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Spring 2017

# Munnar Plantation Strike, 2015: a Case Study of Keralan Female Tea Workers' Fight for Justice

Shoshana Levy  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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MUNNAR PLANTATION STRIKE

MUNNAR PLANTATION STRIKE, 2015: A CASE STUDY OF KERALAN FEMALE TEA  
WORKERS' FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

Shoshana Levy

Mr. Trilochan Pandey

Dr. KJ Joseph, Center for Development Studies

School for International Training India: Sustainable Development and Social Change Program

Spring 2017

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### **Abstract**

*In the southern state of Kerala, tea leaf pickers are nearly all women. They work 14 hour days, six days a week, rain or shine. What's more, they earn the lowest minimum daily wage of any sector in the state, bringing home a meager average of Rs. 231 a day. With women constituting more than half of the workforce on tea plantations across India it is becoming increasingly crucial to understand the challenged, yet integral role they play. Through a case study of the Munnar Plantation Strike of 2015 - a strike organized by the Pempilai Orumai women, against the Kannan Devan Hills Tea Plantation - this paper seeks to reveal the ways in which female tea workers in South India have attempted to dismantle deep seeded inequality. What factors led to this coalescence? What reforms did the female laborers demand? And, what, if any, sustainable changes ensued? In exploring the arc of the 2015 strike, this study also seeks to broadly explore the role of tea and the female labor movement in the development of rural South India. Data was collected through a combination of one-on-one formal and informal interviews, focus groups and analysis of written materials produced by the Pempilai Orumai. The findings reveal the role of inadequate and corrupt trade unions in triggering the strike, the rudimentary list of demands set forward by the strike organizers, and a host of unanticipated consequences that followed. Ultimately, however, the findings conclude that the successes of the strike are rendered negligible in the grand scheme of the Kannan Devan empire.*

# MUNNAR PLANTATION STRIKE

## Introduction

The history of tea in India is long and intricate. While tea production was first commercialized after the British East India Company conquered much of the Indian state, tea consumption is deeply rooted in the history of India. Historical records suggest the prevalence of tea drinking in India dates back to 750 BC. However, it was not until the British formalized cultivation in the 18th century that India began to acquire global recognition for tea production.<sup>1</sup> Plantation construction was utilized by the British as a means of development, as it necessitated the creation of - among other things - paved roads, systems of education and employment opportunities in areas of the subcontinent previously “untouched.”

The history of tea cultivation is therefore the history of imperialism, racism, and social injustice. In *Green Gold* Macfarlane and Macfarlane reiterate that tea is not simply the product of historical colonization, but also a contemporary manifestation of systems of global exploitation. The colonialism and hierarchical systems that were pillars of the initial development of the Indian plantation sector remain inextricably tied to the practice of tea production as it manifests today.

Presently, India is second largest producer of tea, second only to China.<sup>2</sup> Yet, while tea is primarily grown in China, India and Sri Lanka it is exported and consumed in disproportionately high quantities to much of the white western world.<sup>3</sup> Thus, economic and political discrimination are central to the production and consumption of tea. This system of hierarchy in the global tea

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Macfarlane and Iris Macfarlane, *Green Gold: The Empire of Tea* (London: Ebury Press, 2003), 73.

<sup>2</sup> “Origin of Tea,” India Brand Equity Foundation, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.teacoffeespiceofindia.com/tea/tea-origin>.

<sup>3</sup> Macfarlane and Macfarlane, 73.

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trade is reflected in the plantation dynamics across much of modern day India. The most significant indicator of this is the role of women plantation workers.

Women are crucial actors in the tea production chain, engaging in tea picking, weeding and clearing on plantations. In fact, women's labor is central to the economies of production. Employment of women in plantations was historically sought by planters in order to "control the male labour force" and to "ensure a steady reproduction of 'cheap' labour" as recruitment costs were expensive.<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee (2003) found that women workers produced a far more favorable quality of tea leaves than the men workers.<sup>5</sup> Plantation owners often employed the strategy of "depot marriages" in order to recruit men and women and ensure reproduction of labour on plantations.<sup>6</sup> Thus, engagement of women's labor is higher on tea plantations because of "gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves and for maintaining a steady social reproduction of labor."<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite uniquely high numbers of female laborers, it is important to recognize that plantation societies have consistently been defined by patriarchal norms and social conditions.<sup>8</sup> Women have been expected to accept lower wages than their male counterparts, in addition to a general lack of social services - education, healthcare and living conditions to name a few.

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<sup>4</sup> Rinju Rasaily, "Women's Labour in the Tea Sector: Changing Trajectories and Emerging Challenges," in *Globalisation, Development and Plantation Labour in India*, ed. K. J. Joseph and P. K. Viswanathan (New Delhi: Rutledge India, 2016), <http://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NRPPD-31.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor and Post Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Dagmar Engels, "The Myth Of The Family Unit: Adivasi Women In Coal-Mines And Tea Plantations In Early Twentieth-Century Bengal" in *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India*, ed. Peter Robb (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Rasaily, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Rasaily, 5.

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Female tea plantation laborers have been described as “overworked, consistently underpaid, and sometimes sexually harassed and bullied,” enduring gendered and inhuman working and living conditions since the plantation industry’s inception in the 18th century.<sup>9</sup>

In 1951 India passed the Plantation Labour Act, which sought to crack down on the inhumane treatment all plantation workers faced. Among many things, it required plantations to have primary schools, creches, a water source within the labour lines and recreational facilities for all workers.<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, however, the PLA is often not followed or enforced, leaving women workers deprived of whatever sliver of hope they have at improving living conditions for themselves and their children.

While these dynamics have existed - and perhaps even characterized plantation dynamics - throughout history, they were made public during the Munnar Plantation Strike of 2015. The nine day strike was organized entirely by an all female union called *Pempilai Orumai* - which translates to “women’s unity.” The women, all workers at the Kannan Devan Hills Plantation in Munnar, Kerala, demanded an increased bonus, and better wages and living conditions, reflecting the challenges that face female workers across the country. This paper seeks to situate the *Pempilai Orumai*’s fight for justice within the broader context of the female laborer experience and explore the way that tea has shaped politics, culture and the environment in contemporary Kerala. This study will examine both the arc of the Munnar strike and the deeply entrenched history of plantation labor in Kerala. As such, the study seeks to the ways that tea plantations in

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<sup>9</sup> Macfarlane and Macfarlane, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Kanchan Sarkar, and Sharit K. Bhowmik. "Trade Unions and Women Workers in Tea Plantations." *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 52 (1998): L50-52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4407515>.



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Kerala exist in isolation and the ways in which they are microcosmic representations of the political economy of development in India as a whole.

The vast majority of the current literature on female tea plantation workers in India revolves around the northern regions of Darjeeling and Assam. While the Munnar Strike of 2015 and the women of the Pempilai Orumai are nearly absent from any current scholarship, there exists a great deal of research on the topics of tea plantations, female labor movements and trade unions throughout India. The literature brings together a collection of themes, including India's history of tea, women tea workers, and the political economy of Indian tea plantations. While in isolation they are unable to capture the nuances of the Pempilai Orumai women's strike, in conversation with one another they illustrate a web of many of the intersecting ideas at play.

The current scope of literature pays significant attention to economic landscape within which the contemporary plantation sector is situated. Firstly, regard is given to the fight for financial autonomy for female plantation workers - the effects of women earning equal wages to their male counterparts and physically receiving their own salaries, as well as domestic dynamics the result from women controlling a portion of the household's earnings. Yet, the economic independence women gain from earning their own wages is far from representative of gender equality among male and female plantation workers.<sup>11</sup> There exists a tension between the absence of opportunities for upward occupational mobility and a generally consistently commitment among workers to their respective roles on the plantation. This dichotomy reveals the systematic nature of the social dynamics that shape tea plantations, as well as the entrenched feeling of pride women workers associate with their contribution to the the plantation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mita Bhadra, "Women Workers in Tea Plantations," *Indian Anthropologist* 15, no. 2 (1985): 93-114. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41919512>.

<sup>12</sup> Bhadra, "Women Workers in Tea Plantations."

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The political economy of tea plantations extends well beyond the physical confines of the plantation grounds. The industry is historically built upon, and thus presently reliant on, the international market. Over the past 30 years, Keralan plantations have endured a notable decrease in production, resulting in a threatened position on the global field.<sup>13</sup> What's more, according to the United Planters' Association of South India, the average cost of production for a tea estate has gone up by nearly threefold in that time.<sup>14</sup> This tension between increased production costs and decreased output has unsurprisingly resulted in a challenging relationship between plantation management and laborers. While the interests of the management seek to accrue as much profit as possible, ultimately wringing the industry dry of its natural resources, the laborers are being pushed increasingly farther away from the industry's remaining prosperity. Bhowmik (2005), much like Tharian (1984), illustrates the neglect of plantation laborers and disproportionately high management salaries, citing them as the source of expansive production. Ultimately, plantation wide funds are in dire need of reallocation in order to improve worker livelihood, which of course disproportionately affect women more so than men.<sup>15</sup>

Deeply connected to the financial concerns posed by the Indian plantation sector are a host of growing environmental concerns - deforestation, sedimentation in the reservoirs of hydroelectric projects, and environmentally hostile cultural practices and waste generations,

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<sup>13</sup> George K. Tharian, "Historical Roots of the Crisis in the South Indian Tea Industry," *Social Scientist* 12, no. 4 (1984): 50. doi:10.2307/3517082.

<sup>14</sup> Tharian, "Historical Roots of the Crisis in the South Indian Tea Industry."

<sup>15</sup> Sharit K. Bhowmik, "Tea Plantation Workers' Strike: Workers Lose out on Wages," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 38 (2005): 4103-105. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4417159>.

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among many others.<sup>16</sup> These changes in the environment adversely affect plantation crop yield. As such, the environmental sustainability of tea plantations is directly tied to their economic sustainability.

### Methods

To explore the Pemilai Orumai's demand for better wages and living conditions, a varied set of informants were contacted. The researcher employed the snowball sampling method, whereby initial contacts provided further contacts. This method helped to provide a variety of perspectives on the strike and its effects. Contacts included movement participants and leaders, family members of movement participants and leaders, plantation workers not involved in the strike, local politicians and government officials, and scholars of labor history, gender and the plantation sector. Research was conducted through a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observational field work. Research focused on understanding the tea plantation landscape and dynamics, identifying the social and political conditions that led to the strike, and exploring the lasting (and fleeting) effects of the negotiations. Additionally, the research sought to identify and understand structural and participatory changes in the organization of the movement since its inception in 2015. Finally, the research examined textual campaign materials - including a list of demands and pamphlets - and newspaper articles both in local vernacular and English.

Research was conducted in partnership with the Center for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Local contacts were made with the assistance of K.J. Joseph. In

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<sup>16</sup> K.J., Joseph, "Towards a Sustainable System of Innovation: The Case of Plantation Sector in Kerala," *Center for Development Studies*, sponsored by Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India (2013). <http://cds.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/NRPPD28.pdf>

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addition to providing academic guidance and local connections, representatives at the CDS provided significant background information on development issues the region currently and historically faces, as well as the broader context of plantation labor movements.

The researcher sought informed consent for all formal and informal interactions. Auditory recording devices were used during interviews when participant consent was given. While the researcher documented participant information for the sake of general figures and statistics (in an attempt to acquire a representative sample), the data collected will remain within the researcher's possession. All participants will remain anonymous to all advisors and readers.

### **Findings**

#### History of Tea Plantations in Munnar

The early history of Munnar, a town in the Western Ghats mountain range in Kerala, is largely unknown. Early inhabitants of the region are members of the Muthuvan tribal community.<sup>17</sup> The region remained “a wild and unexplored landscape” until the late 19th century when British Colonial powers began creating plantations as a technique for mass development.<sup>18</sup> The region only began to acquire international acclaim in the late 1800s, after John Daniel Munro, a member of the Travancore British kingdom, came to visit. His combined interest in plantations and head over heels admiration for the region's natural beauty led Munro straight to the feet of the Poonjar royal family, begging to lease the Kannan Devan hills, a region he deemed high in potential for plantation crops. In 1877 Munro settled a deal with Poonjattil Koickal

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<sup>17</sup> “History of Munnar,” Kerala Tourism, accessed May 7, 2017. <http://www.keralatourism.org/munnar/munnar-history.php>.

<sup>18</sup> “History of Munnar,” Kerala Tourism.

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Rohini Thirunal Kerala Varma Valiya Raja, giving him access to 1,36,600 acres of land for an annual lease of Rs. 3000 and a security deposit of Rs. 5000.<sup>19</sup>

Munro's success in the region caught the eye of his British comrades, and in 1895 Finlay Muir & Company of Scotland bought 33 independent estates in Munnar. Finlay, among others, capitalized on the bioregion's aptness for tea cultivation. The region's rapid economic growth gave rise to the Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company in 1897 in order to manage the network of estates.<sup>20</sup>

In 1964 Tata entered into collaboration with Finlay, and in 1983 Tata Tea Ltd. took full control of the region's management.<sup>21</sup> Finally, in 2005 the Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company Pvt. Ltd. was formed.<sup>22</sup> While Tata retained (and presently continues to hold) a 28.5% share of the company, full ownership of the plantations was transferred to KDHP.<sup>23</sup>

At present, KDHP controls nearly all of the economic activity in Munnar. While Munnar used to be characterized by its open roads and rolling hills, today it is largely walled off behind "private property" signs, entrance booths and security guards. In addition to KDHP's physical monopoly of Munnar, local vendors display loyalty to KDHP, exclusively selling tea and other products that bear a Tata logo. Thus, KDHP effectively controls the entirety of the physical and financial landscape in Munnar.

### History of Munnar Plantation Laborers

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<sup>19</sup> "History of Munnar," Kerala Tourism.

<sup>20</sup> "History of Munnar," Kerala Tourism.

<sup>21</sup> "History of Munnar," Kerala Tourism.

<sup>22</sup> Raj, Vimal. Interview by Shoshana Levy. Personal interview. Munnar, Kerala. April 14, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> "History of Munnar," Kerala Tourism.

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Nearly all plantation families in Kerala today are of Tamil origin, brought to Kerala during British colonialism as slaves.<sup>24</sup> Many families have been on the same plantation for upwards of four generations. Yet, despite having lived on Keralan plantations for 100+ years, Tamil is the native tongue for almost all KDHP laborers. This is of note because the official language of Kerala is Malayalam. As such, this disconnect begins to demonstrate the physical, economic and political isolation that plantation laborers endure.

### Labor Conditions

Kannan Devan Hills Plantation consists of 36 estates in Munnar alone. Each estate is divided into 3-5 divisions. The plantation follows a rigid hierarchy of authority; in order descending order of power: managing director, regional manager, group manager, manager, superintendent, field officer, supervisor, workers. Furthermore, within each division there is a high manager, assistant manager, 4 field officers and 5 supervisors (again, in descending order of power). Mobility within the hierarchy is nearly impossible. Authority positions are selected based on educational attainment levels. This quickly disqualifies almost all plantation workers (in large part due to the education system KDHP provides for the workers), and thus the positions of authority tend to be filled by those outside the plantation community. What's more, women are not eligible for positions more senior than supervisor. At present there are no women in supervisor positions.

A typical day for a KDHP laborer differs starkly by gender. This division is largely defined by the tasks given to men versus women. Men work half days, from 8 AM to 1:30 PM, and are responsible for chemical management - spraying down the tea plants with pesticides - and factory production - overseeing the mechanized process of separating the tea leaves into

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<sup>24</sup> Raj, Vimal. Interview by Shoshana Levy. Personal interview. Munnar, Kerala. April 14, 2017.

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black, white and green tea.<sup>25</sup> Vimal, the son of two plantation laborers and now a scholar of plantation studies and female empowerment, reasoned that this delegation is made because “[spraying work] is not possible for women workers ... it is very difficult ... need more power.”<sup>26</sup>

Conversely, women workers are responsible for all of the plantation field work, in which they hand pluck tea leaves for at least 9 hours every day. In order to be receive their weekly salary and monthly bundle of rice - for which 750 rupees are cut from the salary each month - each women has to pick at least 21 kilograms of tea leaves every day. Should women pluck more than the target of 21 kilograms per day they are eligible for extra compensation. The kilo to rupee ration varies year to year but at present, 1 additional kilogram is equal to 1 additional rupee.<sup>27</sup> Given the economic sparsity that was consistently employed as a defining characteristic of laborer livelihoods, the slight monetary incentive given to the female laborers often extends their respective work day to more than three times the length - not to mention physical exertion - of a typical male workday.

Participating female workers each outlined a nearly identical “typical work day.” The day consists of her waking up at 5 AM, walking anywhere from 1-3 kilometers from home in order to reach work by 7:45 AM, a one hour lunch break from 12:30-1:30 (which is, more often than not, not enough time to walk home, eat lunch and return to her work site), and an afternoon of continued field work until 5 PM (this, of course, does not include the additional hours many

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<sup>25</sup> Chengal, Anul. Interview by Shoshana Levy. Personal interview. Munnar, Kerala. April 20, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Rajeshwari, Kaeusaloya, and Sri Lada Chandre. Interview by Shoshana Levy. Focus group. Munnar, Kerala. April 17, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Vimal Raj, April 14, 2017.

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women spent in the field in order to make ends meet for their families). Once she arrives at home her “domestic work begins.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to fixing dinner for her family - often 5-7 people per housing unit - she is responsible for fetching water, child care, and various other household chores. Plantation laborers work Monday-Saturday.

At present, workers receive a weekly compensation of 321 rupees and a bundle of rice. Additionally, they receive a 20% annual bonus - an amount that varies year to year. Almost all families elect to reserve annual bonuses for their children’s education (specifically, higher education as schooling through 12th standard is subsidized by the government). All working families are also eligible to receive free on site housing. Each dwelling consists of a kitchen and 1-2 bedrooms. All utilities are paid out of pocket. All workers are required to pay 200 rupees yearly to the union fund for representation of the workers. Finally, due to the provisions set forth in the transfer of ownership from Tata Tea, Ltd. to Kannan Devan Hills Plantation, Ltd. in 2005, plantation workers hold around 60% of the stock in the company.<sup>29</sup> It is of note, however, that despite two seats on the board being reserved for workers, the contract is such that all decision making power still lies within the power of Tata administrators.<sup>30</sup>

Under the Plantation Labor Act, each estate is also required to provide education and healthcare services to its workers. While the facilities are abysmal at best, these basic amenities do exist (despite the fact that several of the provisions outlined in the PLA do not). Each estate provides schooling through third standard. After passing out of third standard, plantation children are expected to attend - and transport themselves to - school in Munnar town. School was,

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<sup>28</sup> Muniamma Raj. Personal interview. Munnar. April 14, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> “Our History,” Kannan Devan Hills, accessed May 2, 2017, <http://www.kdhptea.com/our-history>.

<sup>30</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.



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however, not in session during the one month of field research, as students were on a two month summer holiday. Creches were inconsistently present on estates.

Each estate has a hospital “dispensary.”<sup>31</sup> The dispensary staff consists of 1 part time doctor, 1 attendant, 1 nurse and 1 cook. The dispensary’s hours of operation are from 7:45AM-12 noon, and 3:30-6PM, 7 days a week. On average, the Chokana Hospital sees 35 patients per day. Frequent ailments include fever, stomach pain and accidents incurred during field work. The facility is a three room building, with a dressing room, consultation room and doctor’s office. In addition to estate dispensaries, KDHP has a general hospital located in Munnar town. All emergencies are deferred to the general hospital, though patients are expected to transport themselves there (which can be upwards of a 30 minute drive). KDHP is marketed as a free hospital for plantation workers, but in actuality workers are seen for free the first two visits (per year) and are expected to pay out of pocket for further services.

### Trade Unions

There are three main trade unions active in Munnar: Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), The AH India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Each trade union is associated with a national political party: the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India and the Indian National Congress respectively. These trade unions play a significant and multifaceted role on Munnar plantations. Officially, trade unions serve as the communication link between the plantation workers and management. Each trade union asks members to pay 150 rupees in monthly dues.<sup>32</sup> They hold

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<sup>31</sup> Attendant (hospital), personal interview, Munnar, April 17, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Stella. Personal interview.

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weekly open forums in which workers are invited to voice queries and concerns on topics ranging from household disputes to labor compensation. Because of the massive scale of the KDHP operation, trade unions are the only channel through which to communicate problems up to the management.<sup>33</sup> In actuality, however, these meetings manifest as male-dominated spaces for illicit drinking.<sup>34</sup> Yet, the longstanding history of the trade unions continues to renders them quite an influential force in the political economy of plantation labor.

This influence is, however, “a double edged sword.”<sup>35</sup> With time trade union leaders have acquired a public reputation as pot stirrers. In fact, three participants expressed - unsolicited by the researcher - that there is a general sentiment among workers that trade union leaders are cheating them.<sup>36</sup> This is, perhaps, the product of the significant (and rather transparent) corruption that characterizes the relationship between trade union leaders and plantation management. The management has been known to engage in secret agreements with trade union leaders in order to silence workers’ voices and squash democratic participation.<sup>37</sup> Trade union leaders - a position held exclusively by male workers - and their families often receive better housing and a cut of the wage pool as a product of this partnership.<sup>38</sup> As such, local trade union leaders negate the democratic potential vested in systems of community advocacy. Yet, despite their unethical usurpation of control they remain in a class above the workers they purport to represent.

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<sup>33</sup> Sunny, Lissy. Personal interview. Munnar. April 16, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Stella. Personal interview. Munnar. April 16, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> KJ Jospeh, personal interview, Trivandrum, April 11, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Vimal Raj. Personal interview.

<sup>37</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>38</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

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### Birth of the Pempilai Orumai

In 2014 workers were receiving a daily wage of 231 rupees per day and an annual bonus of 20%. On August 26, 2015, the management announced that the updated salary and annual bonus for the 2015 fiscal year would be the same salary as the previous year and an annual bonus that was reduced to 10%. Workers were enraged. As per protocol, they brought their frustrations to their respective trade union leaders in order to begin the process up the communication chain. Management reasoned that the 2014 market had been exceptionally bad and yield had decreased a considerable amount.<sup>39</sup> KDHP incurred a 68% income fall in 2014-15 as compared to the previous year.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, they explained that the company is only legally bound to provide an annual bonus that is 8.33% of the salary, and that the 1.77% boost was gracious.<sup>41</sup> For many, this substantial drop was particularly upsetting because the annual bonus is the sole contributor to the plantation families' university savings funds - one of very few ways out of the plantation livelihood.<sup>42</sup>

When the trade unions failed to act on the workers' demands, a group of 10 female plantation workers on the Periovari estate plotted an infiltration of one of the weekly, male-dominated trade union meeting.<sup>43</sup> The women took the microphone and demanded an explanation. Word of the "disruption" quickly spread across the plantation community.<sup>44</sup> The

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<sup>39</sup> Rajeshwari, et al. Focus group.

<sup>40</sup> Binu Matthew, "A Greet Blood Women's Revolution in Munnar," *Counter Currents*. Published September 13, 2015. Accessed May 2, 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>42</sup> Stella. Personal interview.

<sup>43</sup> Stella. Personal interview.

<sup>44</sup> Vimal Raj. Personal interview.

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next day, September 5, 2015, the same 10 women skipped work and camped out in front of the KDHP general store in Munnar town. They bore signs in protest of their inhumane working conditions and protested for an increased annual bonus. The media quickly picked up the story and women in homes across all 36 estates saw the local news channels' coverage of the protest on TV.

A combination of media coverage and word of mouth enticed 50 women to cut work and show up outside the KDHP general store the next morning protesting for an annual wage of 20%. This pattern continued for the next 15 days, each day drawing a crowd larger and more boisterous than the day before. Eventually an estimated 5,000 women were cutting work and protesting the bonus decrease. The striking women called themselves the *pempilai orumai*, which translates to "female unity."<sup>45</sup> They held signs with a host of slogans, including "we pluck the leaves, you pluck our lives," and "we pick the tea leaves, we heave the sacks of tea leaves, you heave the sacks of money leaves, there has to be an end to this."<sup>46</sup>

After 16 days KDHP management agreed to restore the 20% annual bonus. The participating women returned to plucking for the next 10 days. On October 1, 2015 the women returned to the KDHP general store, this time to demand a weekly salary of 500 rupees. After 14 days and several thousands of female protesters, the *pempilai orumai* leaders and the KDHP management agreed to increase the salary from 231 to 302 rupees per week.

The strike, though only 30 days in totality, had a significant impact on the larger Munnar community. Traffic on the Kochi-Dhanushkodi National Highway was paralyzed for most of the

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<sup>45</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>46</sup> M Sarita Varma, "Women tea workers in Munnar allege union-management collusion over pay," *Financial Express*, September 11, 2015, <http://www.financialexpress.com/economy/women-tea-workers-in-munnar-allege-union-management-collusion-over-pay/133916/>.

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day because of the magnitude of the strike.<sup>47</sup> This effectively shut the town down, as it blocked the possibility of all entry and exit. As such, the tourism industry - the main economic stimulant in Munnar - was battered. Visitors were stuck inside their hotel rooms, unable to move around the hill station due to the road blockade.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the blow to the local economy, shop keepers, artisans and restaurants owners showed their ardent support for the striking women. All storefronts were closed; “it seemed that the whole of Munnar is in support of the strike.”<sup>49</sup> Meals and tea were provided to the peaceful protesters by collecting funds from the shop owners, rickshaw drivers and local organizations in and around Munnar. Shon, the owner of a chocolate shop in Munna town, said, “They spend the money that they earn in our shops for all those things they need. They help me support my family. Now was our duty to support them.”<sup>50</sup>

While men expressed solidarity with the efforts of the *pempilai orumai* women, they kept their distance. The strike leaders also rejected the proposed alliances of several political parties, citing them as the root of the very collusion they were fighting. Their autonomy - not to mention their success - was revolutionary.

Local trade unions were enraged by the women’s motion to strike and the subsequent success of their organizing. It quickly became apparent that the *pempilai orumai* posed a significant threat to the social and political influence traditionally vested in the trade unions. Trade union leaders were quick to act on their rage, eager to incentivize their laboring

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<sup>47</sup> Matthew, “A Greet Blood Women’s Revolution in Munnar.”

<sup>48</sup> Matthew, “A Greet Blood Women’s Revolution in Munnar.”

<sup>49</sup> Nancy. Personal interview.

<sup>50</sup> Shon, personal interview, Munnar, April 20, 2017.

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constituents to re-ally themselves with the unions. As such, they went on strike as well - demanding a 500 rupee weekly salary - with one distinctive catch: all those who pledged allegiance to the trade unions were guaranteed 500 rupees from the trade union for every day they participated in the strike.

This mockery and added monetary incentive was a direct attack on the *pempilai orumai*. Nevertheless, the participating women were faced with a significant dilemma: to remain steadfast in their morals and give up wages for an unknown number of days or to be handed a notably increased daily sum.<sup>51</sup> While the offer was too enticing to pass up for some, many elected to risk wage-less days in the name of justice.

What's more, the trade unions' utilized their political ties with higher management to scare women out of *pempilai orumai* membership. They kept close intel on who was involved and who was not, and the *pempilai orumai* president even recalled trade union leaders showing up at her doorstep unannounced and beating her.<sup>52</sup>

### *Pempilai Orumai* at Present

This threat remains prevalent today, nearly 2 years after the conclusion of the strike. Many women refrained from participation of the study, citing their discomfort with the unknown recipients of their testimonies as a product of the trade union leaders' emotional, and sometimes physical, abuse in the wake of the strike.<sup>53</sup> In addition, many of the women who chose to participate were visibly timid when answering questions in relation to the trade unions.

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<sup>51</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>52</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>53</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

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That said, every single one of the women interviewed expressed unwavering assent when asked whether they think that the strike was successful or not. According to the current *pempilai orumai* president, the strike was “100% successful ... a historical success to hike the wage.”<sup>54</sup> While others cited the increased bonus as another success of the strike, the mass organization of women required to carry out the strike was never verbalized as a reason that it was successful.

In addition to the explicit consensus that the demands of the strike were met, there were a series of unanticipated successes that the strike brought about. Firstly, women workers, rather than their husbands, began directly receiving their own salary. As such, women have more of a hand in the management of family expenses. Additionally, men stopped drinking in excess because women were empowered to directly report any and all of their concerns - either to plantation management or to the local police.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the strike officially ending on October 16, 2015, *pempilai orumai* continues to function as an active voice for women workers in the KDHP community. In 2016, after secretly going to people’s homes and generating an extensive list of signatures, they officially became their own trade union. While prejudices against them certainly still exist, they are no longer an underground organization. As such they are able to more openly champion female workers’ triumphs and problems.

Presently, there is a president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. The team works together to communicate with women on all 36 estates across Munnar (in addition to their full time work as tea pluckers). The trade union has a small office in Munnar town, where workers can come and write down their name, contact info and problem they are facing. The leadership

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<sup>54</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>55</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

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team divides responsibility for the injuries amongst themselves and directly contacts the management to settle any and all disputes. Additionally, they have a local representative on 16 of the 36 estates in Munnar who works with the organizing team as the liaison for her community.<sup>56</sup> This partnership also serves as a leadership training program, where the current administrators are able to help empower women throughout the plantation community to vocalize their needs directly to the management.

*Pempilai orumai* membership is 100 rupees a year. The money collected goes towards health care, educational opportunities, marriage expenses, policies cases and settling family problems.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the trade union receives money from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a left-of-center, socialist political party. The total money collected is, of course, not sufficient for the needs of the community.

Looking forward, the organization is focused on three main goals. Firstly, they hope to increase the daily wage to 500 rupees. Secondly, they are working towards an improved health care system. They would like to see more local hospitals, as the current medical facilities are “not good for much more than a scrape or a cut.”<sup>58</sup> Additionally, they are working towards implementing ambulatory services throughout the plantation, because currently workers are expected to transport themselves to the central hospital, even in the case of an emergency. Thirdly, *pempilai orumai* is actively fighting to reform the current retirement policy. KDHP forbids laborers to work beyond the age of 58. When they stop working they lose their housing and, given their minuscule bank accounts, are rendered homeless. While it has historically been

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<sup>56</sup> Lissy Sunny. Personal interview.

<sup>57</sup> Stella. Personal interview.

<sup>58</sup> Stella. Personal interview.



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common practice for many generations to live together in one housing units, the increasingly mechanized nature of plantation work is rapidly depleting the job count. As such, *pempilai orumai* is fighting to provide retirees with housing and land.

### **Discussion**

An examination of the arc of the 2015 Munnar Plantation Strike, as described above, reveals three main themes. These themes are best understood by breaking the strike down chronologically.

Firstly, the conditions leading up to the strike illustrate the nuanced nature of the strike and the strike demands. While the women interviewed expressed that the purpose of the strike was to increase the annual bonus and the daily wage, it became increasingly clear that the strike was representative of much more than numbers. Nancy, the daughter of an organizing member of the *pempilai orumai* said, “sometimes they are like slaves ... not sometimes. It’s a reality.”<sup>59</sup> Her acknowledgement is extraordinarily significant for a host of reasons.

Her statement was primarily significant simply because it is true. The physical labor they do, the emotional and physical abuse they endure, the living conditions they reside in and the isolation they experience are all factors that associate life on Kannan Devan plantations with the canonical instances of slavery. Moreover, however, her statement was significant because no other study participants - specifically no plantation workers - made any mention of slave-like conditions.

Nancy is not a worker. She is a nursing student at a nearby university. Her distance from the laborious plantation working conditions gave her the perspective to term her parents’ livelihoods objectively, and thus in a way that they were less able to verbalize. This statement

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<sup>59</sup> Nancy. Personal interview.

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raised the question of what, in fact, defines slavery. KDHP workers receive wages, which is traditionally outside the definition of a slave. Yet, their wages, as made evident in their dwellings, physical and mental health, and access to education - among many other factors - suggests that despite being paid for their work they do, their compensation is not nearly sufficient enough for a healthy, equitable or prosperous life.

Moreover, the social and political conditions the workers endure are such that isolation and denied access to upward mobility are realistic and permanent. Perhaps, more so than their financial handicaps, this sociopolitical handicap is what shackles workers most significantly. For this reason, the corruption and unreliability within the trade unions, the democratic body responsible for maintaining equality across hierarchical strata, is problematic. Had trade unions operated effectively - reliably conveying workers' problems to higher management - the strike need not have existed. As such, the findings reveal that the role of inadequate and corrupt trade unions are in large part responsible for triggering the 2015 Munnar Plantation Strike.

Moving along chronologically, the demands set forth in the strike further illustrate the lack of basic human rights awarded to KDHP workers. The two-part strike, retrospectively regarded as "very peaceful," demanded an increase in monetary compensation not simply for the purpose of increased wealth but rather as a means of support the basic needs of a family. The physical demonstration illustrated the untapped power that female workers possess, and made it clear that their voices would no longer be silenced - not by the management and certainly not by their own system of representation. As such, the strike was just as much a plea for a rudimentary list of demands as it was in defiance against the trade unions.

Finally, the aftermath of the strike presents a new set of noteworthy patterns. The main strike demands were twofold: increase the annual bonus to 20% and increase the daily wage to

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500 rupees. Only the former was met. Yet, there was an agreement amongst all participants that the strike was enormously successful because the demands were, at least partially, met.

Furthermore, there is a general consensus that the strike empowered women, and thus was successful in unanticipated ways as well. Example such as women now wearing dresses instead of sari's, and learning how to use ATMs were cited to support this claim. Yet, the manifestation of this self-described empowerment was evidently relative. Male spouses of the women interviewed were consistently keen on interjecting during interviews, answering question not simply about labor conditions in general but also questions specifically focused on female labor conditions.

The described sense of empowerment is, however, challenged in the context of the transnational company controlling the Munnar plantation. While female workers received the compensation they requested, the 10% and 100 rupee increase is negligible when set against the multimillion dollar, transnational corporation that Tata, Ltd. has developed into. In fact, the hierarchy of labor, extending well beyond the highest plantation authorities, fails to practice responsible wealth distribution. Tata has structured its corporation such that a stark division exists between the isolated, large-scale production that is Kannan Devan and the global market. The isolated nature of the plantation puts no checks on the distribution of profit, ultimately rendering the plantation workers blind to the large-scale disempowerment that the larger corporation is imparting on them. This truism is directly in line with Bhowmik (2005) and Tharian's (1984) claims that expansive production directly correlates to mismanagement of corporate funds, and ultimately results in unequal distribution of compensation.

Thus, the relative employment of the term “empowerment” to describe the current conditions of female tea plantation workers illuminated not only a larger disconnect between the

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workers and Tata at large. As such, the question of whether or not the strike was successful resurfaces. While the workers successfully lobbied for increased compensation, their employer continues to render them unhealthy, illiterate, and generally ignored and vulnerable.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this case study shine a light on an underreported, yet incredibly powerful, showing of female allegiance, grassroots organizing, dismemberment of arbitrary hierarchical systems and human rights advocacy. In following the arc of the 2015 Munnar Plantation Strike, it examines the conditions that led to the strike, drove the strike and resulted from the strike. It identifies the collusion inherent in the trade union network as a key instigator in the inception of the strike and motivator the practice of the strike. Moreover, the study examines the aftermath of the strike, identifying a host of unanticipated consequences, including a generally held sentiment of “success” and “empowerment.” Ultimately, however, the study conclude that the successes of the strike must be understood within the context of the Tata corporate empire. Subsequently, the successes of the strike exist merely exist in isolation. When placed in the global context of international consumerism and capitalism, the value of the compensation the workers successfully lobbied for are rendered negligible.

The review of the relevant literature conducted for this study outlined the social, political and economic framework of female labor, tea plantations and the power of grassroots organizing. They indicated the importance of female financial autonomy as a cornerstone of female empowerment and the shortcomings of the socioeconomic repression tea plantation workers incur. It highlighted the absence of opportunities for workers to achieve upward social, political and economic mobility, and provided a foundation for the colonialist and capitalists

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underpinnings of the tea production industry. The case study conducted supports the pre-existing literature, and builds upon it.

As such, Kannan Devan Hills Plantation is a microcosmic representation of a whole host of problematic practices that exist globally. The multinational corporation, conceived as a colonialist technique for control, continues to uphold racist, imperialist, repressive practices contemporarily. Its reliance on the international markets and its lack of corporation wide cohesion manifest as neglect towards the laborers that fuel the entire operation. The KDHP paradigm elucidates the inhumanity inherent in multinational corporations and highlights the potential for success in a smaller scale model that empowers laborers to play an active role in the distribution of goods, so as to directly reap the benefits of their own craft.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The present study has a few limitations that could be addressed in future studies in order to produce a more nuanced understanding of the Munnar Plantation Strike and the many factors that influenced its trajectory.

Firstly, due to limited time and access, this study incorporates a small sampling of perspectives. All participants were women workers on KDHP plantations in Munnar, almost all of whom were participants in the 2015 strike. Nearly all women remain involved in *pempilai orumai*. Future studies would benefit from including the perspective of women who elected not to participate in the strike and women who initially participated in the strike but have since decided to realign themselves with the trade unions. Moreover, incorporating the male perspective on the strike would be an important addition to the current study. Interviewing male trade union members and leaders about their perceptions of the strike and *pempilai orumai* could

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nuance the current representation of the strike and its organizing members. Additionally, the study would benefit from incorporating the perspective of the plantation management.

Secondly, this study only looked at plantation workers in Munnar. While the majority of KDHP's production is based in Munnar, many other estates exist elsewhere in Kerala. Interviewing workers elsewhere about their knowledge of the strike and the effects they experienced would be an important perspective to include.

Finally, in narrowing the focus of the study to the 2015 strike, it only examined large scale KDHP plantations. As such, future studies might consider exploring the conditions that workers on alternative plantations experience. Specifically, examining a small-scale, mixed-crop farm where workers are active members not simply in the production process, but also in the distribution process, would serve as an important counter to the KDHP model.

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### Appendices

#### Interview Question

\*note that these questions were only loosely used to guide conversations in the field

1. General information - name, age, family, etc.
2. How long have you worked here?
3. What is your role on the plantation?
4. How much money do you make?
5. What is a typical day like for you?
6. Who do you report to? Can you talk about the plantation hierarchy?
7. Were you involved in the 2015 strike? If so, what did your participation look like?
8. How did you become involved?
9. What was your role in the strike?
10. How was the strike organized?
11. How did you hear about the strike?
12. What was it like being at the strike? Can you describe what the days looked like?
13. What events/circumstances led to the strike?
14. Do you think the strike was successful?
15. What changed after the strike? What are some visible and non-visible effects of the strike?
16. What issues remain unsolved? What is necessary to achieve these problems?