

Digital payment deadline for Assam tea workers looks doubtful

The first deadline was December 5

Avishek Rakshit January 16, 2017 Last Updated at 03:30 IST



The Assam government has settled on January 15 as the deadline for transiting to digital wage payment for tea workers from cash

disbursements, after having failed to meet the target dates on this thrice.

The first deadline was December 5.

However, the state government, as well as the banks, is finding it difficult to make the shift because there is no clarity on the number of bank accounts to be opened.

While the official estimates put the number of registered tea garden workers at 786,000, the tea industry's as well as the labour union's estimate is around 1.1 million.

On January 5, Union Labour Minister Bandaru Dattatreya said the accounts of 70 per cent of the workforce of 780,000 had been opened and the rest of the work would be completed in 10 days. Taking into account the

industry estimates and the minister's statement, the Assam government has been able to achieve 50 per cent of the target.

BREW IN THE POT			
Region	Tea estates	Small Tea growers	Workers employed in tea industry
Assam	800	85,000	11,00,000
West Bengal	250	32,000	4,50,000
South India	1,200	80,000	3,60,000

Source: Industry estimates

A tea industry executive in Guwahati said: "The problem is owing to the fact that many are seasonal workers who get employment during the plucking season and are laid off when the gardens remain closed in the winter."

The Indian Tea Association has estimated that 15-20 per cent of the workforce in the gardens is seasonal.

According to the government directive, these labourers must have bank accounts.

According to Paban Singh Ghatowar, president of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha, the largest tea workers' union, confusion over the number of workers stems from the fact that there are at least 85,000 kitchen or small tea gardens, which employ a part of the workforce.

A majority of the garden owners in the state say it'll take another two months to complete the shift and make cash available in the gardens' vicinity. They are displeased at the state government repeatedly revising the deadline.

A section of major garden owners say it would have been better had the Assam government laid down a deadline.

The West Bengal government, after discussions with the RBI, has set a deadline of January 31 on digital payments.