

# Are Deliberate Documentation Errors Denying Bengal Tea Workers Access to State Welfare? - The Wire

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Tea gardens have long been critical pivots of colonial and post-colonial administration and governance, subjected to the scrutiny of various agencies – including tea management boards, political unions, government officials, and various development organisations.

However, a recent fieldwork, in July 2024, with a community of tea garden workers revealed persistent challenges faced in accessing state welfare, especially due to documentation discrepancies.

Governance mechanisms often continue to fall short of addressing the fundamental rights of communities living in the tea gardens of northern West Bengal.

During interviews and focused group discussions (FGD), tea garden workers highlighted persistent challenges they face in availing entitlements due to various irregularities in information dissemination due to discrepancies in vital documents such as voter cards, Aadhaar cards, ration cards, PAN cards, and reservation certificates, and errors in paperwork during the application process.

Many of them often remain unaware of the errors in their documentation or even the status of their applications, creating layers of obstacles. Moreover, they speculated that the source of discrepancies arises not only from systemic ignorance or lack of awareness but also from deliberate actions of the corrupt individuals with socio-political privileges, officers and profit-oriented digitally skilled entrepreneurs.

Also read: [How Poverty Is Perpetuating Trafficking In Assam's Tea Gardens](#)

The burden of discrepancies in documents often flows to the next generation, generating an inter-generational cycle of 'wrong' documentation.

The fieldwork was part of an intervention project of the [Digital Empowerment Foundation \(DEF\)](#), carried out in various tea gardens like Bandapani, Tasati, Binaguri, Huntapara, Dalgaon, etc., from districts like Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. It aimed at assessing the outcomes of the program called [SoochnaPreneur](#), qualitatively.

Under the intervention, sixteen women were recruited as SoochnaPreneurs and trained to run digitally enabled community centres for public service. A few of them, from the village of Bandapani, situated in the isolated and undulating terrain of Alipurduar and surrounded by vast

tea gardens and interlaced by numerous dry riverbeds, shared their struggles in the interviews and FGDs.

Their challenges can be described in the following ways.

### **Delayed & networked information dissemination**

An FGD, with a group of 9 tea garden workers with mixed gender composition – the age group of 22-56 years – revealed that information-related entitlements remain secluded to a few individuals and networks of the privileged.

Despite the growing efforts to bridge the digital gaps and eradicate information poverty, many estimates suggest that access to information remains a challenge for a large section of Indian societies, as many do not even have access to smartphones or meaningful internet connectivity.

This challenge is far more stressful in villages surrounding the tea gardens of Assam and West Bengal, a [recent baseline study of DEF](#) suggests.

For example, only 38.66% of people have a smartphone in the gardens of Jalpaiguri district, while the situation is worse in districts like Cooch Behar (5.80%) of West Bengal, and Dibrugarh (20.89%) and Sonitpur (2.01%) of Assam.

As a consequence of such a striking digital divide, compounded with factors like lower educational attainments among their parents, Sudeshna\* and Sitala\*, two student participants (pursuing undergraduate degree) stated the following:

*Sudeshna: “When the job applications come out, we usually find out later that the form was available, and by then, the time has already passed. It would have been better if we had known earlier.”*

*Sitala: “If we could get updates as soon as the forms are released and know about it in advance, we could apply on time.”*

During the ‘[Duare Sarkar](#)’ initiatives of the West Bengal government, which aimed to deliver services and welfare schemes at the doorsteps of the people through outreach camps, the participants emphasised about information asymmetry in receiving timely notifications, often via mobile phones, while the majority remained unaware due to limited access to connectivity and ICTs. For instance, Jopona\* shared:

*“During Duare Sarkar, only some people received the news, either from the Panchayat office or through mobile notifications. But many didn’t get the information because most people don’t have smartphones, and they spend most of their time working in the gardens.”*

The situation is even more challenging in remote villages like Chaibasa, located in the border areas near Bhutan, where internet connectivity is significantly less. Manisha\*, at her early 30s from the Chaibasa area of the garden, highlighted the difficulties, stating:

*“Our village is surrounded by rivers on all sides, and we don’t even get proper network coverage.*

*We struggle to get all this information here.”*

Given such conditions manifested through information inequality and the digital divide, traditional methods of information dissemination have limited reach and often arrive too late.

Also read: [More than a Tea-Cup: The Anatomy of a Bonus Deal](#)

Even owning a smartphone does not guarantee timely access to information to the underserved tea garden workers – for whom the process of leaving the village to visit the nearest internet café or Panchayat office is both time-consuming and costly, cutting into already inadequate daily wages.

### **‘Wrong’ documentation and information poverty**

An interview with Laxmi\*, a 28-year-old woman graduate running a small ICT service-related business in the village as a SoचनाPreneur, mentioned the transformative potential of socioeconomic growth when one gets information regarding entitlements.

She described the impact of information poverty on marginalised communities in the following way:

*Laxmi: “Many people don’t even know if there are errors in their Aadhaar or voter cards. For example, women often face issues because they don’t have caste certificates, which prevents them from accessing benefits like the Lokkhi Bhandar Scheme. Before our centre was established, people would try to apply, often going to the distant Madarihat block office. But they would fill out the forms incorrectly. For instance, if there was an error in the Aadhaar card name, they didn’t know why their application got cancelled. When applying for a caste certificate, they would sometimes submit proof of their husband instead of their father, not realizing that proof from the husband wouldn’t suffice. They would keep reapplying without understanding the reason for rejection. They didn’t even ask why—it was just, ‘We submitted it, but it keeps getting rejected. Who knows why?’ They didn’t understand the cause.”*

I asked, “Didn’t the officers tell them anything?”

*Laxmi: “The officers were there to explain the forms, but they didn’t tell them, ‘Look, there’s an error in your Aadhaar card, and that’s why it might get rejected.’ They didn’t provide that information. When we started our centre, people came to us asking, ‘Why aren’t we getting the caste certificate? What should we do?’”*

The lack of awareness about the ‘wrongs’ in their documents is not only due to systemic barriers in education but also from the kind of support they get from government bodies, which leads to a general mistrust of government processes.

The daunting experience of applying, more so because of the replacement of manual offline systems with digital systems, especially for those who are unfamiliar or had bad experiences with bureaucratic processes, often makes them reluctant about these processes, discouraging them from claiming their rightful entitlements.

## Deliberate discrepancies?

Furthermore, discussions also indicated that the discrepancies in documentation arise not only from systemic ignorance or lack of awareness around it but may also be because of deliberate actions. While discussing the sources of such discrepancies, some participants claimed the following:

*Sachin\**: “We can’t really say, sir...how these things keep happening! They [meant to indicate the officers/businesspersons of internet cafes/or other intermediaries] are told everything properly, but they still make spelling mistakes.”

*Jopona*: “Maybe, they do it intentionally.”

*Laxmi*: “It happens, especially when Aadhaar cards are made, some people intentionally make errors. It’s like a cycle—as if they ensure mistakes are there so that people have to return and pay money for corrections. If everything were accurate from the start, where would their income come from?”

Even though it can be a question of human capacity – to be able to correctly spell one’s name by just hearing or by decoding one’s handwriting – there are several measures to keep such problems of misspelling/mismatches in check. Implications of these intentional actions create loopholes that often perpetuate corruption, contributing to barriers to essential services.

In many cases, the participants said that the burden of a single spelling mistake made by others in vital identity documents of tea garden workers often gets reproduced in the documents of their children.

If a generation fails to manage and maintain consistency across documents or any digital records, the burden gets transferred to the next, especially in contexts where parents have received less education, live in isolated terrains, and efforts to correct documents may cost their daily wage.

While highlighting these challenges, they mentioned the intergenerational impact of documentation discrepancies leading to a lack of welfare access:

*Sachin*: “Yes, it’s easier to correct the documents for the children nowadays, but the biggest problem is when the parents’ names are incorrect. If the guardians’ names are wrong, it affects the children too. One often keeps on fixing these things throughout their lifetime.”

*Jopona*: “If the parents’ documents are wrong, then the children’s will also be wrong. The problem will continue intergenerationally.”

*Purnima*: “There still exists a family here without Aadhaar cards, despite spending so much money on the process. They had to go back to Bihar to get it done.”

Given such conditioning, these discrepancies in documents are exacerbated by the recent push towards linking every document under new digitalisation initiatives, where any discrepancy, even a minor one, can cause significant anxiety among the already marginalised communities.

In such remote environments, it is necessary to map out the economies underlying correction of documentation discrepancies and allocate services closer to these underserved communities, which reduces the need for expensive and time-consuming travel to distant government offices with an uncertainty of results.

Despite numerous interventions, many studies suggest how these tea garden workers still face persistent socio-economic challenges, including gender discrimination, low wages, inadequate living and working conditions, and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

The lack of access to accurate information, digital platforms, and state welfare schemes further aggravates these issues.

While civil society organisations working at the grassroots and programs like SoochnaPreneur have helped navigate challenges related to information poverty, documentation discrepancies and corrupt actions through various participatory approaches with the communities, the government mechanisms need to step up as well.

*\*All names changed to protect the identities of the workers*

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