

A CASE STUDY OF WOMEN WORKERS' MOVEMENT IN MUNNAR'S TEA PLANTATIONS

In an empirical study, attempt has been made to understand how a movement erupted among the tea plantation women workers demanding bonus and wage hike.

Thousands of women took to streets in Munnar in the Idukki district of Kerala at the first week of September last year demanding wage hikes as well as equal pay for equal work. Their main demand was an increase in wage to Rs.500 from the existing Rs.232 and a 20% bonus. What makes their struggle unique is the complete disassociation from all trade unions and any political parties for that matter. Now this is in Kerala which has many success stories of trade unions to boast for. The struggle of Pembilai Orumai (which is how the movement was named meaning women unity) is in stark contrast to the traditional, popular images about struggles and leaderships.

Ever since women stepped out of their homes to do paid work and started claiming different spaces, their spatiality was given a binary division into home/world, public/private. In the movement, the domestic affairs extended into the public space creating grey areas. Here is when one has to rethink on older perspectives about the women's spaces.

How did women themselves attain this? How did the peculiarity of female relationships that are binded in intimacy pave way for this? Was it the emotional upheaval type nature of the movement that interrupted the consistency of the movement?

The movement claims to be a completely women's collective and refused solidarity from many prominent trade unions of Kerala. There are allegations that it is funded by the Tamilnadu government. The politics in Kerala is where mostly individualistic concerns are addressed. While in Tamilnadu politics is more based on loyalty towards a particular political party/individual figure. Did a blurring of political boundary happen here as is the case with movements that address human rights? If there was any exchange of political ideas across the border, how did it work? How women did became agents in this network of exchange?

Entangled to the progress of the movement is the forging of an identity as woman and the shaping of their political ideas. Starting from their interactions in the *kaadu* to the Kudumbashresthat function within the estates where in women save their hard earned money there existed a passive female consciousness. Even where was no much interaction with women

from different estates there was always an invisible solidarity that finally showed its presence when they took to streets in Munnar.

Scope of the study

In spite of the fact that women constitute the major labour force in the plantations, there is a certain absence of literature that focuses on women's working conditions. This can be attributed to the fact that there is ample surveillance in the plantations that prohibit interaction with the workers. The management was of the view that the estate colonies are essentially private housing colonies and not public places. Thus they are bound by rules and regulations of employment and prevailing standing orders. The workers' benefits accrue according to contractual obligations (Raman Ravi K. 2010). The scholarly literature directly related to tea plantations in Kerala is more discussed in the field of Political Economy (cf. Ravi Raman 2002; Tharakan & George 1986) and the subaltern perspective is generally absent.

The struggle for women's equality as workers in the paid workforce has had to take the form of a double resistance. On the one hand women have had to struggle against the terms of engagement between employer and employed. Their struggle has been against the general tendency to exploitative pay and conditions of work. It has, in other words, had to be a *socialist* struggle, alongside working men, using similar resources of organized labour in the workplace and in society. On the other hand it has necessarily had to be a feminist struggle against the imposition of male sex-right by both employer and male colleagues. And indeed a tendency of this nature runs consistently through the women's movement. (Cockburn 1991).

The struggle's complete reluctance to engage with the existing trade union comes a blow especially because trade unionism in Kerala has seen many success stories in the past. This calls for looking at the trade union movement from a gender perspective. The development of trade union activity in Kerala can be divided into three periods. First, which lasted up to the mid- 1950s was characterised by a break with the past. The collective memories of older women recount this period as 'glorious' because of the achievement of several labour rights. A large number of women participated in this early union struggle.

The second period is termed 'the radical era', and lasted into the mid- 1970s. Huge political manifestations were common. In spite of the radicalism of the period and the huge manifestations of solidarity and power (militant struggles in which women also participated),

some women began to feel that it was becoming harder to put certain issues on the agenda. A decrease in the number of annual working days and continual violation of labour laws contributed to the material difficulties of women. Rumours of corruption, tendencies to distrust leaders, and the increasing aloofness of union representatives made feel excluded from the labour movement.

The third period, from the mid-1970s to the present, witnessed a severe economic crisis. In spite of the prohibition of 'kudivarappus' (illegal factories), most women tend to seek employment in such factories when the registered factories closed down. This trend can be attributed to the fact that, the male trade union leaders never put in their agenda, questions vital to a woman's survival.

Further the trade union movement does not appear to have evolved any specific agenda regarding the gender specificities of the plantation working class, which was constituted mostly by women. It was not their sheer numbers alone by which these women could have given able support to the trade union movement; their potential for revolt would have greatly augmented the struggle against capitalist forces. (Raman Ravi K. 2010).

Research approach

Given the nature of the study and limited period for field work, Case Study method has been found appropriate. This method gives the advantage of using various techniques like non-participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as focus group interview with key informants.

A qualitative approach has been adopted where in priority was given to capture different perceptions of the same issue. This brought out some interesting findings. For example, women answered differently on how the movement was named Pembilai Orumai. Responses varied from saying that it naturally came down to them seeing so much women together at one place, some anonymous person among the women named it and the others agreed upon. But in fact it was the media which gave the name, only one or two among them happened to know this. This shows the subtle nature of their identity formation.

Women from different estate divisions of the Kannan Devan Hill Plantations company was interviewed. Similar kind of uprisings also happened in other companies as well. Though visiting different divisions were random to an extent, distance from Munnar town where the

strike took place was considered- tried to include the distant ones as well as the closest. Also visited the Periyapara division from where the women first set out to protest. Mostly women were met at the estate lines. However visits were carried out at the field where women were met in groups which helped in understanding the intimacy and the bond that they share. Sometimes when one was being interviewed in the estate lines, her next door neighbour joined in.

It was decided that the field work will be carried among women only. However since work was carried out mostly during the evenings and holidays, in most cases, men of the household also came in to express their views. This helped in understanding their attitude towards women striking and how they understood women's hardships at the workplace. Hence the constraints that women faced when they represent themselves became clearer.

Also during the initial few days of the field work it was difficult to separate out women who were part of the movement as well as the ones who have registered in the same name as a trade union. The first days went by interacting with women who were actively involved, but given the nature of the study it was necessary to meet also the 'reluctant' ones.

Bonus money: Hope of a year's hard work

The news of a cut down in the bonus, when it spread in the *kaadu*, was met by women with tear filled eyes. There was anger and frustration, for bonus money is something that they look forward to every year. Needs that require bulk amount is usually postponed to the month of August when they get this money. There was heated discussion in the *kaadu* and a collective decision not to tolerate this. Round of talks were held with the union that proved futile. On Sep 2, 2015 a meeting that was part of an all India strike was going on in Munnar town. The leaders were giving speeches endlessly on workers' rights. Some women planned to raise their issue in this meeting and set forward to Munnar town. They forcefully took the mike and started questioning as to why the union turns a blind eye on their bonus issue. This is when women got the first taste of political action. It defied the conventional way of negotiation which is usually a meeting arranged by the authorities with only a bunch of trade union leaders. The tussle was shown in the local channel that reports news from Munnar town. This incident was of huge inspiration that women from different estates poured into Munnar town- to quote one of them "*ala alaya vanthanga*(came like waves), when you see women like you muster the courage to fight for rights and that representing the whole of women labour force,

how can one sit back home and relax? In two to three days it turned out into a mobilization of thousands of women. Seeing this new strength of women in the streets, media named it the *Pembilai Orumai*. But the movement which the women themselves claim has reached 'world level' has lost its fervour. Only in the memories of women remain the ups and downs of a struggle that they fought together.

The strike and its two parts:

When one closely examines the strike, it happened in two parts. The first one was against a cut down in the bonus and seeing the success of this, the women gathered again demanding for a wage hike. The women claims that they were mesmerized by the strength of their own unity which encouraged them to strike again. But there were forces already working to break this unity hence the second strike had a low turn-out. While women voluntarily came out for the first strike, in the second strike there was a need to convince many of them. The men of the family were used by the existing trade unions to stop women from protesting. Also the three prominent trade unions organised a strike parallel to the women's strike for wage hike to restore their dominancy among the workers.

Marriage into the estates:

The woman who gets married and shifts with the husband to live in the estate lines are expected to do field work in the estates. While the woman who is born in the estate already has the experience of working in the plantations as temporary worker, it is not the case with woman who shifts to the estate after marriage. They tend to associate the life in estate with hardship because of the extra work in the fields that they are expected to undertake. It is important to note that a woman usually becomes part of the permanent workforce in the plantations only after marriage or the birth of the first child.

Retention of their residential areas is mostly through women taking up permanent jobs in the plantations. Some women who are married out of the estate comes back and join as permanent worker to retain house for her parents who have retired and hence not entitled for accommodation facility. This is when there are no sons in the family. But it has to be noted that it is not the son who mostly take up permanent jobs in the estates but the daughter-in-laws. Also sometimes when the daughter-in-laws express refusals to work in the estates and the parents have to retain the residence, they ask their daughters to come and work in the estates.

Woman's domestic identity constitutes her as a disadvantaged worker, while being a low earner and subject to male authority at work diminishes her standing in the family (Cockburn 1991). The field work in the estate by women is mostly considered a part of household chore which as a matter of fact is considered the responsibility of woman. This leads to non-recognition of women's work often by the women themselves. It is the husband who is identified as the sole breadwinner of the family who goes 'out to work' for the collective welfare of the family. Here the contribution of women to the family income gets underestimated.

Unlike other working women, the women who work in the plantations does not go out of the estates and is devoid of the chance to claim other spaces. This also restricts them from getting to know life outside the estates. In fact in some cases it is men who brought about news about women plantation workers protesting in Munnar town. They even asked their wives to extend their solidarity to the movement. The estate life itself is to an extent cut off from the outside world which is slowly opening up with next generation moving out to live in hostels for higher education.

These days, educated women who gets married into the estate are reluctant to undertake field work in the plantations. There is a growing concern among the women workers about the diminishing value of the work that they have been undertaking for years.

Kaadu (women refer to their work place): where women work shoulder to shoulder

How long can you work without talking to each other asks Kavitha of Matupetty Estate?

Six days of the week, from dawn to dusk they spend time together in *kaadu* where they cut leaves standing next to each other. They carry down the heavy load of tea leaves, often from the top of steep hills to get it weighed by the *kangani*, the supervisor.

From the insect bites to the absence of toilets in the *kaadu* they all have similar story of agonies to tell. Almost all of them had to climb steep hill sometimes even during the time of pregnancy. There is something called 'light work' in which the women gets level land to work on. But this is not practised in all the estates. The hardships in *kaadu* largely gets voiced in their slogans. And the slogans, they say, were not made, it is just that they spoke their hearts out.

One such slogan goes like this:

Oom pechu ketu than - listening to your words

Yanainu (elephant) pakkaamah – doesn't care about elephants coming

Anju maniku ponomea – leave at 5 (in the morning for work)

At around eight in the morning, after completing works at home, women start to leave for field work. They go in groups walking and chitter- chattering. If someone gets late on some days, they make sure that they catch up with their friends, not to miss the stories of the day. Also if one cannot make it at the time of muster in the fields, friends will be asked to make excuses on behalf of her to the *kangani*. Shifting the *Aravela* (which is the paid half day leave a woman can take at the time of urgency) is very common among them. The friends also comes to talk to the supervisor when one needs half day leave usually at the time of menstruation. It is not uncommon that the supervisor makes sexist comments when women asks to take leave in between work when they feel sick at the time of periods. Women, who are reluctant to speak about their periods, asks friends to speak for her. Because of the absence of toilets in the fields, sometimes they urinate in the fields itself, with some of them keeping a watch to make sure that there are no men around. *Kaadu* is where they develop oneness as workers.

Later when they break for tea, they share snacks and pour black tea for one another. All the women have memberships in one or the other trade unions. But the difference in affiliation to

trade unions has nothing to do with the bond that woman share with each other at work place. When one helps the other to lift the heavy tea load, such differences never matter. There are *kudumbashrees* that function among the women of estates. Unlike the other self- help groups they are not involved in any production activities, but pool their money and apply for loans together. They meet at the 10th of every month which is when they get their salary. They make sure that they meet on or the next day of receiving the salary at houses of different members. There also is system of chit fund which is organised by one among the women. The women recognises that there is a difference in the amount of money handled by them and the men – women always deals with smaller amount.

These days women hire jeep or auto rickshaws instead of walking together. Some of them still use the short cuts that run through the *kaadu* to reach lines after work.

The Munnar town through eyes of the women

Kaadu und, veedu und, mathapadi munnarku thaan povom (goes to the field, come back home, otherwise its Munnar where we go).Munnar town in their imagination is centrally located with different roads running into Munnar making it easily accessible.It is a place frequented by the women of estates and they form the majority of consumers who go there to buy provisions for household. It also happened to be the place where the regional office of Kannan Devan plantations is located, in front of which they protested. The familiarity with the place was an added advantage because women find it easily accessible and hence the huge turnout. Infact the women who first decided to strike where the ones from estate divisions close to the Munnar town. It is also clear that they make it a point to follow news from Munnar town by watching the local channel. Also Munnar is a significant topic of discussion among the estate workers that any happenings in Munnar immediately reaches the estates by word of mouth. Even though everyone gets information of major happenings from different estates, the women claims that the strike taking place in Munnar was one major reason as to how they got the news instantly and decided to join at once. The familiarity also drew major support from the local shopkeepers of Munnar who supplied the women with food and water. Jeep and auto rickshaw drivers offered to take them to the town free of cost.

Munnar which was only a small tourist town got world level recognition after the strike, says Vasanti and Palaniamma who share a bond of thirty years working in the same estate. It was also the reason, they claim why the government decided to look into their issue. Roads were

getting blocked and tourists were stopped from coming leading to a huge revenue loss for the government.

It was not easy to establish personal relation with each other during the strike nor to gather information of women who were present for the strike. The women did not keep any contact with each other whom they met during the strike. However they see familiar faces in Munnar town and exchange a word or two.

Santha podrathu nanga, Bandha pandrathu neenga (we pay the membership money and you enjoy your life with that?): Women and the trade unions

The three prominent trade unions that function among the plantation workers are AITUC, CITU and INTUC. Even those from the political left treat them as comrades in terms of membership alone; as for the rest, including the question of collective empowerment, they adopt 'masculinist cultures'; trade unions have themselves become 'greedy institutions' as has come to the general pattern across the continents, and the majority of the unions continue to be highly centralised and hierarchized with the leaderships barely concerned about the expectations of the worker-families. The social-institutional barriers in the way of self-representation in terms of non-class identities such as gender and caste still persist and capital (and the state) has succeeded in fragmenting the workers and bringing to nought a long tradition of trade union politics in the plantations. (Raman Ravi, K. 2010).

The women only have a namesake membership in the trade unions. Their membership in any of the three main trade unions is largely decided by the affiliation that men of the family had towards a particular union. It is to be noted that the women largely took membership in the trade union in which their husbands were part rather than their father's. The women never went for any meetings neither their presence entertained. Hence any problems pertaining to women never got any representation. Neither were the men able to recognise the problems faced by the women. Setting up of toilets in the *Kaadu* for women is unthinkable for men. They come up with absurd reasons such as elephants might demolish them. Women feels that there is need for a toilet but does not have a platform to raise such demands. There is a common understanding among men that women are not supposed to carry heavy load. But they does not seem to associate with the kind of women are undertaking in the field carrying heavy load of tea leaves. A prevailing idea about the struggle being exclusively by women was because they form the majority of work force and not because they have been experienced the exploitations

as women. Basically they the struggle was perceived as a mere workers' struggle which had nothing to do with gender of the protesters.

All the negotiation talks were carried out between the management and few leaders of the union. Any message to the workers was conveyed over phone or any one person (always a male person) in the lines will be asked to share the message with others. The women never joined protests called by the unions. The union was thought of as a body that will take care of their rights but not a platform for them to come forward to raise their demands and become a part of the decision making process.

Finally when they held a strike for the first time, the union leaders tried best to break the unity among workers by instilling fear in them. Meetings with chief minister were interrupted – the union claimed that the women has no right to sit for any negotiation talk. Even while the strike was taking place they unleashed physical violence against the workers. The unions have succeeded in convincing most of the men against their wives forming a union of their own.

The workers feel that unions are necessary to establish link with prominent political parties of Kerala. After the strike, more women representatives are getting selected in the union.

Tamil origin

The women internalises the difference that the border created. They recognise that fact that Malayalam speaking women are reluctant to work in the estates. They say that the few Malayali women who work here are the ones whose chose to marry men in the estates. While them, women of Tamil origin, are getting exploited the Malayali women does not come forward to do such hard work, they say. Even though generations have born, raised and their labour exploited, they feel that there is a need for assertion to claim their rights.

Women closely associated with the struggle:

Though everyone played a vital role in the struggle for fair wages, some among them emerged as leaders. They have developed a critical eye on the management- any excuse saying that company is running at loss is interpreted by them as a way to cut down their bonus next year. It is important to note that out of all the women interviewed, only one identified that their bonus increment was an ex-gratia payment. The rest thinks the movement was a success because they

are now entitled to the bonus payment they were fighting for. The disparities in the payment of women who work in the field and the ones who simply watches over (the field officer and the supervisors) are till date questioned by these women. Some of them have still kept the news reports that came in Malayalam newspapers, though they cannot read Malayalam and has also transcribed copy of their slogans:

Siyar vetinah pengalai – women who simply cut tea leaves

Siri paya vaichita. –are bought for a tussle

Other form of resistances: The ‘slow-work’

Thoppi vecha aiyaave – oh sir with the capon

100 vetta sollathe – don’t demand 100 (100kg) cut

Once after becoming part of the initial strike for the bonus hike, the women started practising slow work. There is a compulsory 32kg of leaves that they have to cut everyday. Anything more than this will be paid extra. Before part of the share of company was transferred to the workers, there were regular competitions to test the cutting capacity of women. Women who cuts the highest were rewarded with utensils. But the women decided not to cut more than the compulsory load. This created quite a stir among the superior officers, for they are also benefited from making the women cut extra. The women were told about how the company would run into loss if they work in this manner. There was also notice being put up in the notice board demanding women to stop the slow- work. However the women refused to stop this and sometimes when one cut more than needed she used to transfer it to her friends’ baskets without the *kangani* watching. And they continued to work at that slow pace till five in the evening after only which they can leave.

Surveillance: what changed after the strike?

For over a month, constant vigilante prevailed in the estates. Conversations in the *kaadu* came to an abrupt end. Though living in the lines together was an advantage for the women to plan and organise, sharing the estates with the field officer, supervisor and other higher authorities meant that they were also watched over. The hilly topography also meant that they could be

watched over even from some distance. Any kind of gathering was immediately put to an end if spotted.

While the women were mostly vocal about their involvement in the strike, the ones from Periyapara division pretended to underrate. It is to be noted that it is from Periyapara division that women set out for strike first. Hence this particular division became the site of strict surveillance and torture. The management also put check on the estates that are situated on the road side. The workers here are not allowed to speak to any outside personals.

There is a new trend of recruiting women as *kanganis* in the estates. Though the management claim that it is because men are not available for work in the plantations, this can be seen as a tactic to break the unity of women workers by selecting few among them to play against the others.

The Pembilai Orumai trade union

It is important to draw a distinction between the Pembilai Orumai movement as well as the trade union that was formed in the same name. Not all women who were part of the movement registered with this union. While all of them think that they played a significant role in the movement, they do not feel the same about the trade union, they feel that their agency was lost to some few women who emerged as leaders. This leaders are the ones who were more active during the strike. The women seem to accept their leadership at the time of the struggle but not when the trade union was formed. Also some of the ones who were involved in initiating the movement decided not to be a part of the new union. This is also because the particular estate division from where the struggle emerged is now site of string surveillance. The new union though has kept alive the idea of strength coming from union, largely because of the same name, the union does not seem to conform to the idea. There is no equal representation from the different estates. Also some of the women leaders tend to 'other' women who they think are not capable of becoming a part in the decision making. Even while collecting money for the functioning of the union, they decided not to take money from women who among them have only limited means. But this has resulted in creating an exclusion of some women. There are also men who are involved in the decision making process and are part of the union's executive committee. While all the women look at the strike as struggle of their own, almost all of them look at the union as an 'other'.

Friendship and the political solidarity

The friendship among the women is forged in the work place. The intimacy that women share among themselves did not arise from being the victims of similar kind of oppression but from the negotiations that they made with the oppressive forces. Hence the friendship is bound in strength but works in a subtle manner. Now that there is a rift among the women who are part of the new union and the ones who are reluctant to join in, it seems difficult that the women realise the strength of their friendship which even otherwise was subtle.

Conclusion

Getting photographed in the attire of women tea plantation workers is common among the tourists who come to visit Munnar. With the plantations in the backdrop, tourists pose for photos with a light weight basket and a cap, while in actuality the basket of the women workers are heavy with tea leaves that they cut every day and their attire also weighs up to some 5kg with the tarpaulin sheet that they tie around the waist with rope. With the struggle, they were engaged in reconstructing this image of theirs- the work is not a leisurely activity but is something that involves real effort.

The women consider the strike to be a success because their demand of a 20% bonus was agreed by the company. But not many of the women know that it was an ex-gratia payment by the company to put an end to the strike. Even the wage hike from Rs.232 to Rs.301 is accompanied by raising the minimum weight of load they have to cut, which is now 27kg from the earlier 21kg. The women are also looking forward to the arrear of nine months from the day of wage hike which to till date they have not received.

There is a growing concern among the workers not to send their next generation for estate work. It is to be noted that both sons and daughters are given the opportunity to study in distant places alike. In most estates, the labour force has fallen down drastically. To meet this shortage the company hires labour from other states like Assam and West Bengal. This can affect the potential of the workers to put a claim on the land that they have been working for years.