

EXAMINING DEBPARA TEA ESTATE WAGE CRISIS, 2025 IN JALPAIGURI, WEST BENGAL WITH REFERENCE TO SDG 16 IN ADVANCING PEACE AND JUSTICE

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This study examines the Debpara Tea Estate incident of 2025 in the Banarhat region of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, when over a thousand plantation laborers protested due to delayed wage payments, delays in bonus payments, and the owners' failure to uphold welfare promises. By applying a political-legal lens informed by the legal frameworks under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, and Human Rights Law, this paper presents the work and testimonies of some of the workers, showing how the law intersects with economic exploitation, legal non-compliance, and social vulnerability in the context of India's tea plantations. The study highlights the 2025 wage and bonus crisis at Debpara Tea Estate, emphasizing systemic labor exploitation and the critical role of SDG 16 in promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Introduction

Over a million workers a sizeable number of them tribals and dalits form part of one of the oldest organized labour forces in tea, and much like the agrarian workforce in the rest of India, they have borne the brunt of the lockdown. This is occurring in a scenario where the perfect legal framework such as Plantation Labour Act 1951, Minimum Wages Act 1948 and Human Rights Articles (14, 21 and 23) under constitution of India is stepping down as a law but violating labour rights. One clear illustration of this divide between law and life is the incident at Debpara Tea Estate in 2025¹. This study explores the socio-legal context of this event, the entangled pretensions to rights of workers on plantations, and the maladies of the plantation economics.

Background of the Study:

The wage and bonus crisis of 2025 left the workers of Debpara Tea Estate in Jalpaiguri, West Bengal facing

months of unpaid bills due to prolonged delays in their payments. The state labour department recently recommended a Durga Puja festive bonus amounting to 20% of annual wages, highlighting the deep structural vulnerabilities that have plagued the tea sector of the Dooars for generations. Employees approached the police with complaints about alleged hiring practices, while protests were staged outside the estate, prompting what appeared to be a softening of the management's stance, according to union accounts and media reports, as worker tensions escalated. Introducing policy and regulatory measures into this deplorable situation is essential to restore clarity, accountability, and evidence-based understanding of how falling wages impact tea garden families and their broader socio-economic conditions. The Debpara tea estate, with a workforce of about 1,900, is situated in the Banarhat block of Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal². The protests escalated in the first week of November when over 1,000 workers marched to the Banarhat police station to lodge complaints against the management of the estate. Complaints of workers: Nonpayment of wages for 3 months, nonpayment of Puja bonuses, non-deposit of PF deductions, non-payment of

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gratuity to retiring workers, poor maintenance of welfare facilities such as health care, etc.³.

Result and Discussion

The study and analysis are conducted in an inclusive manner using doctrinal methods and are based on secondary data. The wage and bonus crisis in the gardens of the Dooars tea belt have exposed deep rooted structural and managerial failures. Over the week media reports quoting union leaders, and workers statements have seen an unsettling common trend. Labourers alleged that they had not received salary for three months, they were not paid the Durga Puja bonus as state-level committee recommended 20% in favour of the workers, and there were shortages in statutory benefits like provident fund deposit and gratuity⁴. A mass demonstration of staff (1000 of the 1900 working on that estate) staged on their estate at the beginning of November 2025, was not only a demonstration of the force of the workers grievances, but also of the unity of workers abused and bad management by their owners. Accounts of the crisis, including reports from various information outlets, describe the situation as marked by helplessness and indignity. Assessments from contracted agencies indicate that the problem has both micro- and macro-level dimensions. The unstable conditions within the estates, struggling to meet global market pressures, have led to improvements in some areas but severe deterioration in others. As a result, the structural foundations of labor security that once provided workers with a degree of protection have significantly weakened.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The wage crisis at Debpara Tea Estate underscores the relevance of SDG 16 in promoting peace, justice, and strong institutions to protect workers' rights and address

systemic inequalities. In spite of the statutory framework supported by the extensive protections offered under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, and Articles 14, 21, and 23 of the Constitution which is intended to safeguard tea workers, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the structural and systemic flaws of India's plantation economy remain largely unaddressed. This is especially evident against the backdrop of the recurring hardships and entrenched pathologies associated with statutory obligations toward tea workers, which manifest as blatant injustice and bureaucratic inertia embedded in their everyday lives⁵. We can conclude that the violations at Debpara are not at all an exception, but are indicative of compliance failure, of weak enforcement and of the economic distress of the plantation sector in areas of the Dooars. □

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