

## Dairy farmers keep stir on hold after govt assurance

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GUWAHATI: Dairy farmers of a six-decade old milk cooperative society of central Assam have temporarily withdrawn their agitation following an assurance from the state government that their grievances would be heard in a meeting here on Wednesday.

Several hundreds of farmers, belonging to seven districts, and associated with the Morigaon-based Sitajakhala Dugdha Utpadak Samabai Samiti Ltd had resorted to an agitation against the policies of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) since Friday.

"The state cooperation department has called a meeting with the management of our cooperative society and representatives of the district dairy farmers unions in Guwahati on Wednesday. Since the government has intervened and assured to look into our demands, the strike was called off on Monday evening," Bishnu Upadhyay, honorary vice-chairman of Sitajakhala Dugdha Utpadak Samabai Samiti Ltd told *The Shillong Times* on Tuesday.

Assam chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal had on Monday directed state cooperation minister, Rihon Daimary to hold talks with the cooperative society.

Over 1000 litres of milk were dumped in a river on Friday in protest against the alleged irregularities. However, the incident drew flak from several quarters prompting protesters to resort to a unique protest of free milk distribution on Sunday.

"A tripartite agreement between NDDB, Purabi Dairy (West Assam Milk Producers Cooperative Union Ltd) and the Assam government was signed back in 2008, following which the dairy firm enjoyed lions' share of benefits from government schemes. As a result, local players like us have been deprived of a level playing field to compete in the market," Upadhyay said.

He further said an investment of Rs 5 crore was made to set up a processing plant of Sitajakhala last year.

"Funds were raised from 1000 dairy farmers and we had to bear 100 per cent of the cost on land and infrastructure. Had there been schemes in the offing, we could have availed a substantial subsidy. As it is, our farmers are being paid less than the cost of production of a litre of milk at present," Upadhyay said.

Sitajakhala supplies between 1000 and 1500 litres to the NDDB-managed Purabi Dairy in Guwahati every day.

"As of now, we are primarily demanding that the tripartite agreement be revoked to allow us a level playing field. Besides, we also want a local person as chairman of Purabi Dairy besides assurance from the state government that the dairy firm would only accept milk from local dairy farmers," he said.