

Supriya Sule, MP and Sharad Pawar's daughter, reportedly told a gathering of women in Jalgaon last week that alcohol was a revenue earner for the state and hence its sale shouldn't be opposed. It may seem an intriguing statement, assuming she said it, and she certainly hasn't clarified when asked. But there is a direct connection between alcohol, sugar and Pawar.

Maharashtra is the second largest sugar producer in the country and the bulk of the state's production (80 per cent) happens in western Maharashtra, Pawar's fiefdom. Sugarcane helps produce alcohol. The problem with sugarcane is not that it produces alcohol, but the political arc of complicity it has built around regions like Vidarbha that are thirst

ing for better treatment. Vidarbha has seen almost one farmer suicide a day in the new year but no one has stirred in Mantralaya.

Thanks to its weighty political representation in the state, western Maharashtra has managed to score better on most developmental counts than other regions. In fact, it was the daunting backlog in Vidarbha that prompted the governor to direct the government to rush the irrigation projects through. What largely came out of that push is a scam that woke up the country to the way the powerful in Maharashtra make money. It did not help Vidarbha much.

The sugarcane belt, meanwhile, gets priority attention from the rulers. The sugarcane farmer (who dominates western Maharashtra) is entitled to a loan of up to Rs30,000 per acre because of his higher input cost as compared to the cotton farmer (who dominates Vidarbha) who can get a loan of up to Rs6,000 per acre of non-irrigated land (and much of the land in Vidarbha is non-irrigated). Both the farmers get a four per cent subsidy on interest. Simply put, the sugarcane farmer benefits more from the subsidy than the cotton farmer. In fact, along with other subsidies on fertiliser, irrigation, etc, the total gains for a sugarcane farmer work out to about Rs15,000 per acre, while that for a cotton farmer is about Rs 3,000 per acre. A Vidarbha expert, Vijay Jawandhia, goes a step further to argue that western Maharashtra owes its prosperity to the subsidy cushion and if given a level-playing field it wouldn't be any better off than Vidarbha.

The latest to contribute to this connivance of circumstances, so to speak, are a slew of private power projects planned in Vidarbha. State-owned thermal power units are already in the region. With many more planned, the new plants will get priority allocation of water which, estimates by Vidarbha Statutory Development Board suggest, is enough to irrigate seven lakh hectares of land. This is nothing short of rubbing salt into the Vidarbha farmer's wound.

It was perhaps to stem the progressive marginalisation of Vidarbha that governor K Sankaranarayan had asserted in his directives for the budget last year, "There shall be no diversion of funds from backlog districts to non-backlog districts... without prior approval of the governor."

Unfortunately, it is the government which has the all-important last word. And it can't read.