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Assam tea workers yet to have access to toilets

After 4 years of Swachch Bharat Mission, Dibrugarh tea gardens still low on hygiene quotient

Early this week, when Laya Madduri, District Collector of Dibrugarh, invited tea estate managers to check the progress of Swachch Bharat Mission she was in for a shock.

Roughly one-third of the 170-odd estates are yet to set up toilet facilities for workers, as is mandated under law. Also, the Swachch Bharat Mission will complete four years on October 2.

Dibrugarh is India's largest tea-producing district, with some 25 per cent of its population living in estates. As per the Plantation Labour Act, tea estates are mandated to provide 8ft x 6ft bath-cum-latrines to every labour quarter.

But the law exists merely on paper.

Way back in 2003-04, when the tea industry was in the middle of a down-cycle, the Assam administration offered a way out to planters by allowing them to build 3ft x 4ft latrines on concrete base with a small single-chamber tank fitted with a gas outlet. The rest of the structure could be makeshift.

All tea estates built such toilets. The State administration claimed to have ensured total sanitation to tea workers under the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan, the forerunner to the Swachch Bharat Mission. But the toilets soon became unusable.

"Those toilets were useless. They were destroyed in a year. We built them cheap to remain on the right side of law," a Dibrugarh-based planter told *BusinessLine*. Barely 60 per cent of his workers have access to toilets.

He is not alone. In a meeting presided over by Assam Labour Minister Pallab Lochan Das, planters admitted that a good percentage of the so-called toilets in labour quarters are not usable. Even gardens which were already declared open-defecation free (ODF), like Basmatia of the state-owned Andrew Yule Ltd (one of the best performers in sanitation), were not fully compliant.

New initiative

The government has ordered collection of garden-level data on functional toilets. According to sources, both the planters and the Assam government are now keen on a more durable solution.

On the cards is building Unicef-designed sanitary toilets, which include honeycomb style septic tank and complete concrete structure.

On the flip side, such toilets would cost between Rs. 17,000 and Rs. 20,000, depending on the cost of building material, which is high in Assam.

With the tea plantation sector in Assam staring at a major wage hike this year, tea companies have requested the State government to share a part of the cost by accessing Swachch Bharat schemes.

The Assam government has shown interest in the proposal.

Tea industry sources say that in West Bengal, gram panchayats are offering Rs. 10,000 a toilet by using the Centre's individual household scheme. The rest of the cost is borne by planters.

"West Bengal has apparently done better in ensuring accessibility of toilets," said a planter. The State contributes 25 per cent of the country's tea production against 50 per cent by Assam.

Behavioural change needed

Access to toilets will not ensure end to open defecation. Planters agree that strong advocacy is required to bring about a behavioural change among the tea workers.

In 2015-16, the Tea Board initiated a garden level campaign to encourage sanitation in gardens.

But more can be achieved only when planters take interest in improving the workers' living standards.

Read more at: <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/todays-paper/tp-others/tp-states/article24168476.ece>