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## Workers start cooperative to revive tea garden



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### Initiative comes in the wake of starvation deaths in West Bengal's tea estates

In a unique initiative, the workers of Bandapani Tea Garden, which has remained closed since July 2013, have formed a cooperative society and obtained government registration in a bid to run the garden themselves. The cooperative received government registration on April 26, 2017.

Located in Alipurduar district, the State government had taken over the Bandapani Tea Garden in October 2014. It still has about 1,200 workers on its rolls. "Even after the State government took over, the condition of the workers did not improve. So we formed the cooperative to run the garden ourselves," Ashok Toppo, the vice-chairman of the Bundapani Tea and Allied Plantation Workers' Cooperative Society told *The Hindu*.

garden. “The garden owners have fled with Rs.6 crore of our wages and other payments,” said Mr Toppo.

The workers claimed that they had no choice but to live in “sub-human” conditions in the closed tea garden, without access to basic amenities. “We did not even have access to clean drinking water, let alone proper food. At least 20 workers have died till now due to starvation,” said Bishnu Ghatani, convener of the Chai Bagan Bachao Committee, which took the initiative to form the cooperative.

There are around 25 closed tea gardens in West Bengal. It has been reported that workers in these tea gardens are not getting their wages, proper food, shelter, or medical care. There have also been media reports of starvation deaths in the closed gardens. The Mamata Banerjee government, however, has denied that there have been starvation deaths in the gardens.

Mr Ghatani said that the idea of reviving the tea garden by setting up a cooperative came up last August when they visited the Durgabari Tea Estate in Tripura, which is run by a similar workers’ cooperative.

However, according to sources in the office of the Assistant Registrar of Cooperative Societies (Cooch Behar and Alipurduar Range), the workers will not be “legally entitled” to run the garden on their own merely on the basis of a government registration. “Since the land is currently owned by the State government, the cooperative members have to obtain a lease on the land to run the garden themselves,” said a senior official in the Assistant Registrar’s office. The Cooperative members said that they will meet the District Magistrate of Alipurduar, Devi Prasad Karanam, on Monday regarding the transfer of the lease for the garden.

According to local social activist Rupam Deb, a similar initiative was made by the workers of Sonali tea estate in Jalpaiguri district in 1974. “The workers ran the garden for about four years. But they were forced to give up after the owners moved the court, arguing that the workers were not legally entitled to run the garden since they do not have a lease over the land,” said Mr. Deb.

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