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CRISIS IN TEA-II

By ADITI ROY GHATAK

The current spate of massacres is ominous because they are attacks from within, as opposed to the terrorism-led attacks on industry, though both have taken the severest toll of the managers. The Naxalites had an agenda, the secessionists had an agenda — which was addressed by paying extortion money — the militants, fighting for tribal rights and for the sons of soil, had their own agenda: two years ago on June, 2001, they visited the Moran Polo Club, gunned down a dozen and left. The workers' only agenda seems to be their job and wage security and some are now insecure enough to want to kill.

Governments

On 2 July, 2001, Harpreet Singh Mand, general manager of Towkok, a Jayshree Tea property in the Sibsagar (Assam) was killed by his workers. The year before, Jayshree's officers at Dewan (Cachar), SK Rao and PN Singh, were killed by extremists on 28 September, 2000. Darbari Seth's famous confessional statement about industry having neglected the region that had played host to it for a couple of centuries came a little too late and remedial action was of even less consequence as successive governments were singularly incapable (even reluctant) of dealing with the anarchy even though security is the key to north-eastern prosperity. Governments will behave like they are wont to but even a so-called professional industry like tea could not come up with a management plan — for which it did not need to depend on the state: for advice, intervention or finances. The current plea for compensation funds is quite in line with industry's past mendicancy. Such government-driven ideas were bound to be futile because the state governments themselves had failed miserably in managing their own finances and even with their own tea gardens, the various state tea corporations presenting stories of abject failure.

Meanwhile, there are the executive deaths to deal with. By and large, workers do not go around killing managers when managements are perceived to be fair. Even in the recent past industry has admitted that the workforce has played a stellar role in the industry's phenomenal growth; most significantly by not getting embroiled in the extremist movement that terrorized the northeast. Tea has been productive and clear evidence is to be had from the more than 250 per cent post-independence production increased while area under tea has increased by 40 per cent only.

The owners now complain that the workers account for 55 per cent of the cost of production that industry cannot afford and point out that government keen to protect their constituencies have forced emoluments to increase every year.

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Workers

Labour wages have gone up by Rs 17 per man-day since 1998 without any productivity norm being enforced. Other costs travelling northwards since 1998 are electricity by 167 per cent, petroleum products and other chemicals and fertilisers by 56 per cent, which along with the labour wage increase have pushed up garden costs by Rs 26.65 a kilo or 66.62 per cent. Industry says that the average man-day in a conventional tea garden produces only 1.2 kilograms of tea, among the lowest in the world that puts India at a competitive disadvantage against other tea producing nations. Here lies the rub between many a mazdur and many a malik, The trouble is with those who have no credibility with the workers and have failed to get them to share the burden of stress. Others have found the unions to be pragmatic.

With three troubled years in a row industry has tightened its purse strings and even errant managements want to manage. In Assam, the never implemented productivity clause is being put into place by some managements — pro rata reduction in wages for those who fail the productivity norms — and the worker, unused to such imposition, is annoyed.

Absenteeism is being dealt with an iron fist. Workers like this even less. Temporary workers are being asked to sit out and they are incensed over this. Worse, wages have been delayed and not paid in many a case and even rations have been a source of problem and, across the board, bonus negotiations have been acrimonious. If Sapoi was the culmination of that bitterness, two-and-a-half-year-old Joy Dowerah is fatherless at the Modarkhat estate because the management decided to be firm. The workers believed that the management had much to answer for — which may be the case — but nothing warranted the brutality of the retaliation. Back to economics: garden finances started plunging since September 1997 (South India) and February 2000 (North India), the combined average realisations fell from 1998 and the all India auction averages came down from Rs 76.43 to Rs 55.95 between 1998 and 2002 with export price realization down by Rs 25 per kilogram. Meanwhile, the number of estates went up: from 88,010 tea gardens producing 870 million kilograms in 1998, there were 1,15,250 tea gardens claiming to have produced 826 million kilograms in 2002! This drop of yield per hectare, from 1,995 kilograms to 1,587 kilograms is most unlikely and is a pointer to the produce of the small tea growers (most not registered with the Tea Board), which does not figure in the official numbers.

Applying the 1,995 kg per hectare norm to the 5,10,492 hectares under production one gets a crop of 1,018 million kilograms. The official figures do not reflect the output from the bought leaf factories or the tea waste being recycled with good teas to help flood the market with cheap teas. The government loses revenue and the industry any authentic basis for its calculations, even as some 150 million kilograms missing from the official figures wreck havoc.

INTUC

The only solution is for someone to pick up at least a hundred million kilogram and dump it in the sea or give it away as aid. Industry wants government to pick up the tab. The government lectures industry to prepare business plans as there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

There are between 750 and 800 properties in Assam and a couple of hundred in West Bengal, with some 550 lakh mazdoors and their dependents earning their bread from tea. The unions, mainly controlled by the INTUC, want more. Industry wants to give less and expects the government either to compensate for the mandatory welfare measures and which are being rolled back. The committee, under the Planning Commission set up to evaluate the rationing system a year ago, is still trying to figure things out and events are headed towards a darker future. In West Bengal, the state's withdrawal of controlled price kerosene threatens to affect 200,000 workers. Fuel wood is no longer there for the

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asking and electricity is a scarce commodity. The only smiles are to be seen at the bought leaf factories — some 50 to 100 with their own raj — and on the faces of some three lakh small growers. In this sea of confusion angle the agents of death — loud whispers suggest the name of an MLA, a former minister in the AGP government, who believes that it is sound strategy to incite workers to kill managers and woo them away from the INTUC's fold. Only there is no one condemning his "dastardly impertinence".
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