Is the World Bank keeping its promises to Indian tea workers?

August 2017

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In February 2013, three NGOs in Assam filed a complaint to the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO), the World Bank Group's independent watchdog. The complaint raised concerns about living and working conditions at three tea plantations run by Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL) and owned by the World Bank Group. In November 2016, the CAO released the findings of its investigation, confirming that the Bank broke its promises of increased agency for workers. The watchdog found that APPL workers had low wages, limited freedom of association, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and were regularly exposed to hazardous pesticides without adequate protection.

Unfortunately, the Bank ignored most of the investigation's findings and chose to endorse a limited action plan, called "Project Unnati" – "progress" in Hindi – which only addresses a smaller subset of issues.

Unsurprisingly, the World Bank has also failed to keep the promises it made in Project Unnati. In July 2017, Team AccountabiliTEA met with workers from the three APPL plantations. Workers reported that labour quarters, where auditors and visitors are regularly taken, have seen some improvements. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of other labour quarters remain in disrepair, with broken roofs, squalid sanitation systems, and unclean drinking water. Many worker houses do not have a toilet. Some have toilet structures that are broken or otherwise unusable. One plantation continues to lack electricity in the labour quarters, leaving workers in darkness for years.

Project AccountabiliTEA takes you beyond the glossy facade of Project Unnati and highlights the terrible living and working conditions continuing on APPL plantations. The faces of workers and their families have been blurred and their names withheld to protect against possible retaliation.

For its investment to be meaningful, the World Bank must ensure workers have information about APPL and play a central role in determining what changes are made. This must happen in ways that address the power imbalance between workers and plantation management.
Located in the North-East of India, Assam is the world’s largest tea growing region. Nearly 1 million tea plantation workers and their families depend on the industry. Most workers belong to Adivasi communities forcibly brought from central India over 150 years ago under British rule. Ever since, the community has been entrapped in a cycle of generational servitude.

Workers live on remote plantations in labour quarters, and depend on their employers for almost every aspect of their lives: from their housing and drinking water, to healthcare and education. Plantation managers maintain strict control over access to the plantations, making it difficult for visitors to enter, and limiting workers’ ability to organise.

As they are a distinct cultural group, Adivasi tea workers have a separate existence and identity from the local Assamese. Their cultural and physical separation exacerbates barriers workers face in accessing decent education, jobs, and other opportunities. The Adivasi tea workers are further marginalised in Assam as they do not have Scheduled Tribe status, which deprives them of educational and employment benefits, even though such status is granted to Adivasis in neighbouring West Bengal.

Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL) was set up in 2007, after Tata Tea (now Tata Global Beverages) sold its plantation business. Tata Tea sought to replicate an earlier sale where it sold part of its shares through an employee buyout. The World Bank came on board and invested in the new company (APPL) in 2009.

The World Bank reasoned that the proposed employee share ownership program would empower workers by offering them an opportunity to make decisions in the company and share in its profits. It was envisioned that the Bank’s rules governing financing would help raise labour conditions, and the investment would support the livelihoods of more than 30,000 tea workers and their families.

More than 155,000 people live and work on APPL’s 21 tea plantations in Assam. Eighty percent of workers in APPL plantations are women, engaged primarily in plucking tea leaves. Women are assumed to have more nimble fingers.

Source: APPL Annual Report (2016)
All percentages have been rounded
World Bank ignores watchdog’s investigation

In 2013, local Adivasi organisations filed a complaint to the World Bank’s independent watchdog, the CAO, on behalf of workers from APPL’s Hattigor, Majuli, and Nahorani plantations in Assam. In November 2016, the watchdog found that the project had failed to protect the health of workers and lift them out of poverty.

The CAO found that APPL violated the Bank’s standards, from low wages and restricted freedom of association, to poor housing and sanitation, and exposure to dangerous pesticides. The investigation also found that consultation with workers had been poor, particularly around the shareholder program.

Instead of proposing ways to address the findings reached by its watchdog, the World Bank disputed most of the findings, relying on a separate audit commissioned in 2014 by Tata Global Beverages. The Bank claimed it had “no reason to doubt the integrity of” that audit, which was carried out by an NGO called Solidaridad.

The World Bank disputed the most crucial findings of its watchdog, which addressed the root causes of workers’ poverty: low wages, freedom of association, and discrimination arising from their Adivasi identity.

The Solidaridad audit:
- Has never been made public
- Was not aimed at assessing compliance with the World Bank’s rules
- Was commissioned and paid for by Tata Global Beverages
- Is contrary to findings reached by the CAO, the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and an APPL-commissioned audit conducted by the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS)

FAIR WAGES DENIED
Wages in the Assam tea sector are set through “collective bargaining” between employer associations and only one union. Workers have raised concerns for years that this union is in collusion with tea plantation management and has consistently undermined their interests in collective bargaining agreements.

TEA WORKERS IN ASSAM ARE CURRENTLY PAID A DAILY CASH WAGE OF Rs.137 (ABOUT US$2). APPL APPLIES DAILY WORK QUOTAS TO MOST JOBS. FOR INSTANCE, PLUCKERS MUST PICK 24 KG OF TEA LEAVES OR MAY FACE PAY DEDUCTIONS. THE PAYSLIP BELOW SHOWS Rs.2 WAS DEDUCTED FOR EVERY KILO UNDER QUOTA.
The Bank and APPL promised under Project Unnati that by March 2017, it would put in place a system to monitor attendance and visits of estate doctors in the estate hospitals, and cover all estate hospitals under the National Rural Health Mission.

Workers themselves continue to report that they do not know the schedule of doctors and that on many occasions, no doctor is available. When they do get seen by a doctor, they report poor quality of medical care.

There is no woman doctor in the hospital, So, women feel uncomfortable and can’t share their medical issues. No one has fixed the issue for two years.

-Worker, Hattigor, July 24, 2017

No doctors are available... The doctor won’t even touch me with his stethoscope. He treats us like we are untouchables... Doctors don’t pay any attention to patients, talk on mobile phone as they treat us.

-Worker, Hattigor, July 24, 2017

Workers continue to report that the standard of education provided to children is inadequate. In 2013, in some instances, the teacher-student ratio ranged from 1:200 to 1:300, with instruction provided for one hour to each class level per day.

Some pesticide sprayers report that it is only when visitors come to the plantations that they are given protective gear and are told to wear it. The rest of the time, most sprayers work without protective gear and complain of a burning sensation in their eyes and on their skin.

Others complain that when gear has been made available to them, the gear is ill fitting and unsuited to the hot weather.

Many sprayers have received little training about the importance of protection. To make matters worse, most sprayers go home without washing themselves because wash stations do not exist or lack soap or other washing equipment.

The doctor comes and takes blood samples but the sprayers never get the test results. They take a full vial of blood. After taking blood, sprayers are not given any tablet, medicine or anything… I believe it’s the company hospital that comes to take the blood… I do not know whether they send it for testing or not.

- Sprayer, Majuli plantation (July 25, 2017)

They do not regularly give protective gear. They only give it when outsiders come - then we are forced to wear it. They specifically ask for it back when outsiders leave.

- Sprayer, Majuli (July 25, 2017)

I have been spraying for 15 years now... I have been spraying constantly the whole time. Jo gadha hai wo godha hee rehta hai (If you are a donkey, you remain a donkey).

- Sprayer, Majuli (July 25, 2017)

The doctor comes and takes blood samples but the sprayers never get the test results. They take a full vial of blood. After taking blood, sprayers are not given any tablet, medicine or anything... I believe it’s the company hospital that comes to take the blood... I do not know whether they send it for testing or not.

- Pesticide handler, Hattigor (July 24, 2017)
**SUBSTANDARD LIVING CONDITIONS**

**Housing shortage and disrepair**

While Indian law requires APPL to provide and maintain a house for all permanent workers and their families, many permanent workers have yet to be housed by the company.

Additionally, most existing worker homes are in poor repair. Workers reported having:
- Broken or leaky roofs
- Broken or cracked walls and ceilings
- Broken doors and windows
- Unfinished floors
- Poor air circulation
- Safety concerns

While the company does do some repairs, they are primarily in the areas of the plantations where auditors and visitors pass by. Workers from “model lines” -- where outsiders are taken -- complained that cleaning and repairs are only done before visits.

![Image of worker homes in poor condition]

The World Bank and APPL committed to provide working toilets to all permanent workers by March 2017 and mobile toilets for women in the plantation areas. While some efforts have been made to build and repair toilets, too many homes are still without them, and many existing toilets are unsafe, unhygienic, or otherwise unusable. Some toilets don’t have septic tanks. Many septic tanks that exist have not been cleaned and some overflow during the rains. There are no toilets in the plantation areas, which creates challenges for the predominantly female tea pluckers.

"We go to the bathroom in the bushes"
- Factory worker, Majuli (July 25, 2017)
Dirty drinking water

While APPL has taken some steps to provide access to piped water in houses most visible to visitors, many workers still do not have access to company-provided water, and have made their own makeshift tube wells. Families that do have piped water often share their tap with three other families.

The taps are poorly constructed, and many are broken and leaking. Water quality is also poor, and supply is intermittent – often less than an hour a day.

“Nobody drinks the company water. It comes dirty from the pump – it’s not drinkable.”

The water filter is of no use. The filter is dirty and broken. We used to use it, but it only worked for a year...

“We get drinking water from someone else’s well.”

Discussion between workers and family members in Nahorani plantation (July 26, 2017)

Squalid sanitation conditions

The World Bank watchdog looked at several reports that linked a high prevalence of tuberculosis, anaemia, diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses, and worm infestation amongst residents of tea plantations to bad environmental sanitation and hygiene.

Many drains in the plantations remain uncemented, uncovered, and dirty. Workers report that the drains are cleaned, but only when visitors come.

Very little has been done under Project Unnati to remedy this.
Electricity

The World Bank promised to arrange electricity supply from government boards at residential rates across the plantations by March 2017. Further, workers were to be engaged and trained on good practices of energy saving.

APPL has taken steps to ensure individual metering for all households. However, workers and their families in Nahorani are in darkness, and do not have access to electricity.

Workers in Hattigor and Majuli expressed frustration about not knowing how electricity bills were calculated. They observed that electricity bills for households with a single fan and light bulb are equivalent to bills for houses with televisions, refrigerators, and other appliances.

Workers have not been provided an effective way to register their grievances. Workers fear retaliation from management for speaking up, and there are restrictions on outsiders to enter and observe the labour lines. This has created a chilling effect on workers’ ability to voice their concerns and meaningfully participate in their own development.

EMPLOYEE ESTATE COUNCILS

Employee Estate Councils are monthly meetings that happen on APPL plantations. APPL claims these meetings are an effective setting to resolve worker complaints about housing infrastructure, health, and sanitation. These Councils are also supposed to be a place for management and unions to consult with tea workers. Workers themselves do not consider the Councils a safe or effective space to raise their concerns.

GRIEVANCE REDRESSAL MECHANISM

The World Bank promised that an electronic complaint management system would be implemented by March 2017 to track housing repairs and other complaints. Every complaint was to be logged with a unique number. Additionally, all actions and timelines were to be recorded, with the goal of providing complainants periodic updates in case of delays. Workers themselves are not aware of such a system and are not given any such information when making a complaint. In fact, workers in Hattigor, Majuli, and Nahorani expressed frustration at a lackadaisical and unresponsive approach to worker requests for repairs and maintenance.

“The manager tells us that the plantation is in debt to the electricity provider. He told us that if workers allow for more money to be deducted from their wages, then only we will get power back.”
- Plucker, Nahorani plantation (July 26, 2017)

“My house was banged by elephants 8/9 years ago and that has still not been repaired. My doors and windows are broken. We never open them... My ceiling and floor is broken. The wall is also cracked. I have now been complaining for 6-7 years. When we complain they say they will fix it, but they don’t do anything.”
- Plucker, Hattigor plantation (July 24, 2017)

Source: Project Utnal (2016)
Retaliation from management

Many workers fear retaliation from plantation management if they complain about living or working conditions on the plantations. They have heard instances of workers being penalised for speaking up.

There was a sardar (worker supervisor) who complained about water stagnating close to the school. After two children were sick, the sardar pressured management to take the children to an outside hospital. He was demoted to being a chowkidar (watchman) a few months ago.

- Plucker, Nahorani plantation (July 26, 2017)

Worker shareholder program

Under the World Bank funded project, workers are part owners of APPL. Unfortunately, after more than six years of the worker shareholder program, many workers do not know what the program is, and where to get more information.

We have not been given any information or training programs about the shares. I did not know that I have the right to vote at an Annual General Meeting in Kolkata. Nobody told me that.

- Worker shareholder, Nahorani plantation (July 24, 2017)

The way forward: Hearing the voices of workers

As this report has demonstrated, Project Unnati is largely failing to bring timely and meaningful progress to the lives of workers. For this investment to be effective, the World Bank must ensure workers are adequately informed, and provided genuine decision-making opportunities.

In responding to its watchdog’s report, the World Bank committed to selecting an “independent third party” to consult with workers on the changes that need to be made.

But, nearly a year after the Bank’s response, a consultant is yet to be hired for this crucial task. The Bank must urgently make whole on its promise to ensure workers are consulted by a legitimate third party, without fear of retaliation. This will create a credible action plan, which the Bank must ensure is adequately resourced.

The Bank must genuinely invest in workers - through resources, expertise, and goodwill - for its investment to have the enduring social impact it intended.

Management controls communications between workers and outsiders

In the first half of 2014, APPL commissioned a team from Tata Institute for Social Sciences (TISS) to conduct site visits to five APPL plantations. TISS submitted their audit report to APPL in late 2014. In its report, TISS writes that their team members “were always accompanied by the managers or welfare officers during the audit”...“and...“according to workers themselves, they were forced by management to conceal their actual conditions from auditors.”

Earlier this year, the manager called all the chowkidars (watchmen) for a meeting, and told them to not let NGOs come. They said if NGOs [do] come, tell them everything is better. Afterwards, workers and the overseer were together. At that time, one of the chowkidars said it’s good NGOs come. So why should we oppose them? And later he was taken out of the chowkidar job and made a tea plucker.

- APPL plantation, July 2017 (anonymised to protect identity)

Workers are also told they should not be speaking to outsiders.
TEAM
Promotion and Advancement of Justice, Harmony and Rights of Adivasis (PAJHRA) is an initiative of Adivasis of Assam that tries to steer Adivasis towards self development by networking and collaborating with Adivasi community members and organisations.

People’s Action for Development (PAD) is an Assam-based Adivasi-led organisation that seeks to empower marginalized Adivasis and tribal people by organizing them into self help groups, building their capacity, and enabling them to utilize available resources.

Accountability Counsel assists communities to use little-known international complaint offices tied to projects that cause harm.

Nazdeek is a legal empowerment organisation dedicated to bringing access to justice closer to marginalized communities in India.