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CRISIS IN TEA-I

By ADITI ROY GHATAK

Sitting in distant London — far from the troubled waters of Boston’s Griffin’s Wharf where, on the night of December 16, 1773, angry American patriots, disguised as Mohawk Indians, men destroyed 342 chests of tea — the English sahibs condemned this “dastardly impertinence” and responded with artillery power. This (the cuppa had just triggered off the American war of independence) retaliation was in a language considered appropriate 230 years ago. That the sahib’s response to what has since then been called the Boston Tea Party led to battle, peace and the stability that the American republic represents is not the concern of the hour in India though. The concern is over the manner in which the current burrah sahib of Indian chai, the proud bearers the British legacy and lifestyles, is responding to the ongoing war against his managers; in a language that perhaps befits men who leave their spinal chords at home, when they leave for work: with a deafening silence.

Murders

This is the language of men who live on hope that the nightmarish massacres will go away and that some miracle will get the tea industry back on its feet. The crisis in Indian tea, hidden between the line of attractive balance sheets helped by the Soviet barter prices, is essentially economic: inability to sell what is produced. Turning to Pakistan for purchases or proposing tea bonds may be drops in the ocean on the one hand and pure stupidity on the other. Would anyone want to sink money in a sinking industry?

Listening to lectures by the bureaucrats on managing in tough times is another demonstration of naivete and worse. Meanwhile, scarcely a whimper of protest escapes from the lips of the owners whose executives, left to fend for themselves in the remote estates — where the assailants cock a snook at even the visible presence of the law — pay for the sin of accepting employment from their masters.

Not even a hundred deaths in the least — men, women and children, who have in no manner contributed to the crisis — to bullets, bombs, machetes and axes, to terrorists over the last decade and to angry garden workers in recent times, have prompted an earnest response. Not even the security of their teak paneled rooms in the capitals of Assam or West Bengal, emboldens them to protest, even as it becomes fashionable for sections of incensed workers — prompted by identified and yet unnamed politicians — to go around, threatening to do a “Sapoi” on the managers, as owners relinquish their rights to manage.

This in a professional industry with a Rs 10,000-crore turnover, net dollar earnings of around Rs 1,900 crores, directly employing more than 1.1

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million in some of the country's remotest regions, with 50 per cent of its employees women; indirectly employing around 10 million. From islands of peace, even during the height of extremist sway over the north-east, the tea gardens have been dragged into the regime of unrest that has troubled the waters for political forces to angle in. There is not even a token exhortation from the employers to the assailants to leave the employees alone.

Global markets

Whatever be the reason for discord around tea, it has two critical aspects at the present point of time: the cause and the victim. The cause lies in the combined adversity of falling global markets and sharply increased domestic supplies that has exposed the chinks (read siphoning of funds, lax labour management and unbridled increase in cost of operations) in the hitherto shining armour of the tea managements. The victims are the young executives who are paying with their lives: young and affable Mukul Dowerah, fell to the machetes of seven workers who were sacked for absenteeism last week. A fortnight ago Antony Unger and Susmit Singh were cudged and then burnt to death at the Kanoi owned Sapoi estate. Even as one writes there are reports that an executive in the Cachar's Pramodnagar area, in the Karimgunj district has been abducted. Newspapers may not even find this worth a mention with gorier events to report. The only whimper comes from some executive at the industry association; not daring to condemn the murders but asking the bankrupt governments to share the compensation cost. For the many executives in tea, the latest perk is called death.

This is a far cry from the days when terrorists laid siege on the industry, with the workers supporting the owners; the ghoulish times when Surrendra Paul was shot dead by extortionists on April 9, 1990 during a garden visit, barely a month after PC Sarin of Tata Tea was shot dead. Not even these deaths caused the alarm bells to ring with any measure earnestness. Later while celebrating Diwali at the Borsola Club on October 1990, Jawaharlal Jain, manager of Dherai tea estate was killed while around a dozen others got away with injuries. When the managers were not available, their wives were found suitable substitutes: Tejinder Kaur, wife of Sukhpal Singh, Manager Nagrijuli tea estate was killed in March 1997. A year later, the daughter-in-law of R K. Ojha, assistant manager of the Lediacherra Division of the Dewan Group was kidnapped in December 1998. The list goes on.

Some the faint-hearted owners quit the business; usually yielding place to a class of owners whose primary managerial skills lay in manipulating the system and managing the thugs. Truth to tell, some 60 per cent of the tea estate ownership has passed on to such maliks as India's flagship industry continued to lose its glitter with its organised sector facing an average loss of Rs 20 per kilogram of tea produced.

Meanwhile, some 67 ultra groups flourish in the region, there is a mushrooming of growths from Upper Assam to the Burmah borders, supported by the licensed or unlicensed bought leaf factories have played havoc with domestic supplies that are never reflected in the official figures.

Easy money

Domestic tea consumption continues to be among the lowest, with per capita consumption at 67.5 grams and stagnant in the face of the advertising blitzkrieg by the fizzy drink purveyors. The sahib's long reign of irresponsible prosperity — supported by long years of Russian buying — started coming to an end in the late nineties and he had neither the moral, managerial nor even the financial wherewithal to deal with the troubled circumstances, having frittered away the easy money.

Fond expectations that the Soviet debt repayment would continue into 2005 in which tea would play an important role were belied and between 1991 and 1999, tea exports to Russia declined by 17 per cent on a year on year basis.

Even so, the professionals continue to manage with no unrest in their

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gardens. In private conversations they have no hesitation in admitting that their labour unions in West Bengal have signed bipartite productivity-linked agreements with them with the tacit understanding that the management would not go about crowing about them. In exchange, the managements have promised to maintain the welfare and ration measures that have been the hallmark of the tea industry's wage policy. The other groups and small garden owners who have frittered away their profits or siphoned them off are crippled today, without the means to sustain the welfare measures on the one hand and forced to tighten the working conditions on the other. Even an established company such as Duncans has slipped on rations and wages!

(To be concluded)

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