

Assam: Reforms Free medicines scheme for tea garden workers launched

The Free Drugs Scheme for 651 tea garden hospitals in the state will entail provisioning of 142 essential drugs, 47 surgical items, 45 consumables/linens and 6 numbers of disinfectants free of cost to the hospitals. The Assam government has launched, on September 24, a scheme for providing medicines, including 142 essential drugs free of cost to the hospitals in the state's tea gardens. The move comes just weeks after the health care facilities in the tea gardens grabbed national headlines when a 73-year-old doctor was lynched following the death of a worker in Teok tea garden of Jorhat district on August 31. The Free Drugs Scheme for 651 tea garden hospitals in the state will entail provisioning of 142 essential drugs, 47 surgical items, 45 consumables/linens and 6 numbers of disinfectants free of cost to the hospitals. An amount of Rs 20 crore would be spent every year for the scheme, officials said.



A press statement from Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal's office said "reducing the burden of out of pocket expenditure of tea garden population and making quality drugs accessible to them" are the main reasons for introducing the free medicine scheme. The latest scheme is in continuation to the already existing health schemes such as the 80 Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) service in 442 tea gardens and a wage compensation of Rs 12,000 (in four instalments) to each pregnant woman working in tea gardens. In his budget speech earlier this year, Sarma had also announced that from the next financial year, rice, currently provided at Rs 3 per kg under the National Food Security Act, would be provided free to the 4 lakh tea garden families. Sarma also promised to provide 2 kg sugar per tea garden family per month free of cost in an attempt to counter the practice of consuming salt with tea — started in the colonial era to battle dehydration in workers — which has led to health problems like hypertension and heart attacks. There are over 800 registered tea estates in the state. Tea garden workers were brought by the British from states like Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal after 1860. Even today the community suffers from economic backwardness, poor health conditions and low literacy rate.

Tea industry groups are lobbying for garden hospitals to be taken over under by state government. Industry insiders say that the main reason for urging the government to take over running of the garden hospitals is to reduce the costs and overcome the unavailability of doctors willing to take up jobs in the gardens. They add that tea industry is in a financial crisis due to overproduction and price stagnation. As per The Plantations Labour Act 1951 and the Assam Plantations Labour Rules, 1956, a health care service in a tea garden is the responsibility of the garden's management. Workers' unions say that the free drug scheme is a welcome step in times when medical services in garden hospitals suffer due to multiple causes. "The scheme will definitely benefit the workers. By law it is the management's responsibility but if the government is helping, it's well and good," said G S Barhoi, the Golaghat district secretary of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), the largest trade union organisation in tea gardens of Assam. Speaking at the launch Sarma stressed on "setting up more educational institutes like schools and colleges in the tea garden areas for spreading education and awareness". He also talked about the "need to employ more doctors in tea garden hospitals to adequately handle patient loads".

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