

There's no high for these farmers in

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THE CURRENT crisis in agriculture seems to have spared none — not even those engaged in legal cultivation of opium poppy.

Extreme moisture stress from a failed monsoon and lack of winter rains have led to an unprecedented 95 per cent of the 19,651 licenced opium growers in Madhya Pradesh's (MP) three northeast districts of Neemuch, Mandsaur and Ratlam to seek destruction of their crop this year. The reason: expected yields falling below the minimum 58 kg per hectare level stipulated by the Central Bureau of Narcotics (CBN) under the Union finance ministry.

The CBN, under whose regulation and monitoring the licenced cultivators operate, requires growers to request for destruction of their standing crop if they anticipate yields to be lower than the minimum qualifying level. Not tendering such request and harvesting less than the minimum qualifying yield (MQY) of opium latex would make them liable to lose their cultivation licence.

Every year, there are some growers who approach the CBN with crop destruction requests. But the extended dry spell this time has resulted in only about 1,000 of the 19,651 licenced cultivators agreeing to harvest the crop, which is sown during late-October/November and is ready for lancing in February. Under the rules, such requests are to be made before lancing or scratching of the poppy seed pods (fruits) from which the opium latex leaks out. The latex that coagulates on the pods and dries to a sticky yellow residue is what gets tediously collected by the cultivators; they are supposed to account for every gram that is thus obtained.

While growers are still coming to terms with the poor yields on account of natural causes, their main grouse — for which they have taken to the streets — is the Centre's decision to plough back the entire crop that is not harvested. Previously, the crop affected by natural calamities or disease could be uprooted under official supervision, with the cultivators allowed to take out the poppy seeds (*khas khas*) from the pod after latex extraction and sell these in the open market. Although the pod husk (*doda chura*) remaining after extraction of the opium latex and poppy seeds is classified as a narcotic under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act — in view of containing some morphine that can give a high when used in sufficient quantities — it could also be sold to contractors with licenses from the state government.

The current changed opium cultivation policy mandates the entire sub-MQY crop to be ploughed back to the soil, which growers complain deprives them of revenues that can at least recover their cost of seeds, fertilisers and chemicals. "I realised my crop had failed, so I informed the authorities. But what about



the costs I have incurred and the time spent in cultivation?" asks Rajmal Kabra, a resident of Bahi Parasnath village, about 16 km from Mandsaur. The 55-year-old, who cultivates poppy on a plot of 10 'are' (0.1 hectare) claims he has "never in my life" witnessed so much damage to an otherwise most hardy crop.

The CBN has defended the new total-ploughing-back policy on grounds of preventing smuggling and black-marketing of opium. "Growers don't want to risk their licenses. But they also want to make money from selling seeds and diverting poppy husk

illegally", says a CBN official. He adds that the policy was actually issued first in 2009, but its implementation was deferred twice.

This time, the CBN has even used rotavators to destroy the un-harvested sub-MQY crop, although the Neemuch-based Assistant Commissioner of Narcotics Mahesh Kumar denies it was done on any significant scale. "We don't have any rotavators. It is only a few farmers who have these, and which may have got used," he clarified. Either way, that operation has been kept on hold, following farmer protests.

"*Ek ne bhi chira nahi lagaya* (not a single one in my group has lanced his poppy)," informs Chandraprakash Patidar, a grower in Bahi Parasnath, who also has 67 cultivators

under his jurisdiction. As the *mukhya* of the group, he has to maintain a register tracking the daily opium extraction by each of them.

Satyanarayan Patidar is among the few who has gone ahead with lancing his pods. He grows opium on a 20 'are' (0.2 hectares) patta that has yielded just 9 kg. At 45 kg per hectare, this is below the MQY of 58 kg. "I am scared to lose the licence next year," observes Patidar, whose patta is in his grandfather Shriram's name. This patta yielded 15 kg or an average of 75 kg/hectare in 2014-15.

Producers are paid a minimum price of Rs 870 per kg for opium yields up to 44 kg/hectare. The price rises to Rs 1,000 for yields between 44 and 52 kg per hectare and

going as high as Rs 3,500/kg for 90 kg and above. Last year, Patidar's family earned Rs 24,000 from their 15 kg opium at Rs 1,600 per kg. But they made even more from sale of 215 kg of *khas khas* (Rs 96,750 at Rs 450/kg) and 295 kg of *doda chura* (Rs 25,625 at Rs 125/kg).

"We are awaiting further orders and clear guidelines from the finance ministry," Mahesh Kumar told *The Indian Express* when asked about the authorities' response to the demand for allowing farmers to recover poppy seeds, and also not to cancel licences due to lower yields from unfavourable weather this year. For the moment, the CBN has permitted farmers to pluck and crush the opium pods for obtaining the *khas khas*, before ploughing back the poppy husk along with the plants into the soil. "We don't object to the seeds, as they are not narcotic," explains an official, while confirming the relaxation.

MP accounts for nearly 45 per cent of the country's 44,438 licenced opium cultivators, who are also from Rajasthan (Kota, Chittorgarh, Bhilwara, Pratapgarh and Jhalawar) and Uttar Pradesh (mainly Barabanki, Faizabad, Mau and Ghazipur). In 2013-14, 318 tonnes of opium was produced from 5,893 hectares where legal cultivation took place.

Opium collected from farmers is sent to government-owned factories at Neemuch and Ghazipur for final analysis, drying and processing. The factories convert a part of opium (150-200 tonnes) into alkaloids (morphine, codeine and thebaine) for supply to medicine manufacturers. The balance is exported as raw opium to the US, Japan, Hungary, UK, France and Thailand for medicinal purposes.

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