

Brewing in closed tea gardens, anger against TMC, Left revival

Written by [Esha Roy](#) | Darjeeling/siliguri | Published: April 17, 2016 4:16 am

A dust-laden blackboard lies propped up by a pillar in a factory inside the Panighatta Tea Garden. The date, written in chalk, reads 6-10-2015 — the day the management shut down the factory and the garden, all of a sudden and without any notice to its workers.

Behind the closed doors of the garden, one can find 60-year-old Gorey Tamang, who was once employed as chowkidar (guard) at Panighatta's now shut hospital. His wife was a tea leaf plucker. Tamang sits at a shop in front of a large poster of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). It announces Dr Rohit Sharma as party candidate for the Assembly elections.

"Its been six months since the tea garden shut down. It was shut twice last year, for one month each time, but they (management) opened it. The owner, Shankar Sharaf, kept telling us that there was no more money to run the tea garden. He left a day before the garden was closed for the third time. The next day, all the six managers left as well. Earlier, they used put up notices announcing the decision to close the garden. This time there wasn't any notice. They just disappeared," says Tamang.

President of the Panighatta Trade Union, Hiran Lohar, says that in one week in September last year, as many as six people died at the tea garden. "However, nobody died from starvation. Some died of heart attack, others due to lack of treatment," he says.

Tamang says that for months he has been the unofficial doctor at the tea garden. "The owner never wanted to spend money on hiring a doctor. There used to be a quack, who too left after the garden closed. Now, I administer injections, tend to minor injuries and stitch up wounds," he says.

Predictably the workers have stopped receiving wages and their due bonuses.

Lohar says the management owes the workers Rs 2.5 crore in provident fund.

There are three regions in North Bengal, which constitute tea country – the hill area (in and around Darjeeling sub-division), the Terai region mainly around Siliguri sub-division, and the Dooars (or the seven doors to Bhutan). As many as 277 Set Tea Gardens still operate here. The gardens are regulated by the Tea Authority of India under two Acts – the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which oversees labour laws and ensures labour benefits, and the Tea Act of 1953 which concerns itself with the actual functioning of the tea estate, the management, production and yield etc.

The tea industry is labour intensive and is the second largest employer, close on the heels of the Indian Railways. Apart from some workers who hail from Nepal, most others are tribals who were brought in as indentured labour by the British.

The ailing tea gardens started shutting down 2002 onwards. In the past two years, 16 tea gardens have shut shop. The tea gardens comprise one of North Bengal's biggest and most important vote banks – making up as much as 60 per cent of the total votes caste. Sore at apathy of the ruling Trinamool [Congress](#) government, the tea garden communities had shifted base en masse to the [BJP](#) in the 2014 [lok Sabha](#) elections.

The Left Front vote share dipped to 19 per cent from 40 per cent in 2011.

Since then, however, the Left Front, particularly its constituent RSP, has made concerted efforts to organize and revive the trade unions and carry out a campaign of getting tea gardens re-opened. Now, even the critics say that Left front-Congress coalition seems to be ahead of its rivals TMC and BJP here.

"They are most visible. The BJP has no trade union to speak of and you can't get votes here without trade unions. The Trinamool trade unions have not been strong enough," says CPI(ML)'s Abhijeet Majumdar, who has consciously stayed away from what he calls an "unethical opportunistic (Left-Congress alliance)".

President of the Dooars Cha Bagan Workers Union and RSP member Gopal Pradhan says that the Left has been running an intensive campaign for the rights of the workers through a joint forum for over a year now.

"Politically and economically speaking, tea gardens are the most important factor in North Bengal. Here, it is difficult to tell, which

way the vote is going. It is a silent vote. But, we believe that we have the upper hand in the Dooars. The promises made by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee have not been fulfilled. She had promised rice at 47 paise per kilo but is giving it at Rs 2 a kilo. Even that is not always available to the tea garden workers. In Darjeeling, of course it will be Bimal Gurung who will garner the tea garden votes," Pradhan says.

Gurung had earlier said that dismal conditions of the tea estates in North Bengal will cost Mamata a major vote share.

 1/186

