

## Trinamool faces bitter tea workers in Siliguri

AM Jigeesh



HB Chhetri, in front of the Panighatta tea factory in Siliguri, West Bengal

*Shut factories, poor pay, malnutrition deaths have plagued them in 5 years of Mamata rule*

Siliguri, April 14:

HB Chhetri worked as a clerk in the Panighatta tea factory for more than 36 years. When he joined the factory, which was started in 1820, his family thought he had struck gold. At the end of his service, Chhetri has been reduced being the custodian of an “abandoned” factory where 15,000 kilograms of tea leaves – processed and un-processed – are lying unused.

He curses his fate. “I was supposed to retire with peace and dignity. Now I am struggling to make both ends meet,” Chhetri, a supporter of the BJP, says. The factory he was working closed down after the management refused to accept the workers’ demand for 20 per cent bonus. “It was a black Vijay Dashami for us. They did not give us even the salary and closed down the factory without even a notice. No one came to help us. The government is in their (owner’s) pockets,” he says.

The area (about 1,200 acres and close to the forest) has witnessed 13 deaths due to poverty, hunger and malnutrition since last October, when the factory finally closed down.

“Of these, three children died of malnutrition. There are about 2,500 permanent and casual labourers in this estate. All together, 10,000 people live here. They are under severe distress,” said Oscar Tirki of the Panighatta Adivasi Sanskritik Welfare Society, an NGO. Most of the workers belong to the communities largely referred to as tea tribes.

The government’s rations are limited to permanent employees. “More than 1,500 casual labourers were working here. What will we do? We make a living by collecting stones from a river here. But for how many days?” asks Pascal Khajur, a contract worker. He adds that they did not get jobs under the MGNREGA too as some of them are of Nepali origin.

They blame the Trinamool Congress for their situation. “It was for the second time since 2011 the factory is being shut. The government did not do anything. The proprietor has to be asked to start the factory immediately,” said Gore Tamang, another worker. The only aid they received was a meagre financial help from Gorkha Janmukti Morcha in November.

“We saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi on TV promising many things for tea garden workers. But nothing has reached us. Of course, Tea Board employees were here to count how many people died due to malnutrition,” says Chhetri, and adds that many parents stopped sending children to private schools as they could not afford the fees. “Government schools do not function properly here,” he said. Chhetri, though an ardent Left critic, however, says the factory was never closed down during the 34-year Left Front rule.

Workers in Gulma Tea Estate are also facing similar issues. Though they get their salaries in almost all months, they complain that it is difficult to sustain with wages of ₹132 a day. “There are no benefits other than the wages. The standard of our quarters is pathetic. We need respectable wages and benefits,” says Patrash Tirki, a union leader.

**Opposition tries to cash in**

The Opposition has been using the situation to make political gains. The CPI(M)-Congress alliance in the area is gaining support among workers. “Our struggles are mainly for fixing a respectable minimum wage and other benefits to tea garden workers. We will open all closed tea factories and gardens. Minimum wages and workers participation in running tea gardens will be ensured if we are brought back to power,” says CPI(M) leader and former Rajya Sabha member Saman Pathak. Pathak adds that under the TMC, five tea gardens of the State-run Tea Development Corporation were closed down. “Seven gardens of a TMC leader are in an abandoned State. Food security is a main issue here,” Pathak adds.

Both the unions and managements want the tea industry to be removed from under the Commerce Ministry. “The industry should be brought under the Ministry of Agriculture. Taxation component should be that of agriculture industry. Prime Minister has declared crop insurance to farmers. It should be applicabe to us also,” says Raja Das of the Terai Indian Planters Association. He says drought is the main reason for tea industry making losses. Some gardens are closed because of financial crisis not because of anti-labour policies,” he says.

The Trinamool Congress has, however, denied all the allegations. “These are politically motivated allegations. Under Mamata Banerjee’s government, development has reached everywhere. It is there to be seen,” said Saumitra Kundu, the party’s Darjeeling district General Secretary.

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