

Tea garden closure fear



Demdima Tea Estate

Two managers of a tea garden in Alipurduar have left "without any information", workers said, sparking fears of an "informal closure" at the estate that had reopened in March this year after a three-year shutdown.

The Duncan Goenka Group's Demdima Tea Estate in Birpara, along with some other gardens of the company, was abandoned by the management on April 2015. It was on March 9 this year that work had resumed at the garden following the state government's intervention.

The departure of managers on Thursday prompted the BJP to question Trinamul leaders and the state government. The gardens were "temporarily" opened to help Trinamul reap political dividends ahead of panchayat elections, the BJP leaders have alleged.

"No notice of closure or suspension of work was put at the office. This has left us apprehensive that the management has abandoned or informally closed down the garden again. Back in 2015, the managerial staff had left the garden in a similar way and the management had not issued any formal notice," said a worker.

In absence of any notice, a section of workers thought of continuing their job and went to the plantations where tealeaves were plucked. Later, some of them went to Birpara and met the assistant labour commissioner.

"We briefed him about the situation and our apprehension. He has assured us intervention," a worker said.

There are 1,647 workers in the garden. Two years back, the Duncan Goenka Group had abandoned most of its gardens in the Dooars, including seven in Alipurduar district.

District Trinamul leaders, including party's Alipurduar district president Mohan Sharma, helped facilitate the reopening of the garden. Sharma had said efforts were on to ensure that work resumed in the other gardens of the group.

"In such a situation, the sudden move by the managerial staff to abandon Demdima has sent a wrong message among the workers. It is obvious the BJP would make it an issue, particularly because the party has suffered a setback in the Birpara-Madarihat block in the rural polls," said an observer.

It is the same block where the BJP has an MLA. Also, all the seven gardens are located in this block.

"The state's initiative to reopen the gardens of Duncans was nothing but an election stunt. The workers of Demdima have realised it. The garden has opened three months back but till date, a month's wages are due. The situation is similar in other gardens of the group which have recently reopened," said Manoj Tigga, the local MLA of BJP in Birpara.

Now that management representatives have left Demdima, there is an apprehension that there might be similar departures from the other five tea gardens, he said.

Trinamul leaders rejected the allegations. "We are trying our best to reopen the closed tea gardens. In July, a couple of more gardens will reopen. Whatever has happened in Demdima is unfortunate. We will speak with concerned persons and if required, we might even launch protests," said district Trinamul president Sharma.

Senior officials of state labour department have also put efforts to resolve the issue.

"A tripartite meeting on Demdima will be held on next Monday. Representatives from the management's side would be called at the meet," said Chandan Dasgupta, the Joint Labour Commissioner posted in Siliguri..

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