



THIRST

BRIEFING:
PEMPILA
ORUMAI

The women workers' uprising in Munnar, South India 2015

BACKGROUND

The Kanan Devan Hills Plantation company (KDHP) is one of the main tea growers in Kerala. Established in the late 19th century by a Scottish company, it was owned by James Finlays and Son until the mid-60's when it went into partnership with Tatas who took over completely in 1983. Tata's was seen as a benevolent employer who brought many improvements to workers' housing and conditions. But by the early 2000's Tata's realized that the real money was in tea packaging and marketing rather than cultivation. Rather than sell estates to another company who they feared would undo the social benefits they had brought in, they embarked on the revolutionary (for the tea sector) idea of turning it into an employee-owned enterprise¹. Workers were given training and supported in getting bank loans to buy shares in the new company, in which Tata's retained a 28% share.

The company practices what it describes as a participatory management system with 'Divisional Advisory Committees' (DACs) set up to discuss issues relating to tea cultivation and management as well as social issues for workers. The DACs consist of workers as well as management. At least two of the four labourers² must be women. The workers who pluck the most tea earn a place on the management board as recognition of their performance. Worker representatives have helped to bring in changes such as the company buying rice in bulk and selling it to workers at cost to help them cope with rising food prices as the area became a popular tourist destination.

Since 1951, plantations are required under the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) to provide housing, education, healthcare and food security for their workers and families. On top of PLA mandated benefits, the company also supports workers by providing land to grow vegetables to help supplement their income, providing scholarships for continuing education for high performing children, providing a school attended by children of workers and managers alike (a very unusual concept in a highly class conscious India), providing rice at cost price delivered to workers' doors etc.

WOMEN'S UNITY...

This arrangement appeared to work well for many years. But in September 2015, following an announcement that workers' annual bonuses would be 10% rather than the anticipated 20%, thousands of women workers went on strike. After trying and failing to raise the issue through established trade unions and through existing management channels, they decided to take matters into their own hands.

They held a sit-down protest outside the KDHP head office – of which they are part owners – thus blocking one of the main roads through the area. Thus they brought not one, but both of the area's main industries – tea and tourism – to a halt for several days.

They called themselves 'Pempila Orumai' – meaning 'women's unity'. And while their demands related to the bonus payment, pay and benefits, it was, in effect, framed within gender dimensions since they proclaimed that the (male dominated) trade unions and political parties had not protected their rights. The men from their own families were excluded from the strike.

Their protest was as much against the trade unions as it was against the company. They carried slogans aimed at the trade unions such as "*Kolunthukutta edukkathu naangalu/ panakkutta amukkathu neengalu*" (We carry bags of tea/ You hoard bags of money).

Although they were not officially eligible to take part in wage negotiations at the time since they weren't a registered trade union, their success in mobilizing thousands of workers for a protracted period, and the support of the Chief Minister and Labour Minister of Kerala helped to ensure that the full bonus was reinstated.

However, along with the established trade unions, they continued to strike to protest against wider issues such as low wages (income from shares is sporadic and negligible) and poor working conditions. Their grievances included poor quality housing, dangerous working conditions (carrying heavy weights up and down steep hills, facing wild animals, lack of protective gear etc), and having to pay for services (such as healthcare) that should be provided for free as per PLA requirements.

Of their demands only the wage demand was partially met – they wanted an increase from Rs 230 (approximately £2.30) to Rs 500 (approx. £5) a day. They got Rs 301 (approx. £3) (on condition of plucking more tea).

The event triggered much soul-searching among politicians. Kerala's Chief Minister, Oommen Chandy observed that "Successive governments failed to catch the lapses of the management [in observing laws on the humane treatment of workers]." He went on to confess that "All those who had power, are equally responsible for the events that unfolded at Munnar." Trade unions too, were forced to examine their consciences. According to The Hindu, "Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) State president R. Chandrasekharan described the events in Munnar as "a clear failure on the part of the local trade union leadership..." and sought an urgent meeting of all INTUC-affiliates in the plantation sector to discuss the issue.³

STILL GOING STRONG...

In the months that followed, the leaders of the movement, including Lissy Sunny, Rajeshwari Jolly and Gomathi, said they came under verbal and physical attack from trade unions. They were also subjected to rumours and accusations which succeeded in driving a wedge between them. Nevertheless, Pempila Orumai was registered as a formal trade union – affiliated (as most trade unions in India are) to a political party; the left of centre Aam Admi Party. They also succeeded in winning places in some local elections. The group then fell out of the news – it was rumoured that the trade union had dissolved and workers had gone back to their original unions. People said Pempila Orumai was a "spent force".

In January 2019, I met with Rajeshwari Jolly – the current General Secretary of Pempila Orumai (PO). She assured me that the trade union is still very much alive and well, that they have around 240 members across KDHP estates. Each Division has two PO representative, including one secretary. She said they are still formulating demands to the company on issues such as improved housing, housing rights for workers at retirement, and provision of medical care for the dependents of workers (who are not eligible for free treatment under PLA provisions).

Rajeshwari herself lives in a three room house with her husband (who has not worked since having a heart attack several years ago), 22 year old son (who is blind in one eye from an accident), daughter and mother-in-law. Husband and son sleep on bed, Rajeshwari and daughter on floor in same room and her mother-in-law in an adjacent room.

She says that wages are still too low; "It's our company, it's our work, but we only get Rs 300 a day. We can't manage on that amount. Carpenters get Rs 800, mason Rs 1000, even a coffee maker gets Rs 400 - why should pluckers only get Rs 300/day? We are ready to work hard, we only need a decent salary."

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE...

KDHP appears to be comparatively one of the most benign and generous tea companies in India, providing many benefits and making at least an attempt to involve workers in decision-making. Yet it is just as constrained as other companies by the challenging dynamics of the industry; the aggressive pressure on prices from packaging companies and static or falling prices overall, the requirement to provide benefits to a large population only a small

proportion of which works for them, rising labour and other production costs, competition from the growing tourist industry, and the emergence of a new generation that is not willing to continue to work in the fields under these conditions. More research would need to be done to unpick the discrepancies between workers' and management perspectives – both are likely to hold some truth.

Women-led trade unions in the tea sector like Pempila Orumai are rare and need to be encouraged and supported so that better worker-management dialogue is established. Rajeshwari was frustrated by her inability to hold dialogue directly with senior managers in the company. *"We can talk to our Divisional managers directly, and they often agree with our demands, but their managers don't listen to them..."* The backing of a Global Trade Union Federation like the IUF would help to strengthen and stabilize a genuinely representative emerging women's trade union – in a male-dominated industry with a majority of women workers, and could facilitate effective participation of women in trade union activities and working constructively with companies to bring about sustainable and mutually beneficial solutions.

Sabita Banerji – CEO, THIRST. February 12, 2019

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REFERENCES

¹ <https://www.rediff.com/money/2006/sep/27spec1.htm>

² In tea plantations there are three categories of employee; 'labour', 'staff' and 'management'

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/tough-questions-before-trade-unions-postmunnar-stir/article7653929.ece>