Coffee estates await return of Assam workers

They have been stuck in their home State owing to NRC procedures and floods

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The ongoing verifications for the National Register for Citizens (NRC) in Assam have stopped thousands of workers from returning to coffee estates of Karnataka. The Assamese workers left the estates in March-April, ahead of the parliamentary elections, and a majority of them are yet to return.

In Hassan district alone, more than 10,000 people from Assam are employed in many estates. Similarly, they work in estates of Chikmagaluru and Kodagu districts. For the last 15 years, the estates in the three districts have been dependent on workers from northeastern States, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh.

The final draft of the NRC was published on July 31, 2018. Many workers, whose names did not figure in the draft, were worried. They left to resubmit documents to claim citizenship. B.N. Jaggaish Shetty, manager of IBC company-owned Hasiruguda Estate in Belur taluk, said that last year more than 100 workers from Assam were in the estate. Now, there was none. “A few of them had returned very late and by then, we had made alternative arrangements. They must have gone to other estates,” he said.

The final NRC is expected to be published on August 31 and people are worried about leaving their native until then.

U.M. Thirthamallesh, president of the Karnataka Growers’ Federation, said 25 Assamese were working in his estate and they had not yet returned. “The last communication I received was that they would come back after Bakrid (August 12). I hope they return as our estates are dependant on them,” he said.

This year owing to decrease in rainfall, the demand for labour is minimum. Anticipating dip in production, estate-owners are trying to manage with the available workforce. “But if the workers delay further, the activities in the estates will suffer,” he added.

“Coffee production has always been dependent on outsiders. In the past, there were workers from Dakshina Kannada. Later, it was Tamil Nadu. Many of them settled here over the years,” said B.A. Jagannath, planter and former member of the Coffee Board. People from Assam are stuck in their home State because of the NRC procedures and the floods. They will not return until their citizenship issue is settled, he said.

Key role: Workers from Assam wait at a coffee estate near Arehalli in Belur taluk in Hassan, Karnataka. • SATHISH G.T.