

To stop exodus, sugar mills offer food, shelter to cane-cutting workers

RUTAM VORA

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The 21-day lockdown is becoming a testing time for about 1 lakh cane-cutting labourers and sugar mill workers in south Gujarat. To prevent their exodus, sugar mill owners in coordination with local administration are offering them food and shelter.

About 90 per cent of the workers are migrants from the north-western Maharashtra region, including Dhule, Nandurbar and Jalgaon. Since they cannot work during the lockdown, they are eager to return home. They have been advised to stay put to avoid the spread of Covid-19. "Sugar mill owners have made arrangements



South Gujarat has a high concentration of sugarcane cultivation with 22 sugar factories, mostly in co-op sector

for their food, shelter, sanitation and medical requirements," said Ishwarsinh Patel, Chairman of Pandvai Sugar factory in Bharuch district.

Usually, the migrant workers return home when crushing

activity ends by mid-April. But the lockdown has fuelled concerns that they may leave early. Gujarat has high concentration of sugarcane cultivation in the southern districts of Surat, Navsari, Tapi and Bharuch, with 22 sugar factories, mostly cooperatives.

Tapi Collector RJ Halani told *BusinessLine*: "There is no risk for these workers here. There are clear directives to not allow any mass movement. And specific to the migrant workers, we have ensured that their employers—farmers or mill owners—are arranging their food and stay."

When contacted, Ardra Agarwal, Collector, Navsari, confirmed that as per government

guidelines, people should stay put wherever they are. "The administration is ensuring their safety and basic necessities," he said.

However, labour rights groups have raised concerns about forcibly holding back these migrant labourers at farms. "Their condition is worrisome. They are compelled to stay back because they have been paid in advance by the cane farmers and since the work is still incomplete, they are not allowed to leave. The government has announced assistance but that is insufficient," said Ashok Srimali, Programme Head at the Centre for Social Knowledge and Action, in Ahmedabad.