

Centre stirs teapot with panel

Siliguri: A sudden decision by the Union commerce and industry ministry to form a 12-member group to prepare a report for "revelation and rejuvenation" of the Indian tea industry has left stakeholders surprised.

While a section feels that it is a follow-up move of a recent survey on domestic tea consumption conducted by Tea Board of India, others opine that the panel has been formed to prove Centre's sincerity at the sector, particularly because Lok Sabha elections are round the corner.

On Wednesday, the tea board issued a letter saying the group had been formed under the instructions of Suresh Prabhu, Union commerce and industry minister. Representatives of stakeholders have also been included.

The group has been set up "...for revelation and rejuvenation of the plantation sector to study the various issues related to the tea sector such as identifying areas of growth, steps to promote at international level, employee participation etc... (sic)" says the letter.

It also mentions that the group will submit its report to Prabhu within two months.

Among 12 members of the group, include three officials of tea board while the other nine are representatives of associations of tea planters, small tea growers, exporters, traders, researchers and bought leaf factories.

Interestingly, there is no representative of tea workers, like the unions, on the panel. "We welcome any move by the government that can help in resolving issues deterring the growth of Indian tea industry. But we feel that all sections of people associated with the industry should have been included," said Prabir Bhattacharjee, secretary general, Tea Association of India.

Sources also revealed the group members have been asked to provide inputs on issues related to tea workers, manufacturers, buyers, auctioneers and exporters along with prospective ways and means by which such issues can be addressed. Also recommendations on promotion of teas, areas where policy interventions are required for growth of the sector have been sought from them.

The group members have been asked to submit their inputs by July 18, says the letter.

Since 2014, when NDA came to power, this is the first time that such a group has been formed to recommend for betterment of tea industry.

"As parliamentary elections are round the corner, it seems that the Centre wants drive home the point, particularly in tea belts, that it is sincere at the industry. This is more so because in Assam and Bengal, the two states which together contribute around 80 per cent of the total tea production in the country, have the highest number of people living in tea estates. Added to them are stakeholders of the small tea sector," said a tea expert based in Calcutta.

In both states - the BJP is also in power in Assam - a number of issues are pending. These include minimum wages, amendment of the Plantation Labour Act and bringing the entire population of small tea growers under assistance schemes provided by the tea board.

Back in 2014, BJP had won in seven of the 14 Parliament seats in Assam, most of which are in the tea belt. In Bengal, BJP bagged the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat and narrowly lost to Trinamul in Alipurduar. While tea-belt votes matter in seven parliamentary constituencies of Assam, they hold the key to outcomes in three Bengal seats.

"The (BJP's) failure to reopen the closed gardens (in fact, Trinamul and the state has managed to open some gardens) and the change of political situation in Darjeeling hills have acted as setbacks for the party," said an observer.

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