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India

Storm in a tea garden

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A spontaneous agitation by a collective of women labourers has thrown Kerala's plantation sector into disarray, caught its male-dominated trade unions off guard, and focussed public attention on the growing inequalities and gender-related disparities in the sector.

An agitation demanding higher wages by a spontaneous collective of women labourers of the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations (KDHP) company in Munnar has generated a lot of interest in Kerala for its novelty, the political strength it seemed to muster in quick time and the jolt it has given to the jaded trade union movement in the State.

Even as political parties were bracing for the upcoming elections to the local bodies on November 2 and 5, women workers from the tea gardens of Kerala claimed prime-time spots on television screens, catching everyone by surprise.

Their agitation has thrown Kerala's plantation sector into disarray, caught its male-dominated trade unions off guard and, refreshingly, focussed public attention on the growing inequalities and gender-related disparities in the sector.

Within a week, the struggle spread, with trade unions that were found wanting initially and held at bay by the women too embracing their cause. Nearly three lakh plantation workers across the State, the majority of them women, then struck work demanding a revision in their daily wages to Rs.500 and a 20 per cent bonus. Even by October 7, despite several meetings of the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC) convened by the government, the managements refused to budge, claiming that such a hike would kill the already unviable plantation companies.

The women, under the banner "Pungal Otrumai" (Women's Unity), soon gained the empathy of the entire State as they launched an indefinite satyagraha at Munnar and chose not to be part of the joint agitation of trade unions which commenced at the same time literally across the street, on the Kochi-Dhanushkodi National Highway 49.

The last wage-revision agreement in the plantation sector in Kerala had come into effect in May 2011. According to its provisions, a labourer who gathered the minimum quantity of 21 kilogram of leaves a day would get Rs.232 as her wage. The validity of that agreement came to an end on December 31, 2014. The workers have been demanding a wage revision ever since. In the 10 months that followed, eight PLC meetings were held, but the plantation managements were unwilling to raise the wages without a concurrent increase in the "output" of the workers. The government remained complacent; unrest grew among the workers.