

# **Tea Plantation, Kerala (India): Lessons of Munnar women workers' struggle**

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**Discrimination can be fought, on women's own terms when they organise themselves across differences.**

## **Reading the tea leaves: What the Indian women's movement can learn from Munnar agitation**

The good news for the women's movement in India came from Munnar, a hill station in Kerala, last month where a group of women workers won a signal battle against their employers, a tea estate by the name of Kanan Devan Hills Plantations.

One of the slogans at the protest read: "We pick the tea leaves, we heave the sacks of the tea leaves, you heave the sacks of money leaves, there has to be an end to this."

These protesters did not allow men to be a part of the protest. "Men don't do the work that we do," they said. "We are the ones who pluck the leaves, carry the burden all day and even load it onto trucks."

They did not allow unions to interfere in their protests either. Despite being in a state that has very influential unions and union leaders, the women did not allow them to become a part of their struggle. The women alleged that union leaders had colluded with the management to keep their bonus down.

And this is what made this protest and success unique. These women managed to keep politicians and union leaders at bay for nine days of protest that saw their numbers swell from 4,000 to an estimated 6,000, before the management gave in to their demands for higher bonus.

This is a true feminist assertion. Those unions, affiliated to the Congress or the Communists, dominated by traditional male leaders, were taken by surprise at first. Those leaders who thought they could gain visibility and power by appropriating this unique protest faced the full fury of the women protesters.

Buoyed by the success of this protest, women tea pickers employed in many other tea plantations in the region have gone on strike to press for higher wages.

## **A model of protest**

Like tea picking, there are other "women's only" occupations where this protest would have a clear resonance: paddy transplanting, agarbatti and bidi rolling, prawn peeling, silk-worm rearing, cashew nut husking etcetera. Much has been written about this phenomenon and why women predominate in these jobs, but not enough on why women are paid less than men, or on the specious argument that they contribute less.

This is where the Munnar struggle becomes significant because it shows that this discrimination can be fought, on women's own terms. This uprising draws attention to many aspects of the Indian economy and the role women play in it. It also affirms the need for women to organise themselves across differences – caste, colour, politics – for justice and bringing in change.

Examples abound of such brave struggles especially on economic and survival issues like at Manek Chowk in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, where women vendors did a sit-in to protect against the reallocation of their vending space, which they had used or sat in for over 100 years, to a car park. The women vendors of Ima Keithel, Mothers market in Imphal did a sleep-in to hold on to their traditional market place. Struggles in Darjeeling, however, led to closure and deep distress for women. The broader feminist movement should support women's unions and strengthen their voice, helping sharpen economic arguments for justice.

This becomes even more important when we realise that instead of addressing the question of increasing economic inequality, at the macro level, labour legislation is being revised as part of a programme to reduce costs and make India's production of goods and services more competitive. Capital and its returns are not being touched. With a large, poor and unemployed population, the opportunity to make in India, at least cost, could after all be vitiated if labour is allowed to demand its fair and legitimate rights.

In various fora, feminists are critiquing the economic models based only on the propellers of Gross Domestic Product growth, arguing that it creates inequality and is biased against the poor. But they have not been able to bring their collective voice as a challenge to economic policy discourse at the high levels of decision making.

Economic policy discourse at the macro level does not have what can be called a reasoned feminist intervention nor is there a strong enough voice as we saw when there was an uprising against the Land Acquisition Act by farmers leading to some success or the struggle in the Narmada Valley, which recently has had some success in the matter of compensation.

Gender is seen as a stratification. Gendered and feminist analysis is not seen as a theoretical framework, or as a form of economic reasoning or as a powerful ground level movement.

### **A spark that can start a fire**

In this Munnar struggle we have a spark which the women's movement should fan to start a fire. It has all the characteristics of an economic scenario that we criticise – unprotected labour, the betrayal by employers of labour agreements, and the power, courage, and unity of women as workers.

The Munnar struggle illustrates many of the issues that are taken up as part of the global and national discussions by the women's movement, governments and the United Nations, namely that women are paid less than men, that women organise themselves more effectively than men, that women provide the core sustenance to their families and are willing to place their bodies on the line to that end.

It is important for the feminist movement to take the spark of this struggle into the high visibility arenas, as they did when they protested the gang rape in a bus in Delhi. Making that incident into a bigger movement helped bring about a dramatic change not only in laws, but also provided women the courage with which they are now coming forward to report cases of sexual violence.

This remarkable women-led struggle by workers in Munnar can be a platform for the women's movement to establish the point they have been trying to make. Not only on gender inequality, not

only on women's stereotypical work, but on the economy, on economic policy, on labour and other legislation, on export industries, on corporate power.

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*With inputs from Neha Choudhary.*

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\* "OPINION". "Reading the tea leaves: What the Indian women's movement can learn from Munnar agitation". scroll.in. Oct 20, 2015 · 06:30 pm:

<http://scroll.in/article/761506/reading-the-tea-leaves-what-the-indian-womens-movement-can-learn-from-munnar-agitation>

\* We welcome your comments at letters scroll.in