
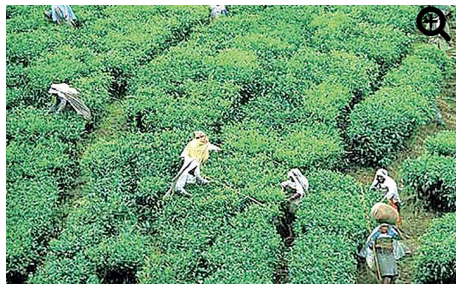


## Plantation sector caught between devil and the deep sea

By Abhilash Chandran | Express News Service | Published: 18th December 2017 01:17 AM |

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**KOTTAYAM:** More than two years after the historic protest of Pembilai Orumai (women's unity) in Munnar brought plantation owners, trade unions and the state government to their knees, trouble is brewing again. Demanding higher wages, the joint trade union council has called for a one-day token strike in plantations across the state on Thursday.

Under the aegis of the joint council, which includes the likes of CITU, AITUC, INTUC, BMS, STU and UTUC, plantation workers will take part in a march towards the secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram as part of the protest.

The strike has been called at a time when the plantation sector - predominantly tea, coffee, cardamom and rubber - is undergoing one of its worst crises. High cost of production, low price realisation and land-related issues, triggered by the report of special officer (land resumption) M G Rajamanickam, have taken a heavy toll on the sector.

The primary demand of the labour unions is that the daily wage should be increased to `600. Right now, it varies from `320 to `480 depending on the crops. "The Kerala government has already declared Rs 600 as the minimum wage. However, it has not been implemented in the plantation sector so far," said AITUC leader Vazhoor Soman. Improving conditions at the workplace and labourers' dwellings are some of the other demands.

"As many as 14 plantations across the state have not been functioning for several years, leaving workers in dire straits. The Plantation Corporation should take over these plantations to ensure employment for workers. The retirement age of workers should be increased to 60 years. Even though many labourers above the age of 60 are continuing to work, the management is not providing retirement benefits. An increase in EPF pension to Rs 5,000, special housing scheme for workers, better roads in plantations are some of our demands," Soman said.

Instead of turning down the workers' demands right away, plantation managements have put the ball in the state's court, saying that a wage hike can be implemented only if the government resolves the woes of the plantation sector.

Interestingly, functionaries of the Association of Planters of Kerala (APK), which represents around 60 per cent of the plantations in Kerala, pointed out that the state is, in fact, paying the highest wages for workers in the country.

"Kerala is paying a daily wage of Rs 321 at tea plantations, while it is Rs 277 in Karnataka and Rs 298 in Tamil Nadu. However, productivity is significantly lower in Kerala (1,754 kg/hectare) when compared to Tamil Nadu (2,600 kg/hectare)," said APK chairman Thomas Jacob.

Jacob claimed Rajamanickam's report has exacerbated the plantation sector's misery. "The dispute over land titles has triggered a crisis as we are unable to invest and increase productivity. How can we increase wages in such a situation? Even banks are not providing loans. Even though the Centre has allowed foreign direct investment in the sector, nobody is coming to invest here," he said.

According to APK secretary Ajith Balakrishnan, tax rationalisation has not been implemented in Kerala, which has resulted in high production costs. "Kerala is the only state that collects agriculture income tax in south India. Besides, plantation tax and land tax coupled with low productivity from land and

**Total area under plantation in Kerala**

**7.11 lakh hectares**

**Rubber**  
5,50,840  
hectares



**Coffee**  
85,501  
hectares

**Cardamom**  
39,680  
hectares



**Tea**  
35,010  
hectares

Number of workers in the plantation sector:

**3.3L**



**₹5,300cr**  
Annual wage contribution

THE GSDP CONTRIBUTION FROM THE SECTOR HAS COME DOWN FROM ₹23,000 CRORE IN 2012-13 TO ₹9,000 CRORE IN 2016-17

### Minimum wage of plantation workers in south India

|            | Tea    | Coffee | Cardamom | Rubber |
|------------|--------|--------|----------|--------|
| Karnataka  | 277.41 | 277.41 | -        | 277.41 |
| Tamil Nadu | 298.80 | 289.80 | 400.08   | 281.0  |
| Kerala     | 321.31 | 321.3  | 350.31   | 401.31 |

labourers have put the plantation sector in an extremely grave situation," he said.

APK officials said the contribution of the plantation sector to the Gross State Domestic Product has come down from Rs 23,000 crore in 2012-13 to Rs 9,000 crore in 2016-17. "Tea is being cultivated across 36,000 hectares. If the government allows replantation in at least 10 per cent of this, there will be an investment of Rs 360 crore as the productivity is expected to become double," said Jacob.

### Pembilai Orumai in disarray

Pembilai Orumai, whose protest in 2015 forced the government and plantation managements to increase wages, has not declared its stand on the token protest so far, even though they are also demanding higher wages.

Two years after the protest, Pembilai Orumai is in disarray because of infighting. While Lissy Sunny, the president of Orumai during the 2015 protest, claimed ownership of organisation registration details and other documents, Kausalya, who also claimed to be the president, said the former has been suspended. Another leader, Gomathi Augustine, who migrated to the CPM before returning to the organisation, is now leading a protest on her own.

### The Great Fall

Kerala's share in India's rubber production, which was 92 per cent in 2005-06, has come down to 69.66 per cent in 2016-17. At the same time, productivity, which was 1,960 kg/hectare in 2006-07, fell to 796 kg/hectare in 2016-17.

Only cardamom has been showing a positive trend in the plantation sector, as production in Kerala increased from 8,550 tonnes in 2008-09 to 17,215 tonnes in 2016-17

Sources: APK, Economic Survey 2016

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