-nyavusha, bijli aur ganna (law and order, power and sugarcane dues)'. "Earlier, we feared to venture out of our villages after 8 pm but now

things have improved. Still, there are incidents of crime, but it has considerably gone down. Moreover, the power situation has improved considerably," said Arvind Pal from Kabraut village in Shantli tehsil of Muzaffarnagar district.

Sitting on a small *charpoi* near his jaggery-making unit, Pal says most people from his village feel that the law and order situation has improved. "And due to uninterrupted power, I can run my jaggery unit for a longer duration," he said.

Muzaffarnagar had witnessed one of the worst riots in 2013, which claimed more than 60 lives and left 93 injured. The riots changed the entire social structure of the region, creating a deep divide between Hindus and Muslims.

In all the subsequent elections starting from the 2014 general elections, the BJP swept the polls, winning most seats.

However, the scenario started changing in 2018 when a united opposition candidate, Tabassum Hasnain (of the Rashtriya Lok Dal or RLD), won the Kairanla Lok Sabha by-poll, defeating Mirganika Singh of the BJP.

Experts said the mounting sugarcane dues and discontent among farmers were among the main reasons for the BJP's defeat.

Since then the Centre has announced a series of measures to clear sugarcane dues, but only a few seem to have benefited from it — like the Mohindupur Sugar Mill of the UP State Sugar Corporation, which lies a few km away from Modinagar.

The mill, which restarted a few years ago, expanded its capacity under the present Yogi Adityanath government and added a new distillery. "We don't have any payment problem and are getting our dues as cleared if not within 15 days but in a month or so," says Jasbir Chandel of a nearby village.

"Earlier, before this mill reopened and was expanded, we, too, used to sell our sugarcane to the factory in Modinagar, but now look at the rows of tractors and bullock carts, which shows how farmers selling to this mill have benefited," Chandel says.

Under the Sugarcane Control Order, every sugar factory has an area reserved for it and farmers within that area have to necessarily sell their produce to that factory.

This was meant to give the sugar mills a captive raw material while preventing the grower from getting exploited.

"For the last few years, the UP government hasn't increased the advised price for sugarcane while our input costs have gone up manifold, moreover many schemes like subsidy in purchasing farm equipment simply doesn't come due to corruption in the system, but, yes, on the positive side, the power situation has improved, which is big plus even for farmers," said Narendra from Kheda Gadai village in Muzaffarnagar.

As west UP goes to the polls in the next few days, it remains to be seen what dominates voters' mind.

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