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MONEY

# Female Tea Workers In One Indian State Fight For Their Rights

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JULIE MCCARTHY



Tea leaf pickers in the Indian tea industry are nearly all women, and in the southern tea-growing state of Kerala, they earn the lowest daily minimum wage of any sector in the state. They work six days a week rain or shine. But J. Rajeshwari (right) helped mobilize the female workforce. "We couldn't feed ourselves or educate our children, so we organized," she says.

*Julie McCarthy/NPR*

A steady rain falls on velvet green terraces, releasing a powerful scent of newly harvested tea. A ripple of voices tumbles down the hillside as a man barks orders.

The tea pickers, all women, many in bare feet, expertly navigate the leech-infested slopes. Balancing hampers on their backs loaded with freshly plucked tea leaves, they descend for their morning tea break.

It could be a scene out of the 19th century, when the estates of the southern Indian state of Kerala were first cultivated on the mist-shrouded highlands of Munnar. Today, the manicured tea terraces sprawl across the landscape.



Fresh tea leaves, plucked from waist-high bushes, are fragile and easily damaged.

*Julie McCarthy/NPR*

The verdant bushes grow year round, spilling down the hills to meet the curving roads. The beauty of these gardens belies the hardships of workers, who produce nearly 50 million pounds of tea a year here at the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company.



For all the timelessness of the place, there's a very modern twist — the tea pickers have defied the male hierarchy of trade unions who represent tea workers and stood up for their rights.

Indeed, life on tea estates reflects the economic and social challenges facing women across India.

On a large estate like this one, hundreds of workers harvest tea, some by hand, some with shears, even in the monsoon.

Wearing a pyramid-shaped hat fashioned out of clear plastic, Sitha Lakshmi, 41, snips the delicate leaves in the pouring rain. She says the hat is all the rain gear her company provides — and that, exposed to the wet, cool climate of 6,000 feet altitude, she is often sick.

When asked how she works in all the rain, another picker replied: "It's the job. I do it or I don't get paid."



Workers on the tea estates of the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company in the Indian state of Kerala live in rent-free housing. Though the accommodations are rudimentary, they're considered a major benefit for employees.

*Julie McCarthy/NPR*

Security on these terraces has been tight since the women began pressing demands for improved conditions and increased pay.

The women are freer to talk at home than on the hills, and we meet in the evening.

The workers live in company-owned settlements on the grounds of the estates.

The cramped quarters of J. Rajeshwari are filled with wardrobes, cupboards lined with utensils — and guests. Eight women and their husbands — all sitting on a large bed — eagerly greet us. The men agree to leave and the women lead the conversation.

Rajeshwari, 45, has worked the tea estate since she was 19. She describes life on their limited income.

"We were earning little more than \$3 a day. We couldn't feed ourselves or educate our children. I couldn't even buy a sari. I didn't have the means to raise my children. So we organized," she says.



Lissy Sunny is president of the Women's Collective formed last fall to represent the nearly all-female work force of tea pickers at the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company.

*Julie McCarthy/NPR*

Nine months ago, the women formed the Women's Collective. The president of the group, 48-year-old Lissy Sunny, rises in the shadowy dawn to work the tea estate until dusk. She lives with her husband in a rudimentary three-room accommodation provided rent-free by Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company — considered one of the most progressive employers in the industry.

But after 20 years of toiling, Sunny sounds more angry than grateful as she recalls the event that triggered the women's agitation for greater compensation.

"We worked hard from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. — we wanted the company to succeed," she says. "But when they cut our bonus in half last September, we said we won't work like this — we cannot live like animals. We're not slaves. We need a dignified life."

Sunny says the greatest indignity was being forced to choose which of her two children to educate. There wasn't money for both. Years ago, she chose her daughter, the better

student, leaving her son, Denil, to live at home and work for the tea plantation.

"He's depressed," she says, and "blames us for not giving him a proper education." He's 29 now, and she points out that his company job is a safety net for her and her husband. As long as her son works, they have a place to live as they grow old.

The need for housing, Sunny says, has tethered generation after generation to the plantations.

Trade union leader V.O. Shaji has a provocative name for this dependence — calling it "civilized slavery."

Shaji says tea plantations pay field workers the lowest minimum daily wage of any sector in the state. They were given shares in the company 10 years ago to give them a sense of ownership, but the shares offer little financial reward.

That's why their bonus matters so much. And why the women took extraordinary steps to restore it.



Employees at the factory of the Harrisons Malayalam Ltd. Lockhart Estate in the highlands of Munnar sort dried tea leaves by size and color. Tea workers here and throughout the state benefited from the labor action initiated by the Women's Collective at the Kanan Devan Hills Plantation.

*Julie McCarthy/NPR*

First, they organized a strike, independent of the trade unions. For decades, they belonged to the unions but they now accuse them of being corrupt and ineffectual. Then the women went directly to senior state officials to demand a \$4 a day increase in their wages. They won an increase of just \$1 a day but even that amount was unprecedented, and it was applied industry-wide to tea pickers across the state.

Rajeshwari says the women didn't trust the male-dominated unions to represent their interests.

"There's an ego problem," she says. "A man cannot stand and respectfully listen to a woman. They don't want to listen. So, we boldly walked away. But now they are scared, and they will have listen to us. Women have won, despite these men."

The minimum daily wage is now 301 rupees — about \$4.40. If they pick more, they earn more, and many do. For each extra kilo, they earn just pennies. But it is an improvement for this newly mobilized female workforce.

Rajeshwari says decades of being dismissed by complacent, patriarchal unions compelled the women to challenge the status quo.

"We gathered our courage and succeeded," she says. "It's men who ruled for the last four generations. It's men who ran the unions. For so long, it's only men. That's why we women came together."



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Feminist scholar J. Devika calls their struggle "a thunderous slap" on "Kerala's highly patriarchal history of trade unionism."

"We are witnessing a huge, very slow, but definitely persistent effort on the side of women to change the terms of their lives," she says.



Devika says that the women dared to organize outside the unions is especially striking considering how strong the established unions are in Kerala and how difficult it is to operate outside of them.

V.O. Shaji says the unions hadn't been idle but admits they "missed the women's grievances because of the lack of representation of women in the union."

"We're now trying to correct that, putting more women in senior positions, and listening to them directly," Shaji says.

Kanan Devan Hills Plantations Company did not respond to repeated telephone and electronic requests for comment.

The nine women we spoke with are determined to stick with their cause, and cheerfully report their progress: They now pick up their paychecks, instead of their husbands. In fact, they whisper that their husbands are even a "little afraid of them."

"One hundred percent," says Rajeshwari, laughing.

The women's slogan suggests a steely resolve: "The hands that wear bangles can also carry swords."

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