

Feisty tea worker brews a campaign in Munnar

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KOTTAYAM: The Pembilai Orumai (United Women), formed last year in Munnar by women tea estate workers to fight for better wages and living conditions, is no longer the force it once was. The allwomen collective, which hit the national headlines and forced parties to take notice, has weakened because of issues within the collective and its inexperience to deal with M established trade unions.

But the spirit to fight holds together the thousands of women workers and the forum is back in news after fielding a candidate for the assembly election.

J Rajeswari, Pembilai Orumai general secretary, is contesting from Devikulam in Idukki. Munnar region is part of this constituency and Rajeswari is fighting three major fronts here.

In the past, this constituency elected Congress and CPM candidates, but these were close contests, victors winning wafer-thin majorities. The Orumai candidate is crucial in this context and major parties have started seeing her as a 'spoiler'.

Rajeswari, 45, has been a plantation worker for 25 years and is confident of converting her wide network of contacts among tea workers into votes.

Pembilai Orumai was registered as a trade union this February and its functionaries claim it has over 3,400 members in various tea estates. Approximately 12,000 people work in the plantations of Devikulam. Taking into account their families and other locals who depend on the industry, around 45,000 votes are from this sector.

The Pembilai Orumai's confidence to fight the polls stems from its performance in last year's local elections. In those polls, Orumai nominees won two gram panchayat wards and one block panchayat ward. However, their leader GomKER athi, who

won a block later, left the collective for the CPM.

Assembly polls are a different ball game, Orumai functionaries concede. "We are poor. To meet campaign expenses we raise money among ourselves. Like other parties, we can't raise campaign funds," said Lissy Sunny, Orumai president. She said people have been coming forward with contributions. The collective highlights the demand to raise daily wages to Rs 500, five-cents of land with a title deed and a house to all workers. They also want Munnar to be made a scientifically planned tourism zone.

"So far things are going well for our candidate, barring the financial crunch," said Kausalya, Orumai vice-president. "We often wait for a lift or hire an auto rickshaw to go canvassing," said Kausalya who accompanies the candidate on campaign. The workers get paid on the 10th of every month.

They set aside a part of their salary to fund the campaign. "Many of us have pledged our jewellery also," said Kausalya.

Rajeswari said the decision to contest was a big step. "We can't live like slaves. We have to earn our rights," she said.

AIADMK has fielded a candidate in the constituency Dhanalakshmi Marimuthu.

The party aims to win Tamil votes which are Orumai's vote bank too. Last autumn, Orumai organised a historic 17-day strike in Munnar demanding better wages paralysing the hill station. The strike was settled after the Plantation Labour Committee hiked daily wages from Rs 232 to Rs 301.