

Why double standards for sugar and rice exports, Lok Satta asks Sharad Pawar

Written by

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Is Mr. Sahard Pawar Union Minister for Sugar Industry or Agriculture, the Lok Satta Party caustically asked today.

Mr. Shard Pawar's missive to Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee seeking immediate permission for sugar exports reflected his determination to protect the interests of sugar mill owners, said Lok Satta Party Working President D. V. V. S. Varma in a media statement.

However, as Union Agriculture Minister Mr. Sharad Pawar had ignored the plight of sugarcane growers by not ensuring a remunerative price for their produce. Permission to exports at the fag end of the crushing season might benefit sugar mill owners, but not farmers who could not get a fair price for their produce. At best, exports might help some sugar mills might clear their cane dues to farmers. In Andhra Pradesh, the State Government has not announced even the State Advisory Price for sugarcane.

He demanded that sugar mills benefiting from exports should be made to share their profits with farmers by way of bonus.

Mr. Varma also faulted Mr. Shard Pawar for focusing only export of sugar and not on foodgrains. "He is arguing for sugar exports on the ground that the country is surplus in sugar. Should he not extend the same logic for export of rice?"

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He pointed out that the country's warehouses and farmers' homes are overflowing with wheat and rice stocks of 60 million tons – double the needs of the country's requirements, even as bumper rabi harvests are round the corner. He demanded that the Government permit export of at least four million tons of rice.

Representatives of the Lok Satta Party and independent farmers' organizations have repeatedly requested the Union Government to permit export of rice to other countries considering that rice prices the world over are ruling high.

The Union Government permitted export of a mere 1.5 lakh tons of rice, although it could have allowed export of lakhs of tons of rice. It could have permitted export of boiled rice and come to the rescue of farmers in Andhra Pradesh. (The paddy crop damaged in heavy rains during the kharif season in Andhra Pradesh was fit only for conversion into boiled rice, which commands a market abroad). Farmers had to make distress sale of damaged paddy as the Government had not permitted export of boiled rice.

The Lok Satta Party as a matter of policy would like the Union and State Governments to rid agriculture of the license-permit raj so that the farmer would have total freedom for marketing his produce wherever he wants within or outside the country. There is no reason why the Government, which ushered in liberalization for the industrial sector since 1990s should not extend it to the agriculture sector.

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India lives in villages and villages are peopled mostly by farmers, workers, and artisans dependent on them. How can India progress if Government policies resulting in denial of a fair market price for agricultural produce pauperize farmers, Mr. Varma asked and said, Governments' policies have driven lakhs of farmers to end their lives.

He recalled that the Government banned export of onions when its price touched Rs.70 a kg. The Government would now not bother when the price of onions has plummeted to Rs.4,50 a kg in the wholesale market. Similarly, the price of tomato has plunged to 50 paise a kg in certain parts of the State.

Mr. Varma wanted the Government to promote storage facilities for food grains and processing facilities for perishable products, impose customs duty on import of edible oil to encourage the indigenous farmer, and compress the number of intermediaries between the producer and the consumer.