

# TUBERCULOSIS FINDS EASY PICKINGS IN CLOSED TEA GARDENS OF NORTH BENGAL

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

In penury: The loss of jobs and erratic government assistance have meant the workers have to fend for themselves. In picture, Kamal Mangar at the State-run health clinic near the factory. DEBASISH BHADURI Debasish Bhaduri

A tea factory and its related infrastructure lie in ruins at the Lankapara Tea Garden in Madarihat block of West Bengal. Tea plants on hectares of land have either turned brown or wilted in the garden, suggesting years of neglect. The garden, next to the picturesque hills that separate India and Bhutan and home to thousands of tea workers, has remained closed since the spring of 2015. For workers, the closure has meant poverty, malnutrition and an unforeseen malaise — tuberculosis.

Kamal Mangar, 25, queues up at a State-run health clinic behind the hospital that had gone to seed along with the tea factory. A health worker takes his weight and shouts 39 kg. The youth with tuberculosis has been reduced to a bag of bones.

There have been 11 cases of tuberculosis at the garden since 2019, the health worker at the clinic said. Lankapara has a population of nearly 7,500 and about 30% of the people have migrated for work. Mr. Mangar cannot go out for work to Kerala like he did a few years ago because of his illness. His father, Kancha Mangar, also unemployed, said his son did not get the Rs. 500 monthly welfare assistance given by the State to tuberculosis patients.

Since the plantation has remained closed for seven years, the workers survive on five months of plucking (April to September) and selling the leaves through various committees.

About 30 km from Lankapara is the Dheklepara Tea Garden which has been closed since 2002. At the entrance of the garden in Alipurduar district stands a dilapidated tea processing factory and a few rusted vehicles. Near the structure, a few workers of the garden are weighing a pile of tea leaves collected from plants that still survive.

A few metres away, at the workers' quarters, Praksh Tanti, 56, lies on his bed well past afternoon. On June 15, he was released from Birpara Sadar Hospital and the diagnosis states tuberculosis pleural effusion — one of the most common kinds of extra-pulmonary tuberculosis. He cannot work and doctors have prescribed him a high-protein diet including eggs, which he said he cannot afford. His 22-year-old son has migrated out for work and does not keep in touch with the family. Like Mr. Mangar, Mr. Tanti too does not get the Rs. 500 monthly assistance.

## Poor conditions

Anuradha Talwar of Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity, who has been working with unions of tea gardens in north Bengal, said the closed gardens provide ideal conditions for malnutrition and tuberculosis. "For workers of gardens that have been shut, the State government provides free rations, but there is no other support. Therefore, malnutrition leads to tuberculosis among the workers," Ms. Talwar said. She said the government was providing Rs. 1,500 monthly to such workers under the FAWLOI (Financial Assistance to Workers of Locked-out Industries) scheme.

Over the past few years, the samity and other trade unions of north Bengal have raised the issue of malnutrition in the closed tea gardens. In 2015, the West Bengal Right to Food Campaign reported a death due to malnutrition in a closed tea garden.

### **In other districts too**

There were also reports of malnutrition in abandoned tea gardens in the Dooars (Himalayan foothills) areas of districts such as Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling.

In 2014, the State health officials admitted that 25 children suffered from severe malnutrition and low weight in the five closed tea gardens. The children had to be admitted to State-run hospitals in Jalpaiguri district. According to trade unions, six tea gardens lie shut in the Dooars region.

In the first week of October, the Alipurduar district administration provided financial assistance to about 1,500 workers of Dheklepara and Lankapra tea gardens just before the Durga Puja. The workers, however, say that the solution to their plight lies in reopening the gardens.

In the closed plantations of Darjeeling district, the situation is eerily similar. At the State-run health centre at the Panighata Tea Estate, a health worker said there were nine patients — five men and four women — with tuberculosis. Lalita Trikey (49), who had come to collect medicines for tuberculosis, said that she sought medical intervention when she started vomiting blood. Ms. Tirkey, who lives with nine members of her family, said that after the garden closed down, she had been travelling long distances to other gardens for work.

Phulmani Khalkho, an auxiliary nurse midwife at the health facility, said that even after completing the required dose, some patients had not gained weight. Tina Lakra, 39, a mother of two, weighs only 31 kg and has been out of work for almost three years. The State government officials, however, denied the prevalence of tuberculosis in the closed tea gardens of north Bengal. “We have a very good screening process to locate TB patients so it does not matter if a tea garden is open and closed. Even in the time of COVID-19, we continued with the screening. Our aim is to eliminate TB in the region by 2025,” Susanta Kumar Ray, Officer on Special Duty (Public Health), North Bengal, said.

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