

SUGAR CO-OPS DEFEND LABOUR PRACTICES AMID ALLEGATIONS

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Sugar cooperatives, which accounted for almost 30 per cent of the country's annual sugar output as of 2023-24 season (Oct-Sept), are up in arms against repeated attempts to raise the issue of violation of labour laws in their factories and farms, alleging that it is a ploy to divert customers from cooperatives to others.

Maharashtra and Gujarat are among the states where a significant portion of sugar production happens through cooperatives.

Addressing a press conference here on Thursday, **Chairman of National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories (NFCSF) Harshvardhan Patil** said that there are more than 0.7 million sugarcane workers in Maharashtra, including those who work in the fields, and even if complaints come about some of them, it does not mean that the whole industry is anti-labourer or farmer.

Patil warned that the "misinformation" could potentially disrupt sugar sales, particularly among major buyers who might be pressured to avoid purchasing sugar from Maharashtra and Gujarat. He was referring to media reports in some global publications on the same.

Explaining the unique harvesting practices, Patil highlighted the difference between southern and northern states. In Maharashtra and Gujarat, manual harvesting remains prevalent, with skilled workers supplied by middlemen called mokadam, who are responsible for recruiting and transporting labourers. The federation claimed that despite potential isolated incidents, sugar mills are providing comprehensive support to workers, including shelter, food, timely payments, children's education, and health insurance.

The **NFCSF** has sought a loan from the National Cooperative Development Corporation (NCDC) to purchase cane harvesters, noting a significant workforce reduction from 15 lakh a decade ago to approximately half that number currently.

In addition to defending worker conditions, **NFCSF** has demanded government intervention in hiking the minimum selling price of sugar, allowing the export of 15 lakh tonnes of surplus sugar, and raising ethanol purchase prices.

According to the **NFCSE**, the country's total sugar production has fallen to 0.70 million tonnes by November 15 in the 2024-25 season, compared to 1.26 million tonnes in the previous year. Total sugar output is projected at 28 million tonnes, down from 31.9 million tonnes in 2023-24.
