

Shut tea gardens open new equations

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Jalpaiguri/ Alipurduar: From dawn till late in the day, Mongra Oraon draws 50 buckets of water from a well to irrigate a small patch of the sprawling Bundapani Tea Estate in Birpara in the Dooars. Though the garden has been shut for years, Mongra diligently carries on the back-breaking work to keep the crop healthy.

"If we don't water the bushes, red spiders will invade and affect leaf production. We will lose our only source of sustenance. We can endure hard labour in scorching heat but not hunger," the sweat-drenched labourer says.

The garden is among seven in the Dooars that are either closed or abandoned, affecting the livelihood of nearly 1 lakh workers. Though some of them, including Bundapani, were taken over by the state government three years ago, they are yet to reopen.

There are 11 more gardens with a further 1 lakh workers that are neither closed, nor operational. They function only during the plucking season and shut down the rest of the year. The situation is worse in these gardens as government doles are not handed out here since they are not declared shut.

Manab Dasgupta, former head of economics department at North Bengal University, says the once-thriving tea industry is being deliberately driven into crisis by short-term profit motive. "Very few gardens have owners. Most of them are operated by traders who have leased the gardens for a few years. They, in conjunction with unions, are wringing the gardens dry. Fertilizer and pesticide is being pumped in to boost leaf production but there is no investment in maintenance and replantation. The gardens will eventually become unproductive and abandoned. The gardens are run only during plucking season and the leaves are sold to bought-leaf factories like the 15,000 small gardens of 5-6 acres that have sprung up in belt in the past decade and a half," said Dasgupta.

Most of the 4.5 lakh workers that work in the gardens in Dooars and Terai are illiterate and, hence, entirely dependent on semi-literate union leaders for everything, from workdays to wage negotiation to bonus. "With the worker count in each garden numbering a few thousand, the management speaks to union leaders. While there were four-five major unions earlier, several new ones have sprung up now. It is through these unions that the new owners control the functioning of the gardens," said a tea industry official.

Though the closure of gardens has driven workers to near starvation (there have been nearly 200 deaths in the Dooars since September 2015 though the government puts the toll at 78) and driven many to work as daily labourers in Bhutan, breaking boulders on the river bed for Rs 45-50 a day, lack of jobs here ensures that union leaders have a vice-like grip on their lives.

While traders use these dubious union leaders all year, politicians depend on them during elections. Despite the odds, the 4.5 lakh tea workers in Dooars and Terai continue to vote, mostly en bloc. With tribals comprising nearly 80% of workforce in gardens, getting Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP) on one's side is crucial for political parties. Since GJM controls a big chunk of Nepali vote in gardens (Nepalis comprise 10% of workers) and is backing the CPM-Congress combine, ABAVP is leaning towards Trinamool.

That should have ensured an easy victory for Mamata Banerjee's party in Nagrakata and Malbazar where tribals comprise over 70% of the electorate. But the equation has changed this year with a split in ABAVP. John Barla, an influential tribal leader and former president of ABAVP who floated Progressive Tea Workers Union, is now a BJP candidate in Nagrakata.

In Jalpaiguri district there are some 3 lakh tribal voters against 70,000 Nepali voters. In Alipurduar too the figure is similar.

Eight tea gardens closed in the Dooars, three in Jalpaiguri and five in Alipurduar.

Redbank, Dharanipur and Surendranagar in Jalpaiguri acquired by state government three years ago but still closed. Bundapani, Dheklapara Madhu, Turturi and Rahimabad closed in Alipurduar. Bundapani was acquired by government.

Fourteen gardens belonging to GP Goenka group are in limbo since February. Recently, three gardens-Bagrakote, Nagaisuree and Kilkote (all in Jalpaiguri) have started functioning. Remaining 11 gardens in Alipurduar still in limbo.

Death toll in these gardens from September 2015 to January 2016 is 78 officially and unofficially over 200.

BOX 2

COOCH BEHAR

Mekliganj (SC)

Adhikary Paresh Chandra AIFB 72040 votes

Jayanta Kumar Ray NIC 39408 votes

Mathabhanga (SC)

Binay Krishna Barman AITC 7 8249 votes

Ananta Roy CPM 72925 votes

Cooch Behar Uttar (SC)

Nagendra Nath Roy AIFB 84825 votes

Prasenjit Barman AITC 82628 votes

Sitalkuchi (SC)

Hiten Barman AITC 84651 votes

Biswanath Pramanik CPM 84394 votes

Sitai (SC)

Keshab Ch. Ray INC 79791 votes

Dipak Kumar Roy AIFB 78214 votes

Falakata (SC)

Anil Adhikari AITC 77821 votes

Rabindra Nath Barman CPM 69775 votes

JALPAIGURI

Dhupguri (SC)

Mamata Roy CPM 73644 votes

Mina Barman AITC 69406 votes

Maynaguri (SC)

Ananta Deb Adhikari RSP 84887 votes

Juthika Roy Basunia AITC 68611 votes

17 Jalpaiguri (SC)

Sukhbilas Barma INC 86273 votes

Gobinda Chandra Roy AIFB 75222 votes

18 Rajganj (SC)

Khageswar Roy AITC 74546 votes

Amulya Kumar Roy CPM 67526 votes