

## **Darjeeling strife hits tea industry**

**KOLKATA. JUNE 20:**

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's decision to take the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) head on, has cost Darjeeling tea industry dear.

Since June 8, when the trouble erupted, plucking of the famous Darjeeling tea has come to a standstill, that, too, in the middle of the second flush, which fetches maximum price.

Though 20-22 per cent of the annual 10 million kg volume, second-flush teas are mostly exported, contributing 40-45 per cent of the annual industry revenue.

"Almost all my second-flush teas find buyers even before they are plucked. I am getting a call from buyers every day but we cannot do anything as operations have come to a standstill," said Ashok Lohia, Chairman of the Chamong Tea Group, which operates 13 estates in Darjeeling, contributing 18-25 per cent of the total production from the hill.

There is no immediate hope of a return of peace either, as hill politics remained tense following a police raid on GJM Chief Bimal Gurung's residence and the death of three protesters in police firing last week.

Following an improved showing in the hills in the Municipal election in May, the State government took two quick decisions — making Bengali compulsory in all schools including the hills, and, holding a State cabinet meeting in the GJM stronghold of Darjeeling on June 8, after a gap of 44 years.

GJM, which was on the backfoot for some time, protested against the decision to make Bengali compulsory but the State didn't relent. Things turned violent on June 8, as GJM took to the streets while the cabinet meeting was on.

### **Agitation to continue**

On Tuesday, the GJM and with 14 hill parties, including its arch-rivals GNLF and the All India Gorkha League, and nearly a dozen hill-based organisations, decided to strike indefinitely and boycott the June 22 all-party meeting in Siliguri. The meeting has been called by the State government.

### **Bad times for tea**

The turn of events has made the tea industry tense. According to Lohia, the Darjeeling industry was expecting better prices for its prized second flush teas this year following the decision of the EU to protect geographical identification of Darjeeling tea, beginning November 2016.

The decision stops blending of Darjeeling tea with flavoured teas from any other origin (such as Nepal) and exploiting the brand image of Darjeeling.

“It was expected to be a good year. But it might turn out to be a disaster,” Lohia said.

A N Singh, Managing Director of the Goodricke Group, which operates seven gardens in Darjeeling, estimates a loss of 10 per cent in annual production and a definite hit on the bottomline.

Out of the company’s seven Darjeeling gardens, one is loss-making. The current agitation may drag the other six into the red as a major chunk of the annual revenue will be lost.



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