

Report from West Bengal: Woes of Tea Garden workers

For the last few years tea gardens in West Bengal had been talked about for several reasons. Every year a number of tea garden workers or members of their families die of hunger. Squalor, hunger and death have become order of the day. Every month there are reports large scale women trafficking from the tea gardens. The present dispensation at the helm of power in west Bengal have continuously been denying the facts though the surveys conducted by UNICEF and other independent organizations have reported about women trafficking and death due to hunger. On the other hand, the Mamata led government is bragging that they have developed tea-tourism, eco-tourism in the terai region, Doars and Darjeeling hills. The people in general have learnt to take such deaths and trafficking stoically. Some protests in Kolkata and some murmurs elsewhere just after the reports are published and then back to the daily problems faced by them – price rise, unemployment, corruption and above all trampling democracy by the state and the government.

Under these circumstances tea garden workers have been protesting and trying to organize themselves as much as they can.

To understand the situation, let us try to base ourselves on a survey carried out by the Regional Labour Commissioner of Terai-Doars-Darjeeling Hills nearly five years ago. The survey was conducted in 273 of the total 276 gardens in the region.

Before going into the details one important thing must be noted. In the tea gardens the minimum wages are kept low. While the real reason is that almost all tea garden workers were brought from Jharkand region and they are mostly tribals. From the beginning they are being super-exploited for the super profit of garden owners. At that time labour laws were non-existent. Even after labour laws have come into existence, minimum wages acts are being applied at different states. Tea garden workers, especially in West Bengal have been treated as exceptions. At first, minimum wages were calculated as half of the other industries. In other industries minimum wages of a worker is fixed by taking the worker as one unit, spouse as 0.8 unit and two children each as 0.6, making the total as 3 units. The calculations are made for their food, cloths, schooling, living place and so on to be provided to 3 units. In the tea gardens, it was calculated as 1.5 units. Why? The reason shown was very sinister. It was argued that in tea gardens both male and female members are working so the wages should be halved. When this was challenged, both the state and garden owners started arguing that unlike other industries tea garden workers are given living quarters, drinking water, electricity free of cost; primary education for their children is also freely arranged by the owners. For primary health a doctor is employed in the garden and moreover rations and fuel are supplied by the owners. So minimum wages should be lower. Given the bargaining power of the poorest of the poor workers is very low the trade unions had to succumb after prolonged strike.

However, with all the arguments and after many struggles wages were fixed as Rs.159 per day. But all those facilities including the provision of 75 yards of clothing per year have in reality not provided or underprovided. The situation can be understood by the survey mentioned above. In that survey in 2013, two years after Mamata led TMC had come to power in the state as that they cannot pass the bean to 34 year left front rule alone.. True, during the left front rule the situation started to continually worsening and TMC government allowed to the continuation of deterioration.

The survey showed that:

1. Of the more than 2,50,000 workers in those 273 gardens (the number was consciously shown low), nearly 96,000 have not been provided with any sheltered housing;
2. 20 per cent of the living quarters provided do not have electricity connection;
3. Less than 20 per cent of gardens have drinking water provision;
4. Ration was not provided regularly causing death due to hunger; and now after the government started food security programme, the gardens stopped whatever meager ration they used to provide;
5. Less than 40 per cent Of gardens have some arrange-ment for health care;
6. Many gardens do not have any school;
7. Large number of gardens do not subscribe to provident fund.

The Survey was conducted five years ago. Till now the state government has not taken any step to force the managements of gardens to provide the statutory amenities to the workers. Rather it acted hand in glove with the hucksters, known as owners of gardens, to drain out the funds paid from the state exchequer to help the tea gardens to overcome the crisis, which is mostly created by themselves. The tea bushes have mostly crossed the life limit. It is expected that there should be no tea bush of more than 40 years. But the owners do not make any provisions to plant new bushes. Same is the situation of the shade trees. As a result the quality is getting down.

Now the owners have taken the policy of closing the gardens the moment the workers demands their rightful wages and other facilities. Workers are dying. Those who are living are moving around sick and weak. Once their ancestors left whatever they had and now they have nowhere to go. They have to live and die in the gardens. They are treated like slaves.

Now they are trying to organize; but that too has become difficult. Some union leaders having close association with powers-that-be go on flexing their muscles.

But limit of exploitation has crossed. The workers are trying to get organized throwing off all terrorization. They know unite they will have to. They will have to fight not only for themselves but also to change the state which is standing behind the owners.
