

A PROBE INTO THE LIVES AND STRUGGLES OF TEA PLANTATION WORKERS IN MUNNAR, KERALA

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ABSTRACT:

It becomes 5 years since a group of disenfranchised tea plantation workers of Munnar conducted a strike under the banner of Pembilai Orumai with the demand of, eke of basic wage, and bonus and to improve the basic living conditions. Besides these demands they had something to speak to the world, which was about the injustice, gender disparity and alienation that they face from the society as plantation workers as well as Tamil community. The workers now living in Munnar are the 6th generation of people bought by the British from Tamil Nadu in the second half of 19th century as slaves. Since then, they are leading slave life inside the *layams* as being alienated, discriminated and exploited by the employers, trade union and politicians. To get a wage of Rs 235 mentioned in the Plantation Act of 1951, they need to work every day 10 hours between 8am and 6pm in the tea hills in frosty weather. Even though they had conducted enormous strikes before, Pembilai Orumai strike helped the women workers there to be more powerful. But as socially excluded and shunned community did that strike make changes in the lives of plantation workers in Munnar? This paper further discusses the findings with the help of field data.

INTRODUCTION

“Social movements are a specific type of group action in which large informal groups of individuals or organizations work for or against change in specific political or social issues” (Boundless "Types of social movements", 2016). For every positive and negative social changes that happened in the world may have a history of social movements. The fulcrum behind the formation of world which now we call as ‘modern world’ is, people’s perennial confrontation with the existing social situations in the world. Social movements are not an action aimed to make new changes, but it stand against unlawful changes which made by the governments or any other

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administrative bodies in the world. Many tiny movements later changed into an utmost wretched virulent struggle which never happened since, also many of them changed the momentum of the human history. “A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavor to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution, or withdrawal into ‘utopian’ community”(Wilkinson, 1971). For freedom, education, franchise, emancipation, parity, outlive, wage, leisure, and so on many people lost their life in the street and jail all around the world. The term ‘Social Movement’ largely used in European languages in the early nineteenth century. This was the period of social upheaval. The political leaders and authors used the term to emancipate the exploited class and the creation of a new society by changing the value systems.

Ghanashyam Shah (1991) in his book “Social movements in India” has classified social movements into, Peasant movements, Tribal movements, Dalit movements, Backward caste/Class movements, Women’s movements, Industrial working-class movements, Students movements, Middle class movements, Human right and Environmental movements. “Pembilai Orumai” was a historical women labor movement which happened in Kerala, was a category of social movement, and the distinguishing feature of Pembilai Orumai is that, it was an agitation completely led by uneducated Tamil women labors in the tea plantations of Munnar. Apparently, the strike was for the hike in the wage and living conditions of the workers, but it also addressed many problems which implicit in their life. To get a deep understand about the nature and the implicit problems which they had addressed through the Pembilai Orumai movement we have to do ransack about the historical and present social position of women in the Indian society and the impact of social movements in their life. Social movements have a significant role in the making of Indian history. The Indian society like a number of ‘classical’ societies was patriarchal. Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction, and social production (meaning total conditions of production) prevailed and were expressed through specific cultural metaphors (S.R Bakshi & Kiran Bala, 2000). Indian society is encircled with abound number of myths and blind faiths about life and the duties that people have to do. In the Indian mythology women were considered as to be fickle and fragile and the status of women were low. The movement for the emancipation of women in India began in the 19th century when social reformers criticized the out model social practices and

stressed more on liberal education for women. Subsequently women participated in various kinds of activities ranging from mass scale popular agitations and revolutionary activities to various constructive works (Sharma, 1995). Contribution of women in the history of labor movements in India are laudatory. In 1917 women led a prominent labor strike called Ahmadabad textile workers strike, Anasuya Sarabhai were the main leader of that strike. By the late 1920s, the women became more active in the social movements. Bombay was the center of this development and several prominent women leaders emerged, Maniben Kara became socialist leader of railway workers and Usha Bai Dange and Parvathi Bhore as Communist leaders of textile workers. In the 1928-29 women played a leading role in the Bombay textile mill workers' strike, as they did in the Calcutta strike during the same year. Kerala also is well renowned for social reforms, it witnessed several tribal, labor, land, religious, caste and women strikes in the history. Strikes suchlike are only some of the examples of efficacious movements led by women. In 1947 August 15 when India became independent, it was widely acknowledged that the battle for freedom had been fought as much by women as by men.

Plantations are economic entities connected historically with certain crops. A plantation crop normally is a monoculture and includes growing of variety of products like Tea, Coffee, Rubber, Pepper & other spices etc.(Employment, 2009). Cultivation of Tea, Rubber and Coffee started in India during Colonial period. Tea Plantations in India were also a product of colonialism and the production was aimed at the World market. Since India's Independence, the ownership of tea estates in India has changed hands. The first Plantation crop came in Kerala was coffee. Decline in coffee economy due to diseases in 1870's, the coming of Brazil coffee and consequent fall in the price of coffee in international market etc; forced coffee cultivators in India and Cyclone to prefer to Tea cultivation in Travancore. In India, the tea plant was firstly introduced in North - East Assam during the early 1820's. It was East India Company, which initiated the possibility of growing tea. India's tea plantations can be largely grouped into two regions with regional specifications - North East India and South India. Assam and West Bengal are Important States in North East India; Tamil Nadu and Kerala are the important southern states. In 1900, Kannan Devan Tea Company alone had 19 estates. The area of cultivation jumped from 3352 acres (during 1885-

90) and 34,555 acres in 1914. Suitable climatic conditions, the availability of workers at low wage and strict controlling rules to them, the company act of 1862, starting of banking Business, the coming of roads connecting plantations and ports etc. accelerated development of tea and other plantation crops, in Kerala. (Mahalakhmi, 2012).

Munnar in Idukki district is well-known for its beauty and climate. When ambitious planters from as far as Europe started plantations here. Munnar came to be known to the outside world in the 1870s with the visit of the British Resident of the then Travancore kingdom John Daniel Munro. Munro formed the North Travancore Land Planting & Agricultural Society in 1879, and started cultivation of crops, including coffee, cardamom, cinchona and sisal in various parts of the region. In 1895, Finlay Muir & Company (James Finlay and Company Limited) entered the scene and bought 33 independent estates. The Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company was formed in 1897. In 1964, the Tata Group entered into collaboration with Finlay which resulted in the formation of the Tata-Finlay Group. Tata Tea Ltd. was formed in 1983. In 2005, the Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company Pvt. Ltd; was formed and Tata Tea transferred the ownership of its plantations to the new company. Employees of Tata Tea hold stake in the company.

Tea plantation is the specific feature of Munnar, and it started since the colonial period. When the period of colonialism, the British government imported workers from other states like Tamilnadu, Assam, Bengal etc., later the decline of the colonialist power the workers became reside in Munnar. Most of the workers, specifically for plucking leafs in the plantation are women. The working conditions of workers employed in plantations are governed by the Plantation Labor Act, 1951 and the rules promulgated by the State governments. The Plantation Labour Act inter-alia requires the employer to provide to the workers and their family members medical, housing, sickness and education facility and various other social security benefits. The act applies in the first instance to tea, coffee, rubber, cinchona and cardamom plantations. (Employment, 2009). Under the wage revision agreement in 2011, a women worker should pluck 21 kg of leaves a day would get 235 rs as wage. During the beginning of the tea cultivation the colonial government propounded many facilities for the workers. British government made an Act XIII of 1859, this Act states that Planters tied the workers to the plantation for minimum three years and also to retain the workers the

planters offered some government approved concessions such as accommodation, supply of drinking water, medical facilities, fuel wood, rice, and clothing, education for children etc. The act also provides for setting up of canteens, crèches, recreational facilities, suitable accommodation and educational facility for the benefit of plantation workers and their families in and around the work place in the plantation estates. Section 10 of the Plantation Labour Act requires that every employer shall provide medical facilities for workers and their families. The Plantations Labour Act, 1951 make it obligatory on the part of employers to maintain primary schools in the plantations where the number of children between the age group of 6 and 12, exceed 25. In plantation industry, majority of the workers employed are unskilled and many of them are not aware of the provisions of Minimum Wage Act, 1948, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and the various other labour acts enacted for their welfare. The high rate of illiteracy and low level of awareness make them more vulnerable to exploitation by the employer (Employment, 2009).

Besides the social situations and social movements mentioned here, the specialty of “Pembilai Orumai” is, it organized and led completely by women laborers of plantation sector who excluded from the mainstream of the society. The Tamil term “Pembilai Orumai” stands for “unity of women”. The woman tea plantation workers in Munnar did start this struggle with an agenda to increase their basic wages up to 500 and bonus up to 20%. Under the wage revision agreement in May 2011, a women worker must pluck 21 kg of leaves a day would get 232 as their wage. But this agreement was end at Dec 31, 2014, so the workers want a hike in their wage and bonus ever since. In 2013-2014 fiscal year KDHP (Kannan Devan Plantation Hills) Company had declared a bonus of 19% but, on 22nd August, 2015 The Kannan Devan management decided to cut short the bonus of workers to 8.33%. There are 84 administrative divisions in the seven estates of the KDHP Company and eight divisions in the two other estates directly under the control of the TATA Company. Women workers from all the 92 divisions chucked their daily routine and marched to the hill station of Munnar. At the beginning the strike was started merely at some of the estates, but suddenly it spread all over the tea estates and its nature from strike changed to a mass agitation. The agitation long for 9 days, and around 5000 women workers were participated. They got massive support from different parts of the world, many famous social workers came to Munnar and participated in the agitation as a part of support. The strike successfully ended on 13th

September; and most of their demands were agreed by the tea plantation company. But that was not easy for them as it look like because, while participating the agitation there were no jobs for them, because of lacks money they were unable to look after their family, education of children, parents, and all the basic needs. When look into the strike there also they had to face many challenges than before. The first and important challenge that they faced inside the strike was lack of leadership because, most of the women activists were uneducated and unable to speak any other language fluently than Tamil. At the time of strike they didn't get required support from their trade unions, they try to manipulate the strike rather than support them. Lack Food and water, urinals, feeding rooms, support from family, media and the public and so on also can count as challenges that they had to face during the strike.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to find out the major challenges that women plantation workers have to face in personal life as well as in the workplace. To get an in-depth understanding about the "Pembilai Orumai" movement and its major challenges, the research conducted among the tea plantation workers in Munnar were qualitative in nature, and adopted case study method as research design. Both primary and secondary data have been used in this research. Since the available secondary data alone were not adequate to carry out a research, the researcher also collected the primary data by conducting in depth interviews with the activists. Researcher randomly took 10 members who participated in the "Pembilai Orumai" movement as population, and 5 members among them were took as the cases for the study. The researcher also interviewed some of the family members of the workers in order to validate the data received from the activists about the practices of power and challenges they had faced.

POWER: THE PROCESS OF EXERTION AND REVERSAL

Michael Foucault explains power as "Productive" and "Power is everywhere". In the concept of "The subject and Power" Foucault discusses the relationship between Power, domination, and resistance in contemporary society. He argues that as a matter of definition, where there is power there must be resistance (Foucault, 1980). Foucault links his analyses of power directly with the

antagonistic struggles of social movements, arguing that one of the most important aspects of these struggles in contemporary society is the way in which they challenge subjectification. Power only acts those who may resist and who may in turn act on others, there is always reversal of power (Kate, 2000). Power may not only associate with the individuals, rather it may associate with institution or it may be with a group of people who exert strength over others. There is no particular order or situation to exert power, it will be changed by the social situation and action. This study tries to explain the practice of power between the Owners, Workers and Trade union in the tea plantations of Munnar. Besides wage hike by the agitation, women also tried to question the capitalist power and patriarchal dominance. To understand how women became much powerful, it would be worthwhile to examine the power relations and the resultant power structure out of the women agitation because the women could attain power through their agitation to resist the capitalists and patriarchal dominance.

POWER: TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES

Life of the workers in the tea plantation of Munnar is surrounded in between the work place and *layams* (cluster of rooms where the workers living). Since the period of British, everyday life of plantation workers is in the path of struggles and protests, and still it continues and could be remain as the same because, they are utterly discriminated and being treated as slaves. The rights and concessions included in the British government Act XIII of 1859 and Labor Act, 1951 are still remains as offers only. In plantation industry, majority of the workers employed are unskilled and many of them are not aware of the provisions of Minimum Wage Act, 1948, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and the various other labor acts enacted for their welfare. Beyond a hike of wage and bonus, the women who excluded and discriminated from the mainstream of society had addressed the problems associated with capitalist patriarchal dominance that they are facing for several decades. During the British period the workers expressed their grievance towards exploitation as a protest by singing songs against employers and managers of the plantation. From where did they get the power to challenge the subjectification by leading a mass agitation?

By analyzing the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the cases took in the study, it can understand that most of the workers in tea plantation sector Munnar seems having almost same

social background and they were all frustrated and fed-up by the exploitation of employers and trade unions. *Lissie Sunny*, one of the leaders of “Pembilai Orumai” movement and labor of tea plantation said that, “*we have been exploited by the laborers and trade unions for long years, but now we think we need a better life like others and education for our children, why do their (employers) children only getting education and better life?*”. By her words it can understand that, they believed that for emancipating their family from exploitations, they need to educate their children and abolish the capitalism from their life situation.

The main success and challenge behind the Pembilai Orumai movement was the leadership. At the beginning only 10 women workers were marched to the trade union office and start strike, later the strength became 5000. It means around 5000 uneducated labor women converged in a public place and led a massive agitation to achieve their rights without an experienced. Beyond this they reviled against politicians and union leaders who pretended as leaders and supporters. *Lissie Sunny*, *Gomathy* and *Indhrani*, labors of tea plantation were the main leaders of the movement, and none of them had any previous experience by conducting such strikes and never spoke to a huge public and media. But they said that, “*we achieved this power from our own life experience because, we have been exploited by the employers since the time of our parents and neither politicians nor union leaders did speak for us, if they did it so we wouldn't have to do this strike now and, now we realize we too have the power to speak*”.

It was *Rosamma Ponnus* who took first initiative to form a trade union in Munnar in the second half of 20th century. After that, there were lot of trade unions including INTUC, CITU, and AITUC, started working and till continues. But during the period of Pembilai Orumai movement activist labors refused trade union support and repeatedly blamed them as by saying “*they cheated us*” till the end of the strike. Workers says that, by receiving liquor and money from the employer trade union cheating us by denying our rights and asking money every month as union fund. *Stella Mary* one of the activists in the movement said that, “*They are not humans they are ghosts*”, adding to this she said, trade unions had the main role in making the workers poor and marginalized. In front of the public they pretend like savior of employees, but really they are the slaves of employers. They would ask money if they come to solve any problems of workers.

Besides trade union, why did they avoid men from the agitation? What was the reason to do a massive agitation by excluding men? *Latha* an activist of the strike said that, it was because, “*women are more responsible than men in home, men may not have the capacity to struggle for long days and employers can easily manipulate them by giving liquor and money that’s why we avoid them, to be frank, we don’t believed them in the case of strike.*” Every women tea plantation are the witness of patriarchy inside the family as well as in the workplace, because a day of a women starts in 5 am, after completing home duties they need to go for work site far away from layam by 7 am, from 8 am to 6pm they have to work hardly for meet the daily wage of R.s 235 and when they came back to home in the late evening, they have lots of home duties to do again. Most of the men working in tea plantation are liquor addicts and they use major portion of everyday wage for having liquor. With the small income, women have more responsibility to manage the family and look after children and parents.

The strike was long for 9 days, and those days bashed the rhythm of their daily life. Above all, challenges during the strike associated with their daily life was devastating. In these days, every women who participated in the struggle had not only lost their job, but in the wake of an immediate strike every tea estates forced to shut down its functioning and it also affect the job of men too, and it subsequently affect the income of their family. *Gomathy*, a plantation worker and one of the leader of the strike, said that “*during the strike her home situation became worst and because of lacks of money they were unable to meet the basic needs like education, medicine etc. She has three children who studying in school with only her lower income they need to manage the family because her husband is unable to do job because of health problems*”. Education of children during the period of strike was in stalemate, most of the children accompanied their mothers when they came to the strike every day.

Health issues related with the work is one of the major threats that they are facing every day. By walking in the tea hills up and down every day by holding more than 50 kg on back of the body in frosty weather had given them serious health issues like austere cervical pain, illness related with vertebra, in the slippery hills they may fall down and it creates bruise in the body, unhygienic working condition may cause scab, and also by in haling pesticide included air makes respiratory

health problems too. Most of the women who work in the tea plantation is facing lack of immunity and problem of atrophy without getting nutritious food and needful rest in life. Even though they are not supposed to take sick leaves, if they take leave by themselves employers would cut their income. Workers said that “*whenever go to the dispensary owned by the company, nurse gives us white tablet (paracetamol) only*”.

To make an end to this situation, women started Pembilai Orumai but, during the time of agitation they witnessed the hideous impact of patriarchy and capitalism. To usurp the agitation owners kept the trade union leaders beside them by offering bribes and deploy them to torment the activists, like giving liquor to husbands of the activists and harassed the activists that, they would lose job permanently if they didn't quit from the strike. The owners also pushed the finance banks to threaten the activists and their family by saying that, all the loans taken from banks needed to close urgently otherwise they will move to further judicial procedures. The employers sent their troops into the strike to make problems inside the unity of women, a women caught by the police while she making language rivalry inside the movement. Many unfamiliar Medias spread news like “*women in this strike has relation with terrorists*”. Employers sent trade union leaders to make split among the activists and in somewhat they won in the mission because, Lissie Sunny and Gomathy had exchanged some bad words, and Lissie filed a criminal sue against Gomathys son are some of the examples for this. But these threatening couldn't have enough to back them off the strike, they lead the strike for long 9 days by enduring all these challenges from different parts of the society.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, literally we cannot say that the strike was a huge victory because, they didn't get everything they addressed, but after tryst with workers, owners gave plight to the workers for better hike of wage as Rs.305/-, and replaced their bonus as of previous year. Company also assured that, will take appropriate action regarding the problems of living conditions. Even though, we can say that they won for creating a stalemate in the mainstream of the society and let world know about the power of women and the problems they are facing in the layams and working place and family. “Power only gets when there is resistance”, In the Pembilai Orumai movement women got more

strength and power to resist the capitalism and patriarchy and also to emancipate themselves from the power of subjectification. When the women became powerful the power dominance of the owners became in a mode of resistance. But at the end of the strike the power again became reversal in action, the owners didn't accept the workers demand but they gave an offer for them and the agitators are forced to accept it because they had no other ways, owners simply put their interest and made the workers as obeying, it is another way of power exertion. So without losing workers and money, the owners again dominant over workers with power. Every social movements are based on power, in the Pembilai Orumai movement also we can see the excretion and reversal of power throughout the agitation. They faced challenges not only from the Owners but also from the Trade union, Family, Government and so on, and all built up with the power of capitalism and patriarchy. When the activists tried to resist that power, they had to face the challenges. From that challenges they attain more power of resistance as the reversal power. With the light of power acquired from the struggle, later on 8th February 2016, Pembilai Orumai became a registered trade union named "**Pembilai Orumai Thottam Thozhilali Union, Munnar**". Now it's an independent trade union in Munnar.

Furthermore, Notwithstanding Pembilai Orumai was a historic social movement, can we say that Pembilai Orumai was enough to make an end for the exploitation and capitalism in the society as well as in the work. After 5 years since the strike, what can we point out as a big change? By looking into the present situation and life of workers there, we can say 'nothing'. 52 life spoiled and 19 people were reported as missing due to heavy rain and landslide in Rajamala (Pettimudi), Munnar on 9 August 2020 reveals it clearly that nothing has changed there, they are still remain as slaves and leading herd life in the layamss. The people who died in the natural calamity were leading slave life in this super modern world without electricity, roads, transportation, water, house, and basic necessities. Who is responsible for their life? The trade unions, government, and employers are equally responsible for all the lives spoiled under the layams, because life of the people who live in the layams there are dependent with the decisions and mercy of these people. As a new trade union Pembilai Orumai is also active in Munnar but, a single Pembilai Orumai is not enough to eradicate the capitalism and patriarchy from society, because the strength and power of Pembilai Orumai has become scattered within this 5 years and capitalism has become more

powerful than ever, like what Foucault says as “reversal of power”. If government still refuse to take proper actions against this exploitation and capitalism, more deaths may happen in the coming years. Dr. P.H Daniel, was a doctor in the company hospitals during 1940, has written a novel titled “Sivappu Theyilai” (Red Tea). In that novel he said that, “when you have a red tea in every morning after a peaceful sleep, you remember one thing, that red color is the blood of every people who fated to spoil their life in layams as worms”.

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