

## THE TEA PARTY'S OOLONG OVER

By Shantanu Guha Ray, Mumbai Mirror | Feb 8, 2016, 09.25 AM IST

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Like everything else in Bengal, the Centre's plan to takeover some ailing tea gardens has hit a road block, triggering further crisis for a beleaguered industry that has helped India earn global reputation but only shame at home.

Tea Board chairman Santosh Sarangi has written to West Bengal chief secretary Basudev Banerjee that it will not be able to take over the seven Duncan gardens immediately unless a clearance comes from the Board of Financial Reconstruction (BIFR).

The news is music to the ears of the ruling TMC government in the state that last year - almost like the Centre -had threatened to take over the gardens.

Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee had almost turned the crisis into a perfect political drama by flying into the gardens in a chopper, asking the owners to resolve the crisis overnight. Nothing changed.

But now, the latest tea Board move would push the troubled gardens in north Bengal that lie sandwiched between the region's twin Teesta and Toorsa rivers with virtually no orders, into the brink of death.

"We are back to square one," says tea workers union's RSP leader Gopal Pradhan.

Once, these very gardens pushed New Delhi's burgeoning barter trade with Moscow, and were considered ideal locales for Bollywood hits. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything changed.

"No help came since then. Now there is death, suicide and prostitution in north Bengal, tea comes last," added Pradhan.

Political slugfest aside, the spectre of death looms large over the gardens, the situation has been worsening for almost two decades.

In November 2015, 10 workers died due to malnutrition, their deaths triggering fears that had gripped the gardens after a little over 240 jobless workers died due to malnutrition and suicide between March, 2002 and February, 2003.

Young women tea workers are increasingly taking to prostitution, men committing daylight robberies in next door Bhutan, and there are intelligence reports claim sporadic clashes between tea garden owners and workers, almost similar to the ones that gave rise to the Naxalbari uprising in 1967.

"Nothing has changed in the last five decades," claims Daniel Oraon, 70. He last week buried a 49 year old worker who died of malnutrition. Oraon says with no income coming from the tea estates, many students have junked school for menial jobs.

"The crisis lie in the roots of the plants in the gardens where owners and workers have been always at loggerheads," says Ashok Bhattacharya, the CPM legislator from Siliguri. What is alarming is tea is not a pushover industry. It employs 35 lakh workers and exported products worth \$644 million in 2014-15. Bulk of the workers, nearly 70 percent, operate out of Assam and Bengal.

Bhattacharya fears more malnutrition deaths because a little over 500 are admitted in hospitals. "There is no overnight solution. The TMC took over some news channels and newspapers after the Sarada scam but is struggling to pay salaries every month," he added.

In Dooars and Darjeeling, there are a little over 65 gardens gasping for breath, saddled with old, low producing plants. "A planter must ensure benefits to the workers by designing a salary package, and weekly ration," says Ankit Aggarwal, a small tea estate owner in Terai region.

Before TMC swept to power, the Left Front government had introduced a Special Purpose Fund so that owners could plant new trees and revive old plantations. There was a scheme for plantation workers to seek assistance under the Financial Assistance for Workers in Locked-out Industrial Units (FAWLOI). Even perks for workers, including additional benefits like increased medical cover and added ration per week, was reworked by the state government.

But sadly, nothing worked. Plantation owners planted less fresh saplings, continued to work on old plants and the workers received additional ration only for a few months.

The plight of the workers was documented in a paper, titled Brewing Misery: Condition of Working Families in Tea Plantations in West Bengal and Kerala by the Delhi-based Centre for Workers Management (CWM). Using it as a tool, the state governments of Bengal and Kerala filed an affidavit in 2004 in Supreme Court, promising to declare all workers in closed and abandoned tea gardens as being Below Poverty Line (BPL).

The affidavit promised the moon to the workers. It promised to provide Antyodaya Anna Yojana ration to all, wheat at Rs. 2 per kg and rice at Rs. 3 per kg, provide work under Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana for 15 days a month at a daily wage rate of Rs. 62, provide cooked midday meals to all primary schools in the plantations, supplementary nutrition to all children under six years and pregnant and lactating mother through the Integrated Child Development Scheme, and arrange drinking water and mobile medical teams.

But no one checked whether the schemes worked and the workers benefitted. Again, nothing happened. In 2005, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) said 100,000 permanent workers were affected by estate closures across India, majority in Dooars.

ILO urged New Delhi to check out conditions in the tea gardens, sanguine that plantation workers were bound to suffer. The ILO blamed the Central government, which had adequate powers under the Tea Act, 1953, for neglecting the gardens and turning a blind eye to routine wage and provident fund defaults by the estate managements.

Workers at Duncan's and other estates in the region claim they have started migrating to neighbouring tea gardens in Assam. Some have moved to Karnataka and Kerala, some have taken up work as daily wage labourers. Consider this one.

Under rules, plantation owners are obliged by law to provide and maintain adequate houses, and sanitary toilets for workers but homes in tea estates across India - for over two decades - are mostly in perennial disrepair, with leaking roofs and damp and cracked walls. Many toilets are blocked, workers drink rainwater piped from streams.

With Duncan gardens remaining closed since late May, between 25-40 per cent of the workforce has gone missing from Dooars, claims Anisur Haque of Zilla Cha Bagan Worker's Union, a trade union affiliated to CPI labour unit AITUC. In fact, some of the workers' colonies within the Duncan gardens have hardly any men left.

"Women who have always plucked leaves cannot work under NREGA because it involves loading and unloading boulders on the river banks to prevent erosion" says Haque.

Madhavi, once a permanent worker at Bagrakote, one of the 13 closed Duncan gardens, now picks leaf twice a week at another garden. She earns Rs 100 a day by picking 24 kilos of leaves without incentives as compared to Rs 400 earlier with all incentives. "There is virtually no food at home," she says. Narendra Taneja, the head of economic cell of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA said tea companies were violating all norms of the industry to push their exports to Russia when Moscow initiated large-scale imports. "No one did their quality checks, all that mattered was windfall profits," said Taneja.

He said workers openly violate the basic norm of picking up two leaves and one bud, mandatory to produce quality tea, and pluck whatever they can get their hands on.

Last year, Greenpeace, in a report titled Trouble Brewing on Indian Tea, said leaves of the beverage have hazardous pesticides in leading Indian tea brands, all of which are exported in large quantities to the US, UK and Europe. The Kolkata-based Tea Board rejected the report but the crisis did not die. In 2014, the Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute said in a study into conditions on estates part-owned by Tata, the giant Indian industrial conglomerate that also owns Tetley Tea, that said "inhuman" and "abusive" conditions it found were endemic throughout the industry.

Last November, Harrods in London stopped selling some Indian tea products because a BBC investigation

found dangerous and degrading living and working conditions in tea gardens in Assam. Pushed by the investigation, several of Britain's biggest tea brands, including PG Tips, Tetleys and Twinings, said they will work to improve conditions of the the tea estates they buy from in India. The faster it happens, the better.

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