

State push for land rights faces tea test

Siliguri/Darjeeling: The state's initiative to grant land rights in the hills faces a challenge - handing out similar benefits to those living in tea estates.

Workers who live in north Bengal's tea estates - which have come up on plots leased out to tea companies for several years - have had no land rights so far.

"Trinamul wants to use the (land rights) issue to galvanise its support across the hills ahead of the parliamentary polls next year. But unlike non-tea garden areas where the land is with the government and can be easily handed over to residents, handing over land rights to tea workers and their families is a complicated process," said a former state government official.

Last year, chief minister Mamata Banerjee had initiated the process by distributing land rights to some residents of Mirik who live in municipal wards but on land that belonged to a tea estate located next to the hill town.

Last week, the state and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration handed over land rights to over 300 people in Kalimpong but those tracts, too, were in non-tea areas.

"There is no indication so far that the state will distribute land rights among the tea population en masse," the official said.

In the hills, there are around 55,000 permanent and 15,000-odd temporary workers in the 87 tea estates producing Darjeeling tea. The total population in the hill tea belt is around 4.5 lakh.

Observers explained why granting such land rights in tea gardens is a major challenge for the state.

First, the state will have to take back the stretches of land on which the workers live with their families from the tea companies. "Only then can the state mark the plots, carry out other processes and hand over the land rights. Also, it is not clear whether tea companies would agree to part with the land," said one observer.

Second, if the process is initiated in the hills, it has to be extended to the Terai and Doars. "If the state does not provide land rights to the tea population, it would leave the people upset and it can have an impact on the poll results," the observer said.

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