

Chapter IV

Hunger and Politics at the Tea Gardens of North Bengal

In the previous chapter we have tried to explore the relationship between hunger and politics at Amlasol. In this chapter, an intensive and analytical study will be undertaken on the tea gardens in the Dooars region of North Bengal, which hit the headlines of regional and national dailies for the news of alleged ‘starvation deaths’ since the early 2000s. This will be discussed in the context of Right to Food and other entitlement rights in the tea gardens (during our time of study) as well as in terms of political fallouts within and outside the tea gardens. Before going deep into our study, let us discuss briefly about the background of the region.

4.1. A Brief History of Tea cultivation in India and the Location of the Dooars Region

The term ‘Dooars’ is derived from the word ‘Doors’ in English and *dwar* in Sanskrit/Bengali. Literally, the region has 18 passages or ‘doors’ to the hills of Bhutan.¹ The region is located in the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal at the foot of east-central Himalayas. The region stretches picturesquely from the river Sankosh from the east to river Teesta in the west covered an area of 130 km by 40km in West Bengal, located in the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar.² The western Dooars falls under the state of West Bengal and is a portion of the Terai, a lowland belt connecting the plains regions with the Himalayas. A large part of the Dooars is in the district of Jalpaiguri. Crisscrossed by the river Teesta, the region is fused with dense forests and green tea gardens.

The economy of the Dooars region depends on three 'T's that is Tea, Tourism, and Timber. The tea gardens of Dooars started their production from the second half of the 19th century. Most of the labours working in the tea gardens are tribal whose forefathers hailed from Bilaspur, Chotonagpur, Junglemahal, Santhal Pargana, and Nepal. The tribal found here are the Oraon, Mahali, Kharia, Munda, Chik barik, Santal. Nonetheless, it was during the partition of Bengal and independence war of Bangladesh in 1971, the region had witnessed the pouring of Bengali people in the region. It was the British who imported the tribal people for working in the newly formed tea gardens as labours since the local Rajbanshis were not willing to work in tea gardens as 'coolies'. The mainstay of the locals had been agriculture. Therefore, it became necessary to import labour from the outside.

The cultivation of tea in India began in the 1820s when the British East India Company initiated large scale production of tea in Assam.³ The tea industry rapidly expanded in the region by the beginning of the 1850s and by the turn of the century Assam became the leading tea-producing region in the world.⁴ In the decade of 1840, the tea industry of Bengal was established in Darjeeling by the British planters. In the time between 1864 and 1865, the Anglo-Bhutan war took place and as a result, the Dooars was snatched by the British from Bhutan. In 1869 the district of Jalpaiguri came into being. By 1874 tea garden near Gajoldoba was established by Richard Haughton. The tea industry started in the district in 1874-1875 and the first lease issued to 22 gardens in 1877.⁵

4.2. The Closure of the Tea Gardens: Some Probable Reasons

After 1990, the advent of globalisation and New Economic Policy (NEP) adopted by the Government of India, the Indian tea was made to compete with the global market. The arrival of the free trade agreement paved the way for free flow of goods across the international borders. In this period, as one author has claimed, the tea planters of Dooars and some other areas resorted to blending the Indian tea with low quality of tea imported from the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka for export in the world market.⁶ This practice led to a decrease in demand of 'original' Indian tea. To cope with this problem – to survive in the new competitive market, the tea planters of Dooars, adopted a cost minimising strategy by notably reducing the labour cost. This resulted in irregular or non-payment of wages, no bonus for the workers, irregular supply of rations, prolonged dues in gratuity, non-deposition of wage cuts in the provident fund, and so on. Moreover, the costs of fuel, medical facilities, education, fringe benefits and other welfare initiatives for the workers, which according to rules and practices, had been the responsibilities of garden-owners, were also compromised. In an article, Roy and Biswas have identified four factors behind the poor condition of the tea gardens so the closure/abandonment of the same.⁷ A) Cost production, B) Trade barrier, C) Poor quality, D) Traditional machinery and methods.

A) **Cost Production:** The price of Indian tea in the world market had fallen so much so that it seemed unbearable for the tea producers compared to the production cost. Cost of production is determined by the followings.

Direct cost: Labour cost, input cost, and transportation cost fall under the direct cost of production. Being a labour-intensive industry, the labour cost accounts for more than half of the total cost.⁸ Statistically speaking, in the total production cost

the labour cost accounts for more than 60 % where in Sri Lanka and Kenya it accounts for 54% and 43% respectively.⁹ The cost energy accounts for 30% of the total cost because a huge quantum of energy was used in the factories of the tea gardens.

Social cost: Providing social security to the workers and their families was the responsibility of the tea owners in India owing to the presence of Plantation Labour Act, 1951 (PLA). While the competing tea producing countries did not have any act. So, Indian tea owners used to bear the more social cost of tea production than its international competitors.

Non-statutory benefits for the workers: Besides carrying the responsibility of social security of the workers, the owners were also used to provide non-statutory benefits to them which demanded by the Trade Unions (TUs) and determined in the trilateral meetings. Non-statutory benefits include subsidised food grains, firewood, tarpaulin, blankets etc.

B) Trade Barrier: Owing to the rules of the free market determined by World Trade Organisation (WTO), India had removed restrictions on imports. As an outcome, the import of tea from Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Kenya increased significantly.¹⁰ On one hand, these imported teas sold in the Indian market at very low prices compared to Indian tea, and on the other, exports of Indian tea had fallen alarmingly.

C) Poor Quality: The demand for Indian tea in the international market decreased because of its poor quality. We have already mentioned above that blending the Indian tea with the imported tea of poor quality and then exporting that corrupted Indian tea to the world market lead to a bad impression of the same on the foreign customers.

D) **Traditional Machinery and Methods:** The tea companies in Dooars were running the production with age-old machinery which harmed the industry in two ways. First, the old machines were very costly to maintain; and second, the quality varied from the tea produced in modern machines. The methods of production were also dated. In most of the plantations, there was no provision of training for the workers and other employees.¹¹

Thus, the financial conditions of the tea gardens of Doors were worst affected. The decrease in demand of the Indian tea forced the owners to go without profit. The garden management failed to leave their responsibility to the workers because of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 which compelled them to provide housing facility, drinking water facility, providing subsidised food, arranging transport for the school/college going boys and girls, medical facilities, crèches, firewood, slipper, blanket and so on. When these facilities were gradually withdrawn, the workers who solely depended on the tea gardens started to participate in agitations. Daily conflicts with management deteriorated working industrial relations between the two parties. Gradually, all these factors led to the abandonment and/or closing down of tea gardens by the management. Now, let us take a glimpse of the main problems faced by the workers after the closure/abandonment of the gardens in Dooars. These are:

- Suspension of the ration supply.
- Suspension of daily wage that led to wage cuts.
- No/Poor medical facilities in the garden's hospitals.
- No drinking water supplies.
- Suspension of electricity

- No supply of firewood for cooking from the garden. As a result, women had to work more.
- Disturbances regarding bonus.
- Suspension of pension and fringe benefits.
- Suspension of house repair programmes.
- Suspension of the employment of the outside (*'bigha'*) workers forced the households to suffer more.

The *Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal, 2004* found that twenty-two plantations were closed/abandoned or sick since 2002. Kohinoor tea garden was the first to be closed in February 2002. Soon, 22 gardens had been closed for 1-2 years. Although the District Magistrate (DM) of Jalpaiguri district claimed that four plantations were to reopen or on the verge of reopening, the team of assistants of the Supreme Court's food commissioners found that on 30th December 2003, one tea garden had been deserted by the owner which clearly indicated that the crisis was far from being over.¹² The total number of permanent workers in these 22 gardens was 20487 and the total affected population was 94347 people. Apart from it, the temporary "*bigha*" workers also lost their jobs in the gardens.

Table 4.1: Closed plantations in North Bengal

Name of tea plantation	Location
Rahimabad Tea Plantation	Hathipota PS, Jalpaiguri District
Ramjhora Tea Plantation	Birpara PS, Jalpaiguri District
Dheklapara Tea Plantation	Birpara PS, Jalpaiguri District
Katalguri Tea Plantation	Banarhat PS, Jalpaiguri District
Pathorjhora Tea Plantation	Maljhora PS, Jalpaiguri District
Dima Tea Plantation	Kalchini PS, Jalpaiguri District
Kalchini Tea Plantation	Kalchini PS, Jalpaiguri District

Raimatong Tea Plantation	Kalchini PS, Jalpaiguri District
Srinathpur Tea Plantation	Alipur PS, Jalpaiguri District
Chamurchi Tea Plantation	Banarhat PS, Jalpaiguri District
Carron Tea Plantation	Nagarkata PS, Jalpaiguri District
Mujnai Tea Plantation	Madarihat PS, Jalpaiguri District
Sepoydhoorah Tea Plantation	Darjeeling District
Simulbarie Tea Plantation	Darjeeling District
Sayedabad Tea Plantation	Darjeeling District
Samsing Tea Plantation	Makeli PS, Jalpaiguri District
Kohinoor Tea Plantation	Hathikota PS, Jalpaiguri District
Dhawaljhora Tea Plantation	Madarihat block, Jalpaiguri District
Jogesh Chandra Tea Plantation	Kranti Block, Jalpaiguri District
Chongkong Tea Plantation	Darjeeling District
Rungnet Tea Plantation	Darjeeling District

Source: *Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal*

Given below is a table that states the arrears and liabilities for the plantations. However, the team of the Right to Food network opined that the real picture could be even bigger as the TUs were not always able to provide exact figures for smaller dues like maternity benefit, overtime etc.

Table 4.2: Liabilities Towards Workers

Name of the garden	Provident Fund	Gratuity	Salary/Wages & Others	Total
Looksan TE	7,704,792.00	1,198,614.70	19,889,644.96	28,273,051.75
Carron TE	6,998,633.00	834,240.15	9,184,551.46	17,017,424.61
Redbank TE	9,524,000.00	5,757,300.00	20,048,700.00	35,330,000.00
Surendranagar TE	3,250,400.00	2,359,700.00	6,977,700.00	12,587,800.00

Dharanipur TE	3,321,500.00	1,687,600.00	6,680,200.00	11,689,300.00
Raipur TE	4,500,000.00	3,300,000.00	7,610,000.00	15,410,000.00
Chinchula TE	10,595,111.00	2,219,629.00	10,388,981.92	23,203,721.92
Ramjhora TE	6,827,667.00	1,385,147.00	3,817,934.00	12,030,748.00
Bamandanga Tondoo TE	12,516,636.00	1,524,439.10	1,000,000.00	15,041,075.10
Chamurchi TE	9,214,317.00	4,234,260.06	24,729,215.30	38,177,792.36
Samsing TE	18,600,627.00	10,000,000.00	Not known	28,600,627.00
Raimatang TE	16,899,938.00	2,809,628.00	19,033,586.00	38,743,152.00
Dheklpara TE	8,100,000.00	1,100,000.00	1,455,000.00	10,655,000.00
Kalchini TE	15,616,564.00	2,685,093.25	31,249,112.21	49,550,769.46
Kohinoor TE	4,983,238.00	3,079,281.68	5,883,496.18	13,946,015.86
Mujnai TE	5,349,408.00	1,501,829.88	6,775,937.59	13,627,175.47
Srinathpur TE	800,000.00	500,000.00	320,000.00	1,620,000.00
Rahimabad TE	40,000.00	30,000.00	150,000.00	220,000.00
Total	144,842,831.00	46,206,762.91	175,194,059.62	366,243,653.5
Dues per worker	8,439.74	2,692.39	10,208.25	21,340.30
No of Months of wages	6.56	2.09	7.93	16.58

Source: *Study on Closed and Re-opened Tea Gardens in North Bengal*

The above Table tells us that the total amount of liability towards the workers was of Rs. 366 million. These 18 gardens had been employed Rs. 17,612/- permanent workers, therefore, Rs. 21,340 for each worker. If we proceed by taking the

minimum wage of Rs. 45.90/- (the minimum wage rate during the time of closure) then this amounts to about seventeen months or more than a year and a half of wages. We should also note that of the money of Provident Fund (PF) was deducted by the employers from the daily wages of the workers as PF but the management had not deposited that money with the PF commissioner. Rs. 8,439.74 of PF was due to each worker which amounts to almost seven months of the wage of a worker. In a similar manner, salary/wages and other dues were amounted to Rs. 10,208 or eight months of wages were due to the workers. It was the responsibility of the government and the TUs to take necessary action against the defaulters. While the TUs had to draw the attention of the government to the PF defaulters and the PF commissioner was equipped with strong powers by the Employees' Provident Fund and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1952 for the recovery of the due amounts. Therefore, under Section 8B of this Act, the authorised officer can¹³

- a) Attach and sale of the moveable and immovable property of the establishment or, as the case may be, the employer;
- b) Arrest of the employer and his detention in prison;

Chinchula tea garden was the only positive example of action for recovery where a case had been filed by the PF commissioner. In this regard, the High Court gave an order for the owner to deposit the due amount of PF in twenty monthly instalments.

4.3. Trade Unions

In the distant past, the TUs played vital roles in improving the conditions of the workers. However, since the 1980s, most of the union leaders were allegedly losing credibility among the worker-members. There were various causes behind this.

First, The TUs emphasised more on increasing wages than on social benefits like building/reconstructing of shelters, medical facilities, insurances etc. They neither involved themselves to raise the level of social awareness of the workers nor forced the management to implement the various provision of PLA.

Secondly, the unions had not taken up the matter to timely remittance of the PF dues contributed by the workers.

Thirdly, traditionally the Adivasi (tribal) workers were not prone to saving; the TUs could have tried to conscious them about the benefits of thrift, moderate drinking habit and family planning. However, in the opinion of a section of TU leaders, tribes do not like that someone intervening in their personal lives. Therefore, the leaders thought if they had persuaded them more on these matters, they would have become unpopular among the tribal workers.

Fourthly, traditional TU leaders mostly came from the Bengali middle-class background. It was told by many to the present researcher (during the field study) that if more people from the workers' community could be in the leadership, the crisis of confidence might have been avoided.

Fifthly, the crisis became more complicated due to the multiplicity of TUs. The management took the advantage of dealing with multiple negotiators to get away from their duties. Sometimes the management had indulged in forming a new union in order to play it against the principal TU engaged in hard negotiation with them. It was found in some instances that the union leader played in the hands of the management.¹⁴ This did not go unnoticed from the workers and the younger generation of workers had started to analyse the situation and there were indications to overthrow the existing TUs and took over the responsibility to look after their interests themselves.

Sixthly, there was a very little or no participation of workers' in the decision-making process either in management or in the TUs. The management preferred to confine the workers' role in the area of increasing productivity. Thus, in the atmosphere of increasing conflicts between workers and management, the support base of TUs also eroded.

Moreover, in the post-independence period, the tea plantation sector had seen an increase in paperwork owing to various legislations and regulations, which had bound the office staff to spend more time in the office than in the field which culminated in further alienation of the management from the workers.

In such a situation, there was an urge for the intervention from the government to define the aspects and the areas where the worker can participate and to recognise the new role of the workers. In September 2005, fifteen gardens out of twenty-two, closed gardens were reopened. The *Study on Closed and Re-opened Tea*

Gardens in North Bengal found that although the TUs played a strong role against retrenchment, the role of unions was defensive when negotiations took place and the issue of the workers' dues was not addressed.¹⁵ In some of the ways, the role of the TU leaders was very 'undemocratic': workers had little knowledge about the re-opening agreements. Another notable fact needs attention: despite the fact that women workers constituted 52% of the workforce of 10 reopened gardens, in both the union leadership and Operation Management Committees (OMCs), their presence was negligible.¹⁶ The workers also alleged that there was lack of transparency in accounts of the OMCs. Many workers were dissatisfied by the role of TUs during the closure. They also alleged that during the closure of the gardens the unions did very little to receive relief to the workers and played a very little role in seeing the Supreme Court's order to provide food for work to the workers.¹⁷

4.4. Wages and Dues

Wages in the two eastern states of West Bengal and Assam are lowest in the country compared to those of in South India. The Government of West Bengal had no minimum wage regulation for the tea industry since 1956-57, while in contrast even in Assam, the minimum wage for the labourers existed, which shows the reluctance/negligence of the Government of West Bengal about the economic conditions of the tea workers, who were mostly tribal in origin. However, subsidised ration was given to workers in Assam and West Bengal's tea estates. Compared to it, the tea workers in the South India (Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka) did not get subsidised ration but their cash wages were higher – Rs. 72/- in Tamil Nadu, Rs.78.04/- in Kerala and Rs. 71/- in Karnataka in 2003-04.

While workers in Dooars used to get Rs. 45.90/- only. In West Bengal, the tea workers got subsidised rations worth Rs.10/- per day. If we add up Rs. 10/- to their wages then the total amount would be Rs. 55.90/-, which is comparatively lower than the southern states of the country. Rations were denied on holidays or if the worker was on leave.

Table 4.3: Rates for Daily Wages for Tea Plantation Labour in West Bengal

Area	Wages rates in Rs.		w.e.f	As per agreement dated
	Adult	Non adult		
Assam Valley	48.50	29.70	1.09.2002 to 31.12.2003	16.03.2000
Cacher	46.25	23.21	01.06.2004 to 31.05.2005	18.07.2001
Dooars	45.90	28.62	01.04.2002 to 31.03.2003	03.02.2001
Terai	45.90	28.62	01.04.2002 to 31.03.2003	03.02.2001
Darjeeling	45.90	28.62	01.04.2002 to 31.03.2003	03.02.2001
North Dinajpur	45.90	28.62	01.04.2002 to 31.03.2003	03.02.2001

Source: Tea Board of India, 2003-2004¹⁸

Table 4.4: Rates for Daily wages for Tea Plantation Labour in South India

Area	Worker	Basic (Rs.)	D.A (Rs.)	Total (Rs.)	w.e.f
Kerala	Adults	34.72	43.32	78.04	01.04.2005
	Adolescent	26.04	43.32	69.36	
KARNATAKA	Adults	(The DA up to 2703 points have been merged with the basic wages)		71.00	01.04.2005
	Adolescent			63.90	
TAMILNADU	Rs. 72/- (Plus Attendance Bonus of Rs.2/-)				01.10.2004
a) Nilgiris	Rs. 73/- (Plus Attendance Bonus of Rs.1/-)				
b) Nilgiris-Waynad	Consolidated pay of Rs. 72/- per day and there is no time limit prescribed. The wage matter is pending before the Special Industrial Tribunal, Chennai.				01.01.2002
c)Anamallais					

Source: Tea Board of India, 2003-2004

During 2003-04, several tea gardens had stopped functioning and their workers had faced starvation. It was estimated that over 500 workers and their family members had 'died of starvation'.¹⁹ So they decided to go for a strike, which came to the employer as a shock because the strike broke out at a time when the industry had begun to stabilise. However, the strike was called off after 16 days by the unions. Before the new agreement, the daily wage of tea labour was Rs. 45.90/- but a study conducted by Right to Food network revealed that in the re-opened gardens, workers (at least in 6 gardens) were not receiving the negotiated

wage of Rs.45.90/-.²⁰ During the negotiations in 2005, when the workers again called for a strike, their demand was for a hike of Rs.42.50/- whereas the employer associations (mainly Indian Tea Association and Tea Planters' Association of India) only offered an increase of Rs.1/- and claimed that the industry was not in good condition to increase the wage of the workers. The employers also told that the labour cost was already too high and any hike in wages without an increase in productivity would cause further losses.

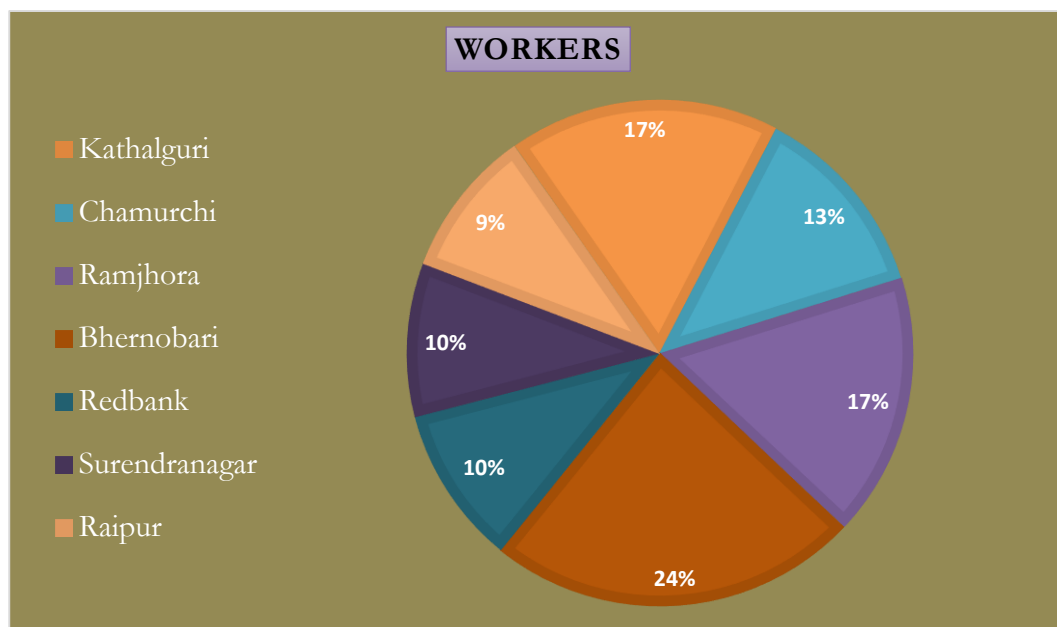
The employers' claim might have some factual truth but there were several other factors that led to the worsening situation of the gardens and for which the employers/management were no less responsible. These include: replenishing and caring of the age-old bushes in order to increase productivity and also expanding the area of tea cultivation. In Dooars and Terai over 50 percent bushes were more than 50 years old: in contrast, in Tamil Nadu bushes were less than 20 years of age, therefore the rate of productivity was much higher. Therefore, it would be wrong to put the responsibility of the worker alone. In Dooars, practically no step had not been taken (till date) for rejuvenating the tea bushes.

4.5. Hunger in the Tea Gardens: Some Common Characteristics

As already mentioned, the issue of hunger and alleged 'hunger deaths' in the tea gardens of Dooars hit the headlines of dailies since early years of 2000. Although each garden had its own stories and reasons behind such a surge in number of deaths, some common factors may also be found among these gardens, which might have facilitated the process of this tragedy. Below are some brief

discussions on these factors. After these, we will narrate the accounts of individual gardens based on field visits and official/research data.

Figure 4.1: Percentage of Workers Across the Studied Gardens



Source: Constructed by the present researcher with the help of data from field study, West Bengal Labour Commissionerate and *Census of India, 2011*

- Based on the archival and field studies, it appears that the *prime and foremost reason* behind hunger and ‘starvation deaths’ had been the **closure of the gardens**. All the reports on these incidents that came to light were from the gardens, which were closed. The management of the TEs not only paid wages to the plantation workers but as per the PLA, 1951, also used to provide the workers with water, housing, medical facilities, fuel, crèches, occupational safety measures and most importantly, *weekly rations*.²¹ Once the gardens closed down, not only the wages but all these were also stopped.
- In the absence of daily wages and weekly rations, the workers had a severe blow that was further intensified by the non-deposition of deducted money

from wages as well as the owners' share in the provident funds and gratuity. This had left the workers almost without any money.

- To survive in this extreme crisis, the workers took some desperate steps and attempts were also made on the part of the State to check the crisis.

4.5.1. Actions by the Desperate Workers

- Selling Machinery and Cutting the Shed trees:** To survive, the workers and their family members adopted various 'illegal' means like selling of the machinery and other stuff (door, windows) of the factories, including the shed trees (highly necessary for the plantation).²²
- Outward Migration:** The non-availability of works in local areas directed them to reach nearby 'foreign' State of Bhutan and also to do stone crushing work at nearby rivers banks. But soon with the increase in number of workers in these places reduced the minimum wage. To cope with this, the workers also started migrating to other Indian states. Nevertheless, to utilise this situation, human trafficking networks were active in the gardens through the pimps/agents. The pimps in different gardens trafficked women from various gardens by making promises of jobs at distant location. However, on many occasions, the women landed in prostitution. And in some cases, the women had no other option than to choose prostitution to earn bread for the family.

4.5.2. The State's Initiatives: OMC & FAWLOI

- The Formation of the OMCs:** To deal with the unemployment crisis the OMCs, an amalgamation of local politicians, trade union leaders and administrative officials, were formed. After the formation of the OMCs at different gardens and at different times, the workers had reinstated in their

leaf-plucking works. But that did not bring any substantial relief from the suffering, since the welfare benefits (like rations, firewood, medicine and other fringe benefits) which the garden owners used to provide as per PLA, 1951, were not restored.

- b) Moreover, there were no provisions for *bigha* (unregistered marginal worker) workers in a garden operated by OMC. The duty of the OMCs was restricted only to supervise the workers in the process of collecting the leaves and selling it during the crop season. The workers had no authority to pluck leaves in the absence or without the permission of the OMC.
- c) Ironically, the formation of the OMCs for reopening of the gardens created some problems for the workers. In some instances, the present researcher has found that before OMC, a section of workers of closed gardens were earning more money than their wages, however, after OMC, it became compulsory for them to enlist as garden workers again to retain their jobs and also the housing provided by the management, which could be forfeited if a worker did not come back to work under the OMC agreements.
- d) **Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked Out Industries (FAWLOI):** The crisis intensified in the non-plucking season. Another factor behind the poor financial conditions of the workers was the mistiming of FAWLOI. There was an irregularity in the payment of unemployment allowance coupled with huge discrepancies.²³ The study conducted by the advisors of the Supreme Court's commissioner found out that the unemployment allowances were given to the workers up to February 2005. And from March 2005 to September 2005, there was no deposition of

allowance in their surveyed gardens, which meant a backlog of Rs. 3500/- for seven months per person.

e) **The Supreme Court's Direction of Incorporating the Closed Gardens in**

the Right to Food (RTF) Network: As the food crisis reached its pinnacle in the closed gardens, in 2004 the Supreme Court spelt some orders regarding the incorporation of the closed tea gardens into the right to food machinery. Previously, only the garden owners had the responsibility of providing their workers with life-sustaining materials like weekly rations, water, medical facilities, and proper housing condition. The supply of these essentials stopped after the closures. In the absence of these, the Supreme Court of India took a step forward to safeguard the rights of its citizens. The court instructed the Government of West Bengal to take the following measures:

- I. First and foremost, the apex court directed the state government to declare that the plantation workers of the closed gardens in the region belonged to the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category.
- II. The tea labours would be provided with Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) food grains at Rs.2/- per kg of wheat and Rs. 3/- per kg of rice.
- III. For the medical care of garden workers, the state government would send a medical team comprises doctors, nurses, and a pharmacist with medicines at least twice a week to each garden.
- IV. To make it sure that in each garden the workers would get an unemployment allowance of Rs. 500/- per month and 15 days of work in a month will be provided under Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojana (SGRY).

f) The state Government's Initiatives to Extend Social Security Schemes to the Gardens: As its response to the crises, the West Bengal government also came up with some measures. It announced that the state Labour and Labour Relations Department would take steps to ensure the immediate regularisation of the new plantations (belonging to small growers mainly) including those that involve vested lands and putting the abandoned gardens to open bid from the promoters.²⁴ Moreover, to manage the demands of the working population, the state government also decided to extend the schemes like supplementary nutrition programme under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), cooked mid-day meal under the School Education Department, drinking water was arranged with the help of the Public Health Engineering (PHE) and rural water supply under the Zila Parishad.²⁵ However, allegedly, the performances of the above schemes were not up to the mark (For the erstwhile status of the schemes, vide Appendix; Figure 1 and Table 6 to 10).

4.6. Hunger in the Tea Gardens: Case Studies

With the above background and common factors in mind, let us now take a deep look into different tea gardens of Dooars, which had, and still have, their own problems and points of crises. The account below is based on both the field study conducted by the present researcher in 2019 and also on the government statistics and research-based articles.

4.6.1. Kathalguri Tea Garden

Kathalguri tea garden is under the Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri district. It was reported in February 2003 that within eight months more than 80 persons had died in the tea estate.²⁶ The death toll includes 28 children. The main causes behind the

deaths were supposed to be diarrhoea and other waterborne diseases. Due to abysmal level of groundwater, digging up a well was almost impossible: hence the families of the Kathalguri tea garden opted for small streams and open water tanks of other nearby gardens. The water in these streams was highly contaminated with synthetic pesticides along with very high concentration of bacteria. This was a common problem. Almost all the gardens in the region were facing a severe crisis of basic amenities of life owing to the violation of provisions of PLA 1951.

The hospital of the garden was closed with the abandonment of the garden on 22nd July 2002. It had increased the maladies of the workers because the road conditions were bad coupled with inadequate public transport and the nearby government health centre was at Gairkata, 21 km away from the garden.

Table 4.5: Garden Wise

2000-2010*								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
1442	Rs. 52/- (2002)	Bad	Doctors- 02 Nurses-02	Bad	Tube well- 16	4	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
866	Rs. 167/-	Good	Bad	Medium	Tube well- 12 Tap- 20	15	58	By the Government

Source: Field Study 2019 and West Bengal Labour Commissionerate

*For the period between 2000-2010, the average data has been presented here. The data presented here in subjective terms are not of the present researcher. During the interview the respondents failed to remember the data in quantitative terms, therefore, they told it qualitatively. The same goes for other gardens also.

After the abandonment of the garden, the bushes became unkempt. The shed trees, which are essential for the growth of tea bushes, had been cut down and statutory pruning had not done for years. The workers admitted that they had sold them out to the contractors against Rs. 500/- per tree and it can be perceived that almost all the shed trees had gone in this way.²⁷ Driven by starvation; the workers resorted to selling the machinery of the tea leaf processing factory of the garden. The doors, furniture, windowpanes of the manager's bungalow were also sold just to fetch some food. But these were indeed a one-time ministrations which was not enough in front of the chronic crisis. To run the kitchen regularly, they used to go to the riverside to pick up big pebbles and boulders and loaded it on the trucks. But that did not fetch them adequate money because the rush of workers increased, who were also facing the same crisis. However, they also supplemented this deficit by collecting leaves from the garden. A family, with the help of all the members, was able to collect approximately 40 kg of leaves per day. When the leaves would be reduced to 10-12 kg after drying that could be sold at Rs. 6/-10/- per kg. At the end of the day, family-wise, the workers between Rs. 100/-120/-. This was certainly bigger than their daily wage of Rs. 60/-per worker under normal times! Thus, the question arises that why after earning more money, the phenomenon of 'starvation deaths' occurred? The most probable reason would be the very fact that after the closure of the garden the workers were not getting the garden-provided essential facilities like rations, fuels, medical assistance and other fringe benefits anymore. These facilities and amenities were given to the workers and their families by the garden owners in addition to their daily wages. Thus, even after earning Rs. 40/- to 60/- more than their normal wage, the workers

failed to meet the expenses of the abovementioned essentials, which were earlier given free by the management.

After the closure of the garden some men were also going to Bhutan to work as daily wage labour but failed to continue it owing to Bhutan's cleansing operation against the Indian militants, launched in December 2003. The male workers feared being caught on the suspicion of being a member of the banned Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) rebel or a link man. After the closure of four years, the OMC was formed in the garden by the Block Development Officer (BDO). and only then the retired workers were able to collect their due pensions.

It was reported that a number of women of the garden resorted to prostitution to avoid 'starvation deaths' in the families.²⁸ Ratia Oraon (25, name changed) was found saying that 'It is better [prostitution] than seeing my little brother die without eating.'²⁹ The women also said that they would 'boycott the general elections if the government and political parties failed to open the garden before the poll.'³⁰ They also started to restrict the entry of political campaigners in the garden. Already the women from the garden organised a meeting and unanimously took a decision of boycotting the poll and the same was also conveyed to the male members.

Another perennial problem faced by the workers' family was that of human trafficking. The 'enclave economy' in Jalpaiguri district provided very few alternate opportunities to the semiliterate and unskilled boys and girls that exposed them to the well-built network of trafficking agents working in the gardens openly as 'placement agents'. The young tribal boys and girls became the

main targets. In many cases, they had been deceived by the agents who promised them a job at a distant location. During the field visit (2019), the present researcher also came to know that many parents did not even know where their children had been ‘working’. The Table presented below shows the intensity of this crisis faced by the gardens during 2010.

Table 4.6: Number of Missing/Trafficked Children from Tea Gardens in 2010

Tea gardens	Status	Girls	Boys	Total
Indong	Sick	5	6	11
Grassmore	Sick	5	4	9
Redbank	Sick	7	5	12
Chulsa	Good	5	4	9
Nayasaili	Sick	5	5	10
Samsing	Sick	5	4	9
Bhernobari	Sick	5	1	6
Dheklapara	Closed	6	3	9
Radharani	Sick	4	3	7
Rahimabad	Sick	2	1	3
Raimatang	Sick	5	4	9
Satali	Good	2	5	7
Total		56	45	101

Source: Ghosh, Biswajit. (June 28, 2014). Vulnerability, Forced Migration and Trafficking in Children and Women: A field view from the Plantation Industry in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*. VOL.XLIX NOS 26 & 27 pp.58-65

It was also claimed that between 2002 and 2005, 525 died (one in every third household) in this garden.³¹ Moreover, the implementation of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in the garden was not at all satisfactory and wages remained unpaid for months in 2009.³²

The panchayat was under the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or the CPI (M) but the garden workers alleged that no leader of the ruling party was found to be 'worried' for the workers. Mahesh Mahali, a teacher of Kathalguri T.G Hindi JR. High School, said to the present researcher³³ that approximately 500 people died within two years after the closure of the garden. He came to the West Bengal Legislative Assembly with the list of the dead persons. "But the state government declared that only 5 people died", he added. In those days the Bharat Sebasram Sangha (a religious organisation known for its relief works during various crisis situations) used to provide aid to many gardens in the region including Kathalguri. In 2010, the new owner M/s Arion Agencies Private Limited, Kolkata had bought the garden. The garden reopened on 02.06.2010. On this occasion, a trilateral meeting (the stakeholders were the workers, the new owner and the District Magistrate) was held in the office of the DM on 27.5.2010. But unlike the previous occasion, it was decided that "only one member from each household of the tea garden (1112) will be employed by the new management for 180 days in a year". And that "100 days of work would be provided through MGNREGS."³⁴

4.6.2. Chamurchi Tea Garden

Chamurchi tea garden is also located in Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri district. The garden started to wobble from the year 2000 and was officially closed in April 2004 after the owner R.S. Kajriwa left it in 2002. This made one thousand and seventy-four (1074) workers jobless with their dues in gratuity and provident fund.³⁵ The TATA group came to buy the garden but failed due to the high selling cost of the garden. Tumults over non-payment of the wages of the workers, irregular ration distribution became a daily routine. The last per day wage before the closure was Rs. 42/-.³⁶ The closure of the garden made the workers to go to the hills of Bhutan for doing stone related works. It fetched them at average Rs. 100/- per day.³⁷ But that was not enough to meet with the daily needs.

Therefore, the workers of the garden decided to sell the machines of the factory but the OMC in the garden was formed at the right time which prevented them from the above act. The OMC came into operation after the official closure of the garden. It paid Rs. 50/- to each worker per day. And, after it took charge of the garden, workers had also started to get Rs. 500 under FAWLOI. But the wage still remained low compared to the wages outside the garden. If the works in Bhutan fetched them average Rs.3000/- per month, after working in the garden they hardly earned average Rs. 2000/- per month which included rupees five hundred (500) under FAWLOI. With this money they had to buy rations, medicines, etc. After the formation of OMC, the workers were forced to discontinue their works in Bhutan because it was necessary to work in the operating garden to maintain their names in the employees' roll and to sustain their quarters in the labour lines.

Table 4.7: Garden Wise Data of Chamurchi Tea Garden

2000-2010								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
1074	Rs.67/- (2002)	Medium	Medium	Bad	River	2	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
984	Rs.174/-	Do	Do	Medium	Well-3	6	58	By the Government

Source: Field study 2019 and West Bengal Labour Commissionerate

However, perhaps because of the quick formation of OMC and the money from FAWLOI the present researcher during his archival and field study hardly found any mentioning of ‘starvation deaths’ in the media or during the field study on in Chamurchi, compared to cases of other gardens like that of Kathalguri. But we would misconceive the situation if we think that the inhabitants of Chamurchi tea garden were free from poverty, since the phenomenon of ‘starvation deaths’ is the benchmark of assessing dismal situation in tea gardens. R.P Tiwari, the new executive director of Chamurchi Agro India Private Limited bought the garden in 2007 and declared after several meetings with the TUs that they decided to pay the dues of the workers.³⁸ In 2019, per day wage per worker is Rs. 167/ and per day quota for plucking leaves is 25 kg. If one makes excess than the quota, then she/he would be paid Rs. 1.5/- for each kg.³⁹ This practice is popularly known as

dabli (the word derives from the word ‘Double’) in Dooars, which is still in operation.

4.6.3. Ramjhora Tea Garden

The occurrence of ‘starvation deaths’ had also caught the attention of international media like BBC. The BBC reported on 2nd October 2007 that one study revealed that in little more than one year, more than 700 people had died in the gardens of Dooars and in last five years more than 200 people died in Ramjhora tea garden alone.⁴⁰ Ramjhora tea garden is located at Madarihat block of Jalpaiguri district.

Table 4.8: Garden Wise Data of Ramjhora Tea Garden

2000-2010									
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System	
1074	Rs.65/- (2002)	Bad	Bad	Bad	Tube well- 05	2	58	No ration after the closure	
2018									
984	Rs.167/-	Good	Bad	Medium	Tube well- 12	6	58	By the Government	

Source: Field study 2019 and West Bengal Labour Commissionerate

On 24th February 2007, a 59 years old woman named Fulmani Dey allegedly ‘died of starvation’ at the garden due to ‘want of food’ for a long time.⁴¹ Her sister Juhungi Dey was also going through the same situation. The Block Medical Officer Jotirmoy Halder opined that “they need food before being treated for other

diseases. We have told the workers to inform us immediately when one of their family members falls ill. We'll hospitalise them.'⁴² However, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of Jalpaiguri district seemed to have undermined the situation when he said that "We are conducting camps in the panchayat office. The garden employees should visit them at...otherwise it is difficult for us to attend to them."⁴³

In 2007, between 17th to 20th February, four people had allegedly 'died of starvation'.⁴⁴ The same source also alleged that after the closure of the garden in the past four and a half years, more than hundred workers died of starvation.⁴⁵ The MGNREGS was yet to start in the garden. The OMC barely managed to employ the workers to collect green leaves and sold it on its own. During the 'sterile season' that started in December and ended in April, the crisis intensified. To save themselves from hunger, the workers went to the other states in search of work and most of them did not return.⁴⁶

The news of 'starvation deaths' of the plantation workers and their family members were suddenly publicised by the newspapers (A detailed study of households witnessing "starvation death/s" is given in the Appendix; Table 11 to 12). To have a first-hand knowledge, Sri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, the then Governor of West Bengal, paid a visit to Ramjhora tea garden on 1st March 2007.⁴⁷ He went into direct conversation with the workers. The workers of the garden registered their pleas by making him aware of the poor condition of the garden in terms of basic amenities.

The district administration tried its best to make the situation look ‘normal’ by commencing the Social Security Schemes, two days before the visit. Nonetheless, Rs. 500/- under FAWLOI⁴⁸, which was due for almost one year, deposited in the accounts. Shri Gandhi also visited the families having unnatural deaths, including a 20 days old baby named Yunus Sorin who had passed away just in the morning.⁴⁹ The governor asked the state Public Works Department (PWD) minister Manohar Tirkey and the District CMO to take necessary steps. He claimed that he had the news of 173 deaths in the garden.⁵⁰ He said that “It is shocking to find people dying of starvation in a progressive country like India. I have come to know about the fact from newspapers. I saw it with my own eyes after my visit to this garden. It has left me disheartened.”⁵¹ However, news of death continued to come from the garden, even after the visit of the Governor to the garden.⁵²

4.6.4. Bharnobari Tea Garden

The same story was also coming from Bharnobari tea garden located at Kalchini block in Alipurduar district (erstwhile in Jalpaiguri district), got closed on December 30, 2005. According to garden record, eighty-eight people died during the closure of the garden. *Dainik Statesman* (February 25, 2007) published a list of dead persons in Bharnobari tea garden, which is given below.

Table 4.9: The List of Dead Persons at Bharnobari Tea Garden

Name	Guardian	Date of the death	Cause
Ramesh Kharia (46)	Agot Kharia (Father)	February 08, 2006	Anaemia
Fulo Oraon (48)	Atoa Oraon (Husband)	February 19, 2006	Anaemia
Basanta Baraik (44)	Gopal Baraik (Father)	March 10, 2006	Anaemia
Nisha Borah (6)	Avuas Borah (Father)	April 04, 2006	Anaemia
Sukumar Baraik (15)	Raghu Baraik (Father)	April 11, 2006	Anaemia
Bablu Kharia (32)	Abodh Kharia (Father)	April 16, 2006	Anaemia
Putul Baraik (30)	Bharti Baraik (Sister)	April 23, 2006	Anaemia
Dukhi Majali (65)	Amo Majali (Husband)	May 07, 2006	Anaemia
Kharmu Baraik (28)	Dinu Baraik (Father)	May 19, 2006	Anaemia
Julia Topo (28)	Lalit Topo (Husband)	April 25, 2006	Anaemia
Anupa Dorji (30)	Dilip Dorji (Husband)	July 05, 2006	Anaemia
Yasomati Baraik (37)	Basanta Baraik(Husband)	October 02, 2006	Anaemia
Mahadeo Lohar (36)	Balka Lohar (Father)	October 24, 2006	Anaemia
Punia Nagbansi (35)	Somra Nagbansi(Husband)	October 28, 2006	Anaemia

Milsa Kharia (38)	Jagadish Kharia (Husband)	October 29, 2006	Anaemia
Jagia Oraon (35)	Chayu Oraon (Husband)	November 14, 2006	Anaemia
Agasta Naik (35)	Ramlakhan Naik (Father)	January 01, 2006	Anaemia
Gangadas Oraon (55)	Durgadas Oraon (Father)	January 16, 2007	Anaemia
Gita Baraik (18)	Basanta Baraik (Father)	January 24, 2007	Anaemia
Sita Oraon (30)	Arjun Oraon (Husband)	February 05, 2007	Anaemia
Johan Borah (65)	Harmu Borah (Father)	February 03, 2007	Anaemia
Bisu Munda (55)	Situ Munda (Father)	February 04, 2007	Anaemia
Gosnar Kharia (45)	Madan Kharia (Father)	February 08, 2007	Anaemia
Ashoka Baraik (40)	Etoari Baraik (Husband)	February 10, 2007	Anaemia
Sisinia Baraik (65)	Etoari Baraik (Husband)	February 14, 2007	Anaemia
Binita Baraik (4)	Etoari Baraik (Father)	February 15, 2007	Anaemia

Source: *Dainik Statesman*, February 25, 2007

It was reported in February 2007 that from the previous year (2006) allowance under FAWLOI had not been given to the workers.⁵³ The number of schools drop-outs increased since many students from the garden went to search for work as

contract labours in Bhutan. The young girls from the garden also migrated to the other states. Most of them went to Delhi to work as housemaids. The pimps took advantage of the situation. After its closure on 30th December 2005, almost 50 women had left the garden.⁵⁴

During the closure, both women and men had also been going to the jungles to collect woods, which they sold at town to sustain their livelihood. And, those who could not find any other alternative of earning went on with partial or full starving. After the formation of OMC, the people were given back their jobs but in the lean seasons, the crisis intensified. From the above figure, we can see that nine persons died within two months in 2007! The CITU member (the trade union of CPIM), Madan Sarki, who was also the convenor of the OMC in the garden, alleged that they all died owing to diseases caused by malnutrition and that the leaders had been assuring them of adequate supply of food only in the time of the election.⁵⁵ The local panchayat and the legislative constituency were also occupied by the Left Front (LF).

Table 4.10: Garden Wise Data of Bharnobari Tea Garden

2000-2010								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
1074	Rs.48/- (2002)	Medium	Medium	Bad	River	2	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
984	Rs.176/-	Do	Do	Medium	Tap-10 Tubewell-07	8	58	By the Government

Source: Field study 2019 and *The Telegraph* (11.04.2008)

But Geeta Baraik (18) was the one who unable to leave her home owing to her four younger siblings. After the closure of the garden, her father Basanta Baraik (44) used to cut stones at the hills of Bhutan. But inadequate food intake made him too weak to continue with his work and ultimately, he died. His wife Yashomati Baraik died within seven months of his death. Geeta used to go jungle to collect woods for feeding her brothers and sisters. One day Geeta was also became ill. The doctors informed that she was having lung-infection caused by malnutrition.⁵⁶ The DM reached the garden to see her. After facing the remonstrance from the workers, he directed the BDO to get her admitted in the hospital. The BDO admitted her at Kalchini hospital but he hospital authority did not agree to keep her for many days. She was released from the hospital on 31st December 2006 without having proper treatment. After her return to home, she was forced to get back to the same way of collecting wood from the jungle as the

only means of income despite severe illness. Finally, she too had died on 24th January 2007, at the shelter of her grandfather. After her death, her brothers and sisters used to spend days with half-starved stomachs as their grandfather was also having his garden closed. However, as for the ‘official’ cause of the deaths of all the three members of Baraik family: ‘severe anaemia’ was written in the death register of the garden.⁵⁷

Every labour line of the garden was facing the same crisis. Most of the families survived by devouring musty rice and bread, just one time a day. The Antodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) scheme which aimed to provide 20 kg of rice and 15 kg of wheat at Rs. 3/- and Rs. 2/- per kg respectively to every household of the garden, could not achieve much success owing to the buying incapacity of the workers and alleged malpractices by the ration dealers.⁵⁸ The health system in the garden was in abysmal. There was no doctor, nor any compounder at the garden hospital with inadequate medicine storage. The medical van in the garden had been irregular.

Ms Anuradha Talwar, the Assistant to the Commissioners of the Supreme Court in the Right to Food case, paid a visit to Bharnobari on 5th March 2007 to inquire about the alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ in the garden. She stated that “It is clear that the orders of the Supreme Court are not being implemented. The state government has not taken the necessary steps.” Dismissing the claims by the government and the administration, which claimed that they were providing adequate governmental amenities, Talwar alleged that the “truth is the same has not reached the workers of the closed Bhernobari tea garden. There is a lack of

work and wages in the 100 days' work has remained unpaid. Laxity in distributing the AAY cards can be seen. Many families have not got cards. As a result, there is a lack of food and money in every labour line of the garden. They are also not getting proper medical facilities."⁵⁹ In sum, as one source claimed, total of 88 people had died according to the death register of the garden.⁶⁰

On 10th April 2008, in a tripartite meeting, the company agreed to lift the lock-out order because Kingshuk Saha, the new financier offered to bail out the owners.⁶¹ The trilateral meeting took place in the labour commissioner's office in Kolkata. By May 2009, The Bharnobari Tea & Industries promised to clear the bonus, rations, wages and other fringe benefits. However, they had excluded the payment of gratuity and provident fund. The owners also promised to fill up the vacancies created by retirement, resignation or death by employing permanent workers from the families having one earning member. On a three-year contract, the other will be recruited and made permanent in 2011. It was also said that with the implementation of this decision, the OMC will be dissolved. Bharnobari tea garden was one of the tea gardens, which were identified by the then Union minister of State for Commerce and Industries, Shri Jairam Ramesh, for his nation-wide drive to reopen closed tea gardens.

4.6.5. Redbank and Surendranagar Tea Gardens

Redbank and Surendranagar are the two adjoining gardens owned by the same owner located in the Dhupguri block of Jalpaiguri district. Over Rs. 2.5 crore gratuities remained due till 2019. After the closure of these two gardens in 2003, the male workers went to Bhutan as daily wage labour, working in the hills,

masonry labour. In an average estimate, one was able to earn up to Rs. 125/- per day. The women stayed behind and used to collect green leaves. After drying the leaves, it reduced to 10-12 kg. They sold the dried leaves against Rs. 10/- per kg. The workers were not provided with any rations, firewood, medical facilities during the closure. The OMC formed within a year. Surendranagar tea garden reopened in May 2007. The gardens went through several closings and re-openings. After its first closure in 2003, it reopened in 2011. Then in April 2011, the gardens were closed again. Again, they reopened in April 2012 for three months only to close down again in July 2012. At present (2019) Surendranagar TE is closed.

Table 4.11: Garden Wise Data of Redbank Tea Garden

2000-2010								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines &Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
866	Rs.61/- (2003)	Bad	Bad	Bad	Tap-30	2	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
600	Rs.167/-	Medium	Run by MANT (NGO)	Medium	Tap-40, Well-40	8	58	By the Government

Source: Field Study, 2019

Table 4.12: Garden wise Data of Surendranagar Tea Garden

2000-2010								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
840	Rs.61/- (2003)	Bad	Bad	Bad	Tap-30	1(makeshift)	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
650	Rs.167/-	Medium	Run by MANT (NGO)	Medium	Tap-40, Well-40	4	58	By the Government

Source: Field Study, 2019

Sushil Sarkar, the Provident Fund (PF) officer of the two gardens has elucidated that the workers had faced wage cut of approximately Rs. 2 Crores, while nothing has been deposited in the PF. And, the money which had been deducted from the per day wages of the workers for providing them with firewood and ration, also had not been given to the workers, and amount due on the count is about Rs. 2.5 Crores.⁶²

4.6.6. Raipur Tea Garden

Raipur tea garden is located at Jalpaiguri Sadar block in Jalpaiguri district. The garden was closed on 17th October 2003. Seventy people died after the closure of the garden. Among them, 15 people had allegedly died owing to starvation related diseases.⁶³ Within the first two months of 2007, two people died owing to semi starvation for a long time and were not having money for medical treatment.⁶⁴

Table 4.13: Garden Wise Data of Raipur Tea Garden

2000-2010								
Total Workers	Wage	Housing	Medical facilities	Latrines & Urinals	Water supply	Total ICDS	Retirement Age	Rationing System
840	Rs.61/- (2003)	Bad	Bad	Bad	Tap-20	1(makeshift house)	58	No ration after the closure
2018								
650	Rs.167/-	Medium	Run by MANT (NGO)	Medium	Tap-43, Well-34	4	58	By the Government

Source: Field study, 2019

On 19th January Hira Munda (12 F) died at the godown line of the garden. Her mother Faguni Munda narrated the sad incident. According to her, “[during] the sterile season there was no work in the garden. Hira’s father Mangal Munda went to town to pull rickshaw to scarcely feed the family of five members. Then suddenly Hira became ill and we had no money to get her admitted in the hospital. Thus, she died without treatment.”⁶⁵ Sitaram Munda, one of the workers of the tea garden said that he and her two daughters and one son were devouring wild potato and puff rice for the two weeks. Owing to physical weakness he could not to go to the 100 days’ work under the MGNREGS. Sania Bhumij, the secretary of CITU of Raipur tea garden herself stated that only 527 workers were given the job cards of 100 days of work among 630 workers. She also alleged that ration of two years and salary of six months remained due and although the work under SGRY ended on July 2006 but the workers were yet to get the due quantity of rice (63 Kg).⁶⁶

Under the AAY scheme, every household was to get 35 kg of wheat and rice but, she alleged, they were only getting 12 kg.⁶⁷ She further said that for many times they had requested the DM to reopen the garden but with no success and till 2007, thirty-six bilateral and trilateral meetings had been held with no positive outcome. The students were facing so problem of continuing studies without electricity in the garden. Sania's mother and son were also ill, and she asked, "if we have no money to buy food, how can we bear the costs of treatment?"⁶⁸ As per the official promises, the medical team used to come four days a week but remained there for a little time. And in case is hospitalised, she/he did not get any free medicine as per the government rules and had to buy medicine from the open market, something almost impossible for the workers. Therefore, the workers and their family members, who died during the period of our study, died mainly suffering from malnutrition and other related ailments in the condition of semi/full starvation.

4.7. Loss of Entitlement, Lack of Capability and Breach of Right to Food in Tea Gardens

The Right to Food machinery operates in two ways. The first one is the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) and Food for Work (FFW) schemes that aim to provide foods directly in the hands of the individuals. And, the second one is more focused cash transfer either direct FAWLOI or by creating employment SGRY. As our findings suggest none of these initiatives could achieve the desired goal in the tea gardens. In our study, it has emerged that the garden workers failed to access the *food as entitlement*. Food as entitlement can be achieved depending on several other variables like the status of employment, assets, savings and role

of the local institutions and state in transferring cash and food items. The erstwhile given legal, political and economic structure would not facilitate these. However, after the commencement of National Food Security Act, 2013 (NFSA) a flexibility in the structure has been brought, which declares: “notwithstanding anything contained in this Ordinance, the State Government may, continue with or formulate food or nutrition-based plans or schemes providing for benefits higher than the benefits provided under this Ordinance, from its resources.”⁶⁹

The allocation of material goods (like food) and opportunities to access the same (employment) can also be seen as something that ethically needs to be distributed equitably to every section of society from the standpoint of ‘distributive justice’. Let us first deal with the food security. Food security can also be perceived as ‘food justice’. For achieving food justice, society needs a *just* distribution of the same. A *just* distribution preceded by just accumulation. It is not desirable that in one part of the country food grains are rotting do while from another parts, news of ‘starvation deaths’ keep surfacing. Therefore, in countries like India, where we witness stark differences in terms of area wise development/underdevelopment, abundance/scarcity, the government is the prime authority with the task of equitable distribution of ‘social primary goods’ (to use a well-known Rawlsian term) as far as practicable.

Proper distribution of food on the way to distributive justice is only the one step demands to be supplemented by another that of accessing the food. Purchasing power is a thing that demands more attention from the State. The prevailing wage rate and employment opportunities in the Dooars region were not in favour of the

labours. In the absence of wage and garden provided rations, this had dramatically affected the food security of the dwellers of ‘enclave economy’ for the purchasing power is related to food security. In an interesting article titled ‘*The Republic of Hunger*’, Utsa Patnaik has made this factor of purchasing power responsible for the excess food stocks in the government’s warehouses. The lack of purchasing power caused a decline in food grain consumption even through the TPDS.⁷⁰ So, it appears that with the processes of *just* accumulation and *just* distribution, the factor of *just* acquisition is something without which right to food cannot be materialised. The Right to Food as a positive right can only be realised only by the facilitation of a welfare State like India.

But should we consider food security only as *the sign* of all-round development of an individual? The life with dignity as enshrined in Indian constitution (Article 21) does not solely depend on food security. One could look into this problem, with reference to the gardens surveyed under the present research, with a much broader outlook by taking into account other factors like health and literacy. To make an individual capable means making her/his capable of choosing a lifestyle with values like education, good health facilities, dignity and ability to decide on the political community.

4.8. The Political Fallout of ‘Starvation Deaths’ in Dooars

To probe the real causes behind the closure of the tea gardens and bring a durable solution to the problems faced by the workers, the trade union leaders had several meetings with the state labour minister, Md. Amin, in 2003. The meetings did not generate desirable outcomes; hence, the trade union leaders demanded the

intervention of the Chief Minister (CM) of West Bengal, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya.⁷¹ The TUs argued that they did not foresee an early resolution of problems faced by the tea industry and got frustrated by the ‘false promises’ and ‘slew meetings’ conducted by the labour minister.⁷² The unions had also held that they did not want Mr Amin who was playing the role of ‘principal negotiator’ between the management and the owners in the meetings, and demanded an inter-departmental panel to probe the real causes behind the closure of the gardens.

Samir Ray, the Convenor of the Defence Committee for Plantation Workers’ Right (DCPWR) and the Secretary of West Bengal Cha Mazdoor Sabha (WBCMS) said that they wanted Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharya to intervene to handle the issue and find a solution of closed tea gardens in Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars.⁷³ The unions argued that despite being attending several meetings, 12 gardens were closed and a few more were still functioning ‘irregularly’.⁷⁴ In the meantime, the Labour Minister hinted that another meeting would be convened to discuss the ways by which the deadlock of the closed tea gardens could be broken by involving various plantation associations. In an earlier meeting Mr Md. Amin walked out angrily and threatened the garden owners to cancel the lease of all the closed gardens, if they did not make the gardens reopen by May 15, 2003. The deadline was over and nothing was yielded.⁷⁵

On January 16, 2004, in his first meeting, with the representative of seventeen TUs from the gardens (since the condition of the tea industry had deteriorated) the CM cautioned that he would not tolerate a militant attitude on the part of tea labours. Some of the TUs participated in the meeting were Defence Committee

for Plantation Worker's Rights, West Bengal Cha Shramik Union (WBCSU), WBCMS, All West Bengal Tea Gardens Labourers Association (AWBTGLU), and the Coordination Committee of Tea Plantation Workers (CCTPW). The CM said that the the picketing and agitation in the name of labourers' movement would not be tolerated. He suggested refraining from strikes and *Bandhs* as the tea industry is already in a miserable state.⁷⁶ However, he admitted that everything was not well in the tea gardens and he was informed of seventeen reported deaths in the gardens mainly caused by diarrhoea and malaria.⁷⁷ He added that if there was a proof that the owners were depriving the labourers of their legitimate dues, strict action would be taken against them. But there was no need to create disturbances for this.⁷⁸ The CM declared that the government would ensure that the managers of the tea gardens abide by the rules engraved in PLA 1951 but incidents like Dalgaon, in which 19 persons⁷⁹ were allegedly burnt by the tea workers, inside the house of a CITU⁸⁰ leader, on 6th November 2003, should not occur again.⁸¹

The CM's statement was contrary to the Agriculture Minister Kamal Guha (from Forward Bloc party – FB – in the LF Government), who claimed that deaths in tea gardens were taking place owing to starvation.⁸² The Minister went on to criticise the government for its failure in improving the condition of the tea gardens and termed the situation as 'explosive' by referring the incident of Dalgaon and accentuated that 'the state government's role in Dooars is extremely disappointing.'⁸³ He further stated that hundreds of workers in Dooars were dying of starvation and the state government was stuck in the same (non-active) position in the tea gardens. Guha further claimed that his party (FB) had carried a survey

across the gardens, where it was found that about 320 deaths already took place and over 50,000 families in 14 tea gardens were spending their days in distress and having been denied food and other bare necessities of life.⁸⁴

This claim was strengthened when Khiti Goswami, the leader of Revolutionary Socialist Party, India (RSP), another ally of the LF, also claimed that his party's trade union wing also conducted a survey and found that the death toll was even higher and touched the 450 mark and they submitted the report to the CM and Labour Minister, seeking their intervention and the CM had assured them that he was personally looking into it.⁸⁵ Amin, admitted that he had received reports of starvation deaths and gave instructions to the panchayats to deliver relief to the impoverished workers. But he refused Guha's claim by saying "we do not have such a Table with us."⁸⁶

However, Chittabrata Majumdar, Secretary of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) the CPI(M)'s trade union, which had a wide influence on the tea gardens, did not deny the report of starvation in the gardens and admitted that 'some people' in the garden died after the closure of the gardens. He also added that the workers lacked in food, medicines and did not have other means of livelihood for months and many of them died owing to malnutrition and lack of medical care. But despite that he was unsure about the Table of the death toll claimed by the Agricultural Minister.⁸⁷ He questioned Guha's motive in publicly raising the issue and held that it was a conspiracy against CITU because they were in the majority in the tea gardens and Forward Bloc was active only in some gardens. He continued to allege that some people were creating troubles for creating a cleft

between them and the workers. Ashok Bhattacharya, the Urban Development Minister and a very important leader of CPI(M) of North Bengal said that Kamal Guha's statements were against the spirit of collective responsibility and smacked of ignorance and whenever the CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharya came to North Bengal he used to rebuke the garden owners for their irresponsibility.⁸⁸

In this spell of the blame game, a new controversy had cropped up: an intra LF collision started in tea gardens. On 8th April 2004 at Birpara tea estate, trade union wings of both CPI(M) and RSP confronted each other. According to reports, the feud between the CPI (M) and RSP was the main reason for the confrontation between the two groups.⁸⁹ But, both CPI (M) and RSP tried to deescalate the tension. According to these parties, there was 'no connection' between the incidents of Dalgaon and Birpara tea-gardens.⁹⁰ But the leaders of the opposition parties said that the neutral investigation would prove that the allies of the front were trying to instigate violence in the tea gardens to establish their control. According to Anil Biswas, the State Secretary of CPI (M), no person or political party was involved in the violent incidents at Birpara tea gardens rather the act was done by some miscreants.⁹¹ According to RSP, these incidents did not have any connection with politics.⁹² Pradip Bhattacharya, the Deputy Secretary of Indian National Congress (INC) said that the CPI(M) and RSP were trying to save the Front from insults by putting the entire blame on the miscreants.⁹³ He also demanded compensation for those who died in the incident. Pankaj Bandyopadhyay, the Leader of the Opposition of West Bengal Legislative Assembly, also wanted a judicial probe into the situation on behalf of All India Trinamool Congress (AITC).

4.8.1. The Role of the Opposition Political Parties

It was alleged that the trilateral meetings became ‘meaningless’ as the owners were absent from these meetings day after day. Some of the TUs of the opposition parties became very critical of this. For example, Alok Ghosh, leader of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) alleged that the LF government had “kicked in the stomachs of poor peasants” and befriended with capitalists like Tata and Salem group of companies.⁹⁴ To sustain the tea industry of North Bengal, the government proposed to promote tea-tourism and eco-tourism. But all these initiatives, Ghosh alleged, were only to pave the way for “prostitution by the women of the gardens against some extra money”.⁹⁵ He also added that impotency and lack of thought on the part of the government made the women to be trafficked to the other states and starvation deaths were taking place in the garden. On the other hand, the garden owners criticised the government for not opening the gardens.⁹⁶ Mr Mohini Das, the spokesperson for the Indian Planters Association asked that him how it could be possible for the labour department or the government to open the gardens without going into roots of the crisis? It was a hard job for the garden owners to reopen the gardens without any aid from the government on the matter of economic burden and crisis of the gardens.⁹⁷ Mr Prabir Bhattacharya, who represented the owners of the tea garden, stated that “no one closes the garden without causes. For the past four years, the government has only been discussing about the crisis of the gardens. The garden owners had given proposals to solve the crisis. Without materialising these proposals, how could be the gardens reopened?”⁹⁸ Tripurari, the erstwhile Superintendent of Police of Jalpaiguri, also accepted that there were traffic rackets in operation in the gardens,

and that a good number of trafficking of the women from the gardens to the other states took place. The police had rescued some girls and some culprits were being caught.⁹⁹

The AITC, the erstwhile main opposition party in West Bengal (now the ruling party), claimed in Bidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly) that 22 plantations are closed and 40000 workers had been affected, 496 people had died. Since 12 July, 51 persons had died in 4 months in Kathalguri plantation.¹⁰⁰ In Dheklapara tea garden there were 605 workers among them 69 people had died so far. Ramjhora tea garden has the area of 610 hectare and had a population more than 4500 but the management of the garden suspended all the activities on August 11, 2002. Since then, 1,103 workers had been fighting for their survival. The labour department also conducted several meetings but nothing had changed and the deaths had been continuing to take place. The district health department was ignorant about the number of deaths. Samir Biswas, the Health Assistant of the gardens claimed that “We have a record of 85 deaths. But the panchayat or health department does not have any information about it”.¹⁰¹

In June 2007, in the backdrop of protests over the issue of land acquisition at Singur and Nandigram, Mamata Banerjee the then main opposition leader (now the CM) had also reached closed tea gardens of Jalpaiguri. She summoned the workers of the closed Raipur tea garden and assured them to provide all the possible supports if they come to power. She also urged them to launch a movement against the ruling LF without any delay. She told them to leave the TUs and form an apolitical *Cha Bagan Protiraksha Committee* (The Committee

for Protecting the Tea Gardens) along with the lines of the *Krishi Jami Raksha Committee* (The Committee for Protecting the Farmland) of Singur (a place in Hooghly district in southern part of the state, where the state government had acquired about 1000 acres of agricultural land for Tata Motors) for rejuvenating all the closed gardens. In a tea garden at the outskirts of Jalpaiguri, she tried to motivate the workers, while addressing them that “it’s high time all tea workers united and launched a massive movement together to save the tea gardens. If you don’t do it now, the entire tea industry will die. You need not join TMC. You can form a Cha Bagan Pratiraksha Committee yourself and I promise every possible support to you.”¹⁰² Criticizing the state government for the crisis she claimed that the tea industry has transformed into ‘a green desert’. And, asserted that the state government had already handed over the Darjeeling to Subash Ghising and was trying to distribute the tea gardens among the promoters in the name of ‘development’, as the government had already done in Chandmoni tea estate, near Siliguri. Banerjee also asked that why the state government had given the Tata Motors, a tax relaxation of Rs. 135 Crores? If the state government had taken the money, she argued, that could be utilised for the tea gardens, instead of pleading their incapacity in the pretext of lack of fund. She claimed that they had done the calculation for revival of the tea industry in North Bengal and further claimed that only 70 crores could change the picture of the tea gardens.¹⁰³ To pressurize the government, she declared a ‘gherao’ of Jalpaiguri divisional commissioner’s office.

4.8.2. The Role of the Central Government

On 11th June 2007, the Union Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, Jairam Ramesh criticised the West Bengal Government for its ‘inability’ to match Kerala’s drive to reopen the closed tea estates. He said that though both the states were ruled by the same party and it was surprising to see that only one garden was reopened among 14 closed gardens in West Bengal, wherein Kerala, 5 out of 17 closed gardens were reopened within the same period and on July 17, eight more gardens were likely to reopen in Kerala.¹⁰⁴ He also said that representatives from the West Bengal Government were speaking of industrialisation and were doing well in some cases with progressive attitude but it was a baffling contradiction that they failed to persuade owners or prospective buyers to reopen the gardens.¹⁰⁵ He also remarked that ‘it seems that entrepreneur in Bengal could not be motivated like their colleagues in Kerala’.¹⁰⁶

On his first visit on May 17, 2007, the Union Minister “was asked by the Chief Secretary of the state Government to shelve his plan of accompanying the owner of the closed Surendranagar tea garden to the garden for its reopening in the face of a possible law and order threat.”¹⁰⁷ Rabin Paul the owner of the Surendranagar tea estate, succeeded in reopening the garden on the scheduled date and the garden became the first to reopen among the erstwhile 14 closed gardens of the state. The Union Minister also noted that the lease of Ramjhora tea garden was over and the government did not invite bid from the buyers, and in case of the other few gardens, like one Chamurchi tea estate, where the owners had identified prospective buyers.¹⁰⁸ It was also said that the Central Government was likely to invoke section 16 D and section 16 E of Tea Act, 1953. While 16 D talks about

“Handing over the management after an enquiry”; 16 E spells out that the Centre has the “Power to take over tea undertaking or tea unit without investigation under certain circumstances”.¹⁰⁹ Jairam Ramesh suggested that after invoking the said acts the gardens will find new buyers for the states and all the procedures will be done in a transparent manner.¹¹⁰

However, a women delegation, belonging to a group of rights activists and many women workers of the gardens requested him not to take this kind of initiative because it would be a ‘miscalculation’ and also requested him to shift the Central Government’s focus from the owners to the workers. In the meantime, Mr Ashok Bhattacharya, the State Urban Development minister, asked the Union Minister for a rehabilitation package for the workers. In reply to that Mr Ramesh said that the allocation for the social welfare for the tea gardens had been increased to Rs. 5 crores to Rs. 50 crores in the eleventh five-year plan and that the first tranche of funds will be distributed among 30,000 families affected by the closure of tea gardens across the country.¹¹¹

On September 8, 2007, the Union Minister declared that the central government had created an Special Purpose Tea Fund (SPTF) that will rejuvenate 2 lakh acres of tea plantations across the country and under this fund around rupees 4,760 crores would be spent over the next 15 years.¹¹² The Minister further told that this re-plantation initiative would increase productivity by at least 20-25 per cent and since the plantations were very old and that this factor contributed a lot to the workers’ distress.¹¹³ Ms Mohini Giri, the former Chair of the National Council for Women was suspicious about the scheme. She said that the scheme was for the tea

garden owners and not for the tea labours and she visited the gardens and saw the plight of the workers.¹¹⁴ The Chairperson of Institute of Gender Justice, Ms Sreerupa Mitra Chaudhury who led a women delegation along with Ms Giri to the Union Minister also said that although the minister was negotiating to reopen the tea gardens but no one was showing any interest in his proposal. She also asked that why the minister was not visiting the tea gardens like Kathalguri and Ramjhora where more than 400 people died of starvation? She also remarked that the government should adopt a two-pronged strategy by accommodating both commercial interests and welfare component.¹¹⁵

In June 2007, the Union Minister had a meeting with the Tea Board of India and other stakeholders. As per sources, the meeting indicated about the reopening of at least five tea gardens in July in the same year.¹¹⁶ The Minister had also proposed the formation of workers' cooperatives for the 14 closed gardens in the region. He said that the model of workers cooperative was in operation in Durgabari, a tea garden in Tripura and they must try it in the Dooars also. Both the Central and the State Governments would provide support to these cooperatives.¹¹⁷ The proposal was accepted by the senior members of Indian Tea Board, Consultative Committee for Plantation Associations and other major TUs like INTUC and CITU and it was said that the Indian National Congress (INC) made it a major issue in the poll campaign in 2009 General Elections. However, despite being praised for these proposals by all the stakeholders, the formation of workers' cooperatives never materialised. And, the leaders of CITU went on to label the concept as something 'impossible' to workout in North Bengal.¹¹⁸ N.K Basu, the

Principal Advisor of Indian Tea Planter Association said that “Cooperatives are not likely to succeed here.”¹¹⁹

4.9. The Changing Discourse of Mobilisation in the Gardens: ‘From Redistribution to Recognition’?

To understand the politics in the tea gardens it is essential not to treat them as closed-off spaces and politically isolated from outside rather they should be located in the larger context of state politics. We will make attempts to understand how the politics of tea gardens were related to the larger scenario of state politics of West Bengal later, but now in the upcoming lines, we will try to understand how the politics in North Bengal was tied with politics in the tea gardens.

In the early decades after independence backed by a legacy of the radical trade union movement in the late colonial and immediate post-colonial phase, the TUs in the gardens were known for ‘movement-based politics’ that manifested in the bonus movement of 1955, the movements in 1966 demanding increases in the wages, increasing employment and filling vacancies movement in 1969.¹²⁰ Over the years the Left parties that served as the backbone of these movements could not follow their radical path and get trapped within the structure of parliamentary democracy. And the lack of ability to organise any large-scale movement pushed the trade union movement in the area into a phase of stagnation.¹²¹ The activities of the unions regarding minimum wages, bonus, giving a facelift to the labour quarters remained short-lived, scattered in individual plantations. Moreover, to take any major step the local leaders used to depend on the high command of their respected mother parties who preferred to maintain the status quo rather than

creating any major turmoil. At other times they revealed their inability to pressurise the government.

Apart from the changes in the functions of the trade unions, their composition had also undergone a fundamental change. The emergence of identity-based politics in North Bengal had also affected the power structure of the gardens that can be seen in arrivals of the TUs like Akhil Vartiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad (AVAVP) , Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM). Therefore, the workers who previously organised themselves along with the line of *class*, now (during the studied time) decided to go along with the line of *ethnicity*. This factor acted as a major obstacle in gathering the workers under a common cause thereby launching a powerful movement demanding their basic human rights. Here one can see the way in which the liberal conception of human rights/politics was replaced by group rights/identity politics. Nancy Fraser puts it right: “In these ‘post-socialist’ conflict, group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle.”¹²²

Around the year 2008, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) was replaced by GJMM, therefore, aggressive demands regarding separate statehood once again cropped up that made North Bengal vulnerable to ethnic unrest. In the politics of West Bengal, the demand for a separate state for the Gorkhas had been a long-standing issue. The main feature of the movement was; firstly, the politics of identity and secondly realisation of that identity through self-rule/separate state.

A violent movement known as Gorkhaland Movement for a separate state was started in the 1980s under the leadership of Subhas Ghising that only diluted after the establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 for administering the Darjeeling hills with some degree of autonomy. However, optimism soon faded away owing to the rampant corruption and high-handedness of GNLFF.¹²³ In 2007, Bimal Gurung who was once the trusted ally of Subhas Ghising decided to break away from GNLFF and continue the legacy of the Gorkhaland movement with a newly formed organisation called GJMM.

However, this phase of the movement by GJMM witnessed a variation in the demands. The GJMM demanded a separate state within the union territory of India for Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong but later they also demanded to *include Terai and Dooars*. With the support of a sizable Nepali (Gorkha) workers, especially in the hills, they won three seats in the state assembly elections of 2011 and 2016.¹²⁴ The tribal workers of Terai and Dooars opposed it as they perceived they would be then dominated by the Gorkhas.¹²⁵ The ABAVP stepped in to support the tribal workers. Demands were voiced for the recognition of the cultural differences of the tribal people. In this way, hunger strikes as well as clashes with State officials began to take place.¹²⁶

Although numerically the GJMM overshadowed the ABAVP both parties had a presence in the area. This was not because of their electoral capacity but the protests, political programmes and frequent strikes that they organised with some kind of support from their respective ethnic communities.¹²⁷

In a nutshell, it was the fragmentation of working class into specific cultural groups. The identity politics does not possess a universal definition of welfare or does not view it as the universal goal rather a goal to be achieved only after a competition among the groups. Borrowing the term from John Carter, we can term the phenomenon as ‘Postmodernity and the Fragmentation of Welfare’.¹²⁸

4.10. The ‘Starvation Deaths’ at the ‘Margins’ of Politics

A ‘border’ in politics – both in spatial and temporal terms – is the site of both inclusion and exclusion. It means that in a given spatio-temporal structure of politics certain things/issues can be perceived as *more important* over others. These are the issues of political ‘mainstream’ of a State, nation, or even of the world. Other issues are relegated as marginal and generally lost in oblivion, which can bounce back and occupy the ‘centre’ in another time. Thus, both the locations and timings of politics are most significant. If through this lens, one attempts to look into the tragedies and helplessness of tea gardens of North Bengal and their workers, it will be soon realised that both spatially and temporally, they failed to occupy the centre stage of politics of the state.

During the most parts of the LF rule, no major protest movement could challenge the hegemonic rule of the Left (which connoted the supremacy of the CPIM) not only over the institutions of the government but over different layers of society as a whole.¹²⁹ However, after almost three decades of the LF rule, the spell of protest movements in West Bengal took a new turn and dimension after the conclusion of assembly elections in 2006. Since that time, the state politics rode the roller-coaster of two turbulent popular protest movements over the issue of

land acquisition by the LF government in Singur and Nandigram. It was also the same time when the alleged news of ‘starvation deaths’ was coming from the northern parts of the state. But, even this tragic news and the pathetic conditions of the gardens, failed to garner state-wide popular/political movements, compared to the magnitude of protests over the issues located in the southern parts of the state, which enjoy locational advantage of having proximity to Kolkata, the state capital and the nerve centre of politics in West Bengal.

On another score, the victims of Singur and Nandigram were ethnically Bengali in origin, whereas the victims of the tea gardens were multi-ethnic and rarely had any Bengali connection, and on the whole, they constituted a microscopic element of the total voting population. This would perhaps explain that why despite having the presence of TUs affiliated to all major national parties and some efforts of the then opposition leader, Mamata Banerjee, the alarming incidents of tea gardens failed to cause any major effects in the state politics compared not only to Singur and Nandigram, but also to the outbreaks of ‘ration riots’ in the southern districts of West Bengal. The issue of disturbances over the alleged ‘mal-distribution’ in TPDS will be discussed elaborately in the next chapter.

4.11. Summary

From early 1990s the condition of the tea industry in the Dooars region was deteriorating. As a result, the owners forced to abandon the gardens. Once the gardens were shut down, wages and other benefits mainly the rations were discontinued. Moreover, the dues in the provident fund and gratuity were not paid. And, in absence of any alternate source of income, the workers had a severe blow.

The TUs and other political parties failed to draw any large-scale protest. Some workers resorted to sell the machinery and other stuffs from the factory. And, females from the families opted for prostitution to run their households. Besides, networks of human trafficking activated throughout the gardens.

Previously the tea estates were not under the panchayats therefore the plantation workers were not entitled to any social security schemes of the government and solely dependent on the gardens. The Supreme Court of India intervened to solve the puzzle followed by the state government's initiatives to provide social security to the workers. However, the social security schemes were not implemented properly as a result events of 'starvation deaths' occurred.