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The Telegraph

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State food subsidy for tea belt

- Days after Centre's Duncan move, Mamata govt announces 45p grains for all garden residents

Our Correspondent

Alipurduar, Jan. 31: All residents of tea gardens will get rice and wheat at the rate of 45 paise a kilo, said state food minister Jyotipriya Mullick, two days after the BJP-led central government decided to acquire seven of 14 ailing tea gardens of the Duncans group.

Mullick said the food grains would be given under the central National Food Security Act, although under this scheme, subsidised rice is given at the rate of Rs 2 a kilo and wheat at Rs 3 a kilo to the needy.

The minister told **The Telegraph** over phone from Calcutta: "Chief minister Mamata Banerjee is always trying to help the people residing in tea estates. At the state cabinet meeting held yesterday, it was decided that workers and non-workers of all the tea gardens will receive rice and wheat at the subsidised rate of 45 paise a kilo. Under this scheme, each family will get 35 kilos of food grains each month, irrespective of the number of family members."

Left and BJP leaders in the tea belt said the move would indirectly benefit tea garden owners who would buy subsidised grains from the government and sell them to garden residents.

A senior administrative official said the subsidised grains would have to be bought by the garden managements as they are bound under the Plantation Labour Act to provide low-cost grains and other services such as free water, power, firewood and health care to tea garden residents.

Before the National Food Security Act came into force in 2013, rice and wheat used to be distributed under the Antodaya Annapurna Yojana in closed and ailing gardens. Under this scheme, 35kg of rice for Rs 2 a kg or wheat for Rs 3 a kg used to be given to every family every month. When the food security act was enforced, the Annapurna scheme benefit of 35 kg of grain per family was retained by the Centre for those who were receiving it because the plan served the poorest of the poor.

In open and well-functioning gardens, the management used to give 2kg of rice and 1.7kg of wheat at the rate of 40 paise a kilo every week for each member of the family under the Plantation Labour Act.

Now, not just workers of well-functioning tea gardens, but residents of all tea estates in north Bengal will receive food grains at 45 paise a kg.

The administrative official said: "The planters used to buy food grain at the rate of Rs 9 per kilo from the state and distribute it among workers at the rate of 40 paise a kilo for rice and wheat. Under the new plan... the owners will buy food grain at the rate of Rs 2 per kilo and sell these among workers at 45 paise per kilo."

The tea union leaders said that while the Trinamul-led state government was making a show of concern for tea belt residents, the 45-paise subsidy move was an indirect benefit to garden owners, who instead of buying a kilo of rice for Rs 9 earlier would purchase that now for Rs 2, thereby saving Rs 7 for each kilo.

Ziaur Alam, the convener of the umbrella tea union conglomerate Joint Forum, said: "The scheme has been designed to help tea planters as they would be saving Rs 7 while buying a kilo of food grain. The state should have explored some other option like implementing the food security act directly and sought immediate amendment to the Plantation Labour Act so that garden managements can be asked to pay in cash the



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amount they used to spend to provide subsidy to each worker on account of rations."

Ganga Prasad Sharma, the Alipurduar district BJP president, said: "The state is doing politics with tea workers. We repeatedly asked for the Centre's intervention and the central government finally stepped in and decided to acquire seven tea estates of the Duncans group, all of which are in Alipurduar district. The state immediately announced distribution of food grains at a subsidised rate."

Sharma said that "the Assembly polls are round the corner, Trinamul is desperate to woo tea workers by extending such subsidies."

Representatives of tea planters, when asked about the issue, said the state should call a meeting to clarify the issue.

"Tea garden managers have been functioning as ration dealers since 2007 when the Targeted Public Distribution System was introduced in estates. It is nothing new, only that the ration would be provided under the food security act now. However, there are certain issues which need to be sorted out to make the scheme completely functional in tea estates," Prabir Bhattacharjee, the secretary general of the Tea Association of India, said. "It is evident that if the state goes ahead with distribution of food grains without involving the management and stops providing us food grains at a subsidised cost, we can no longer distribute rations, which means that would be a violation of the Plantation Labour Act."

He added: "There is no question of depriving the workforce of their legitimate dues. We want the state to convene a meeting to discuss and sort out these issues."

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY AVIJIT SINHA

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