

The Politics of “Pombilai Orumai”: The 2015 Kanan Devan Strike in Kerala, India

by Anagha S.

Abstract: Colonial hegemony was retained in the South Indian plantations of Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Limited, where the workers belonged to marginalized classes. The landless employees were given housing facilities, and this compelled them to remain there for generations despite poor wages. These uneducated and geographically secluded people found it difficult to come out of the plantation labyrinth, and the labour acts or land legislation acts were of not much help. In 2015, around 5,000 women workers called “Pombilai Orumai” led a successful strike for a wage increase. The most remarkable aspect of this was the disassociation with political parties and trade unions and the solidarity of women workers despite all odds.

Keywords: colonialism; plantations; trade unions; wages; women’s strike

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Kanan Devan Hills Plantation Limited (KDHP), a tea plantation company located in the Munnar hills in the South Indian state of Kerala, was established during British rule in India. This article traces the trajectory of an unparalleled women’s strike that took place at this plantation and considers its social significance.

Tea plantations in India are a product of colonialism, and the workers, most of whom belong to the Dalit castes (most marginalized groups) from the neighbouring states, constitute their working population. A major part of the labour workforce in these plantations comprises women workers who are engaged in tea picking, whereas men tend to be employed in other types of work on the estate. The middlemen who acted as recruiters of workers and supervisors on the estates are known as “Kanganies.” Until India gained independence in 1947, most of these managerial positions were held by Europeans. This colonial legacy prevailed in the hills and the hegemony over the working class remained even after the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956 (Raman 2010, 164).



Figure 1: Women working in the tea plantations of Munnar. Image courtesy of R.K. Sreejith

Generally, workers were paid on a daily basis and they were eligible for an annual bonus, plus incentives. The planters provided housing facilities on the tea plantations until a worker reached retirement age (Muthiah 1993, 323). Most of the time, the landless labourers

could not purchase land within their active years of employment, and their family members would be obliged to take up the same low-paid jobs in order to retain their access to housing. The low level of education among the workers also compelled them to adhere to what could be termed “ancestral jobs” and made it impossible for them to move out of the plantation enclave. The geographical seclusion, as well as the lack of educational facilities in the hills, acted as a hindrance in the acquisition of knowledge. The plantation enclave was the labyrinth from which the working community found it difficult to escape. A tremendous change in the plantation sector was brought about by the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, and this remains the basis of all major legislation in the sector, though many of the laws are not strictly followed. Another critical aspect of the plantations was that they were unaffected by the historic Land Legislation Act of Kerala (1963) (Baak 1997, 253). They were exempted from the land-ceiling limit which restricts the amount of land owned by one person, as well as from the restrictions on monoculture.

Trade unions in the hills emerged only after India's independence, and women's participation in the unions was minimal. People from the plains had the upper hand in the male-dominated trade unions, despite the fact that Dalit migrant workers constituted the majority of workers. In these trade unions, women's involvement was limited to participation at lower levels, and none of the supervisory or managerial posts was held by them. These unions had a considerable impact on the political economy of the plantations in the years after independence. The leaders of these labour unions acted as middlemen between the planters and the workers. Despite the presence of three major trade unions in the area, namely Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), All Indian Trade Union Congress (AITUC), and Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), respectively under the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Communist Party of India and the Indian National Congress, the disparities prevailed in the plantation sector.

In September 2015, more than five thousand women workers of the Kanan Devan tea plantations started a protest in front of the company's sales point in the town of Munnar. It was led by a group of determined women, who came to be known as “Pombilai Orumai,” which means women united. The strike was spontaneous and they were demanding increases in wages and bonuses. They strongly opposed the nexus between the company and the trade unions leaders (Raj 2022, 157). This work-

ers' strike in Munnar was instrumental in successfully bringing the company's operations to a halt. The strikers demanded a wage of Rs. 500 per day (approximately 6 US dollars), which was low in comparison with other informal workers in the state, and an increase of 20 per cent for their annual bonus.

The most important aspect of this women-led strike was the distance they kept from the established trade unions associated with the political parties (Thampi 2015, 9). The efforts of the trade unions and mainstream political parties to intervene in the struggle did not succeed. It is of great significance that this happened in a state where the traditional political Left and trade unions had a firm hold over workers. Kerala's history as the first democratically elected Communist government in the world, in 1957, and its contributions to working-class struggles are notable in this context.



Figure 2: Pombilai Orumai strike. Image courtesy of Prasad Ambattu

The general notion among the workers was that the unions had close connections with the planters and were negotiating with them in many respects, rather than considering the well-being of the worker community. The Pombilai Orumai strike brought about some significant changes in the wage structure of plantations in Munnar. The strikers were successful in increasing the basic wages from Rs232 to Rs301 and won their demand for the 20 percent bonus. During the first phase of the strike, the government intervened and agreed to a meeting with the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC), including the representatives of the trade unions, the government and the company. But this attempt to negotiate failed, and the women workers started to protest again for their rights, which they successfully attained.

The most important facet of the Pombilai Orumai strike was that it showed possibilities for the working class to come out of their categorical exclusion without any organizational framework. Though the increase in wages was not significant, the strike was instrumental in bringing about a change in the plantation sector, which the traditional political parties and trade unions failed to achieve. The movement also proved that the unity of women could challenge the power structure of trade unions and come to the forefront of a strike. The protest also raised questions about the celebrated Kerala model of development and the state's high rates of social development indicators. Through this protest and strike, the state's negligence towards the Dalit marginalized migrant worker community was exposed, along with its underlying patriarchal values.

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