

Cane growers' protest stirs govt into action

Starts releasing funds to mills to clear dues

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With the Lok Sabha elections round the corner and sugarcane farmers in Punjab upping the ante against the government over pending payments, the state has started releasing funds to 16 sugar mills in the state to clear the growers' dues.

Private sugar mills have also been issued "strict directions" to release Rs 50 lakh daily for clearing the dues of cane growers.

The farmers have been protesting in Sangrur (outside Dhuri Sugar mill and on the Dhuri-Sangrur highway, besides having earlier organised protests in Gurdaspur and Phagwara) over non-release of payments by cooperative as well as private sugar mills.

Figures gathered by *The Tribune* show that these mills owe Rs 1,192 crore to the farmers, with Rs 170 crore due for the cane procured by them in 2017-18 and Rs 1,022 crore for the ongoing crushing season.

With farmer unrest in the state expected to turn into a major political issue



Outstanding dues

	2017-18	2018-19*
7 private mills	₹97 cr	₹762 cr
9 co-op mills	₹73 cr	₹260 cr
Total	₹170 cr	₹1,022 cr

(*As on March 17, 2019)

ahead of the general election, the state government is learnt to have stepped up its efforts to check the growing dissent among this major vote bank.

Officials told *The Tribune* that a meeting of representatives of all seven private mills (owned by politicians from across parties) was called by Additional Chief Secretary (Development) Vishwajit Khanna here today.

The mills have reportedly been told to release at least Rs 50 lakh every day to ensure that the dues are cleared as soon as possible.

"For clearing its own dues towards the private sugar mills, the state today released Rs 54.57 crore, and has reportedly asked the mills to use the money to clear farmers' accounts," confirmed Khanna.

The state government owes these mills Rs 67 crore towards interest on soft loan of Rs 200 crore raised by the mills five years ago, as part of a bailout package offered for the losses suffered by the mills. This money has been credited into the accounts of the private sugar mills at Dhuri, Amlloh, Mukerian, Phagwara and Keeri Afgana.

