

# Trouble brews over Assam tea estate workers' puja bonus

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**D**IBRUGARH: The stalemate over Puja bonus in tea gardens entered its second day on Tuesday with workers in several upper Assam tea estates refusing to budge from their one-time bonus payment demand.

Since Monday, prominent tea belt districts in upper Assam like Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar and Charaideo have been witnessing strong protests from labourers following the decision by some tea majors to pay the festival bonus in two instalments.

Tea companies like Mcleod Russel, Apeejay Group and Warren Tea Company had earlier announced a quantum of 20% puja bonus for

workers, which will be split into two instalments. As per their plan, a 16% bonus was to be paid before Durga Puja and the rest in January next year.

Refusing to accept the split bonus formula, workers in several tea plantations owned by these companies have gone on strike since Monday morning.

"Forty nine tea gardens owned by Mcleod Russel, 16 of Apeejay Group and seven of Warren Tea Company have opted to pay the amount in two instalments. But workers want a one-time settlement of the bonus amount before puja. We are trying to work out a reconciliation formula to end the crisis," said Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) general secretary Dileswar Tanti on Tuesday.

There were reports of strikes and dharnas for the second successive day at the Apeejay group-owned Mathurapur, Suffry, Naphuk and Joboka tea estates in Charaideo district. The workers carrying placards and banners raised slogans against the tea garden management. Effigy of ACMS president and former Union minister Paban Singh Ghatowar was also burnt by the protestors at Mathurapur tea estate.

There were similar protests by workers in the two McLeod Russel-owned gardens of Bordubi and Beesakopie in Tinsukia district. The Deohall and Hatimara tea estates owned by Warren Tea Company in the district were also no exception. In Sealkote tea estate in Dibrugarh, around 2,000 workers on Tuesday morning assembled in front of the manager's bungalow and staged a protest which lasted for seven hours from 7am to 2pm. The protestors agreed to leave only after an assurance by the management about arriving at a mutual solution in 24 hours.

The Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA) has blamed the ACMS for the bonus crisis. "Festival bonus has always been a sensitive issue in the tea gardens. The ACMS negotiates with the tea companies on the workers behalf but every year this kind of situation arises. The workers have every right to protest. They toil the whole year and when the time for yearly Puja bonus arrives, the tea industry resort to such tactics. A regular worker on an average gets anywhere between Rs 7,000 to 9,000 as bonus while a casual worker gets paid between 3,000 to 3,500. In this day of rising costs, it is just a paltry amount," said Sunil Pator, ATTSA general secretary of Dibrugarh district.