

UNENDING WOES OF WORKERS :

The Plight of Abandoned Tea Garden Workers in West Bengal

Darjeeling tea from the tea estates is the famed best tea and is a pride to our country. Recently during his visit to England, Prime Minister Modi presented Darjeeling tea to the Queen of England.

But neither the fame of Darjeeling tea nor the pride enjoyed by our country by its best taste and quality, have never brought prosperity in the lives of the tea garden workers of Darjeeling tea estates who are the real producers of the famed Darjeeling tea, by investing their blood and labour power. On the contrary from the times of the British Colonial rule, till today it is the British tea companies or their collaborator Indian companies that have prospered, earned wealth by way of huge profits and drained that wealth to the parent foreign tea companies.

Since 2002, 100% of FDI has been permitted in to the tea plantation sector, in the name of economic development of our country, particularly the tea sector. Even this policy has not brought out any happiness in to the lives of the living and working conditions of the tea garden workers, but had profited the tea plantation owners and tea companies.

Now a distress situation pervades in the tea estates of many tea gardens in North Bengal, where mounting hunger looms over several thousands of North Bengal tea garden workers, leading to 'starvation' deaths of workers. Within 45 days (from Sept 15 to November 31, 2015), 13 starvation deaths have been reported. These deaths have occurred in the tea gardens abandoned by Duncan, a leading tea company.

But the administration of Mamata Benarji's government denies that the deaths are due to starvation but are due to ailments or natural deaths, but after much public out-cry and condemnation about these starvation deaths, the administration admits that due to abandonment of the gardens the workers are under stress.

Without taking any immediate step to rescue the tea garden workers under distress, the Chief Ministers simply warns the owners of tea companies that the state government would take-over, if they cannot administer them properly. And to eye wash the public a CID probe was ordered in to the issue. These actions of the state government will in no way bring any relief to the suffering tea garden workers who are on the brink.

The Duncan tea company began its operations in India from 1857 by clearing large swaths of dense forests in North Bengal to establish its extensive tea plantations. It transported industrious tribal people from Chota Nagpur and Santal paraganas as indentured, near slave labour. It exploited these tribal labourers to the utmost and earned huge profits. Even after the transfer of power in 1947, in India, the workers continued to work almost in the very colonial conditions (living and working). These workers households were not even issued with ration cards issued by public distribution system, but the state government supplied PDS grain to companies to issue to tea garden workers.

Presently the Duncan had abandoned 15 tea gardens, and 30 tea estates in North Bengal are now either closed or abandoned by their owners.

Thus Duncan Company by abruptly abandoning the gardens, it stopped paying wages to its workers. It also terminated food rations. It cut electricity and drinking water supplies to worker colonies. For several years pensions and P.F. funds of the workers had not been paid. So the worker households of these are facing conditions of acute starvation. These workers for survival are forced to travel to neighbouring gardens and working at very low, piece-work rates and are forced to spend longer hours to earn far less uncertain casual employment. Some workers are forced to go for the works of mining stones on river beds breaking stones. Most of the tea garden workers threatened by hunger are single women, those ailing and elderly. These women, who break stones, get only Rs

70 for a week. In a month they earn not more than Rs 150 at the most. Several young workers have migrated to Bhutan, Kerala, Delhi and Tamil Nadu. Children of these tea garden workers are also forced to work and bring some food to the family table.

Thus the future and survival of 15,000 workers of Duncan Tea Company and their families has been jeopardized, due to the inhuman and illegal abandonment of the tea estates.

Neither the labour department nor the trade unions have done anything to hold the Duncan Goenka management accountable for creating this devastating human crisis by plunging its workers in to condition of perpetual starvation and untold distress.

The states instead of protecting the workers from the wiles of exploitation of the plantation owners have been morally and legally defending the culpable tea plantation owners and their willful defaulted managements, leaving away the workers defenseless thrown to the edge of survival.

So it is imperative that the workers of this country have to unite and organise themselves on the basis of class-orientation and class-politics to protect their class interests through a path of continuous struggle on their own –not exclusively relying on the ineffective workers movement of the established trade unions that had long before failed to deliver the goods.
