

India: West Bengal's Striking Tea Plantation Workers Are Only Demanding Their Basic Rights

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India takes pride in the globally-acclaimed Darjeeling tea, but does not talk about the kind of oppression that the workers in tea plantations have been facing for generations.



This 2004 file photo shows tea pickers arriving for work at a tea estate at Naxalbari in West Bengal. Credit: Reuters/Kamal Kishore

A pressing issue that has received hardly any attention from either academics or the mainstream media is the precarious condition of the workers in north Bengal's tea gardens. The workers, under the Joint Forum of Trade Unions (a platform for all unions from the hills as well as the Terai and Dooars regions), have been on strike since August 7. As I write this, about three lakh workers are striking work.

Why the strike

With more than 4.5 lakh workers (of which 2.62 lakh are permanent workers) engaged in 330 registered big tea gardens spread over Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts, the tea plantation industry is the largest employer in the formal private sector in West Bengal. Yet, the wages of these workers are the lowest across industries. The prevailing daily wage is Rs 150, whereas the prescribed minimum wages of even unskilled agricultural workers in West Bengal is Rs 244 and the MGNREGA wage is Rs 191 per day. The workers' unions argue that tea plucking requires some amount of skill and therefore, it should be treated at least as a semi-skilled activity. As per the latest wage notification of the West Bengal government, dated June 22, 2018, the minimum wage for semi-skilled workers in agriculture is fixed at Rs 244 (without food). Thus, the plantation workers have been demanding a minimum wage of Rs 239, besides the other statutory benefits.

The minimum wage for tea plantation workers in the state is set through collective bargaining between representatives of employers' associations in plantations and workers' unions, while the

state government officials play more of a mediatory role. The last such collective agreement was reached on February 21, 2015 with the formation of the minimum wage advisory committee. The committee was given the mandate of recommending a minimum wage within two years, but even after 3.5 years and the lapse of the said agreement on March 31, 2017, it is yet to submit a proposal. However, after the three-day successful strike in tea plantations during July 24 and 26, the government proposed to increase the daily wage from Rs 150 to Rs 172 in the last tripartite meeting that took place on August 6. This has prompted the workers' unions to call for the strike, as they feel that the suggested wage is too low and, more importantly, has been determined completely arbitrarily.

The employers' associations are unhappy and have stayed away from the meeting called by the state government last Tuesday to negotiate on the workers' demands. The planters are of the view that their profits are not that high and hence, any hike in wages will be detrimental for the tea industry. One of the major complaints of the employers is that they need to fulfil other obligations for the workers provided under various legislations such as Industrial Disputes Act, Factories Act, Provident Fund, Gratuity Act and the Plantations Labour Act (PLA).

Considering the remote and isolated location of the tea plantations, where the workers usually do not have access to basic facilities, the PLA fixes the responsibility on the employers to provide drinking water, sanitation, medical facilities and so on for the workers. However, it is common knowledge that the PLA remains poorly implemented in most tea plantations, owing to the indifference of the state and the lack of workers' unity. Therefore, the costs claimed by the planters for the implementation of provisions made under the PLA is totally unfounded. In fact, the wage rate in West Bengal is the lowest in the country. The daily wage of tea plantation workers is Rs 310 in Kerala, Rs 263 in Karnataka and Rs 241 in Tamil Nadu. Even if the costs of all the fringe benefits are taken into account, the daily wage is still far below the subsistence wages in the informal sector.

Further, studies on the tea industry reveal two distinct patterns. One, tea has seen very little fluctuation in price; in fact, it has experienced a steady increase in price over the years. This completely busts the usual claim of the employers that Indian tea is fetching lower prices at auctions and as a result, they are not in a position to provide minimum wages to the workers. Two, the prices of east India-grown tea, on average, are higher compared than south India-grown tea. The average auction prices of per kilogram for teas from West Bengal was Rs 197 in June 2018, significantly higher than that of south Indian states (ranging between Rs 92 and Rs 116). Despite this price advantage, the employers of tea plantations in West Bengal and Assam deny their workers minimum wages. Currently, the workers in West Bengal are receiving just half of the prevailing wage in Kerala, and the difference will further exacerbate once the Kerala government accepts the demand for wage revision.

Living conditions

Our independent survey on the living conditions of the tea plantation workers in 30 tea gardens of north Bengal last year revealed that almost 50% of the tea garden workers' households do not have a toilet and hence, are forced to defecate and urinate in the open. The monthly per capita consumption expenditure (including non-food items) stood at Rs 1,232. The workers' appalling living conditions have severely affected their health and nutrition status. Nearly 55% of the children aged below six years were found to be suffering from stunting, an indicator of chronic malnutrition.

The situation in closed tea gardens is even worse. The health conditions of adults are also equally bad. Almost three in every five individuals reported some health problems in our survey. Despite the PLA being in force, only four out of 15 surveyed tea gardens in Dooars have fully functioning hospitals. Consequently, almost three-fourths of sick individuals had to seek treatment from public

and private providers, incurring high out-of-pocket expenditure which pushed the already poor workers deeper into poverty. Starvation deaths are also common in tea plantations, although they don't come to the surface as 'malnutrition' is not considered a disease.

India takes pride in the globally-acclaimed Darjeeling tea, but does not talk about the kind of oppression that the workers in tea plantations have been facing for generations. All that the workers are demanding is a minimum wage that would help them survive. Is that too much to ask for?

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