

Hills tea workers return to garden

tnn | Aug 18, 2017, 05.50 AM IST



DARJEELING: Almost half the number of workers at the Kurseong's Longview tea garden on Wednesday joined "voluntary work" and started de-weeding bushes which have already overgrown following the bandh in the Hills for a little over two months.

More than 500 workers at the tea estate joined "voluntary work" on the 64th day of the bandh in the Hills over the Gorkhaland demand. GJM leaders were prompt to describe the development as "workers' love for the gardens", but ruling Trinamool Congress claimed tea garden workers are now trying to break the impasse.

Longview tea estate, which employs about 1,200 workers, has been shut since June 15 after GJM gave a call for a strike in protest of a police raid at the party's office at Patleybas. Garden management on Thursday said it was voluntary work on behalf of a section of workers who take a sense of ownership of the garden. "It is more like cleaning the garden and not plucking tea leaves. Some are doing it for two-three days as they have a sense of belonging for the gardens," said garden manager Kuldeep Mullick.

Tea industry insiders on Thursday indicated workers in some of the gardens like Sangma, Thurbo, Badamtam, Tarzom and Selimbong in areas such as Kurseong, Sukna and Darjeeling are also joining for a few days of "shram-daan". "In the past two months, tea leaves have not been plucked in any of the 87 gardens in Darjeeling. When the gardens open, the biggest challenge will be to clean up the bushes which have now become like hedges," said a source.

Jyoti Kumar Rai, assistant general secretary of GJM, said the "voluntary works" are out of the love for the tea gardens. "There is

nothing to read between the lines. The workers attended the gardens from their sense of belonging. The agitation for Gorkhaland will continue," Rai said.

"Workers at Simulbari tea garden in Sukna have also joined work. It seems they want to come out of the days of hardship," said tourism minister Gautam Deb.

Meanwhile, constituent parties of GMCC like CPRM felt if the deadlock does not break, more workers will join work at the gardens. "Workers get a wage of Rs 132 per day if they attend work. They have been jobless for two months. They will eventually look for ways to earn their livelihood," said R B Rai, president of CPRM.

Present at the rally at Chowk Bazaar in Darjeeling, CPRM spokesperson Govind Chhetri said: "We have created an ambience for talks and lifting of hunger strike was part of that strategy. We should not give them a chance to point fingers at us, but we have to put more pressure on the central government to hasten the process," he said. According to sources, GNLF leaders are also in favour of putting more pressure on the BJP.

On Wednesday night, two key GJM leaders — Sanjila Chhetri and Ambika Sharma from Malli (an area closer to the district's border with Sikkim) — were arrested. They were charged with arson and spreading violence in Darjeeling during the agitation. While Sharma is a councillor of ward 30 of Darjeeling municipality, Chhetri is a member of GJM's Darjeeling sub-division committee.