

India: A travesty of tea and tribals - Gross violations of workers' rights in Tea Plantations

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No amount of mockery would have been more pronounced than the holding of the Tea and Tribal Festival at Banarhat, in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, under the “auspices” of the Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. The programme held between February 15-17, 2015 intends to “provide a platform to display tribal talents” said the official invitation. This charade is emblematic of the larger spoof that continues with around two million tea-plantation workers of India.

The venue, Banarhat Tea Garden playground, is located within 15 kilometers of the closed Red Bank, Dharanipur and Surendranagar Tea Estates that have been virtually shut-down since the last 12 years. These non-descript locations sometimes hit headlines when starvation and chronic malnutrition take the lives of the closed tea-garden workers and their family members. The otherwise picturesque Dooars, at the foothills of the Himalayan West Bengal and Bhutan has turned into a veritable valley of death with tea garden workers suffering due to low wages, poor quality rations and inadequate medical facilities. It is a shame and matter of utter disgust that the government, instead of bringing the real culprits to books, decides to organize a festival that makes fun of the dead. And not one or ten, but thousands of deaths due to malnutrition, starvation and undernourishment. Matters that could have otherwise been easily prevented.

According to a survey done on body mass index (BMI) by rights activist and doctor Binayak Sen and five other organisations, in the erstwhile closed Raipur tea garden in the same district “40 per cent of its residents have a BMI lower than 18.5, indicative of being underweight, and 140 people in 539 examined had BMI lower than 14, a sign of malnourishment.” The report points towards the dire living conditions in the closed tea gardens in West Bengal and exposes the sub-human conditions that people are compelled to endure.

Turning a deaf ear to such alarming developments, the Trinamool Government in the state - (in)famous for its ardent mela culture where millions of rupees are disbursed in extravagance - tries to showcase its “talents” leaving the tribals and the tea-workers in a quandary. Critics say that these melas or fairs are organised to conceal the failures of the government and also dish out money to local beneficiaries and contractors. Besides, these are great public propaganda exercises for a party in a desperate need to repair its tarnished image owing to unfulfilled expectations and widespread corruptions. Though, the multiple scams, including Saradha ponzi scheme, has hit the government so hard that its image seems beyond any repair. The party can only hope to stay in power with the opposition votes squarely shared between the CPI (M) and the BJP, as testified by the recent assembly and parliamentary by-polls in Krishnagunj and Bongaon respectively.

While workers reel under pathetic wages, currently Rupees 90-95/day, the ministers of the government including the one in charge of labour, resort to falsehood about improving the lot of the labourers and the implementation of minimum wages in the sector. This enclave economy has witnessed notorious collusions between the owners and the successive governments reducing the

workers to penury, permanently. Even, in the face of a strong and unified resistance from workers, the government takes the mantle of dragging them into dubious wage deals that would see their hard won gains further eroded. Any Lady Macbeth to say- “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand”?

In a landmark judgment on Kamani Metals & Alloys Ltd vs Their Workmen, the Supreme Court of India on 24 January 1967 ruled that “a minimum wage which, in any event, must be paid, irrespective of the tent of profits, the financial condition of the establishment or the availability of workmen on lower wages. This minimum wage is independent of the kind of industry and applies to all alike big or small. It sets the lowest limit below which wages cannot be allowed to sink in all humanity.” The government is resolute to connive with the tea-garden owners to violate every word and spirit of this opinion. West Bengal is the only “owner’s pride” in the country after the neighbouring Assam government, also notorious for gross violations of workers’ rights, issued necessary notifications towards the implementation of minimum wages, last month. Let us not forget that the health of the tea industry depends a great deal on the health of the workers as this is highly a labour intensive industry.

And the timing could not be better with the industry poised to witness tea prices climbing by 9% to an average of Rupees 200 (\$3.2) per kg in 2015 as consumption rises in a recovering economy, according to McLeod Russel India, the world’s biggest tea grower. ASSOCHAM, the oldest and a leading apex-body of the trade associations of India, projected the industry to achieve a turnover of Rs. 33,000 crore (\$5.4 billion) by this year making plantation owners richer and leaving workers earn the lowest wage of all organized sectors in the country.

Surely, after forcing a black-wage agreement on the workers, the government could only resort to such travesty to woo the plantation workers and the tribals. And, no wonder there is hardly any turnout of lesser mortals to witness such a farce.

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