

In Bengal's wilting tea gardens, Adivasis live on edge

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Well-maintained shelter for workers at Gairkhata tea estate in North Bengal ASHOKE CHAKRABARTY
Kolkata, March 15:

The metal on the road has long worn off; tea bushes have grown seven feet high in the absence of pruning... It doesn't need an expert to certify that Bandapani tea estate in Alipurduar district in North Bengal has been closed for years.

This is only one of many closed gardens in the region. And trade unions say that of at least 361 starvation deaths in 2015, nearly 10 per cent are from Bandapani, in the foothills of Bhutan.

But travel into the 'Nepali line', located at the farthest corner of the labour colony, and there is hardly any sign of stress. Nicely done-up houses with row of cars (and a truck) parked in front... it looks like another village dominated by the prosperous hill community, .

"Some of them have businesses. Many others have earnings from sons who have migrated to other Indian cities or even out of India," said Tilak Thapa, a para-teacher in a local primary school. His parents once worked in the garden.

Thapa lives in the New Pukka Line, located a little below the Nepali Line, which has a mixed population.

The hill communities here are visibly not as well-off as those in the Nepali Line, but they are not in misery either. Dish antennas and bikes are common, one has three cars. They may have been hit by the garden's closure, but they get by.

Adivasis affected

But the 'Adivasi' quarters, in the same line, tell quite another story.

Somra Murmu (70) was piling up firewood in front of his house, which has gaping holes in place of doors and windows. He is one of the members of the tribal communities from central and Eastern India who were once resettled by the British to work as tea labourers.

The garden management defaulted on his retirement benefits. As a retiree, he is not entitled to the financial assistance offered to workers of locked-out industries by the West Bengal government.

Under the rules,, Murmu should get old-age pension of ₹1,000 a month reserved for BPL tribal communities. But the CITU Panchayat member from the area tells them that the benefits are not offered to everyone.

The alibi is a sham. But Murmu and his old neighbour, Somari Oraon, have nothing more to live on.

Oraon's son, Temba, a casual worker in the garden, died last year. She doesn't know what caused his death. In the absence of any assistance, she goes to the river to collect stones, but being infirm, can't make much money from it either.

"Adivasis are the most affected by the crisis," says Abhijit Majumder, a local trade union leader and central committee member of the CPI(M-L). They are particularly handicapped by their limited skill set, poor education and an inability to adapt to change, as compared to the hill diaspora

Majumder says he doesn't know why Murmu or Oraon don't get their old-age pension. But Damber Tamang, a Gorkha Janukti Morcha Panchayat member from SB line in the closed Lankapara tea garden of Duncan Goenka group, blames it on politics.

While Sura Munda (72) of SB Line confirms receiving the pension, not many have heard of it in the Adivasi-dominated "Line No. 20" in the same garden. Suryaman Tamang (63) of "Basa Line", represented by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha

(JMM) in Bandapani, is emblematic of those who draw the benefits reserved for the tribal communities.

A former head clerk in the garden, Tamang is articulate, and his sons are employed; his life is relatively easy. Unlike the illiterate Murmus and Oraons, Tamang was able to work the system and secure old-age pension by virtue of his hill tribe status.

Evidently, all tribal communities are equal, but some are more equal than others...

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