

POOR WAGES FORCE HILL YOUTHS TO EXPLORE LUCRATIVE OPTIONS

Israel-exodus storm in Darjeeling teacup

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Darjeeling: Cheers for Israel are getting louder in the queen of the hills where the “champagne of tea” is grown.

“I used to hear from my elders that the saying ‘gold grows on tea bushes’ drove the earlier generations to work in tea gardens. Today, I have sold my family’s gold necklaces and am heading to Israel to earn a decent living,” said Bikash Chhetri (name changed on request), a resident of the Soom tea garden in Darjeeling.

Bikash is undergoing a one-month caregiving training at a centre on Panchkui-an Road in Delhi. He is also

being taught basic Hebrew. Most from the region land the job of a caregiver to the elderly in Israel.

The road to Israel, however, is not cheap.

An aspirant must be willing to shell out more than Rs 16 lakh to agents to land a job in Israel. Earlier,

[VOTECHASE]

the amount was Rs 26 lakh but the cost came down because of the ongoing Gaza war that has pushed up the demand for labour.

“I sold gold, cows, sought loans from relatives and have still managed to collect only around Rs 6 lakh. The agents have agreed to put in



A tea garden in Darjeeling

the rest of the money with a 5 per cent interest that will be deducted from my salary,” Bikash said.

Many who are now in Israel — where the sal-

aries are “relatively lucrative” — agree that the agents profit the most.

“We get anything between Rs 1.2-2 lakh in Israel. A similar job in

Dubai fetches you around Rs 20,000 per month,” said Pravesh (name changed on request), a youth from Darjeeling who is currently working in Ramla, around an hour’s drive from the capital Tel Aviv.

Pravesh, 29, will be welcomed with open arms if he wants to join any tea garden back home.

“Absenteeism is as high as 45 to 50 per cent of the workforce. The exodus from the Darjeeling gardens became acute after the 104-day strike in 2017,” said Sandeep Mukherjee, principal adviser, the Darjeeling Tea Association.

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The 87 tea gardens of the Darjeeling Lok Sabha constituency that can sell their produce as "Darjeeling Tea" because of the Geographic Indicator (GI) status it received in 2003 have 70,000 workers on its roll and provide direct or indirect sustenance to around 3 lakh people.

Poor labour supply has been one of the biggest problems for the industry of late. The union and workers blame low wages and point to a general trend among youths to join the hospitality industry and other less labour-intensive and more rewarding professions.

"The Darjeeling gardens used to complete around 26 rounds of plucking in a year. Now it has come down to 16-18 rounds on an average," said a tea planter. The industry, which in the 90s would produce 14.5 million kg of made tea, produced only 6.1 million kg in 2023.

Pravesh, who is a graduate, said there was no question of returning to work in the tea gardens. "For most of the youths of my age, going back to the tea gardens is an absolute no. Even if not Israel, most prefer to work in the bigger cities for better salaries," said Pravesh.

The daily wage of a tea garden worker is Rs 250.

"This is a wrong representation. The Rs 250 is only the cash component of the wage. If one is to take other fringe benefits into account, the wage will be Rs 422," a planter said.

A 2022 report of the parliamentary standing committee on commerce, which focused on Darjeeling Tea, took "cognisance of meagre wages being paid to tea workers of Darjeeling and other areas of north Bengal which is below the statutory threshold of minimum wages in the country".

A 24-member minimum wage advisory committee on

tea was formed in Bengal in 2015. It has met 18 times but is yet to finalise the minimum wage for workers.

The management, however, stresses that the Darjeeling industry, which has an annual turnover of around Rs 400-500 crore, is in a crisis because of high absenteeism, low production and low-price realisation in domestic and international markets.

"Tea gardens of Darjeeling are up for sale but there are no buyers. Why would owners want to sell gardens?" said a planter.

Union leaders said the management, too, must take responsibility as they have not "invested back" into the garden through replanting. The deteriorating health of the Darjeeling tea industry is expected to fuel the exodus.

Life away from home, however, is not easy. Once in Israel, it takes almost two-three years to pay off the debt, forcing the workers to stay back even during periods of conflict.

Many parents are forced to leave their children in Darjeeling with their grandparents for years.

"In 2020, I developed complications in my gall bladder. Doctors advised me to return to Darjeeling but I refused," said Pravesh who visited Darjeeling only once after he left in 2018.

Pravesh recounted the instance of a woman who fell sick and returned to Darjeeling after three months. "After another four-five months, she went back to Israel by paying another Rs 15 lakh but unfortunately she fell ill for the second time. She ended up losing around Rs 30 lakh," Pravesh said.

Bikash is hopeful of flying off to Israel before the results of the Lok Sabha elections are out. "I am hoping that my fortunes will change after two-three years. My wife is also in Israel. My brother-in-law, too, is there and he has now bought land in Siliguri and is doing good financially," Bikash said.