

Goodricke evinces interest in ailing Duncans' tea gardens

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Kolkata: This might be a ray of hope for 8000-odd jobless workers of the seven ailing Duncans tea gardens in Dooars. Goodricke group has emerged as the first prominent name to show interest in managing some of the ill-fated Duncans estates owned by the G P Goenka-led group. The Tea Board of India has floated a tender for inviting expression of interest (EOI) to pick suitable operator for handling operations and running the gardens commercially.

On Thursday, a top Goodricke official confirmed the development. He told **TOI**: "Although we have not made up our mind yet, our managers have visited the ailing gardens last week. I will make a recce very soon to take stock of the gardens, which I believe are in dismal condition. With the added time given by Tea Board for submitting EOI till April 26, we have got more space to weigh pros and cons of bidding for the same. However, the Board has left little clarity over the future operations and profit-sharing of this Duncans gardens."

The Tea Board will add and revise some of the clauses in technical and financial bidding process and issue it on April 15. On March 15, the Calcutta high court had dismissed Duncans' petition challenging the Central government's decision to take over the management and control of its estates in Dooars. However, in another order, the HC has also told the Tea Board to keep the tender process on adding that the final handover of the gardens can only be done following the court nod.

Meanwhile, A N Singh-led Goodricke, which has 10 gardens in the Dooars, has faced losses in five of them this year — a first in the company's history. Quite naturally, the tea major is a bit sceptical over possible takeover of 'mismanaged' Duncans estates. A Goodricke source close to the development said, "In order to make the Duncans gardens profitable one has to change the entire infrastructure. We don't know how much time the new operator will get to revive the gardens and reap profit. The top Goodricke management will go for a due diligence now and scan the probability of yield from Duncans gardens."

Recently, officials from a south India-based tea company along with Tea Board executives have done a formal recce of some of

the Duncans gardens. The Board sources said that as many as nine parties have shown interests in entering the tender process so far.

According to industry estimates, the risk of incurring loss is massive in these irrigation-dependent Dooars estates. "In comparison with Assam, we have to pay Rs 7-8 more in day wage to workers here; whereas the Dooars tea fetches Rs 30-50 a kg less than its north-eastern counterparts. The amount of green leaf produce is almost 50% less here," a Dooars tea garden owner said. Following the wage revision in Bengal, the wage has been increased by Rs 10 per day with effect from April. However, neither Duncans nor Tea Board – which hasn't paid a penny for the February and March salary – is willing to take the onus and foot the bill till the ongoing legal case is over.

Following the Goodricke recce, the workers pin hopes on revival. "A stable and seasoned operator like Goodricke, which has the best expertise in handling Dooars tea gardens, is always welcome more than any party," said a labour union leader.

In the circular (no. 22015/1/2016) issued by the Union commerce and industry ministry, the Tea Board has been asked to take management control of Birpara, Garganda, Lankapara, Tulsipara, Huntapara, Dhumchipara, Demdima tea estates through sub-section I of Section 16E of Tea Act, 1953. However, Bagracote Tea Estate that has reported the largest number of worker deaths does not figure in the list.

On the viability of gardens, another Goodricke official said, "The condition of the seven Duncans gardens along with many more Dooars estates is going to get worse if the state government does not step in after the Assembly elections. The producers are badly hit by high cost of production, excess manpower and deplorable infrastructure. The Centre, state, workers' unions and garden owners must figure out the remedy."