

Grievance in Identity Conflict: A Review of Pembilai Orumai (Women's United) in Munnar

*Shyam Hari P.**

Identity conflicts are common features in heterogeneous societies. These conflicts are understood around the grievances that include the specific interests and the value-centric nature of identity. In such a backdrop, this commentary engages with the conditions around the formation of 'Pembilai Orumai' or 'Women's United' as a gender identity group in the plantation dominant Munnar Gram Panchayat. Based on the ethnographic survey and focused interviews, the study finds that the formation of the group was bound on specific interests that were independent of the elements of 'gender' as symbolic in their name. The association of the group with the gender identity is relatable to the general popularity of gender movements, especially as a point of interest for the media. In the process, the group gained dominance through the help of media publicity, but in practice it innately nurtured the elements of subjugation of itself in the political space. This case highlights a dichotomous viewpoint around the assertion of gender identity in conflicts where identity is treated as an instrument.

INTRODUCTION

A society that comprises of multiple identities is prone to conflicts over the incompatibilities between different identities. The grievances in identity conflict are understood over specific interests and the value-centric nature of identity (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, and Schmid, 2011; Goldstein and Rayner, 1994). The specific interests are around a frustrating object in conflict, the attainment of which is the focus of the actors that are engaged in that conflict. In the value-centric nature of identity, the identity in itself induces conflict. This may suggest that the frustrating object is neither rigid nor clearly defined as seen when the

*PhD Research Scholar, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and the University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, Bengaluru.

conflict is over specific interests. The interaction of interests and values in identity conflict is also understood to be observable at the various stages of conflict manifestation. At the stage of origin, the identity conflict is around specific interests, whereas, at an intense state of manifestation, the conflict pursues the values of an identity (Galtung 2009).

To understand the functioning of grievance in identity conflict, the case of 'Pembilai Orumai' or 'Women's United' in the Kannan Devan Hills village in Munnar Gram Panchayat, Idukki district of Kerala is considered. The Pembilai Orumai gained popularity in 2015 when various media houses reported that the women plantation workers in numbers of few thousands were staging protests against a plantation company in the region for wage related issues. This movement was depicted as a political emergence of the unorganised section of women employed in the plantation sector for their rights. Based on an ethnographic field survey conducted in the village, the study aims to understand the trajectory and transition of the movement from its origin to its establishment as a registered trade union. Along with ethnographic field survey, the data from the interviews with key stakeholders that includes the leadership of Pembilai Orumai is considered relevant for the study. Field notes and literature available on the subject are also used for developing the arguments.

The commentary is divided into four sections including the introduction. The section following the introduction discusses the formation of the village society and institutions it nurtured. The next section engages with the advent and transition of Pembilai Orumai in the socio-political landscape as a movement to a trade union. The commentary concludes with the learnings from the case of Pembilai Orumai.

SOCIETY AND NEGOTIATORS

A society consists of structures that define the nature of the relationship between the various components of that society. These structures are built around various institutions. The institutions are responsible for the negotiations between multiple identities within a society by understanding and separating the specific interest and values of identity in conflict. In the plantation dominant Kannan Devan Hills village, the major institution involved in negotiation between actors involved are the trade unions. The

relevance of trade unions in the socio-political backdrop of the village can be understood from its temporal transitions (Hari P, 2019). The village traces its origin back to the later part of 19th century. A census of the region recorded in 1880 estimated the population to be around 2500 people (Munro, 1880). This region presently comprises of multiple villages and panchayats. The latest census of 2011 records the population of the Kannan Devan Hills village itself to be 55,738 (Hari P, 2019). The massive growth in the population over a century can be associated with the origin of the plantation industry in the village. The remote nature of the region and its climatic conditions attracted the British planters to the region. The planters saw the economic potential of the region in producing plantation crops for the global markets. The plantation activities began with the signing of the first Pooniat Concession in 1877 between a British planter and Poonjar royal family that held the control to the region (Nalapat, 2010).

The chief plantation crop when the first concession was signed was coffee. The coffee plantations needed only seasonal labour that was often provided by the Malayalis from the Travancore state. The Malayali labourers got engaged in the plantations jobs to earn extra income during lean agriculture seasons for traditional crops (Baak, 1992). The major societal transformation took place when the planters decided to focus on the cultivation of tea as the chief crop. The decision was influenced by the fall in the prices of coffee in global markets, and the political requirement to compete with Chinese tea. The tea trees, unlike coffee plants, needed constant care and maintenance, and hence a search for labour who could reside in the plantation became a priority. This labour came from the nearby regions in the Madras Presidency where the socio-economic conditions were fragile.

Through the Kangani system, indentured labour practise formed where a '*Kangani*' or 'Supervisor' pays off a person's debt in the village in advance for a promise of employment. This process led to the migration of a large number of Tamil Dalits into plantation jobs in the village. The migrant workers were housed in homestead houses within the plantation. In the initial periods, the Tamil Dalits continued to be engaged in the plantation activity fearing laws of the Travancore state, such as the Travancore Criminal Breach of Contract Act of 1865 (Raj, 2018). In the later period, it was more due to the factors of familiarity and acclimatisation (Hari P, 2019). With the expansion of the plantation estates, more Tamil Dalits

came into the village to work in the plantation. Over multiple generations of engagement in plantation activities, the migration of extended families, and the formation of new families within the migrated communities led to the strengthening of a village society within the plantation infrastructure. The village thus formed had a dominant population of Tamil settlers (Hari P, 2019). The peculiarity of this society was that 70.9 per cent of population belonged to the Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribe, with 91.7 per cent households being landless, and 91.4 per cent of the household's highest member earning income being less than Rs. 5000/- (Hari P, 2019). As a dominant voter base, the issues of the Tamil Dalit plantation labourers led to several institutional involvements of political parties. At the level of central and state government, Plantation Labour Acts were passed that prescribed measures that were needed to be taken by the plantation companies to prevent exploitation of labour (Tantri, 2017). At the local level, trade unions of popular political parties assisted in the negotiation process between the labour and the plantation over various points of interactions including those prescribed in the various Plantation Acts. These interactions often extended over livelihood, accommodation, health facilities, water and other basic utilities. In this process, trade unions became critically relevant in the everyday life of the plantation (Hari P, 2019).

The relationship in society changed with subsequent transitions. Post India's independence, the plantation companies continued to exercise their influence in the region as the earlier agreements between the companies and the predecessor state continued to be valid. This arrangement was influenced by the gaining popularity of tourism in the state. New opportunities emerged in commercialising the village as a hill station that did not directly threaten the earlier agreements with the plantation companies. The emergence of the tourism industry in the region impacted social demography (Hari P, 2019). The period saw an increase in the influx of Malayalis into the region who wanted to benefit from the economic prospects of tourism. The Malayalis who were dominant in the social, political and economic spaces of the Kerala state were able to make their influence in the village for constructing tourism infrastructure with relative ease. The Tamil Dalits who were often landless perceived this as a subjugation of their localised ethnic identities. The Tamil Dalits perceived competition with the Malayalis over resources such as land, livelihood and imposition of mainstream culture by use of Malayalam as official language (Hari P, 2019). The perception also

nurtured a sense of alienation from the region using institutions of the state that were dominated by Malayalis and was perceived to be in favour of Malayalis (Hari P, 2019).

The trade unions were considered to be negotiating and subjugating the Tamil identity (Hari P, 2019). Negotiation of Tamil identity was done by the separation of specific issues of land and livelihood from the ethnic nature of identity. The issues were addressed often with temporary remedies that increased the dependency on trade unions for recurring interventions. The subjugation of Tamil identity was conducted to maintain regional politics within the context of class struggle rather than ethnic tensions. This was articulated around a strong fear of possible leadership change with the emergence of ethnic politics. The familiarity and continuation of class politics that focussed on the employee and employer relationship between plantation labour and plantation companies had its own frustrating elements.

The trade unions and plantation companies were perceived to have formed informal alliances over the decades of their interaction. This may have formed naturally when practices like the collection of membership fees or '*Chantha*' that a worker pays to the trade union of their choice is done through the plantation company who deducts it from the salary. The plantation companies also provided offices and residential spaces for the trade union leadership that are also at times unofficial revenue generators during peak tourist seasons. The multilevel alliances between the trade unions and plantation companies were considered preconditions to the failure of proper representation of the labour class. This failure in the part of negotiators created the spaces for alternative representatives in the social structure, and Pembilai Orumai was one such entrant.

FORMATION AND TRANSITION OF PEMBILAI ORUMAI

The failure of negotiators in society led to the conditions that further led to the advent of 'Pembilai Orumai' in the village. The grievance behind the initial protest was over the percentage of wage received as a bonus, and this was independent of the issues faced by any particular gender. The issue was anchored on the nature of jobs that prevailed in the plantation dominant village. The reason that this protest took place in 2015 can be related to the frustration that was slowly built around employee-buy-out model. Through the employee-buy-out model (EBO), the employees of

the plantation received certain shares of the company (Deepika, 2010). This mechanism addressed the problems around alienation of labour from the produce, but it created frustration over the actual sum received by the employees. The dividends of shares were lesser than what the workers expected. The estimation of the production quantity of tea was done by those workers who were engaged in the tea plucking activity, and this happened to be mainly women. From the workers engaged in tea plucking activities, the information spread to other sections in the workforce. The workers brought issues before their respective trade unions. The workers were not content with the responses they received from their negotiators. Perceiving collusion between the trade unions and plantation company, some workers from few estates within the plantation decided to protest. This group consisted of both women and men who were frustrated by the lackadaisical approach of the trade unions. This protest was covered and aired by the local media channels.

Some of the social practises in the society captured through the local media channels made multiple interpretations when adopted by media channels from outside the village, and this changed the course of the movement from its initial conceptions. When women and men gathered together to protest, they did so by maintaining physical space from each other as a form of an unsaid social taboo. With this context of space utilisation, the women who recognised the issue due to the nature of their job occupied the centre of the physical space of protest, and men surrounded the periphery. This protest took place in front of the regional office of the plantation company located in the village centre.

The village centre as a location for the protest had its significance as most women in the village would, as a common practice, procure Jasmine flowers along with other household commodities and socialise there. The media focussed on the Jasmine flowers worn by the women as a symbol of protest and named the movement as 'Jasmine Revolution'. The movement gained popularity as a women's movement as it received incremental media attention. Initially, the protestors wanted to name their movement as '*Thalir*' or 'Sprout', as symbolic to the emergence of exploited people. Due to the recognition received as a women's movement, the leadership dropped the earlier name and adopted the name 'Pembilai Orumai'. The adoption of this name did not change the earlier demands of the protest. The success of the negotiation, and

recognition that Pembilai Orumai garnered resulted in the group being registered as a trade union.

The formal structure of the newly formed trade union had some innate elements of conflict. The movement initially had the active support of both women and men workers. With the new structure, male workers who had earlier been part of the protest were side-lined, and spaces were created for accommodating new leadership from women workers in the plantation. These women workers were from different estates within the village, who were not active in the initial protest, which even included the Malayalis tasked to negotiate with government bodies.

The increase in leadership and popularity came with an increase in stakes that prodded personal differences and issues due to lack of trust. The ethnic conflict between the Tamils and Malayalis are latently present in Munnar (Hari P, 2019) which was visible at the leadership level of Pembilai Orumai. Internal conflict over personal benefits emerged in Pembilai Orumai, and impacted the cohesion of the group. The trade unions utilised the internal conflict in Pembilai Orumai and made lucrative policies to attract its members. Special seats in estate subcommittees were created for the women leaders who left Pembilai Orumai and joined trade unions. This weakness in the group was understood by few of its earlier leadership, who inclined towards moving away Pembilai Orumai. To these leaders, the re-engagement in Dalit issues in general, and Tamil Dalit issues, in particular, were important. This highlights that the movement, and later the group, in its course of activities were not value-centric on the specific issues of women, but largely focussed on the issues that most members in the society faced. This is important considering that the socio-economic conditions of most people were similar, and in a family, the economic contribution of women and men were equally important.

CONCLUSION

The Munnar society was formed as a product of the plantation industry with a dominant population of Tamil Dalits. The important negotiator in the plantation dominant village society are the trade unions. The perception of failure of the negotiators has created spaces for new negotiators, and in such conditions Pembilai Orumai emerged as a new

actor in the socio-political space. The group in its conception stage was independent of gender identities and was focussed on the representation of Tamil Dalits who were oppressed in an informal alliance between trade unions and plantation companies. The social features interpreted by the media, and the general discourses around gender movements had led the movement to be imagined as a women's movement. The restructuring of the movement as a gender group created impediments in attaining larger objectives, as it alienated some of its earlier support bases. The in-fighting in the group resulted in its weakening in the socio-political space. Considering this case, the study recommends that stakeholders engaged in understanding global social movements should focus on the subjective nature of local issues, and policymakers should consider the multiple angles in developing and implementing effective policies.

REFERENCES

- Al Ramiah, A., Hewstone, M., & Schmid, K. (2011). Social Identity and Intergroup Conflict. *Psychological Studies*, 56(1), pp 44–52.
- Baak, P. E. (1992). Planters' Lobby in Late 19th Century : Implications for Travancore. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 27(33), pp 1747–1753.
- Deepika, M. (2010). Employee-Buy-Out and Participatory Management: The Case of Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(37), pp 63–71.
- Galtung, J. (2009). *Theories of conflict. "Definitions, Dimensions, Negations, Formations."* Oslo: Transcend.
- Goldstein, J., & Rayner, J. (1994). The Politics of Identity in Late Modern Society. *Theory and Society*, 23(3), pp 367–384.
- Hari P, S. (2019). Assertion, Negotiation and Subjugation of Identity: Understanding the Tamil-Malayali Conflict in Munnar. *Millennial Asia*, 10(2), pp 167–182.
- Munro, J. D. (1880). *The High Ranges of Travancore*. Peermaad.
- Nalapat, S. (2010). *The Story of Munnar*. Kottayam: DC Books.

- Raj, J. (2018). Tea Belts of the Western Ghats, Kerala. In A. Shah & J. Lerche (Eds.), *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in Twenty-First Century India* pp. 49–81 New Delhi: Pluto Press and Oxford University Press.
- Tantri, M. L. (2017). *India's Plantation Labour Act - A Critique* (No. 398). Bengaluru. Retrieved from [http://www.isec.ac.in/WP_398 - Malini L T_11 - Final.pdf](http://www.isec.ac.in/WP_398_Malini_L_T_11_Final.pdf)