

Can the Dalit woman speak? How 'intersectionality' helps advance postcolonial organization studies

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journals.sagepub.com/home/org**K Ravi Raman** 

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Abstract

Through a sustained engagement with postcolonial/subaltern studies scholarships, I would inquire into how intersectionality as an approach could advance an argument in the context of the postcolonial organization studies. This would ensure a submerged possibility of understanding 'workplace resistances' and their varied dynamics. The case study involves both contemporary ethnographic and in-depth historical accounts sourced from the Dalit women's protests at tea plantations in the south Indian state of Kerala in 2015 (along with pertinent secondary sources). The article explores how 'self-organizing' by the mis-organized, during the course of the struggle, turned them into active political subjects: a 'subject position from which to speak'. Exposing certain theoretical constraints within the postcolonial approach and incorporating insights from deeper subjective aspects of the labour process, social reproduction in postcolonial perspectives, and the feminist literature on intersectionality as an integrative narrative, an attempt is made to supplement the postcolonial organization studies and open up the gateway to its advancement.

Keywords

Dalit women, India, intersectionality, Kerala, plantations, postcolonial, postcolonial organization studies, resistance

Introduction

Ever since Spivak (1988: 271-313) raised the foremost epistemic question: 'Can the subaltern speak?' a debate has been generated both within and outside postcolonial scholarship/the Subaltern Studies in terms of understanding the subaltern representation and resistance. Adding a new dimension to the debate, particularly in feminist scholarship, Spivak also asserted that, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p.287). No significant attempt has, however, been made to incorporate this

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question into organization studies on workers' resistance; moreover, it is inadequately addressed even in a body of work that exclusively focuses on postcolonial organization studies (Prasad, 2003, 2012). This article attempts to bridge this gap. I would assert that if organization scholarship is to be enriched by postcolonial theory, it is imperative to locate, as an epistemic justification, what would have enriched postcolonial organization theory itself – namely integration of the postcolonial perspectives, labour process theory and the feminist literature on *intersectionality*. By studying the Dalit women's workplace protest in the tea plantations of Munnar in Kerala, India, I attempt to delve into an exceptional example of subaltern representation and resistance: what I call *self-organizing* by the *mis-organized*. In doing so, I hope to turn the deficiencies of the postcolonial organization approaches and 'intersectionality', the latter as mutually constitutive relations that shape and being shaped by multiple identities in relation to one another (see Crenshaw, 1989, 1991, also see Dalla Costa and James 1975; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Cole, 2009; Collins, 1989; Laughlin et al., 2010; McCall, 2005; also see Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995; Holvino 2010; Healy, Bradley and Forson 2011), a mutually constructive intellectual process.

More on theoretical integration

Interventions in organization studies scholarship from a postcolonial perspective is a recent trend which, however, have given birth to what has come to be called postcolonial *organization studies*. One of the powerful criticisms raised by this new scholarship is that 'most of the management research – including, most of the critical management research – continues to be overwhelmingly Eurocentric' (Prasad, 2012: 20), an idea they share with the postcolonial theory (see Chakrabarty, 2002, Chatterjee, 2012; Dirks, 2001; Ludden, 2001; O'Hanlon, 1988; Prakash, 1994; Sen, 1987; Spivak, 1988; also see Gramsci 1971) which has come to represent an epistemic position from the global south. While exploring postcolonial theory as it relates to organization studies in varied contexts such as call centre work and aboriginal governance, Prasad (2012) and colleagues open up a space for articulation between critical management studies and workplace resistance (see Hodson, 1995; Jermier et al., 1994; Prasad and Prasad, 1998, 2000, 2003). This was in contrast to the managerialist approach to resistance wherein the resistance itself was treated as 'undesirable' for organizations with a resultant search as to how best to negotiate the same through technological and/or managerial strategies (see Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001; Lawrence, 1969; Spicer and Bohm, 2007; Thompson and O'Doherty, 2009). The critical management research was driven primarily by Marxist insights on workers' resistance to autonomy and liberation (see particularly Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; 1985; also see Armstrong, 1989; Beverungen, Böhm and Land 2015; Gottfried 2001) a tradition further moved forward by postcolonial organization scholars.

While examining how organizational agencies and actors frame each other's subjective experience and help generate shared and collective 'meaning-making' process in social movements (Ganz, 2000; Kurzman, 2002; Mellucci, 1996; Poletta, 2002), the critical labour studies (see Böhm and Land, 2012; Collinson, 2011; Sutherland et al., 2014: 759–781) explore how this meaning-making happens in the *absence* of permanent and stable leaders. From the postcolonial/Subaltern Studies perspective, the 'movement-processes in specific places' (Nilsen and Roy, 2015: 64) resulting from the decline of traditional agential forms such as density, membership and influence of trade unions help generate fresh collective meaning-making through self-assertion of subjugated identities based on race, caste, ethnicity, gender and sexuality as opposed to the class-based interest politics of yesteryears; women had to confront with the problem of identity; and more than that they had to "prove that women were human" (Friedan, 1971 [1963]: 81; Falcón and Nash, 2015; also see Friedan, 1971 [1963]). With the experiences of White, middle-class and heterosexual women being central to second-wave academic feminism, their analysis misses out the

social complexities of women of colour, the poor, as well as their agency, strategies of resistance and collective meaning-making from the global south. The key marker of departure of the third wave was the recognition that unlike White feminists for whom gender is central to identity, non-White feminists perceive many identities beyond gender such as race, class religion, and thus subjected to the multiple 'layers of oppression' (Crenshaw, 1991),¹ which in turn triggers the resistance. Not only the universal experience of womanhood was challenged (see Butler, 1990; Spivak, 1987; Chakravorty and Barlow, 2006) but also the centrality of postcolonial women, particularly the underprivileged within the larger postcolonial discourse and politics regained through imaginative forms of struggles and resistance.

It implies that (1) both the management and the constituted form of hegemony in which various forces such as the management, the state and the male-led unions become the agents of exploitation/oppression; (2) there is not enough literature available on postcolonial organization research on the women workers confronting the hegemonic forces, not to speak of either subaltern women engaging in collective protest against the constituted hegemony or the concerns of multiple oppression as expressed by the intersectionality scholars; (3) while critical management studies and postcolonial organization studies do engage with the labour process, they do not reflect the everyday social cost of reproduction (see Benzanson and Luxton, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2017: 1–20; Brenner and Laslett, 1991; Durbin and Conley, 2010; Frenkel, 2009; Gill and Bakker, 2003; Mojab, 2015; Vogel, 1983: 151–170), which is often the trigger for workplace resistance, particularly where gender precarity forms the substance of everyday reality; (4) while various disciplines have advanced the notion of intersectionality, organization scholars too have made their significant contributions, particularly since Kathy Ferguson (1996), in the inaugural publication of *Organization* highlighted why the scholarship should be enriched in terms of theoretical vigour and empirical voices with the associated notions of politics, plurality and power and the interconnected relations of gender, race and class shaping the organizational life (cited in Townsley, 2003: 617–639). Thomas and Davies (2005) problematize feminist theory and fortify and revitalize resistance conceptualization within organization studies; the necessity of locating resistance in terms of intersectional aspects as relevant to post structural feminism. In their review of feminist studies in organization scholarship, Harding et al. (2012) reinforce the necessity of intersectional analysis; the authors also highlighted why feminist organization scholars need to engage with the question of what might be the impact of these intersections on everyday life (also see Acker, 1990; Barndt, 2002; Ferguson, 1996; Marshall, 2000; Meyerson and Kolb, 2000; Symposium Team, 2000). However, the intersectionality scholarship fails to incorporate certain critical aspects such as labour organizations and mis-representation of workers as well as the social cost of reproduction of labour power. Important aspects like the twofold production of values, the daily material existence of the workers and the biological reproduction of human labour power and the associated resistance (see particularly Arruzza, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017: 1–20; Gill and Bakker, 2003; Luxton, 2006; Mojab, 2015; Vogel, 1983) have also been overlooked save a few. It is this potential as integrative narrative that is attempted here as is in the case of postcolonial/postcolonial organization studies (Chatterjee, 2001; Kwek, 2003; Misoczky, 2011; Nkomo, 2011; Ong, 1987; Sen, 2018).

It is true that oppression operates through a series of interlocking systems of production and power relations that cut across identity categories (Cohen, 1997; Crenshaw, 1991). However, we cannot treat all oppressions and resistance with equal importance as they vary in terms of caste, gender, everyday livelihood and social reproduction of labour. Oppression experienced by caste Hindu woman is not the same as faced by a Dalit woman, as the latter has been historically oppressed, since facing multiple 'layers of oppression' as this study would reveal. This necessitates the location of 'subaltern counter publics', the possibility of a subaltern counter-discourse

and a recognition of their ‘identities, interests, and needs’ (Fraser, 1997: 81, 69–98) thus releasing the ‘emancipatory potential’ of ‘subaltern woman counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1997: 82; Spivak, 1988: 271–313). It represents the power of the collective agency within the social realm of differences, operating through what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) would call ‘chains of equivalence’, and what Yuval-Davis (2004) would call, ‘politics of belonging’ through ‘transversal’ (Yuval-Davis, 2004) and transverse solidarity politics (Raman, 2010a, 2015a, b, 2017) erasing the concern of intra-group differences as outlined by intersectionality scholars.

While Kwek (2003) is one of the exceptions within postcolonial organization scholarship directly addressing the question of the subjectivities of ‘local, lived experiences of cross-cultural encounters’, this was by and large confined to the resistance to the Western theories of cross-cultural studies of management. Nkomo (2011) and Misoczky (2011), yet another set of scholars, representing Africa and Latin America enrich the postcolonial organization studies by intertwining the regionally specific features of postcolonial questions with critical organizational concerns such as leadership, strategies and management. A significant attempt in exploring postcolonial resistance in the global south workplace was that of Ong’s (1987) study of Malaysian workers in electronic chip factories. Similarly, Chatterjee (2001) and Sen (2018) have come up with the feminist ethnographic accounts of work; culture and power relations embodied postcolonial production systems and narrated how they sustained the invisible activism of poor minority women, Adivasis and Nepali minorities respectively in north-Eastern tea plantations. The everyday making of collective meaning helps them articulate ‘oppositional consciousness’ to hegemony (see Chela 2003), and they respond as feminists in the larger ‘gendered process of social reproduction’ (see Swarr and Nagar 2003; Sexsmith 2012). Yet, the postcolonial reflexivity on management and organization theory and their interventions are ‘still in their infancy’ (Kalonaityte, 2012: 116) with their potential yet to be fully explored through integrative. It is this integrative narrative by making the marginal voices heard and recognized as is done in this article. Another significant addition to the existing literature is an exposition of yet another layer of patriarchy – the male led trade unions – and showing how the gendered precarity becomes a challenge to their own trade unions in the gendered process of collective meaning-making. Yet another addition to the literature is the newness in method that is called ‘on-the-spot ethnography’ employed without any prejudiced, predetermined and formalized questionnaire. This captured comprehensively the victims’ voices: in this case Dalit women speaking themselves.

Methodology: On-the-spot-ethnography

In terms of method, the study is *reflexive* at three levels. First, based on my observations as a critical participant observer; second, as a historian of the plantation Dalits; and third, as the study is integrationist and trans-disciplinary in terms of drawing insights from theoretical strands on postcolonial theory, labour processes and social reproduction of labour power. As the strike broke out on 5 September 2015 in the high ranges of the Munnar tea plantation owned by the Kanan Devan Hills Plantation Company (P) Limited (KDHPCL) in Kerala, I travelled to the site, with the objective of conducting an *on-the-spot ethnography* of the struggle/event. This was at variance with the practice adopted by the otherwise rich ethnographic tradition in organization scholarship (see Decker, 2014; Jaumier, 2017; Kapferer, 2010; Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Mauksch, 2017). While the research participants get accustomed to the ethnographer over the period of study, the *on-the-spot ethnographer* observes firsthand the ‘diagnostic events’ as referred to by Moore (1987: 730). In attempting to chart a path for contemporary anthropologists in their fieldwork, Moore agrees with Foucault (1971) on the premise that no single episteme could truly encompass the whole wide

picture in all its nuances. Instead there are many, including many modes of knowing things capable of unravelling multiple meanings as and when we juxtapose competing events and ideas.

To state the obvious, while the earlier generations of ethnographers used the occurrences as reflections of coherent cultural systems, the ones that followed have veered away to a historically innovative anthropology. This has helped me link the present to the past and move back and forth between the two, allowing an anthropological inquiry into the local and global with historical transitions; ethnographies that really report present conditions are future historical documents or primary sources in the making (see Marcus and Fisher, 1986: 961; Moore, 1987; also see Visweswaran 1997).

I would reiterate that *on the spot ethnography* helps contribute to the understanding of diagnostic events such as the Munnar revolt by the Dalit women who challenged the multiple hierarchies embedded in patriarchal forms. I was able to interact directly with the women involved in the struggle in their own location, occasionally exchanging ideas as a critical participant observer, as Spivak (1988) insists in the larger context of postcolonial epistemology that ‘the task of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them freely speak for themselves’ (pp. 271–313). While traditional ethnography makes the ethnographer’s presence a familiar sight for the research participant, ‘on-the-spot ethnography’ further strengthens the communication and exchange of ideas between the two, as the latter participates first-hand in the processes of struggle, however much limited the participation may be.

I was constrained in my efforts first by my being a male, raising concerns by the feminist ethnographers in conducting ‘gender sensitive research’ in addressing issues of caste, race, marginality, representation and resistance (see Alexander and Mohanty, 2013; Chatterjee, 2001; Davis and Zarkov, 2017; Kahne and Giele 1992; Hart 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Scott, 1986; Sen, 2018), and second, my own social positioning in terms of caste, in that I am a male belonging to the larger category of other backward communities, but still outside the Hindu caste hierarchy embodied in the *chaturvarna*.² The Dalits form the lowest of the low in the hierarchical order and those above and yet outside the *chaturvarna* constitute other backward communities in the Indian caste system. Although the women had taken a firm stance to exclude their male counterparts on the worksites, including their husbands, I had several opportunities to hold discussions with the women workers on the picket line. My *on-the-spot ethnography* was also extended to the capital city, Thiruvananthapuram, wherein several rounds of discussions took place between the leaders of the *Pempila Orumai* (PO) and the state government. On both occasions, the subaltern women proved their ability to speak up, and they spoke with an irrefutable reasoning from a politically charged subject position.

The reflexive method is further augmented by my earlier research into the working and living conditions of the plantation Dalits in the Indian south over the period of 150 years (Raman, 2010b/2015). In my historical and ethnographic account of the tea plantations in this part of the world, I have validated the hypothesis that whenever the metropolis was in crisis, it was unfailingly transferred to the workers; the fruits of prosperity, however, never found their way back to them making the social production of labour a precarious process (Raman, 1991, 2010b).

Labour process and social reproduction of labour power: Dalit women and Kerala’s tea plantations

If any state in India could be called a ‘plantation-state’, it is Kerala with three fourths of its net area under coffee, tea, rubber and cardamom. Much before the organized entry of planting capital in tea in Kerala, forest lands were made available in Wynad for coffee cultivation by the Europeans

followed by expansion of tea cultivation in Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south, along with the northern parts of India such as Assam and West Bengal. The North Travancore Land Planting and Agricultural Society formed by the consortium of British investors in 1879 eventually became the Scottish-based James Finlay's Kanan Devan Plantation Company (KDHP)—altogether accounting for more than 5.4 million hectares of land used, and employing more than 20,000 workers, mostly Dalit migrant women who were extensively sourced and mobilized, primarily from the poverty-stricken neighbouring villages of Tamil Nadu from the mid-19th century. It is their descendants who remained as the workforce and took up the historical task of revolting against the multiple forms of exploitation and oppression over the years.

Dalits are India's former 'untouchables', as B R Ambedkar (1948), the iconic Indian anti-caste intellectual, called them. They were called untouchables as their physical touch was considered polluting in the caste-based social division in India – the 'other' for the caste Hindus for centuries, subjected to discrimination and denial of basic human rights (Thorat and Kumar, 2012). Doing away with slavery in this part of the world – in Malabar in 1843 and in Travancore in 1853 – had little effect until the opening of the coffee and tea plantations in the mid and late 19th century. Soil slaves were theoretically liberated to become 'free men' to be recruited to the plantations; furthermore, the spread of plantations precipitated the process of pauperization with the tribals being evicted from their own homelands; the peasantry buckled under increased land revenue, frequent famines, ecological-livelihood destructions, all akin to *primitive accumulation* violence (see Harvey, 2003). The workers churned out from the impoverished masses were thus peripheralized, disciplined in the estates and exploited at different levels: class, caste and gender (Raman, 1991, 2010b/2015), forming the Gramscian/Spivakian caste subaltern women with caste remaining the 'very part of the material reality' of the society (see Omvedt, 1994; Raman, 2010b, 2014); with implications in terms of social reproduction of labour and Dalit epistemic agency (see Guru and Sarukkai, 2012). It was the fifth- or sixth-generation descendants of the plantation Dalits, marching forward with their Tamil identity, who authored the historic struggle.

The sexual division of labour on tea estates remained the same over the decades, with men specialized in 'prestigious' work in factories and women predominated as field labour for plucking. The labour process on the plantations has always been gruelling and exacting – a process of 'real subsumption of labour to capital' – continuing as it was in colonial days. Work was extracted from the labourers with inexorable precision, any deviation in practice attracting severe retribution (Raj, 2018; Raman, 2015a,b). The most exacting of these rules was related to time: the estate gong/siren signalled the time in such a way that the women workers rose from bed at 4.30 or 5 a.m., gathered for their daily roll-call and inspection at 6 to 6.30 a.m., and then it was a hard day's toil up to 5 p.m. Moreover, they had to pick up their children on their way back home after an exhausting day in the fields to begin the next phase of their toil at home – cooking, cleaning and managing their families, all unwaged – and remained integral to the social reproduction of labour power. And the caste life – the subjective experience – in the plantations structurally overlapped and dialectically intertwined with the class factors of low wages, earnings and status. The Dalit assertion that emanates from such oppressive totality is simultaneously a struggle against co-constitutive hegemonic forces. Paradoxically enough, the trade unions that came to dominate in the plantations belonged to different ideological streams. Those remained unified with respect to leadership, mostly, headed by caste Hindus or Christians, all male and largely Malayalis – creating yet another layer of hegemony in their everyday agential life, a classic case of mis-representation of Dalit women.

The KDHP was acquired by the Tatas from James Finlay and Co. in the 1980s, and Tata Tea went on to become the world's second largest branded tea company, the Tetley Group, while simultaneously negotiating the world's largest employee buyout in 2005 giving birth to the KDHPCL, with some level of workers' participation in terms of share capital. This was a period when world

commodity prices particularly that of tropical tea came under the influence of the global trade regime with a drastic drop in prices. Despite the fact that the workers, including women, hold shares in the newly constituted company, the KDHPCL also represented a system that was not only patriarchal but also was ethnic-cum-caste hegemonic (or *brahmanical*), thriving on the traditional caste hierarchy in the life of Dalit women. Furthermore, the newly floated company was also keen in recruiting fresh flow of migrant women from the north-East, as yet another cheap and disciplined source of labour.

To quote Lisy Sunny, one of the organizers of the struggle, ‘When one of us dies, our body is carried in a tractor. We want to change this animal-like life’ (Lisy Sunny, personal interview, Munnar, 4 and 5 September 2015). Lisy Sunny’s words took me back to October 2002 (Raman, 2010b: 158) when Velankanni, a ninth class student hanged herself in her parents’ workhouse in RBT estate, which had remained closed for the previous year, as she found herself unable to comply with the headmaster’s orders to come to school in a new uniform. Mallika (name changed on request) added, ‘We are Dalits that’s why we are continued to be trapped in such low paying jobs; we have no openings in government jobs. We are forced to speak caste as we are subjected to exploitation due to caste’; an aspect that intersectionality scholars acknowledge by taking a position that the women’s social identities influence their beliefs about everyday life, including the gendered work experiences (see Shields, 2008: 301–311).

Echoing their slogans, Vinitha said, ‘sir, we are the ones who do the work, but all the benefits go to the owner; while we live in dilapidated houses, they all live in bungalows; when they eat meat, we are deprived of even the basic diet . . .’ (Interview with Vinitha, Munnar (name changed on request) 4 September 2015), a feeling shared by many interviewed Dalit women (Interview with Selvi, personal interview, Munnar, 4 and 5 September 2015) This gives us the insight that neither the education nor modern democratic state formation have challenged caste defined jobs, not to speak of the precarity of Dalit women, issues to be read along with the larger Dalit critiques of Kerala model of development, wherein Dalits remained outliers and precarious (Raman, 2010a,c, 2017; Devika 2010; Heller 1999; Kannan 1988; Kurien 1995; Rammohan 2008; Ramachandran 1997); although the wages in tea plantations of Kerala are relatively high when compared to the rest of the country, the direct producer gains very little for her labour, the upper nodes in the profit hierarchy enjoy the profits from her hard work. This briefly reflects the unequal distribution of income and surplus along the tea value chain, as in the case of coffee in the Indian south (see Neilson and Pritchard, 2012; Raj, 2019; Raman, 2012b: 459–628). As history enters the era of post-Tataisation, the plantation Dalits expected a difference in their everyday life. This however turned out to be a false hope in terms of everyday discrimination and deprivation of basic human rights in terms of health, education and housing.³

Self-organizing by the mis-organized?

In August 2015, the newly reconstituted KDHP unilaterally declared a wage bonus – without discussing the matter with any of the recognized trade unions – for the fiscal year 2014–2015 at 10%, as against 19% the previous year, nearly halved. This was also at a time when the management refused to revise the statutory minimum wages that were due for months and the right-wing state government was not keen on forcing the management comply with the Plantation Labour Act (1951) in terms of improving the plantation life.

All the major trade unions in the KDHPCL – the AITUC-led Devikulam Estate Workers Union, the INTUC-led South Indian Plantation Workers Union and the CITU-led Plantation Workers Union⁴ – decided to refuse the bonus declared as they were demanding 1% higher than the previous year at 20%. The management tried to come to a consensus by highlighting global economic crisis

and its impact on tea prices in the world market. However, the trade unions refused to accept the management's offer and instead, served strike notice, adding yet another demand that the minimum daily wages should also be revised to Rs 500 from the current wage of Rs 232. As the women workers were closely following the development of negotiations, they took the decision to *go-slow* with plucking leaves, the main operation in the industry. They also felt collusive deals of trade union leaders, whom were otherwise accused of corruption, and the Company, known for such practices (see Raman, 2010a). The unions, however, jointly rejected the women workers' response and directed them not to practice any go-slow protests. This was the first provocation for the women workers who were already disheartened by their trade unions' lackadaisical approach to their question of livelihood and responsibility. Discussions among themselves, both at home and on the estates, led to their decision to represent themselves: the already (mis)organized women workers split away from their male-led trade unions, challenging them and the company, and keeping all the trade unions, save a few, out of their protest domain including the local Communist Party of India (Marxist) legislative assembly member.

Their initial demands concerned basic needs for their material existence and social reproduction of labour, such as wages and bonus. Their second concern was in relation to representation – why their own trade unions, including those with left-wing ideologies, were reluctant and often tardy in addressing their specific concerns, sometimes even rendering them invisible. They also highlighted the fact that they were engaged in multiple burdens of value production – for instance on the worksite as workers, at home as a vehicle of social reproduction – among other unspecified forms of work.

On 5 September 2015, a relay hunger strike was launched by hundreds of low caste plantation women in front of the Company headquarters at Munnar – with black flags instead of red that they used to carry all along – virtually occupying the colonially evolved market town of the entire tea region. High land life came to a virtual standstill, with feminist slogan of *Pempilai Orumai Zindabad* (Long Live Pempilai Orumai) in bilingual dialect of Tamil and Malayalam, often reminiscent of the *occupy struggles* in the global south, including the Arab spring (see Graeber, 2013; Werbner et al., 2014; Alexander 2019). Those youth who also accompanied their mothers and sisters expressed their wrath by shouting slogans and throwing stones not only to the union offices but also the state institutions, including the offices of Forest Department and Inspector of Plantations. When the struggle drew mass support from the media, particularly the visual media from the second day of the struggle – 6 September – when thousands of Dalit women began raising their slogans against the Tatas, the KDHPCL and the state (see Joseph, Rammohan and Soman 2015; Raj, 2019: 671–689; Raman, 2015a) – the mainstream male-led trade unions and their loyalists turned against the striking women. The police had to arrest those men indulged in violence against striking women; a woman worker attempted self-immolation, while the strike also evolved to incorporate new slogans such as 'no men no unions'. The struggle has been variously depicted by scholars and groups. While some political parties described it as the *Jasmine revolution* (Keralasabdam 11 October 2015), there are others who described it as, the Women Multitude (Raman, 2015b), reflexive of the "cultural power" (see Alexander 2019) and the "political aesthetics" of the protests (Sartwell, 2010) occupying wider spaces (see Butler, 1990, 2011; Werbner et al 2014).

To quote the woman leader, GS:

It's the annual bonus that brings relief to the workers. The average bonus they expect would be around 8000-10000 which a great help is. Most of their future plans would be centred on this. Any uncertainty regarding bonus would unsettle our future plans. While the male-led trade unions were become ineffective in countering the bonus deduction by half, our plans for the future lay in complete disarray. This was the primary reason for the strike this time round. (Gomati Sebastian, personal interview, Munnar, 5 September 2015)

Several of the women workers whom this author interviewed on the day of the strike (Malathi, personal interview, Munnar, 5 September 2015; Kameswari, personal interview, Munnar, 4 and 5 September 2015; Merina, personal interview, Munnar, 4 and 5 September 2015) shared this view. They had narrated their everyday precarity, and in the words of Mallika ‘we owe nothing; neither a house nor land; everything was company owned’. Earlier, they had been allowed access to common lands for the raising of mulch animals, however, this had been barred of late, as part of the rose cultivation project of the company. While the agitators half-heartedly welcomed a few local representatives,⁵ all other local leaders were barred entry into the protest area, including the local legislative assembly representative. As the female workers’ protest progressed, the social reproduction of labour was in crisis. Such was the precariousness and vulnerability of the plantation households in Munnar when their only source of income was cut off owing to their participation in the protest.

The outcome

As the struggle progressed, the women leaders were creating history by forcing the state leaders, intellectuals and social activists to participate in the struggle or to express solidarity with them. Labour ministers’ two rounds of formal talks and attempts to resolve the issue failed, the chief minister was then forced to the negotiating table mainly with the striking women workers without any union representation or male trade unionists, and thus an agreement was reached: a bonus of 8.33% with 11.67% ex gratia as a one-time payoff altogether meeting the workers demand for the bonus of 20%. Wage revision was also agreed upon.

Interestingly enough, the *Pempilai Orumai* was not in agreement with the new settlement, and they publicly expressed their dissatisfaction with it. The leaders told me that they were not convinced of the management’s argument that there was a reduction in profit responsible for reducing the bonus declared. Nonetheless, they have withdrawn their struggle owing to the extreme deprivation caused by a lack of daily earnings for over a month. It was difficult for them to reproduce their labour without basic income or access to provisions. As a few workers revealed, local shop owners began to refuse provisions to them on credit; in addition the sources of costly credits through private money lenders – the newly emerged predatory capital – even at high interest rates began to dry up. Umamaheswari, a Dalit woman doctoral student at the Kerala University Thiruvananthapuram, who originally hails from Munnar pointed out:

My mother is on strike. The shops from where we used to get supplies suddenly turned against us . . . they don’t want to continue to supply provisions on credit. I had to send my fellowship to my family. (Umamaheswari, personal interview, student, Thiruvananthapuram, 12 September 2015; also Murukeswari, personal interview, Thiruvananthapuram, 12 September 2015)

The striking workers were increasingly realizing that even when the strike was called off and work returned to normalcy, it would take years to fully repay the money they received from the money lenders. So punitive were the terms and conditions attached to these loans. The emergent agreement was, therefore, both positive and unwelcome.

‘The greatest victory of *Pempilai Orumai* was not the bonus hike or the salary raise’, Sunny says proudly. ‘It is the empowerment that every woman feels now. No man dares to hit a woman these days as he knows that women now have the courage to hit back’. And this has earned her a new set of enemies – the husbands of the female workers. They complain that their wives no longer obey them. ‘Once a group of men surrounded me and started complaining that I have ruined their family lives’, she says. ‘When I asked their wives, they told me that they now insist on getting a share of their husbands’ salaries, which would otherwise have gone straight to the coffers of liquor shops’.

Their articulations reflect their future plans, which also amplify their perceived difference between themselves and the mainstream representational organizations.

Gomati Sebastian, thus commented:

Yes, we have a union of our own. We don't allow either the Left or the Right wing forces to interfere with our plans. Those who predicted that we would die a natural death with the end of the struggle have been proved wrong. We have become stronger. We want to expand our activities beyond Munnar. There are people without houses, proper livelihood sources . . . we want to organise them. (Sebastian, personal interview, Munnar, 5 September 2015)

Earlier, she had expressed how difficult it was for them to organize and form a union of their own:

It was through secret arrangements that we registered our trade union. Otherwise, the mainstream political parties and their followers would have obstructed the process. They would have continued to mis-represent us as they are not in favour of our activities, nor our presence in Munnar; only we could represent ourselves. (Gomati Sebastian, personal interview, Munnar, 5 September 2015)

As Sunny says,

The women realised that heaven will not fall if they utter the name of their men. Our group did not have any name or specific slogans. We shouted whatever came to our minds. But whatever we said came straight from our hearts.

As Badiou (2004; also see Hallward, 2004) would remind us, what is important in such cases is post-eventual declaration and in this case one of the women I interviewed after the struggle commenced, to quote, 'at least now we have a union of our own' (Lisy Sunny, personal interview, Munnar, 4 and 5 September 2015) (see Note 1).

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this discussion part, I would engage two questions: What does the data – *on-the-spot ethnography* – show with respect to something that organization scholars so far have missed? How does this work complement the existing intersectionality approach and postcolonial subaltern scholarship?

My study of Dalit women's struggle within the gendered tea production domain is in many ways a combined derivation from three sources of knowledge: first, my *on-the-spot ethnography* of the struggle; second, a continuum of historical and ethnographic accounts; and third, the secondary sources available primarily in the vernacular Malayalam. This unique combination of sources not only offers spaces for the Dalit women to narrate their own experience but also facilitates an exchange of views: between myself as a critical male participant observer and the Dalit women directly involved in the struggle with their non-textual reflections but reflexive of their everyday social reproduction of labour. It also implies that in order to interpret the struggle in its fullness, it is imperative to listen to the voices of the Dalit women themselves – which I also hope would become the sources of oral history in subaltern historiography for future research – and to try and acknowledge the stark realities articulated by those who live within these realities. This necessitates a shift in perspective from the part of the listener, but not in treating class and caste as separate or consciousness as autonomous and independent of social reproduction. Instead, the former must be seen as overlapping realities that feed into each other as dialectically intertwined in the form of categories and power relations triggering the acts of resistance. Neither the postcolonial nor the

postcolonial organization perspectives explore these realities save a few; the actual sense of such realities could be made integral by making their voices heard and by bringing the Dalit liberatory epistemology as intersectionally constituted into postcolonial organization scholarship. While engaging with the critiques of Chibber (2013), Spivak (2014: 189) has rightly pointed out that when one moves 'from physical well-being to fighting for physical well-being', there is language, history and 'permissible narratives' (see Said, 1984) on a wide range of issues such as representation, autonomy and modes of resistance, critical constituents of subaltern counterpublics (see Fraser, 1997). However, this should in no way marginalize the issues of physical well-being and the ownership of experience itself which is implicit in the social cost of reproduction and resistance, aspects that remained by and largely unfocussed while the postcolonial organization scholarship and the intersectionality scholarship engage the everyday resistance of the outliers, thus adding to the potential of intersectionality in organization scholarship.

While critically reviewing Prasad (2012), Hanchey (2015: 612–613; also see Colignon 2004) challenges the new wave of postcolonial scholars, arguing that, '. . . little work has specifically been done to theoretically examine what organization studies can augment or challenge in postcolonial theory writ large, and what postcolonial theory can augment or challenge in organization theory'. There are at least three ways that I have identified by which this study augments the postcolonial organization approach to workers' protests within management and organization discourse and politics. First of all, this work addresses the issue of unspeakability/unrepresentability of the subalterns and confirms that they do have the power to organize and speak for themselves by deriving insights from intersectional life-world experiences down the years. And by doing this, they offer a response to the Spivakian challenge as to 'can the subaltern speak?' and reaffirms that the subaltern as dalit female is no longer in shadow. Second, the strategies of dissent which occur at two levels: first as *self-organizing*, by splitting away from the non-representational and hegemonic organizational forms – thereby self-organizing by the mis-organized refusing to comply within the traditional Marxist understanding that workers cannot represent themselves but are to be represented. Third, challenging not only the management but the very constituted hegemony in which other hegemonic forces such as the state and trade unions play their regressive roles and thereby become new political subjects conscious of their own acts of resistance and unleashing their own agency – a theoretical aspect that advances both intersectionality and postcolonial organization scholarship.

Given the fact that class, caste and gender overlap in such a manner that the women in revolt were subjected to multiple deprivations – the question raised by intersectionality scholarship – it is neither economic reproduction alone that matters to them, but the cultural reproduction as well – combined with the social reproduction of labour – Dalit women thus had to engage simultaneously with the politics of recognition and politics of equality (see Fraser, 1997, 2000), aspects of Dalit feminism and subaltern identity that require focussed attention in both intersectionality and postcolonial organization studies. This helps us to provide an integrated narrative of intersectionality, labour process and postcolonial, and an aspect on which organization scholars are yet to make serious engagements.

One of the domains wherein the postcolonial organization theorists are not in consonance with the postcolonial theorists is the way in which the latter group problematizes the question of consciousness. Given the fact that the women workers, sourced from different spatial locations, share a common social origin in that they all belong to the historically underprivileged 'the other': the postcolonial position that 'the bonds of solidarity that tie them together already exist' (Chatterjee, 1993: 163; also see Guha, 1997) finds relevance. But the advanced postcolonial organization scholars would demand, as I do in this article, not just the presence of consciousness and 'domination-subordination' to incorporate the questions of consciousness, representation and identity – often expressed in terms of caste, gender and religion are the aspects taken in all its seriousness by

intersectionality scholars, but the very expression of the same, which cannot simply be confined to any kind of implicit consciousness produced in autonomous domains. As has been shown in the study, by their own admission – and thus without elitist or external mediation – it is specifically the social reproduction of labour and the precariousness of their everyday livelihood, which are intersectionally sensitive to the historical roots of divisions of caste and gender that trigger their protest and struggles. It is also they who choose to speak against the specific ways in which they are misrepresented/mis-organized and to highlight why it was imperative that they ‘self-organized’ themselves. It is the way in which they were mis-organized and misrepresented that formed the axis of challenging the constituted hegemony and helped construct a new subject position from which they could and did speak.

As we have shown in this study, by their own admission, the Dalit women engage in self-organizing and launching struggles, primarily driven by the misfortunes in their lives, and their accumulated misery, aspects of labour process and social reproduction of labour. Furthermore, it is not the duality that acts as the source of power – class as externally imposed by colonial conditions and caste as an internal force as many postcolonial/Subaltern Studies scholars view, but it is mutually reinforcing and structurally overlapping with caste life as the significant indicator of subjective and collective experience of intersectionality. While the scholars have sought to investigate collective meaning-making processes in events, protests and social movements, I have sought to explore how this meaning-making is done when the subjects are mis-organized and how alternative organization is articulated and how the political aesthetics of counter-narrative is produced. As has been widely recognized that in future any revolutionary impulse would tend to come from the ‘margins’, from oppressed social sections (see Barker et al., 2013) for whom the resistance to layers of hegemony is modernity (Raman 2017), it is not something that could be disguised in any manner: caste subaltern position triumphs other divisions of labour and the very caste and gendered subalternity as emboldened in intersectionality of multiple oppression acts as the source of critical autonomous power challenging the constituted hegemony by offering fresh insights for the broader field of organizational and critical management scholarship. This is where advancement in postcolonial organization scholarship becomes significant.

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Notes

1. The intersectionality literature burgeoned with scholars debating on the ontological and epistemological dimensions of intersectionality as a paradigm (see Bilge, 2010; Hancock, 2007), or method/approach or on the complexities and dilemmas associated (see McCall, 2005; Nash, 2008; Walby et al., 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2004) and more importantly overlapping categories of identities and socio-cultural systems of power (see Collins, 1989, 1990; Mohanty, 1991; Lewis, 2013; Davis and Zarkov, 2017; Cooper, 2015)/

- domination/subordination and so on (also see Hillsburg, H. 2013; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Verloo 2006; Risman 2004).
2. Hindu caste hierarchy embodied in the *chaturvarna*, the four *varnas*—Brahmin, Kshathriya, Vaisya and Shudra—under the hegemonic frame of Brahmanism/Hinduism (see Deshpande, 2010, 2014; Dirks 2001; Jeffrelet, 2003).
 3. Vazhoor Soman (personal interview, State Secretary, AITUC 4, 5 and 12 September 2015, Munnar), a communist trade union leader, confirms that the living conditions in most of the tea estates are deplorable, and even worse in closed estates without any sign of revival.
 4. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC, affiliated to Communist Party of India (CPI)) was the single largest union in Munnar plantations followed by the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU), affiliated to the mainstream Indian Communist party, the CPI(M), and Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), affiliated to Congress Party, and Hind Mazdoor Sabha, an independent socialist union.
 5. The sole political leader who was wholeheartedly welcomed with ultimate acceptance was the opposition leader VS. Achuthanandan. Even at the age of 94, he was courageous to travel all the way from Trivandrum to the High Range and sit with them, declaring he would continue to be with them until the stir is resolved in their favour.

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