

## **Gorkha Janmukti Morcha requests for allocation for jobs for tea garden workers**

***Vivek Chhetri | Darjeeling Published 03.06.21, 02:35 AM***

The demand comes at a time cinchona plantation labourers across the hills, most of whom are not working due the ongoing “restrictions”, are being inoculated

Now that vaccines are being made available to private hospitals, some tea gardens are trying for tie-ups.

The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha’s Binay Tamang camp has requested the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration to allocate Covid-19 vaccines to tea garden workers and teachers and non-teaching staff of private educational institutions.

Keshav Raj Pokhrel, the spokesman for the Tamang faction, said it was difficult for labourers to abide by Covid-19 protocol while working in tea gardens. “I request your good office to initiate steps to vaccinate the tea garden workers,” Pokhrel said in a letter sent to the principal secretary, GTA.

The request comes at a time cinchona plantation labourers across the Darjeeling hills, most of whom are not attending to work because of the ongoing “restrictions”, are being inoculated. But the tea garden hands who are reporting for work in the present situation are finding it difficult to manage jobs.

The paradox stems from a government order that has identified priority groups for vaccination.

The Directorate of Cinchona & Other Medicinal Plants, which employs around 5,000 workers, is a public service undertaking. Tea gardens which employ nearly 3 lakh workers across north Bengal are private entities.

“The state government has identified 20-odd categories as priority groups. One such group is government employees. The cinchona plantation is a government entity,” Darjeeling district magistrate S. Poonambalam said.

While vaccination is currently open for people aged only above 45 years, those listed in the priority group can get vaccinated if one has attained the age of 18 years.

Sources in the cinchona plantation said vaccination of workers had started a few days back.

Samuel Rai, director, cinchona plantations, did not answer calls from this newspaper but sources said apart from emergency and office staff, most cinchona workers were staying off work after some Covid-19 cases were detected in the plantation.

“Workers stopped attending to work, two three days into the restriction announced by the state government,” said a source.

When the state government announced the restriction from May 16 onwards, it allowed tea gardens to operate with 50 per cent of the workforce in each shift. There was no such mention regarding cinchona plantations.

Most of the 87 tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills are open. “Some divisions of tea gardens did enforce localised lockdowns when cases were detected but by and large, the estates are open,” said an industry source.

The source also said “some” tea groups were ready to buy vaccines at their own cost and not wait for free doses from the government.

A tea garden worker earns Rs 217 a day, while the wage of a cinchona plantation labourer is Rs 260.

“In fact, we had started the process to procure vials from private hospitals during the start of the second wave of the pandemic. But the government then restricted the availability of vaccines to private hospitals,” said a source.

Now that vaccines are being made available to private hospitals, some tea gardens are trying for tie-ups. “Even though we are still hopeful, we have not managed to secure the vaccines (for the workers) till now,” said a source.

The tea estates in the hills employ around 55,000 permanent workers and 15,000 temporary labourers. “It will definitely be difficult to get vaccines in such large numbers at this moment,” admitted a planter.

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