

# Government Indifference Exposes Humanitarian Crisis: A Study of Plight of North Bengal's Tea Garden Workers



12 April, 2024





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# FACT FINDING REPORT

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Study of Hunger Situation in North Bengal Tea Gardens in West Bengal



April 12, 2024

**Right To Food and Work Campaign, West Bengal**

*Peyara Bagan, PO: Udayrajpur, Madhyamgram, North 24 Parganas – 700129*

## Issue

In response to distressing reports of a hunger-related fatality on February 3rd, 2024, at Madhu Tea Estate in Kalchini Block, Alipurduar District, West Bengal, a sense of urgency gripped Paschim Banga Cha Majoor Samity (PBCMS), an independent trade union representing Tea Garden workers. This tragic incident, which claimed a life due to hunger, served as a stark reminder of the dire circumstances faced by many tea garden workers in the region. With its affiliation with the Right to Food and Work Campaign (RTFWC), RTFWC & PBCMS swiftly initiated a fact-finding mission to delve into the underlying causes and prevalence of hunger within North Bengal's Tea Gardens. The urgency to investigate and address the prevailing hunger situation was fueled by the commitment to uphold the fundamental rights of tea garden workers to access adequate food and secure employment, ensuring their dignity and well-being.

## Objective

The primary objective of the Right to Food and Work Campaign in West Bengal is to confront the persistent challenges of food insecurity and employment instability gripping marginalized communities, particularly tea garden workers. Recognizing the inherent vulnerabilities and systemic injustices faced by these workers, the campaign endeavors to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the ground reality to shed light on the root causes contributing to hunger and poverty. Through rigorous investigation and data collection, the campaign aims to uncover the multifaceted issues plaguing tea garden workers, from inadequate access to food resources to precarious employment conditions. Armed with these insights, the campaign seeks to advocate and demand for policy interventions and social welfare measures that safeguard the basic rights of tea garden workers to food and dignified work. This report serves as a testament to the findings gleaned from an extensive survey conducted across various Tea Gardens in North Bengal, offering invaluable insights to guide campaigns, targeted interventions and advocacy efforts aimed at uplifting the socio-economic conditions and well-being of tea garden workers in the region.



## Team Composition & Date of Visit

From February 25th to 27th, 2024, a dedicated team comprising individuals with expertise in labour rights and community outreach embarked on this mission. The following table details the composition of the fact-finding team and their respective roles.

Name	Organization	Designation
Abu Sayed	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Akbar Ali	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Ashiq Rai	PBCMS	Member
Ashta Oraon	PBCMS	Asst. Secretary and Central Committee Member
Binay Kerketta	PBCMS	Central Committee Member
Christian Kharia	UBCSS & PBCMS	Whole Timer
Jaideep Mahali	UBCSS	Former Sangramer Sathi
Kamal Toppo	PBCMS	Asst. Secretary and Sangramer Sathi
Liton Hoque	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Mahesh Xaxa	PBCMS	Asst. Secretary
Mahfuz Rana	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Malati Lohar	PBCMS	Unit Committee Member
Mosa Aklima Khatun	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
MST Taramoni Khatun	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Pawan Baxla	RTFWC, West Bengal	Coordinator
Pawanty Oraon	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Prasanta Basak	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Rahul Naik	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Sabita Mandal	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Sachitra Sarkar	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Sajida Parvin	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Subhom Naik	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Syed Rajesh Ali	RTFWC, West Bengal	Sangramer Sathi
Urmila	PBCMS	Member
Purbayan Chakraborty		Advocate

## Details of the Sampling Area

Tea Garden	Current Status (Running/Closed)	Status of Fawloi	Name Of the Management	Number Of Workers
<b>Bamandanga Tea Garden</b> (Jalpaiguri)	Closed	Sanctioned but FAWLOI is Yet to start	NA	1184
<b>Kalchini Tea Garden</b> (Alipurduar)	Closed	Sanctioned but FAWLOI is yet to start	NA	1273
<b>Birpara Tea Garden</b> (Alipurduar)	Running	NA	Merico Agro Industries Private Limited	7000
<b>Lankapara Tea Garden</b> (Alipurduar)	Closed	Workers are currently covered under FAWLOI	NA	9000+
<b>Madhu Tea Garden</b> (Alipurduar)	Running	NA	Madhu Tea Co ltd.	950
<b>Nagaisuree Tea Garden</b> (Jalpaiguri)	Running	NA	Sammelan Tea & Beverages Pvt. Ltd.	1200
<b>Raimatang Tea Garden</b> (Alipurduar)	Closed	Sanctioned but Yet to start	NA	1258

All the gardens chosen for the study were either closed and abandoned or sick. They have all been going through cycles of closure and opening, with the opening being illegal most often, despite Government oversight.

### Unveiling Reality: Tea Garden Survey Snapshot

*This is a fact-finding report summarizing the findings of a survey conducted among Tea Garden workers in North Bengal. Prompted by a hunger-related fatality at Madhu Tea Estate, a team was formed to investigate the prevalence of hunger and its underlying causes. The respondents, totaling 122 individuals, were identified as people at risk by active members of PBCMS from that garden. Using a mixed-method questionnaire and photographic evidence, data was collected on various aspects including demographics, rationing, physical characteristics, income, employment, and issues with social welfare programs. The findings provide insights into the challenges faced by Tea Garden workers, serving as a basis for targeted interventions and policy recommendations to improve their socio-economic conditions and alleviate food insecurity within the region.*

<b>Demographic Profile of Respondents</b>	A total of 122 Tea Garden workers were interviewed during the fact-finding mission. The respondents provided details regarding their age, gender, address, Aadhar number, and family composition.
<b>Dependency on Ration Cards</b>	The survey assessed the number of family members dependent on a single ration card. It also investigated whether the respondents possessed caste certificates.
<b>Physical Characteristics</b>	Data regarding the height and weight of the respondents were collected to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI). The team recorded the height in both inches and meters for accuracy.
<b>Rationing</b>	Information was gathered regarding the type of ration card held by the respondents and their access to Public Distribution System (PDS) benefits. Reasons for not receiving ration, particularly for holders of Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) cards, were documented.
<b>Food Intake</b>	The frequency of food consumption and the types of food regularly consumed were analyzed.
<b>Income and Employment</b>	The number of working members in each family and their monthly average income were recorded. For permanent tea garden workers, legal rights such as paid leave, maternity benefits under the law, and access to government schemes were investigated.
<b>Issues with Social Welfare Programs</b>	The survey delved into any issues or challenges faced by respondents regarding Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-day Meal schemes, housing accommodations, access to garden hospitals,

	and documentation concerns such as the availability of caste certificates.
<b>Labor Welfare and Payment Status</b>	The total number of workers in each garden and the status of wage payments, including any delays or irregularities, were documented.

A total of 122 respondents participated in the survey, representing various tea gardens across the region. The subsequent table delineates the distribution of respondents according to their respective tea gardens.

Tea Garden	Bamanda nga Tea Garden	Kalchini Tea Garden	Birpara Tea Garden	Lankapara Tea Garden	Madhu Tea Garden	Nagaisuree Tea Garden	Rimatang Tea Garden
<b>Number of Respondent</b>	22	18	9	14	23	15	21

## ISSUES

### 1. Analysis of BMI Status and Undernutrition Among Tea Garden Workers

Based on WHO standards<sup>1</sup>, Body Mass Index (BMI) serves as a crucial indicator for assessing weight-to-height ratios and classifying individuals into categories of underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obesity. BMI values are age-independent and remain consistent across genders, yet the interpretation of BMI grading and associated health risks may vary among different populations due to diverse body proportions. **Thinness**, defined as a BMI below 17.0, indicates moderate risk and is linked to increased illness and adverse health outcomes. A BMI below 16.0 is considered an extreme limit with markedly elevated risks for poor physical performance and even mortality. **Underweight**, with a BMI below 18.5, is associated with health risks, although the cut-off point's experimental validity is subject to ongoing studies. Approximately 3-5% of healthy adult populations are considered underweight, highlighting the significance of addressing this public health concern. **Overweight**, indicated by a BMI of 25.0 or higher, is a major contributor to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and certain types of cancer. Metabolic consequences can manifest even at

<sup>1</sup> *Malnutrition in women.* (n.d.). <https://www.who.int/data/nutrition/nlis/info/malnutrition-in-women>



modest levels of overweight, underscoring the importance of early intervention. **Obesity**, characterized by a BMI of 30.0 or higher, is a preventable disease with significant health and socioeconomic implications. Beyond premature death and healthcare costs, obesity leads to disability, diminished quality of life, and heightened risks for various chronic conditions. These BMI classifications and associated risks emphasize the critical need for monitoring and addressing weight-related issues to promote overall health and well-being across populations.

**The analysis of the Body Mass Index (BMI) status among the 122 surveyed tea garden workers in North Bengal reveals a shocking picture of their nutritional health.**

BMI Category – Grade <sup>2</sup>	Count
Thinness (BMI < 17)	44
BMI <18.5: underweight	20
BMI 18.5-24.9: normal weight	48
BMI ≥25.0: overweight	6
BMI ≥30.0: obesity.	4

The prevalence of thinness (BMI < 17) among 44 respondents highlights a concerning aspect of nutritional inadequacy within this population. Thinness can be indicative of insufficient food intake, poor dietary quality, or underlying health conditions, all of which pose significant health risks and can impact physical performance and overall well-being.

Additionally, the presence of 20 individuals classified as underweight (BMI < 18.5) further underscores the nutritional vulnerability among tea garden workers. Underweight individuals may be at risk of nutrient deficiencies, weakened immune function, and impaired growth and development, emphasizing the need for interventions to address food insecurity and improve access to nutritious foods.

Conversely, while 48 respondents fall within the normal weight range (BMI 18.5-24.9), it's important to recognize that BMI alone may not capture all aspects of health. Despite falling within the normal weight category, individuals may still face nutritional challenges or have underlying health concerns that warrant attention.

In conclusion, the BMI analysis among tea garden workers in North Bengal once again underscores the gravity of nutritional health within this population. While generally malnutrition has been associated with closure of the garden and the subsequent loss of employment and wages, open gardens like Birpara (3 persons), Madhu (12 persons) and Nagaisuree (8 persons) also had a sizeable number of persons with BMI<18.5

<sup>2</sup> WHO. Global Health Observatory (GHO) data repository. Body mass index (BMI)





## 2. Public Distribution System under NFSA and its role in ensuring food security: An Analysis

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### A. *One unit of ration viz. – a – viz. number of dependent beneficiaries and its impact of food security:*

Tea garden workers were earlier provided with industrial rations by the employer. In 2003-04, when the industry was in crisis with over 30 gardens closed, with employers absconding, these rations stopped, leading to a malnutrition related deaths and a “Mrityur Micchil” (a procession of the dead), according to a popular Bengali daily. Subsequently, a Supreme Court order in the Right to Food case (WP 196/2001) in January 2004 made it mandatory for the State Government to provide food grains to workers in closed gardens under the Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY). In 2016, the State Government gave a notification, extending this scheme to the entire tea garden population. Under the National Food Security Act, 2013, it is now a legal right.

As per the “*Dietary Guidelines for Indians: A Manual*” issued by the *National Institute Of Nutrition Hyderabad*, an adult male and an adult female, engaged in moderate physical activity, needs 13 Kgs and 950 Gms., and 10 Kgs and 230 Gms. of Cereals & millets in a month respectively and a child of 10-12 years age needs 9 Kgs and 300 Gms of Cereals & millets in a month. Under AAY, each family is supposed to get 35 kgs of cereals per month. Therefore, the current entitlement under the AAY card can satisfy dietary needs of a family of 3 at best.

Surprisingly, about 49% of the respondents reported that more than 4 persons were currently dependent on a single ration card within their families and in some cases the numbers were as high as 13.

This issue has arisen primarily because the AAY quotas have been exhausted. NFSA provides for coverage of up-to 75% of the rural population and up-to 50% of the urban population for receiving foodgrains under TPDS. Corresponding to the above coverage at all India level, State-wise percentage coverage has been determined by the then Planning Commission (now NITI Aayog) and accordingly the AAY<sup>3</sup> quota has also been set based on 2011 census. As per the law, the figures were to be revised after each Census. The percentage of population to be covered in West Bengal was 67.5%.

However, post 2011, there has been no census and hence no revision of AAY quota even though rural marginalized population who suffers from hunger and food insecurity has continued to grow. In fact, we are now in the dire position when projected population for West Bengal in

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<sup>3</sup> The Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) ration card is a lifeline for India's most vulnerable families. Issued by the government, it grants access to subsidized food grains at significantly reduced prices. This is particularly important for those living well below the poverty line, often with no steady income. AAY prioritizes families led by widows, the terminally ill, people with disabilities, or senior citizens lacking support. While the exact amount varies by state, AAY cardholders typically receive essential grains like rice and wheat each month at a fraction of the market cost. At the moment the food grains are provided free of cost.

2024 is 9.9 crores<sup>4</sup>, while number of NFSA ration cards have remained static at 6 crores, hence Central Government NFSA rations now cover only 60.2% of the state's population, instead of 67.5%.

The real-life impact of this on nutrition levels can be found in the tea gardens. There is a widespread issue of high dependency on one ration unit resulting in food insecurity among tea garden workers' families in North Bengal. 72%<sup>5</sup> or 43 people with BMIs <18.5 had ration cards on which 4 or more persons depended.

### **B. Non-issuance of ration card and resultant deprivation of food entitlements under NFSA:**

Among the 122 respondents surveyed, 7 individuals reported not having been issued a ration card. 6 of these were from the group with BMI<18.5, or the most vulnerable group.

Tea Garden	Respondent
Bamandanga TG	Ganesh Nagasia
Birpara TG	Sita Khariya
Birpara TG	Heduik Khariya
Nagaisuree TG	Gopal Kumhar
Nagaisuree TG	Dansari Oraon
Nagaisuree TG	Mina Oraon
Nagaisuree TG	Asha Nayek

Even after 11 years of passage of NFSA, the most vulnerable population is struggling to receive their statutory entitlements for their survival. This finding

highlights collective failure of the government and the society at large. It points towards vulnerabilities and gaps in social welfare coverage within tea garden communities. Addressing the needs of individuals without ration cards requires targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to food security measures. Removal of arbitrary quotas and extending coverage to all eligible individuals can help alleviate food insecurity among tea garden workers and their families to some extent.

### **C. Lack of Cereals Aggravated by Low Access to Protein**

All respondents were also asked about the frequency with which they consume pulses, meat, eggs and fish. This presented a very worrying picture of their intake of pulses, which when combined with the low availability of cereals from the PDs and the low income of these families puts them in jeopardy.

Figures given below are for the highly vulnerable group of respondents who have BMI<18.5.

Type of Food	Daily Basis	Weekly Basis	Monthly Basis	Once in Two Months	Total
Pulses Intake	8	38	18	0	64
Non-Veg Intake	0	9	44	11	64

<sup>4</sup> [https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/Population%20Projection%20Report%202011-2036%20-%20upload\\_compressed\\_0.pdf](https://main.mohfw.gov.in/sites/default/files/Population%20Projection%20Report%202011-2036%20-%20upload_compressed_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ration card information was available for 59 persons out of the 64 low BMI persons.

Thus only 8 families consume pulses on a daily basis, while 38 or 59% have dal once or twice a week and 18 or 28% only once a month. Other sources of proteins like eggs, fish and meat are consumed even more infrequently. No family has it on a daily basis. 9 or 14% consume meat etc on a weekly basis, while 44 or 69% have it in a monthly basis. 11 or 17% reported having meat, fish or eggs once in two months.

#### 4. Non possession of Schedule Tribe certificate:

Among the 122 respondents surveyed, 99 belongs to Schedule Tribe (ST) Community, However, out this 99 eligible respondents surprisingly only 26 individuals reported possessing ST certificates. This means that about 74 % of the respondents were never issued with a certificate for their Schedule tribe status.

This finding indicates that vast majority of the Tea Garden population has remained neglected by the system even today. The ST certificate comes with a lot of consequential benefits. There are targeted welfare schemes by both the governments for upliftment of this community such as Jai Johar (Old Age Pension) Scheme, Lakshmi Bhandar, Gitanjali Housing Scheme. However, if they do not possess a valid ST certificate, they cannot access these benefits.

We believe that if they cannot reach the system, the system must reach them. Both the state and the central government must join hands in addressing this issue which is of pressing concern. They should hold a series of camps in this region to issue ST certificates to the eligible Tea Garden workers. They should also ensure that they start receiving all consequential benefits without any further delay.

#### 4. Analysis of Age and Gender Distribution Among Tea Garden Workers

The survey data provides insights into both the age and gender distribution among tea garden workers in North Bengal. Among the 64 individuals identified as having BMIs<18.5, surprisingly a large number are from the working age group. Thus 34 or 53 % of these highly malnourished individuals are in the working age group of between 20 and 50, and 24 or 37% are between 51- 65 years of age, an age when retirement sets in, but in the case of tea garden workers, without pensions.

Age Group	Number of Respondent
20-35	14
36-50	20
51-65	24
65- Above	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>

Moreover, the survey also illustrates a significant gender disparity among the respondents. Out of the 122 individuals surveyed, 86 (70%) identified as female, while 36 (30%) identified as male. In the group with BMI<18.5, the percentage of women was less at 42 or 66% out of 64 persons.



## 5. Abysmally low and unstable daily rate of wage and Food Insecurity

### A. Non implementation of Minimum Wage and its impact on food security

Implementation of minimum wage can undoubtedly be an effective tool to mitigate food insecurity in this region. The current daily rate of wage of Rs. 250 for tea garden workers is insufficient to lead a dignified life. The workers and the workers unions here, therefore, have been demanding implementation of minimum wage for a

Monthly Family Income	Number of Respondents
Less than 2000	41
2000 - 4000	54
4000 - 6000	21
6000 - 8000	2
8000 and above	4

long time. However, the state has been showing reluctance in notifying minimum wage for reasons best known to them. It is pertinent to note here that the state is under a positive statutory obligation under The Minimum Wages Act, 1948 to fix minimum wage as Tea is one of the Scheduled Employments under the Statute. It may be noted that, one of the members of the RTF&W West Bengal campaign, Paschim Banga Cha Majoor Samity approached the Hon'ble High Court at Calcutta praying for implementation of minimum wages in tea industry. (WPA 814/2024) On 10<sup>th</sup> April 2024 the Hon'ble High Court at Calcutta, Circuit Bench at Jalpaiguri directed the State Government to pass a reasoned order on minimum wages and implement the same within 8 weeks.

Many of the people surveyed are also not permanent tea garden workers, hence the low income is also a reflection of the general backwardness of the area and the difficulty in finding well paid work.

Not surprisingly the number of low-income families within the BMI<18.5 is much higher. 53 families or 83% families had incomes less than 4000 rupees a month. Incidentally the statutory minimum wage for agricultural workers in West Bengal is 8104 rupees per month, which means except for one family everyone was earning less than this.

Monthly average income of the family	
less than 2000	26
2001 to 4000	27
4001 to 6000	9
6001 to 8000	1
8001 to 10000	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>

### B. Tea Gardens frequently going through a cycle of reopening and closure and its effect on food security:

Out of 7 Tea Gardens that were surveyed only 3 were operational. When Tea gardens are abandoned by the owners without following the due process of law, it not only affects the regularity of wage payment, but severely impacts food security of the workers. When a garden is closed, the workers heavily rely upon FAWLOI (A Scheme for financial assistance given to

workers in locked out industrial unit). The financial assistance of meager Rs.1500 under this scheme is highly inadequate to even meet basic necessities of life.

The tea garden land in West Bengal is owned by the state government. Ideally if a company wants to manage a tea garden, it must follow the due process of law whereby they would be required to obtain lease from the state government as the first requirement to start operations. This also binds them to observe all statutory labour laws. However, the state has been sitting tight when companies/individuals are starting operations in Tea Gardens bypassing the due process of law, without obtaining lease from state, and without complying with labour laws. This inaction by the state forces the entire garden population to undergo a frequent cycle of reopening and closure which destabilizes their lives and contribute significantly to food insecurity.

A typical example would be of the Dekhlapara Tea Estate. This estate was under liquidation and such proceedings have going on before the Hon'ble High Court at Calcutta since 2006. However, a company called Banglarjhar Tea Company Ltd. came and started running the garden. They neither had obtained leave of the Hon'ble High Court, nor obtained lease of the Tea Garden land from the State government. The opening agreement between the TMC and BJP led unions and the new employer took place before the State Government authorities, but without their signature. The state government instead of taking action against the erring company, decided to stop FAWLOI. The company ran the garden for five months before running away. Neither a closure in terms of The Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 was affected, nor any other statutory labour laws were observed. Moreover, the company left the workers in a situation where they neither had the financial assistance of FAWLOI from the Government, nor they had the daily wage. Dheklapara is classic case that indicates that if state authorities sit tight over such illegal reopening/running of Tea estates, it can adversely impact the worker's interest.

## **6. Status of Housing Accommodation**

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Most houses are informally erected temporary structures made of bamboos/woods and tarpaulin. The houses are very poorly maintained and lacks basic amenities such as electricity, water etc. The consistent mention of poor housing conditions among all respondents suggests a widespread and enduring problem within tea garden communities.

Under The Plantation Labour Act 1951 read with West Bengal Plantations labour rules, 1956, every employer is under a statutory obligation to provide housing to tea garden worker and carry out proper maintenance of such housing. They are in direct violation of the law.

The Inspector under the meaning of Plantation Labour Act 1951, who is the Assistant Labour Commissioner, has been in absolute dereliction of his statutorily mandated duties as for the last few years, there has been no inspection carried out to ascertain the compliance of this law. Without adequate intervention, residents continue to endure substandard living conditions, perpetuating cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

## 7. Voices of the Respondents

Respondents also spoke about their insecure situations to the interviewers. Given below is a synthesis of what the vulnerable population with BMI<18.5 had to say, which brings out even more poignantly the precariousness of their lives.

Other Concerns	
Category	Important Points
<b>Financial Instability and Livelihood</b>	The family's primary breadwinner, retired from forest work, now struggles to make ends meet by selling wood due to the closure of the tea garden where he once worked. This shift has led to financial uncertainty, aggravated by the absence of a permanent residence and the lack of a ration card, which hampers their access to essential supplies.
<b>Health Challenges and Medical Expenses</b>	Compounding their difficulties, the family grapples with significant health concerns, including the daughter's battle with cancer. The expenses associated with her treatment strain the family's already limited resources, further exacerbating their financial instability.
<b>Bureaucratic Obstacles and Welfare Programs</b>	Despite efforts to access government welfare programs, bureaucratic hurdles impede their progress. The family lacks the necessary documents and faces challenges in obtaining assistance, leaving them vulnerable to their circumstances.
<b>Emotional and Physical Well-being</b>	The husband's declining physical and mental health adds another layer of complexity to their situation. His inability to work effectively impacts the family's emotional well-being, exacerbating their overall distress.
<b>Community Support and Accessibility</b>	Lack of community support compounds the family's challenges, as they struggle to access assistance and navigate their circumstances. Despite their efforts, they find it difficult to receive help due to bureaucratic barriers and limited social networks.

## ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This report was not planned for the Lok Sabha elections. It is by coincidence that it has been completed and is being released when the Lok Sabha elections in the two constituencies from where the respondents come (Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar) are going to vote in a week's time.

The report thus provides a reflection not just on the conditions of tea garden workers but also a sad commentary on the failure of the two major contenders in this election, one of whom controls the Central Government and the other the State Government. Incidentally the same parties have been in power in the Centre and the State for 10 years or more, more than sufficient time to change people's lives

The socio-economic conditions of tea garden workers in North Bengal reflect a typical interplay of factors, including low wages, employment instability, inadequate access to essential services, pandering by Governments to employers and systemic neglect by government authorities. This analysis report synthesizes data from a survey conducted among 122 tea garden workers, shedding light on the challenges faced by this vulnerable population.

The survey reveals a precarious employment situation, with only 4 respondents reporting monthly average incomes above 8000 rupees, which is the West Bengal statutory minimum wage for agricultural workers. It also reflects on the stubborn attitude of the employers to not give a decent wage and the neglect by the State and Central Government to back up an industry which perhaps needs more help to pay decent wages.

The backwardness of the area, coupled with little effort by the Central and State Governments to create alternative jobs or even decent jobs within the tea industry have resulted in a mal-nutritioned population with frequent reports of hunger deaths. Widespread unemployment, coupled with irregular wage payments and lack of job security, exacerbates financial instability among tea garden workers and their families.

A significant proportion of respondents exhibit signs of undernutrition, with alarming numbers falling below the BMI threshold of 18.5, indicating chronic energy deficiency. Limited access to nutritious food, compounded by challenges in obtaining ration cards and accessing Public Distribution System benefits, further exacerbates food insecurity among tea garden workers. A gross neglect by the Central Government in revising quotas under the National Food Security Act since 2011 in gross contravention of the law has meant that populations have increased, but ration cards have not.

The report shows unfortunately that even in open gardens mal-nutritioned populations at risk of hunger related deaths are significantly large. It also shows that the State Government has been neglectful in making employers accountable and in their mad pursuit of ease of doing



business, both Governments have made labour departments fangless and inspections meaningless. In their desire to re-open gardens anyhow, the State Government and the two major party related unions have put tea garden populations to risk.

Housing emerges as a pressing concern, with all respondents reporting issues with their dwellings. Substandard housing conditions, characterized by inadequate amenities such as water, electricity, and sanitation facilities, contribute to health hazards and diminish the overall quality of life for tea garden workers and their families.

Despite the pervasive challenges faced by tea garden workers, the survey data indicates a lack of adequate support from government authorities. Many respondents' express frustration with the absence of government assistance in addressing their housing needs, accessing social welfare programs, and securing livelihood opportunities.

The findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive interventions to address the multifaceted challenges facing tea garden workers in North Bengal. A declaration of a decent minimum wage, making employers more accountable in obeying labor laws, efforts to improve employment opportunities and enhance access to essential services are essential for uplifting the socio-economic status and improving the well-being of this marginalized population. Additionally, greater accountability and responsiveness from government authorities are imperative to ensure that tea garden workers receive the support and assistance they urgently require. This analysis report serves as a call to action for all political parties to prioritize the needs of tea garden workers and implement targeted interventions aimed at addressing the systemic inequities and vulnerabilities prevalent within these communities. Only through political will, which acts rather than just speaks, can meaningful progress be achieved in improving the lives of tea garden workers in North Bengal.

### **Concerning Note | Concerning Note | Concerning Note**

This worrying report brings to light the terrible situations that many families in the Tea Garden neighbourhood face. Each story shows how hard it is to make ends meet, deal with family problems, deal with health problems, and live in bad circumstances. From women who have to take care of their families after losing a spouse to people who have to deal with disabilities and being left alone, these stories show how hard life is for many tea garden workers and their families. The stories keep coming back to the same problems: poverty, unemployment, bad access to health care, and a lack of government help. These problems make things even harder for these weak communities. Families are already having a hard time with money because they can't find stable work in the tea fields. Instead, they have to rely on small pensions, irregular income sources, and limited rationing. The stories also show structural problems like employer impunity and Central and State Government neglect. These systemic hurdles keep families in a state of constant hardship and vulnerability by keeping them in cycles of poverty and lack.









## About Us

### Right to Food and Work Campaign, West Bengal

As a vital part of the Right to Food and Work Network, West Bengal, our mission is to champion the rights of marginalized populations, with a primary focus on issues related to nutrition and wage-based employment. We closely align with the overarching goals of the Right to Food Campaign of India (<http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in>), functioning as its dedicated State chapter. Our efforts center around overseeing the functioning of critical systems like the Public Distribution System (PDS) and other food-based schemes mandated by the National Food Security Act, 2013. Additionally, we diligently advocate for adherence to the provisions of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005. Beyond legislation, we are actively involved in championing the effective implementation of the Forests Rights Act, 2006, and ensuring the disbursement of social security benefits such as state-sponsored pension schemes and maternity benefits.

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This Fact-Finding Report is prepared by Advocate Purbayan Chakraborty and Atendriya Dana, Right to Food and Work Campaign, West Bengal under the guidance of Anuradha Talwar, Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity.

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Right to Food & Work Campaign, West Bengal

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