

The Jalpaiguri story: Innovative application for livelihood security

Jalpaiguri, in the state of West Bengal nestled between the hills of Bhutan, the marshy grasslands of Assam and the plains of Bangladesh, largely comprises of tea gardens and forest villages. The geographic location and climate led to tea estates being planted here about 150 years ago, and they have been the mainstay of the economy of the region. It is the second highest tea producing district in the country. The tea estates define not just the economy but also the ethnic composition, employment and livelihood patterns, culture and development perspective of the district. The labourers are tribals brought from present day Chattisgarh and Jharkhand area and settled here by the Britishers. Their ethnic and cultural identity and social systems are maintained till date.

The tea Industry went through several fundamental changes and a severe crisis that peaked during the first decade of this century. This manifested itself in a large number of sick, locked out and closed tea gardens. After a period of great hardship, a number of gardens did become operational, though issues of productivity remained. However, despite all efforts, twelve gardens remained closed and two were abandoned at the beginning of 2008. The geography and economy of the region being totally dependent on tea, this resulted in absolute unemployability for the workers of these gardens. The wage system of the tea gardens compounded the problem as the wages include not just the cash payments but also rations, fuel for cooking, medical benefits, housing, post retirement security and other sundry benefits. This in effect means that once a garden closes, the workers not just lose their livelihood, they are also deprived of food, housing and medical aid. The unavailability of alternate employment in the region, the unique social system of tea garden labour brought in from outside and living a life of total dependency, unaware of the outside world further compounded the problem. This in turn led to migration, trafficking, destitution and even starvation deaths. A number of benefit measures were started by the Central and state governments, but they could only tackle the absolute destitution and not make the fundamental correction of opening the gardens. While the gardens were closed or abandoned, the lease granted by the government to the managements either expired or were cancelled, the possession of the gardens taken over by the collector and in most cases a local committee of workers and government officials was formed to run the day to day affairs. There were no developments, maintenance or even garden sustenance works during the period, making the gardens further unviable and creating a vicious circle. The closed gardens affected 13,236 worker families and over 3,000 non worker families, totalling over 81,000 people.

In March 2009, the Government of West Bengal gave a 'letter of Intent' to a tea management group, desirous of taking over a closed garden. The government proposed to give conditional possession of the garden to the new management. If and when the new management succeeded in meeting all pending dues and made the garden viable, the lease would be transferred to the management. A series of meetings were organised by the district administration with all stakeholders, including labourers, labour unions, various government departments, the new management and the tea owners associations. During these meetings, it was realised that despite all the benefits available under various schemes, the biggest hindrance towards reopening the gardens would be the high labour numbers and the devastated condition of the gardens. On an average, the gardens needed at least 4- 5 years of continuous financial and planning inputs to become viable and they could not sustain the high labour numbers during this period of low returns and high investment. However, retrenchment of labour was unacceptable as the problems of migration, trafficking and destitution would continue, only difference being in the numbers affected. The social and emotional trauma of division in the egalitarian tribal society that would follow partial retrenchment was also a cause of concern. Meanwhile four other 'letter of intent's were issued by the government, but no garden could be opened due to above mentioned stalemate.

During this stalemate, a scheme was devised by the district administration for utilising the MGNREGS for reopening the gardens. The broad outlines of the scheme include:

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1. Closed gardens, would be covered under MGNREGS and a hundred days of work would be given to all workers, concentrating on the lean season.
2. The new management would keep all the workers on their rolls and there would be zero retrenchment. They would give 180 – 240 days of regular work to the workers. The workers would be given all other benefits for all working days, including MGNREGS workdays.
3. The works taken up under the scheme would be works permissible under the act, of community benefit and not directly accruable to the management. This would include land development, drainage, irrigation channel, connectivity. Absolutely no plantations and plucking would be allowed.
4. A dedicated team, institutional arrangements for smooth and timely implementation, regular fund flow and monitoring were put in place.
5. All the works would be implemented by the Panchayat Samitis as per the existing rules and guidelines.
6. Planning for the works would be done by the Panchayat Samiti with the active involvement of the workers, community members and the new management.
7. This assistance would continue for a limited period, ideally till the garden becomes viable and can reabsorb the full labour strength. (the period varies from 3 years to 7 years, depending on the condition of the garden)

The scheme was finalised after detailed deliberations with all stakeholders and committed by all concerned through 'minutes of meetings', signed by the Collector and DPC. This scheme resolved basic hindrances and further welcomed as there was no retrenchment, social equity was maintained, workers got permanent and lifelong employment and social security thereafter. In addition gardens can function to optimum capacity, government becomes a partner in the revival of the garden, the management can concentrate their resources on upgradation of the gardens and make them productive.

With this package in operation, seven gardens were opened between July 2009 and March 2010. Another three gardens were opened by October 2010. All ten gardens are already on the path of revival with new plantations and factories in process. Two hundred and thirty five development works have been completed and others are continuing under MGNREGS. A total of 3.90 lakh persondays were created with an expenditure of Rs 314.75 lakhs in the reopened gardens during 2009 -2010. The number of days that employment has been provided to households under MGNREGS in the reopened gardens ranges from 28 days to 99 days depending on the opening date and capacity of the garden and each garden has provided regular employment to all the households during the days not covered under MGNREGS.

The results seen so far include the following:-

- Reopening of tea gardens which remained closed for last 5-11 years despite special packages tried from time to time.
- End of destitution, starvation deaths and acute suffering.
- Regular employment to the workers of the reopened gardens. The employment exceeds temporary livelihood as it covers full benefits of regular jobs, including pension benefits.
- Reduced migration and trafficking.
- Increase in the wages of seasonal and temporary workers, in the regular tea gardens.

The initiative has thus used MGNREGS not just as a temporary job creation scheme but as a means of securing a permanent livelihood for the people, in their own habitat and social system. In the process, the most glaring problem of the district has been resolved and a regeneration of the old economy initiated as the reopened gardens are using organic cultivation methods, bringing in new technology and machinery and upgrading the gardens. This success also provided an impetus and

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public faith to the MGNREGS works outside the gardens leading to an expenditure of Rs. 210 crores in the district during 2009-10.

District Magistrate and DPC
Jalpaiguri, West Bengal