

Reopening of Jalpaiguri tea auction centre **'not viable'**

Our Correspondent | Jalpaiguri Published 23.06.21, 01:59 AM

Union ministry of commerce and industry has said the Tea Board of India was of the opinion because of alleged infrastructure lacunae at the facility

Union ministry of commerce and industry has said the Tea Board of India was of the opinion that reopening of the Jalpaiguri tea auction centre was "not viable" because of alleged infrastructure lacunae at the facility and inadequate supply of the brew for the sale.

Stakeholders of the north Bengal tea sector said the reasons were factually incorrect, while the Trinamul Congress seized the opportunity to attack the BJP government at the Centre for its alleged step-motherly attitude towards the region.

The ministry has sent the communication to the north Bengal tea auction committee that runs the centre. The bad news for the industry came through a letter dated June 9 and sent by Bijendra Singh, section officer, ministry of commerce and industry, to Purjojit Bakshi Gupta, the vice-chairman of the tea auction centre.

The letter mentioned that the issue of reopening the centre had been considered in consultation with the Tea Board but was considered unviable.

"The Tea Board has also informed that the matter has been thoroughly examined by them and the Board is of the opinion that opening of Jalpaiguri Auction Centre is not viable at present and will not add any value to the tea trade," the letter states.

The Jalpaiguri centre was opened in 2005 but has remained defunct since 2015.

The ministry has cited a number of reasons — which tea auction committee members allege are factually wrong — for the decision.

The ministry said in the letter that the Tea Board had informed "that Jalpaiguri physical tea auction centre lacks certain infrastructural facilities" and became "non-operational essentially due to non-availability of tea for auction".

The ministry hasn't, however, specified the lacunae in infrastructure facilities. Another reason cited by the ministry is the presence of an auction centre in Siliguri, about 45km away.

"Further, the Jalapaiguri centre is located in proximity to the Siliguri e-auction centre, which handles about 140 million kgs of tea per year and caters to the entire North Bengal region including Jalpaiguri," the letter states.

There has always been a simmering undercurrent over facilities in Jalpaiguri and Siliguri.

Against this background, the ministry has suggested that the Siliguri e-auction centre "can be expanded" to handle higher volumes.

"As tea auctions are being held through an online platform, revival of the physical auction centre of Jalpaiguri may not add any value," stated Singh.

Purjojit issued a point-wise rebuttal stating that the ministry was stating wrong facts to close the auction centre.

The vice-chairman of the auction centre said that M.G.K Bhanu, former Tea Board chairman, had visited the auction centre in Jalpaiguri in May 2012 "and had appreciated the infrastructure".

"He had also inaugurated an e-auction facility here. We are shocked by the content of the letter from the official of the Union ministry," said Purjojit.

Auction committee members also said a total of 77,573 kg of tea had been auctioned off at the Jalpaiguri centre between January and September 2015.

Over the years, there has been a demand that all CTC tea be sold from Jalpaiguri while leaf tea could be traded from Siliguri to ensure optimum utilisation of both the centres.

The closure of the auction centre would impact the local economy as several warehouses, blending and packaging units and hotels used to thrive on of the facility.

The central government's decision, several tea industry insiders said, has exposed New Delhi's apathy towards the tea sector in general despite "tall claims" by senior Union ministers.

Krishna Kalyani, vice-chairman, West Bengal Tea Directorate, has threatened to resort to a movement against the Union ministry's decision.

"BJP leaders want division of state alleging lack of development in north Bengal but their government is stalling development in our region. If the decision is not reversed, we will resort to agitation," said Kalyani, who is also the Jalpaiguri district president of Trinamul.

Another Trinamul leader said: "In 2016, the then Union minister of state for commerce and industry, Nirmala Sitharaman, had talked about opening seven closed gardens in the region but nothing has happened. Former Darjeeling MP S.S. Ahluwalia had also talked about creating a separate ministry for tea but that remained confined to election speeches."

Jalpaiguri BJP MP Jayanta Roy said: "I am unaware of any such letter from the Union government. I want the tea auction centre to function here and I will contact the ministry concerned."

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