Work, Social Reproduction and Negotiations in the Everyday Gendered Spaces: A Study on Tea Plantation Workers in Munnar, Kerala

A thesis submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

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in

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by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled '**Work, Social Reproduction and Negotiations in the Everyday Gendered Spaces: A Study on Tea Plantation Workers in Munnar, Kerala'** submitted by **Anu Mariam Philipose** bearing Registration Number **15SEPH02** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of **Economics** is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

This thesis is free from Plagiarism and has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or Institution for award of any degree or diploma.

Further, the student has the following publications and presentations before submission of the thesis:

I. Presentations:
   A. Presented a paper titled "**Negotiating with the Gendered Spaces of Tea Estates**" at the 28th IAFFE Annual Conference, held on 27-29 June 2019 in Glasgow, Scotland.
   B. Presented a paper titled "**Triple-burdened Women Workers in Tea Estates: A Time-use Survey**" at the YSI Asia Convening, held on 12-15 August 2019 in Hanoi, Vietnam.

II. Publications:
   A. Anu Mariam Philipose. **Women Tea Workers in Munnar: Daily Negotiations with the Restrictive Spaces**. In *Female Voices from the Workspace* (ISBN- 978-1-7936-2874-9). Marquita Walker (Ed). Maryland: Lexington Publishers, 2020.
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DECLARATION

I, **Anu Mariam Philipose**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled, **"Work, Social Reproduction and Negotiations in the Everyday Gendered Spaces: A Study on Tea Plantation Workers in Munnar, Kerala"** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. G. Vijay**, School of Economics, University of Hyderabad is a bonafide research work, which is also free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodganga/INFLIBNET.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations Used

AITUC	: All India Trade Union Congress
ATM	: Automated Teller Machine
B & B	: Bed and Breakfast
BMS	: Bharatiya Mazdoor Sang
CITU	: Centre of Indian Trade Unions
EBO	: Employee Buyout Option
ICATUS	: International Classification of Activities for Time Use Statistics
INTUC	: Indian National Trade Union Congress
KDHPCL	: Kanan Devan Hill Plantations Company Limited
OBC	: Other Backward Classes
OEC	: Other Eligible Communities
PLA	: Plantation Labour Act
PO	: Pembilai Orumai
SC	: Scheduled Castes
TUS	: Time-use Survey
UPASI	: The United Planters' Association of Southern India

Chapter 1

Introduction

Pembilai Orumai Zindabad!
Paniyeduppathunangalu, kollayadippathu neengalu!
Kolunthukuttaeduppathunaa, panakkuttaamukkuthu neengalu!
Pottalayangal nangalku, AC Bungalow ungalku!
Tamizh medium nangalku, English medium ungalku!
Kuttathoppi nangalku, coatum suitum ungalku!
Chicken, dosa ungalku, kaadi kanji nangalku!
Paniyedukkuvathu nangalu, panamkoyyuvathu neengalu!
Poraduvomporaduvom, neeti kidaykkumvare poraduvom!

(Long live Pembilai Orumai!
We do the work, you do the looting!
We take the leaf basket, you take the money basket!
The bad line houses are given to us, the AC Bungalows for you!
Tamil medium for us, English medium for you!
Basket strings for our heads, coat and suits for you!
Chicken, dosa for you, old rice gruel for us!
We do the work, you reap the money!
We will fight, we will fight, we will fight till we get justice!)
Source – Slogans from the Pembilai Orumai strike held in September 2015.

1.1. Prologue to the Problem

In September 2015, there was an all-women workers' strike that happened in Kanan Devan Hill Plantations Company Limited (KDHPCL) in the idyllic hill station of Munnar in Kerala. This large strike that had about 5,000 women workers who came together asking for various demands also brought the activities of the small town, including the thriving tourism business of the larger area, to a stand-still. The trade union leaders who tried to join the women's cause were chased away by the protesting women. The nature of the strike particularly interested the media which hailed its 'apolitical' nature, although there were some which fed on conspiracy

theories about how the women were manipulated into the strike. As the state intervened as a mediator and with the spotlight on Munnar in the media, the management of KDHPCL was forced to deal with the situation and reluctantly gave a rise in the wages from ₹232 to ₹301 for the workers. The media and some of the academic writing that followed soon after that hailed the agency of the women workers and deemed the strike a success.

My initial introduction to the field of tea plantation under KDHPCL in Munnar was through these reports that came in during and after the strike. Even while reading the initial reports, without visiting the field, there were several questions that bothered me. What were the deeper issues that were embedded in the structure of the tea plantation that led to the strike by the women workers? Why is it considered a 'successful' strike, if the increase in the wages have still remained too low in comparison to the prevailing wages in other sectors? How did the women manage to survive on these low incomes? Did the strike fulfil their expectations of change that they were hoping to achieve?

As I reached the field with these initial questions, hoping to study more about the nature of their jobs and about the strike itself, I understood that their paid work was just one part of the whole movement. Their daily negotiations were many and diverse, and analysing the strike alone would render an incomplete picture, concentrating on one aspect of their everyday. The present-day tea estates under KDHPCL have the structure of the plantation itself rooted in colonial origins. Moreover, the majority of the workers employed are descendants of the earlier migrant workers in the same plantation, carrying forward their inequalities inter-generationally. The mother tongue of most of the workers is Tamil, and a majority of them are Dalits. The contrasting narrative of 'you' and 'us' in the slogans mentioned earlier stems from various factors. Belonging to a linguistic minority as well as socially disadvantaged groups within the mainstream Malayalee society, there are multiple dimensions through which these inequalities operate, not just in terms of economic classes alone. For the women workers, the paid and unpaid components of their work are both part of their 'responsibilities' of the everyday. These aspects, which mostly operate simultaneously and constantly, can be understood if we move the point of enquiry to the 'everyday' itself by placing importance on the lived experiences of the workers as a whole.

The objective of the following section of the chapter is to place the thesis in relation to other works in the available literature on 'plantations'- starting with the definition of the term, the history of plantations across the globe, the different theorizations of the term, including the

debates in the Asian context and 'plantationocene'. The chapter then pull out the different strands of literature contributed in the context of South Asian plantations, including their history, crisis in the tea industry, labour and the works that focus specifically on the state of Kerala. Through this exercise, the gap in the available literature is identified and elaborated. The history of the plantations in Kerala and the role of the state in relation to the plantations is presented next. Following this, the conceptualization of the dimensions of time and space as it evolved in literature, towards employing them as categories of a framework on everyday social reproduction is presented. The research objectives and question are presented at the end of the chapter.

1.2. Plantation: Meaning of the Term

A plantation, in the general use of the term, describes a large estate cultivating a specific crop in large quantities. It has a distinct production organization that is hierarchal in nature. The earliest usage of the term plantation was mostly to describe the 'planting' of Europeans in the colonies (Greaves, 1959; Xaxa, 1997). However, the meaning of the word changed in the 17th century when it was used to describe the planting of crops specifically for export. Greaves (1959) notes that the meaning of the word changed during the course of some 200 years 'from planting by colonists irrespective of crops to the planting of certain crops by colonists, and finally to planting crops irrespective of colonists' (pp 76).

The plantations are very often compared to firms mostly because of the hierarchal nature in the way production is organized. Myint (1973) observes that the large-scale enterprise involved with the plantation distinguishes it from other peasant agriculture. Similarly, Jones (1968) defines the plantation as an economic unit that undertakes the production of agricultural commodities for the purpose of selling, employing a close supervision of its large number of labourers who are unskilled. Many studies have merely looked into the economic aspects of the plantations alone. However, the plantation is much beyond its economic characteristics; it possesses 'a distinct form of production organisation which gives rise to certain specific social relations' (Bhowmik, 1980). It is, therefore, important to go beyond the economic aspects of the plantation and consider it as a social system in itself.

1.3. The Plantation System: History

Large scale plantations started with the Portuguese experiment of sugar production in one of the islands in the Atlantic Ocean, Sao Tome, in the 1520s (Curtin, 1998). As a system of

production, the plantations, therefore, started with 'the union of black slavery and sugarcane' (Schwartz, 1985, as quoted in Jayawardena and Kurian, 2015; pp 7). Wolf (1959) describes two kinds of plantation systems, the old and new styles. According to him, while the old style bases itself in coercive practices of labour control, it also has a more personal relationship between the owners and workers. Labour time is employed not only in the fields, but also to service the owners and their families 'to enable them live in the style demanded by their social position' (Wolf, 2001: pp 219). Status consumption was a big part of the old-style plantations. The newer plantation model is based solely on economic rationale, and the owners and workers have impersonal relationships. The way in which the surplus is spent, and the forms of labour, control differ in the two models. However, Wolf's classification remains too simplistic and cannot account for the various other types of coercion that exist outside the old style of plantations.

Another way is to look at the history of plantations is through the three broad stages of the traditional, industrial and modern as proposed by Courtenay (1980). This roughly corresponds to the periodization proposed by other scholars in the field as well (e.g. Beckford, 1972, Mintz, 1959). The first stage corresponds to the early plantations from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries[1] in the tropical and subtropical regions. This was an extension of the colonial project and utilized slave labour from mostly Africa on the plantations. Borrowing the concept proposed by the sociologist Erving Goffman, some scholars (see Smith, 1967 and Mandle, 1973) define the plantation as a 'total institution'[2]. The harsh labour practices found in the slave-based plantations in this period essentially exhibited the characteristics of a 'total institution'. The labour-intensive plantation crops of the period, mainly sugar, rice, cotton, tobacco and indigo, added to the inflexibility of the system resulting in strict labour control and disciplining (Reddock and Jain, 1998). This phase mostly covered the plantations that were first developed in Brazil, the Caribbean islands, mid-Atlantic and the southern parts of the United States.

[1] See Jayawardene and Rachel (2015) for the periodization discussed.

[2] Goffman in his work *Asylums*, defines a total institution as 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (1961: pp xiii). Goffman uses this concept to study establishments like the asylums, army barracks, jails, monasteries, etc. where the inhabitants are subject to strict controls.

The slave mode of plantations could not be sustained with the resistance faced internally and externally against slavery. The nineteenth century saw a different system in place with the abolishment of slavery in the British colonies in 1833. The plantations began using indentured labour for its production. Under the new system, indentured labourers were obliged to work for the employer for a specific period, agreeing to the conditions of work, wage etc. The 'total' nature of the plantations did not fully go away even in this stage. The industrial plantations were established to cater to the needs of the industries. The increased competition pressurized the plantations to undergo changes to maximize returns which saw the emergence of joint stock companies in the place of the older system of individual owners. The estate size became significantly larger as a number of smaller plantations under individual owners were integrated to economize the scale of operations. This stage also saw the introduction of the plantation system to areas in the Pacific, Africa, South and South East Asia with the inclusion of new crops like tea for plantation production (Courtenay, 1980; pp 44). Workers from China, India and Java formed the major share of indentured labour (Jayawardene and Kurian, 2015) and were transported to the British Guiana, Suriname, Jamica, Trinidad and Tobago, Fiji, parts of Africa, Malaysia, Ceylon and to the tea plantations within India itself (Reddock and Jain, 1998).

The colonies becoming independent from the 1930s onwards marked the beginning of the third phase (Beckford 1972). The phase becomes more pronounced by the mid-forties. The plantation transformed with the gradual disappearance of expatriate ownership as the requirement for foreign aid included the participation of local capital (Graham and Floering, 1984). The newly independent colonies also passed new laws that changed the plantation system in the local setting, like the nationalization of Guyana and Tanzania plantations (ibid; pp 45–50). With rationalized land usage and the use of new technology, the modern plantations increased their labour productivity manifold. Although the focus of the third phase revolves around improving the technological know-how and efficient use of capital, the labour, however, remains unfree even in the modern settings. Reddock and Jain (1998) note that 'the continued existence of plantations even in their modern form are testimony to the economic advantages of the plantation as an instrument of accumulation' (pp 6). In the context of India, especially in the case of tea plantations, the local capital gave way to multinational capital after the 1970s (Raman, 2010). This neo-liberal phase of plantations could be recognized as an additional fourth stage (see Banerjee 2017, Raman 2010). The fourth stage does not differ

significantly from the third stage in terms of labour conditions, and perhaps might have added to the vulnerability of the labourers arising from the volatilities of the world market.

1.4. Theorizing the Plantation System

Apart from studying the history, a number of works were devoted to theorizing the nature of the plantation system itself. One of the earliest academic writings about the planation as a system was the unpublished PhD thesis of Edgar Thompson in 1931 (Tomish, 2011). His main attempt was to define the *plantation*, and assign to it characteristics, both economic and sociological (see Thompson 1988b). With the plantations attributed to the underdevelopment of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, the 1960s saw a surge in interest in studying about the general nature of the plantation as a system. Scholars associated with the Caribbean Plantation School including Best, Beckford and Thomas were prominent in bringing works that saw generalizations about the plantation that could be used for comparisons in different contexts. The plantation as a 'total institution' (Best, 1968) and an 'enclave' (Beckford, 1972) were some of the propositions of this school, suggesting the picture of a rather closed system. Mandle's works in the 1970s extended the view of the plantation as an enclave as he proposed the plantation mode of production. A comparison between Thompson's and Mandle's propositions would present two sides of the debate on the closed nature of the plantation system.

Edgar Thompson sees the plantation "as a landed estate specializing in the production of agricultural staples for export" (Thompson, 1975; 9). He places importance on the market for-export itself and views the plantation as a system intrinsically connected to the market. He extends this view to propose that the "internal organization of the plantation is a function of the external situation which includes not only its major market centers, but also its competitors in other part of the world" (ibid; pp 34). He regards capital as the 'controlling force' behind evolution of plantation. A close reading of Thompson would suggest that, although he had placed importance on the capital, market, and competition, he introduced dualism (not in the way Mandle proposes) as he believed that "the plantation is both pre-capitalist and industrial; it is transitional" (Thompson 1988a; Tomish 2011, pp 28). For Thompson, who regards plantation as a settlement institution, it necessarily has a characteristic of racially different labouring class and, thus, calls the plantation system a 'race-making' institution.

Jay Mandle, in his studies on the plantation economies in Guyana and the US South, observes that the plantations are neither capitalist nor pre-capitalist in nature and, thus, proposes the 'plantation mode of production' (Mandle, 1973). Mandle observes that the 'plantation societies are characterized by the absence of a free labour market' (ibid; pp 228). The coercive nature of labour control, which does not allow the workers to leave the plantation, is a feature he points out to distinguish the system from being capitalistic. On the other hand, the absence of land claim by the occupants again makes it different from the feudal system. And thus, he characterizes the plantation mode of production where due importance is given to the unfree nature of labour controls that drives its internal structure. The institutional continuity of the plantation in the long-term is given importance over the changes in the 'plantation regimes' explained by the historical processes, for instance; in the case of plantations in the Southern US, slavery was replaced by sharecropping and tenancy (Tomish, 2011; pp 24). Using the neoclassical view of international trade to downplay the significance of the external world outside the plantation, including the role of markets and the international division of labour, Mandle places analytical importance on the internal structure of the plantation. Mandle's plantation mode of production could be considered as an 'uneasy marriage between Marxism and neoclassical economics' (Tomish 2011; pp 29).

Thompson and Mandle had proposed theories which are almost contradictory in nature. A third set of theories that try to explain the plantation system has its origins in the World Systems Theory[3]. The focus is moved away from the plantations per se into the world economy itself. This perspective offers to look at commodity frontiers which are created by the expansions of the world-economy. Expansions in the world-economy lead to the creation of new frontiers which stem from fresh conditions of accumulation. It attempts to capture the link between world-systemic movements to "environmental conditions, specific processes of commodity production and class relations, and the production of local space as well as the role of particular places in shaping processes of capital accumulation" (Tomish 2011; pp 35). Raman (2010) also places the plantation as an institution in the integrated world economy, but tries to alter it to better explain its internal relations. He employs the world systems theory to provide the macro

[3] See Wallerstein 1979 for reading more about this theory.

picture, while using a subaltern[4] perspective to study the relations at the periphery. Although Raman's framework remains extremely useful in studying the plantation, his study remains in employing a top-down approach.

1.5. Debates in the Asian Context

One of the main debates in the literature on the plantation studies in the Asian context is regarding the nature of the plantation system. The Modernization Group[5] believes in the advantages that the plantation offers to the labourers and even the local economy. For instance, Griffiths (1967) mentions the advantages that the plantations brought in the south Indian context to help workers break out of hereditary serfdom and improve their position. This faction believes that the choice to work in a plantation seems to be the labourers' choice. The group also maintains that the plantation plays a role in rural development with its positive linkages to other agrarian sectors.

Contrary to this line of thought, the Anti-Colonial Tradition believes in the coercive and unfree nature of labour contracts. For instance, Breman (1990) observes the role of intimidation that played a role in labour recruitment in tobacco plantations in Sumatra and states that it is 'nothing other than a colonial fantasy to maintain that a contract was entered into voluntarily' (pp 132). He describes how the contract coolies, the Chinese labourers who were employed on a contract basis in the tobacco plantations in Sumatra, were generally despised and humiliated. Breman discusses about the 'new wage slavery' in the plantations which came into existence with the deproletaranisation[6] of workers, where the lines differentiating coercion and free selling of labour were blurred or non-existent. The latter group of scholars also perceives that the development of plantations occurred at the cost of 'indigenous modes of production' (Baak 1997) and that the state policies exhibited patterns that favoured the planters more.

[4]Subaltern studies concern itself with the study of marginalised groups of people within the society whose political voice has been silenced historically. The branch studies 'the history from the below'. (See Spivak's seminal article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988)).

[5] Terminology as quoted in Baak (1997). He also refers to this school of thought as the Imperialist or Colonial Group. They prominently subscribe to the neoclassical approach in which believes in the total freedom of entering into labour contacts.

[6]See Brass and Bernstein 1992 for a longer discussion.

Paul E. Baak, in his works (1998, 1993), tries to summarize the works in the plantation studies in the context of the Asian region as three threads of debates 'regarding (1) plantations as social organisations, (2) plantations and the state, and (3) plantations and other agrarian sectors' (Baak, 1993; pp 74). He then proceeded to criticize the Modernization Group which argued about the advantages of the plantations with regard to all three aspects as well as the anti-colonial or Neo-Marxists group which pointed out the exploitative nature of the plantations for adopting a Euro-centric viewpoint. The writings concentrated far too-much on the colonial nature of the plantations without also understanding the developments in the local contexts, or in some cases, completely stepping aside to regional capitalists. Baak (1993) deviates from the usual narratives centring around the European Company-led agrarian sector of plantations and gives some important insights into the early emergence of planters among the Syrian Christian community in the first half of the twentieth century Travancore, the erstwhile princely state of which Munnar is a part of now. While a lot of these planters were in the business of other cash crops like rubber as well, they nevertheless formed a powerful lobby with the royal family, who negotiated with the British officials. This point is further elaborated in the work of Varghese (2009), who not only brings in the dimension of the Syrian Christian planters in twentieth century Travancore, or the '*purogamana karshakar*' (which roughly translates to the 'modern farmer'), but also the flows of migration into the spaces of the plantation in its initial stages, which were advertised as important means through which the 'empty landscapes' of the hill areas could be transformed into spaces of development and nation-building.

1.6. The 'Plantationocene'

Recently, there has been a renewed interest in the works on plantation. Newer studies are basing themselves on a view of the plantations as more than a type of organising agricultural crops. Plantationocene, a term coined by Donna Haraway (2015), builds on the earlier works on plantation economies that viewed plantation as a social system. Haraway uses this concept to refer to the process by which the plantations of the modern day have shaped and affected human history and the sustainability of life on the planet. While there are criticisms about keeping the discussion centred around plant life and the racial injustices that defined the plantations to the margins, reducing the voice of the indigenous and minority voices in this discourse (see Jagathesan 2021, Wolf 2022, Raj 2022), there is an attempt to include these discussions and voices in the forefront of this approach as is evident in the newer works that are emerging.

The inequalities and injustices it helped to perpetuate are also part of the meaning of the term 'plantation' and there are many old and new writings that put racial injustices and ecological exploitation on the centre-stage using this same approach. The social relations created by the plantations have repercussions even to this day. For instance, the north-eastern part of Brazil still remains the poorest as a result of the large-scale plantations and systemic injustices perpetuated to this day (Pereira 1999). Added to this, there are modern plantations being created to solve the food crisis (See Wolford 2021 for a discussion on the case of Mozambique's new plantations).

By taking into account the role played by plantations in creating the new world order (the system as we know it), Wolford argues strongly for the case of identifying the origin of modernity itself with the emergence of plantations as they "reordered space and scale" (Wolford 2021, pp 1629). Colonial quests for raw materials and the establishment of large-scale factories to process them changed the scale and pace of modern capitalism and plantations and their exploitative nature which included slave labour as a feature in the centre of it all. Wolford argues that, while it paved the way for modern, large-scale capital with colonial characteristics, it "perpetuated a core–periphery dualism within and between countries, organized a highly racialized [labour] force worldwide, and shaped both the cultures we consume and the cultural norms we inhabit and perform" (Wolford 2021, pp 1623). The modern-day plantations transcend the earlier meanings associated with the term and operate in a space that is no longer rural, as it was once characterised.

1.7. Tea Plantations – Literature in the South Asian context

1.7.1. Historical Studies

There is no dearth of literature on tea plantations in the South Asian Context, mostly India and Sri Lanka. In India, the main tea-growing regions are the north-eastern corridor covering Bengal and Assam, and the Western Ghats area in the south spread across the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The growing of tea in the modern era started with the colonial interests in the beverage. Not native to the European countries, tea was first packed in the ports of Japan by the Dutch East India Company in 1609, and soon it was smuggled into various markets within Europe, including the U.K. (Liu 2020). The novel beverage soon became popular in the European countries and the East India Company started trading in tea in larger quantities as soon as the maritime restriction on the trade were lifted by the Qing China in the

1690s (ibid). This growing popularity of tea was one of the major reasons that pushed the British into conflict with China in the later period. Tea was an integral part of the triangular trade between China, India and Britain which also consisted of the commodities of opium and British textiles (for which the raw materials were procured from India). It also led to the expansion of other plantation cultivations as well. Sugar plantations in the Caribbean were a direct result of the success of tea (see Mintz 1985, Liu 2020). With an ever-growing demand for tea in the home market, the EIC wanted to expand tea cultivation in the 1800s as they were unsure of whether they could depend only on China as the supplier. The decision may have been pushed by the presence of others in the tea market, like the Americans and the Dutch.

The possibility of cultivating tea in India was considered with the proposal for the same drafted by the English Botanist Sir Joseph Banks in 1788 (Dey 2018, pp 41). There were other instances of spotting tea as a native bush in Kathmandu and Assam by the English as well[7]. The Opium war with China, along with the annexation of Assam to its already large colonial territory in India, created the final push to register the Assam Company in 1839 (Behal and Mohapatra, 1992). Establishing tea plantations in the South, and specifically Munnar, came much later in the 1860s after the experiments with the northern tea plantations in the country took off[8]. The speculative boom in the industry lasted till 1865 which saw increased prices and profits, after which the tea industry still expanded with the backdrop of falling prices and began to be increasingly controlled by managing agency houses – 'a process initiated by the Assam Company placing its gardens under the management of Schoene, Kilburn and Company' (Behal and Mohapatra 1992, pp 145).

In a very short period, an exponential growth was recorded in the book value of the assets of such companies like James Finlay and Co., Harrisons & Crosfield (H&C), etc., which dealt in the trade of tea[9]. The growth of the agency houses was possible as they started "diversifying into control of joint-stock companies in the jute, coal, tea, and rubber industries, showing how problematic the distinction between "mercantile capital" and "industrial capital" had become

[7] In 1816, Edward Gardner claimed to have spotted a tea plant in Kathmandu and in 1823, Major Robert Bruce and his brother Charles 'discovered' tea being served as an herbal beverage in Assam. See Liu 2020 for a detailed description of the same.

[8] The history of the plantations in Kerala, specifically the tea plantations, are detailed in section 1.9.

[9] See Banaji 2020 for a detailed description of the same.

under this transformed form of merchant's capital" (Banaji 2020, pp 48). By the beginning of the 20th century, "seven managing agency-houses controlled 55 percent of the jute companies, 61 percent of the tea companies, and 46 percent of the coal companies" (Bagchi 1972, quoted in Banaji 2020, pp 48). Another changing feature was that the expansion of the tea industry after 1870 was fuelled by the undistributed surplus of the already-existing companies and not with the backing of banks and lending houses based in the Imperial capital cities (Bagchi 1972, quoted in Behal and Mohapatra, pp 145). The expansion of companies like the Finlays, which carved out a major stake in the tea industry by the end of the century "when it controlled a capital of £4,458,400, had seventy-four thousand acres under cultivation and as many as seventy thousand workers in India and Ceylon" (Banaji 2020, pp 49) in the backdrop of falling prices of tea, underlines the exploitative labour practices that were employed in the industry to increase productivity and profits.

The starting of new tea plantations in Assam opened up demand for a large number of workers. When the required number of workers could not be found locally, they were recruited from the neighbouring states of Bengal, Bihar and even Odisha (see Behal 2009, Behal and Mohapatra 1992). The agent or *arkatti* system came into place, recruiting large numbers of workers, not just men, but women and children too, into the plantations. Various acts were passed, including the 1882 Act, which gave the planters the right to arrest the unruly and deflecting labourers. This gave the planters tremendous power to control the labourers. In addition, the Act gave a provision to the planters to pay the labourers low wages as the statutory minimum wage which transformed into the only wages paid (and not above this level). As Behal and Mohapatra argue, "the major function of penal sanctions was to keep down wages, by preventing the operation of a labour market" (Behal and Mohapatra 1992, pp 156). The Act helped the tea industry immensely as it led to an enormous expansion of tea plantations in the country.

With the provisions of the Act, the labour force in the tea plantations were subjected to extreme work load with an intensified labour process under extremely strict supervision to contain the labourers from running away. The reproduction of the labour force was non-existential even before the Act was passed, as there was a high mortality rate from overwork and under-nutrition. Behal refers to the Commissioners' Report 1868 which noted "the average rate of mortality ranged from 137.6 per thousand to 556.6 per thousand" in Assam during that year (Behal 2009, pp 37). The large over-turn of workers with the new migrants coming in every year also worked in favour of the planters as they could work with a disciplined workforce with

minimum efforts from their side. Disciplinary measures to control the labour were commonly employed, and most of these punishments were inhumane in nature. The labourers were employed as helpers in the planters' bungalows as well. The inherent disregard and view of the labourers as inferior was even reflected in their vocabulary as well in using terms like "'coolie', 'primitive', 'jungly', 'slothful', 'scoundrel' and 'absconder'" to describe the labourer (ibid, pp 36). If the plantation hierarchy was born with the colonial planters establishing different layers of supervisory staff, it was cemented with the fear instilled in the labourers with the punishments and insults meted out to them. Although there were a few regional differences in the recruitment of the plantation labour during the colonial times, the story remains almost the same across India and as well as the case of the Plantation Raj that emerged out of it with strict hierarchical nodes[10].

Not all historical writings reflected the same sentiment and it varied with the positionality of the writer. For instance, in the writings of Sir Percival Griffiths, the plantations have a 'paternalistic' attitude, as could be seen in one of his accounts: "Fortunately, tea-garden managers in the last few decades of the last century were drawn from a better class of society and so the system which grew up was as a rule not tyranny, but paternalism" (Griffiths 1976, pp 376). Such a sympathetic view of the indentured system could also be seen in the various official writings of the period by the colonisers[11]. However, as Behal argues, the Indian tea plantation in places like Assam, which had an indentured labour system, had no prior history of it, unlike that of the regions of South America and Carribean (Behal 2009, pp 32). The post-colonial writings on the history of the period have heavily criticised the Anglican view of the plantations being 'development-friendly' and the characterisation of inhumane practices as 'necessary evils'.

1.7.2. Studies on the Crisis of Tea Industry and its Effects on Plantations

The post-colonial tea plantations did not change much until the 1970s, and until then, the foreign capital invested in these plantations reaped profits with the same exploitative systems in place. Some of the legal framework which wielded extra power to the planters were repealed as there were violent protests against them (like the 1882 Act in Assam), but the plantation

[10] The details of the history of labour recruitment to the colonial tea plantations in the South are mentioned in section 1.9.

[11] See Behal 2009 for a detailed discussion on these various historical writings.

hierarchy and practices remained the same. In 1970, the managing agency system was abolished in India. Along with it, tax rates were raised in Kerala and Tamil Nadu to make the big (global) capital pay more. The tea companies responded in two ways. One set of companies retracted from India into far more profitable areas like Kenya to begin anew, like the Brooke Bond Ltd., and in the process, drained the maximum resources out of India (George K. 1984, pp 42). Another strategy employed was to collaborate with Indian Capital and reorganise themselves. In the context of the Foreign Exchange Regulations Act (FERA) that was introduced in 1973, this option seemed more viable as the Act still allowed 74 percent foreign participation. The collaborative ventures bore the same features as earlier and continued to operate in the Indian market. The state was also more or less supportive in this venture as it could be seen in even the land reforms initiated during the same period that exempted the plantations[12].

The tea industry entered into a crisis phase in the 1990s which had huge repercussions in the plantations across the country. A huge chunk of available literature is based on this period and the after-shocks it carried forward to the subsequent decades and their various takes on how to solve the crisis. The widely-attributed reason for the crisis is the fall in the auction prices. With the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, the Indian tea industry was exposed to the stiff competition in the world market (Hayami and Damodaran 2004). Globally, there had been a dip in the price of tea as there was an oversupply of tea in the world markets with many new countries like Kenya and Tanzania entering tea production under the mandates of the structural adjustment programme initiated by the World Bank and IMF. Even when they had to pay a heavy price in their own domestic economies for pursuing this, countries like Kenya became top exporters of tea. As has been cited by many studies, India could not compete with the younger tea producing countries as the cost of production has been higher here for some time (see Hayami and Damodaran 2004; Asopa 2007; Vishwanathan and Shah 2013; Vijaybhaskar and Vishwanathan 2019).

The commonly attributed reason for the high cost of production from the side of the planters as well as some of the studies from a management perspective (see Asopa 2007) has been the labour costs- wages as well as the provision of basic facilities for the workers living inside the

[12] A longer discussion on the role of the state in the case of the tea plantations in Kerala can be seen in section 1.11.2.

plantation under the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951[13]. The planters' associations have always vehemently opposed the rise in wages and have been pressurising the state to take over the welfare measures as well[14]. The response of the plantation owners has been to either abandon the estates or move into smaller holdings where PLA provisions were not applicable. Abandoning the estates was a common resort than to close it formally as there were restrictions in place regarding establishments with above 30 workers and the planters, therefore, moved on to other sectors without reinvesting in the older estates (Neilson and Pritchard 2009). The starvation deaths reported in the tea plantations were a result of such abandonments[15]. Some of the larger players could diversify into other roles within the tea value chain, by entering into wholesale trade or establishing retail brands, while some others moved on to unrelated sectors as well (Vijayabhaskar and Vishwanathan 2019). Neilson and Pritchard also note the increase in the casual labour in tea plantations during the heights of the crisis in the 2000s to reduce the labour costs in plantations with regard to the provisioning of the PLA (Neilson and Pritchard 2009). Needless to say, the larger plantations which were functional diluted the provisions of the PLA as well to cut down on the costs (Vijayabhaskar and Vishwanathan 2019).

Apart from the planters' side of the story, most of the studies attribute the reason for the rising cost of production to the low productivity of the tea plantations. There have been studies comparing the farm size productivity of the small and large tea plantations and have come to conclude that the tea plantation productivity has been tipping in favour of the large-scale estates (see Mishra 2012, Hayami and Damodaran 2004). The small and medium tea plantation holders could never bring in new technology into their plantations due to their limited capital. Hayami and Damodaran quote the UPASI[16] report on this to point out that – "99 per cent of tea

[13] Apart from the living arrangements inside the estate, the workers are entitled to health care, creches for the children, maternity benefits and subsidized rates of certain food items, firewood, etc. Other provisions of the Act include maintaining and repairing the houses of the workers on a timely basis.

[14] See "*Plantation workers' wage increase 'unreasonable': UPASI",* Business Standard, Dated October 20, 2015 https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/plantation-workers-wage-increase-unreasonable-upasi-115102000937_1.html

[15] In 2003, there were 12 deaths that were reported from malnutrition and hunger (Neilson and Pritchard 2009, pp 153). In the same year, there were eight documented suicides as well (ibid).

[16] The United Planters' Association of Southern India (UPASI) was formed in 1893 and functions as the apex body of planters of various plantation crops, including tea, in the South Indian States of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

producers in south India are smallholders, though their share of tea land is only 41per cent" (Hayami and Damodaran 2004, pp 3993).

Even with the large plantations, the re-planting of older tea bushes has not been prioritised, and has focused more on increasing labour productivity and cutting down labour costs. In Kerala, 70 percent of the tea bushes are over 50 years old, reflecting the gross neglect in re-investment in their re-plantations (Viswanathan and Shah, 2013). While many of the studies advocate for interventions of the state to make the modern contract farming of smaller plantations a viable alternative (see Hayami and Damodaran, 2004), there has been another strand of studies advocating for innovations in the process and product in the tea industry calling for more research in the growing of tea plants as well as in the marketing of the products (see Joseph and Thapa 2015, Joseph 2010).

Nielson and Pritchard (2009) employ a Global Value Chain (GVC) analysis to point out that 'value chain struggles' are a by-product of the negotiations of place-based institutions in developing countries with their ability to govern structures hoping to influence immediate outcomes. They employ a modified version of the original GVC proposed by Gereffi (1994) to include the institutions as well in the analysis of the value added at each level in the entire product chains of tea and coffee. They argue that, in order to better understand the global economy of commodity chains, one needs to look at the processes that dominate the local institutions of environment, livelihood and labour struggles. They point to the path-dependent behaviour of place-specific actors that have been deterring the local plantations to respond to international market signals. Also placing their study in the value chain approach, Vijayabaskar and Viswanathan (2019) discusses the possible failures of governance and polity as the reasons behind the crisis in the tea plantation sector. Criticising the cost-cutting approach in the interventions in the sector, these authors emphasise on the need to focus on the local factors that currently sustain the plantation economy, including the politics of land grabs and titles, gender, biodiversity and ecology. Both the studies also put their weight behind product, process, functional and intersectoral upgrading for the survival of the plantation sector.

1.7.3. Studies on Tea Plantation Labourers

There have been numerous studies examining the socioeconomic conditions of the workers in the plantations, both in the north and the south. One of the pioneers of the studies of the Indian plantation economy of tea is Sharit Kumar Bhowmik, who, over the years, have written much

about different issues and sociological aspects in the tea estates of Bengal. Perhaps, the most notable contribution is his edited book (1996), '*Tea Plantation Labour in India',* where the authors compared and contrasted the demographic characteristics and socio-economic profile of the workers across the states of Assam, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Years before the book, he proposed that the plantation must be studied as a social system, and not merely as a production system (Bhowmik 1980). Originally a colonial product, he argues that the plantation was possible more by coercing its alien or migrant labour, more than technology or its resident labour force. The conditions in the plantation survived over the course of several decades post-Independence because the workers were isolated and had almost no legal protection in these spaces. Elsewhere, he points out that, despite the general safeguards in place in the country protecting the rights of workers, the ethnic identity of the tea workers who mostly hailed from tribal groups marginalized the workers, as the plantation owners were successful in recruiting cheap labour from other parts of the state or the country to settle down and work in their estates, along with their families (Bhowmik 2011). Here, the low wages and the almost complete dependence of the workers' families on the plantation enabled the owners to keep the labour force unfree (Ibid).

He has also written about the absence of changes in the wages or general plight of the tea workers in Bengal, in spite of a labour-friendly Left government assuming rule in the state (Bhowmik 1994). This assumes additional significance when one reads into the fact that the membership of women in the trade union of Bengal was extremely high, but that they were mostly forced into the same by the male members of their family, and in reality, only participated very little in the activities of the Unions (Bhowmik 1998). Analysing an unsuccessful workers' strike that almost lasted a month in 2005 in the estates of West Bengal, Bhowmik (2005) points out that the higher cost of production of tea is, in fact, exacerbated by the neglect of the living conditions of the workers in the plantation. While analysing the workers' strike that took place in Kerala almost a decade later, Bhowmik (2015) draws some differences between the contexts of the plantations in West Bengal and Kerala, especially the higher wages of the workers in Kerala even before the strike, but even more so, the difference in the attitude of the state governments itself towards the workers' cause.

Forty years ago, he posited that, "The factors which we think are inherent in the plantation system are in fact allowed to exist, or are protected, by the larger socio-economic system. The production relations in the plantation system change when there is a change in the wider socio-

economic formation." (Bhowmik 1980: 1526). Bhowmik's contributions are immensely significant in laying the initial ground for many studies that continue to build on the same, which is mainly possible because of the way in which the space of the plantation in different contexts has resolutely remained the same. However, much like the studies concentrating on the 'economics' of the tea plantations that suggest solutions for the crisis in the industry, Bhowmik's works also adopt a top-down approach even while focusing on the living conditions of the workers and almost always advocating for their betterment.

Very similar to Bhowmik's work, Prasanneswari (1984) writes about the industrial labour relations inside the plantations of West Bengal, which included rich descriptions about the plantation hierarchy, the differential wages paid to different sections of the workers which structured their relations with each other, and the attitude and relations of the management and the trade unions with the workers here. Mishra, Sarma and Upadhyay (2011) examine the incidence of intergenerational mobility among the tea-pluckers of Assam and conclude that there is almost no mobility that was visible among the workers because they could not afford to move into another job. If at all there were job changes that were observed, those were shifts towards temporary jobs in the informal sector. Those workers who were living outside the plantation and could manage to find alternative job opportunities had higher chances of mobility than others. The study aligns with the proposition of others about the existence of neo-bondage in the plantations today (see Raj 2013, Raman 2010, Brass and Bernstein 1992).

Sifting through the literature, one may stumble upon many of the older studies on plantation workers which adopt a language and approach that justified the employment of women in the plantation labour as they were considered 'naturally' better, even while sympathising with the living conditions and socio-economic background of the workers. The 'nimble fingers' argument has almost been a standard justification for proving that women are better suited for the job (see Griffiths 1967, Khar 1984). Another example of this gendered view (other than inheriting a colonial viewpoint in the name of 'efficiency') in writing could be seen in the following statement: "selective recruitment is advantageous to the management mainly for the following reasons: (1) By employing more children land-labour ratio can be kept at a relatively higher level than the cash outlays made for the purpose, (2) women and children do not actively participate in the activities of the labour union, (3) it is easier to control and convince women and children labour at work, (4) absenteeism is relatively less among the woman workers, and (5) women are better suited than men in plucking" (Khar 1984, pp 22).

There have been other studies that take a gender lens to understand the plantation labour as well, in sharp contrast to the one mentioned above. Piya Chatterjee attempts a creative style in presenting an ethnographic study she has done in the Bengal tea plantations and writes extensively about the treatment of the female body in the plantations and delves into the cultural meanings and historical roots of some of the rituals and labour practices in the field. One of the interesting aspects she extensively discusses is the 'fetishism' of nimble fingers– how the labour practice of plucking the tea leaves with hands is crafted as feminine and delicate- as part of the imperial story with a rich aesthetic appeal (see Chatterjee 2001, pp 4, 8, 28). Even the modern-day tea brands sexualise the image of the female tea worker and aesthetically market the 'nimble fingers'. She discusses that, in "the woman's body being disciplined into stories of ideal interiority and delicate, nimble work becomes a bridge across the imperial/colonial/postcolonial pastiche. The narrative of ''woman-as-tea'' is a feminized historical matrix of postcolonial [labour and imperial leisure" (Chatterjee 2001, pp 43). In another instance, she discusses about the meanings ascribed to the tea bush by the workers. During her ethnographic study, she came across the comparison of the tea bush to a woman who gives birth to a new off-spring after nine months (in this case, spending nine months in the plant nursery). Chatterjee's unique writing, adopting a mix of literary and cultural anthropological writing, has remarkable insights, but remains a niche account, being very context-specific and distinct in style from the rest of the literature.

Mita Bhadra (2004) attempts to address the gender dimension in the tea plantations in Bengal by writing in detail about the women workers here. While delving into the historical roots of the Bengal plantation, Bhadra delivers a socio-economic account with sex disaggregated statistics of the plantations with some details on the gendered nature of the plantations. Rasailly (2014) adopts a mixed methods approach to describe the socio-economic background of the workers in small tea-holdings in the Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts in West Bengal. Her work attempts to capture the insecurities experienced by the labourers in the small plantations, along with women workers' labour in both paid and unpaid work through the qualitative descriptions of interviews with her participants.

Two articles talk about the continuum between the spheres of production and reproduction and both of these appear in an edited volume by Jain and Reddock in 1998 titled *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences,* that bring forth the comparable and different experiences of women plantation workers (not necessarily in tea alone) from across the globe. While Jain's

article is set within the context of Assam tea plantations, Kurian describes the Sri Lankan case, and both of them treat the plantation as a total institution with no observed cases of upward mobility. Jain observes that '[t]he economic system… dominates or encompasses the socio-cultural dynamics of the labouring community' (Jain 1998, pp 11). For instance, she notes the case of the early entry of children into the workforce as well as their obligations to marry within the community as a survival strategy imposed by their economic conditions. As the estate management stops providing subsidized rations of food commodities for the children of workers above the age of fifteen, they are expected to start earning before that. Jain suggests that there is a continuum between the two spheres as the households produce the ideological base along with the reproduction of the labour force that perpetuate the economic exploitation in the plantations, and the severe economic conditions imposed by the plantations, in turn, control and homogenise the socio-cultural aspects of the labouring community. She also observes more egalitarian gender relations within the economically poor households in Nimari that is very different to what has been observed in other plantations. She partly attributes this to the presence of the predominant tribal population in the area and the rest to the survival strategies of the household. She cites the examples of inter-changeable gender roles within the household with regard to performing chores, pooling of resources together for the better survival of the household and the common practice of men and women in the households drinking rice beer together to make her case.

Kurian, on the other hand, observes women being treated as inferior in both the jobsite and within the household in the Sri Lankan plantations, as here, 'the analysis of labour process would also include an examination of the nature of the work and power relations within the household' (Kurian 1998, pp 71). She mainly cites three reasons for this proposition: 1) The close proximity of the labourers residing within the estates creating an intermittency between the two types of work undertaken and establishing a continuum between the two areas of work in terms of space and time; 2) The similarity in the nature of the activities undertaken in both the areas that 'tend to be labour-intensive, time-consuming and monotonous, and perpetuate the same sexual division of labour'; 3) The similarities in labour control in both the areas of male domination that 'shapes and reinforces the same tendency in the other sphere, and places women in a rather extreme form of subordination in the overall structure of work' (ibid, pp 72). She also places importance on caste in creating the ideological notions in the plantation order that had been used to cement the patriarchal authority over women.

There are other works that use a gender lens in the context of Sri Lanka, which conclude that the conditions there are very similar to those observed in the Indian plantations as well. Samarasinghe (1993) evaluates the economic independence and empowerment of women workers in the tea estates of Sri Lanka through various factors including their income, control over income, health, education and trade union relations. There are other works which concentrate on specific aspects of the plantation or life of the plantation workers. Viewing the plight of the women in plantations through the cultural lens of marriage, Philips (2003) analyses the gender relations inside the households and work sites of the tea plantations of Sri Lanka. Jayawardene and Kurian (2015) conducted a seminal study tracing the intersections of class, patriarchy and ethnicity in the Sri Lankan tea plantations[17]. Their work is more of a historical study, digging into the dimensions of political economy and gender studies, and provides a firm grounding for future studies on the Sri Lankan tea plantations.

Mythri Jegathesan's work (2019) is an elaborate account of the post-war plantations in Sri Lanka from a cultural anthropology perspective. Relying on both oral histories and alternate visual methods like body mapping, drawings and the author's personal photographs, the book tries to delve into how the desires of workers operate in breaking and moulding the colonial past in the plantations. Jegathesan's training as a cultural anthropologist and fluent speaker of the native language of the workers in the plantations help her to focus at length on the evolution of the language used in the present plantations by the workers to go beyond the restrictions imposed by the colonial structures. She also notes how the workers create their own sense of belonging in the estates even though they do not own the land. She argues that the 'poesis of desire' (pp 23) of the workers could be interpreted as decolonial and transcending the boundaries of the estates, and extends this argument to challenge the enclave structure of the plantations.

Apart from Jegathesan's work, another work that recognises the agency of the women workers is Banerjee's elaborate ethnographic work (2017) that is set in Doars in West Bengal. Her work places importance on the agency of the women workers in their respective settings to make changes in their lives. While recognising plantations as social and gendered spaces, she builds on the earlier works of James Scott and others to understand everyday activism and protests.

[17] A concept from the book 'plantation patriarchy' has been explained in some more detail to contextualise the framework to the discussions in chapter three. Please section 3.1 for more on this discussion.

For instance, she notes the way a woman in her field neutralised rape threats against her made by a group of men with the help of other women in the field who challenged the men in the open space of the market with rolling pins in their hands (see Banerjee 2017, pp 170-71). Banerjee's contribution to literature in recognising the women as non-passive actors is, thus, an important one.

Set in Darjeeling, Sarah Besky's work (2017) is again an ethnographic work with descriptions of plantation work, as well as the Gorkha movement of the land. She observes how the GI tagging of tea has increased its value in recent times and made it extremely profitable for business, while none of that has trickled down and benefitted the workers much. She also notes how the Gorkhaland movement, while initially championed the workers' causes, evolved into a political movement excluding the women workers in the plantations. Besky also follows her older work (2008) in criticising the failure of the various fair-trade practices in improving the lives of the plantation workers (also see Makita 2011 for a similar critique of the social reach of the fair-trade certification).

1.7.4. Studies Specifically Set in the Context of Kerala

Raman's work (2010) is one of the first thorough and systematic studies of tea plantations in the south, especially in the High Ranges area where Kannan Devan hills are located. An earlier work by Uma Devi (1989) covers some of the history of the High Ranges in an appendix to a chapter (see pp 111-124), but because of the focus of the book being that of the entire plantation crops in Kerala, the details regarding the history of the area were not as detailed as Raman's. In arriving at his framework, Raman attempts to combine the world systems approach and subaltern studies, which he critiques individually for largely ignoring each of these branches' unique perspectives. In doing so, he tries to acknowledge the 'periphery within periphery' (Raman 2010, pp 5). From a theoretical perspective, Raman's framework has very little to be criticised with and remains an important contribution to the literature in the field. However, in his execution, he fell short and took mostly a Marxist class-approach in understanding much of the relations in the field, discounting the intersectionality of other factors. His study mostly

makes a historical approach and he bases his writings mostly on archival research and, thus, this work fills in the huge gap in the historical literature available in the South Indian context[18].

Various works by Jayaseelan Raj (2013, 2018, 2019), which also partially overlap with the writings in the pages of his recent book (2022), filled the serious lacuna in the anthropological writings in understanding the South Indian plantations. Raj offers a rich ethnographic account of the tea plantations (Peermade belt) and the lives of the labourers from an insider's perspective, having grown up, in his own words, as a 'plantation boy' within the household of a plantation worker himself (Raj 2022, pp xii). Building on the earlier works in the plantation literature, he views plantation as enclave spaces and talks about the 'neo-bondages' of workers to the plantations (see Raj 2013). He weighs in more towards the alienated exploitative enclaves of the plantation than towards the literature celebrating the agency of workers of which he was very critical about, and calls it a myopic view of the lives inside the plantations (see Raj 2022, pp xiv, xv). He discusses about categorical oppression which bring in the intersectionality of caste oppression along with other facets of the workers' identities like ethnicity, spoken language, place of origin etc. that play a role in their lives, intensifying the economic exploitation that they face (Raj 2022, pp 11).

Hari P (2019) studied the Tamil-Malayali conflict in Munnar. Although set in the village of Kannan Devan hills and not exactly a plantation study, his work is crucial in understanding the identity politics within a society that has a history of being created for the purpose of serving the needs of the plantation labour. He mentions the conflicts that routinely happen between the Malayali and Tamil populations in the village, where the latter is seen as inferior by the former. Another study set in the context of Munnar is by Rammohan et al (2015) from a political ecology perspective. The study, in the wake of the PO protests in Munnar, observes how the plantation workers have not seriously benefitted from the explosion of tourism in the area. While advocating for more ecologically-sensitive tourism endeavours, the study also proposes that the workers of the plantations ought to get a bigger share of the revenue from such projects than what is disbursed presently. The article written by Kamath and Ramanathan (2017) is based on the interviews with the PO leaders right after the Pembilai Orumai movement. The article rides on high optimism and presents an extremely positive view of the movement when,

[18] His work has been referred to as a source (perhaps the only source in many cases in citing historical developments in the field) in sections 1.9, 1.10. More discussions regarding the critique of his work along with others' works is detailed in the next section.

in fact, by the time it was published, there were visible factions within the trade union, which were omitted in the article. The authors did not even interview one of the main trade union leaders who left the organisation in the very early days itself.

1.8. Positioning the Study/ Gaps in Literature

As can be seen, there are a number of studies on the tea plantations in India. While the historical studies provide the much-needed context to the present conditions of the plantations and the workers within it, some of it also reflect the colonial and male-bias in its writings. The take on nimble-fingers as a 'natural' feature making women workers suitable for the job is one of the examples fitting this view point in the writings (see Griffiths 1967). The literature on the plantations in the post-independent period mostly deals with the crisis of the tea-industry. Most of these studies are concerned with the macro-factors creating the crisis along with providing very technical solutions to improve the productivity of the plantations, improving innovation systems for tea planting and marketing etc. (for instance, Joseph and Thapa 2015, Vishwanathan and Shah 2013). Even while employing a GVC analysis, some of the studies fail to incorporate the role of plantation workers as active agents in the value chain, and mostly employ a top-down approach.

The top-down approach is not limited to those studies alone, but a majority of the socio-economic studies remain statistical analysis, reducing workers to just numbers, or economic agents with no voice and agency. While some of those studies addresses the larger structural issues along with a description of the workers' socio-economic conditions (like Bhowmik's), there is not much of importance placed on workers' lived experiences and their everyday negotiations. Even while trying to follow his grant framework, Raman's work also fell into this category and mostly followed a class-analysis. Raj (2022, 2019, 2013) deliberately critiqued the celebration of agency of workers and instead placed his study in the context of plantations with neo-bondages, with categorical oppression and alienation. While it is true at some level that the workers do not have a lot of agency to act on, Raj's work could have improved vastly if he could have included the cases of 'bounded agency' or 'negotiations'. Raman and Raj's works, remain the most important works in the context of tea plantations in the High Ranges, the two works have their own biases of class and caste perspectives respectively. While these are extremely valid and important entry points to the studies on tea plantations in the area, the fact remains that the majority of the workers in the plantations remain women and their studies

would have been enriched with the addition of notes on the gendered experiences as well, instead of a cursory treatment.

On the other hand, many of the studies with a gender angle brings out various nuances of the labour from the lived experiences of the women, especially the ethnographic accounts (Jagathesan 2019, Banerjee 2017 etc). Even some of the older studies provide extremely useful accounts on the plantation labour and address some of the theoretical issues feminists are grappling with even today (Kurian 1998 and Jain1998). While some of them miss the larger contexts of the plantations and adopt a very myopic view, they all provide useful insights about the chosen area of the tea plantations. That brings to the area of studies of these works. A significant portion of the writings with an explicit gender angle in India is concentrated on the plantations in the north. Most of these studies are also done in the smaller estates and where majority of the workers employed are not permanent.

While it is extremely important to the study the informal job contract and associated vulnerabilities of the workers, my study places itself in a context where majority of the workers are formally employed receiving additional benefits from the company that employs them. During the PO protests, one of the demands also included issuing BPL ration cards to the workers. This highlights a scenario where - the boundaries of formality and informality gets blurred in a very different sense. Granted that the permanent workers' lives represent the best-case scenario in the plantation hierarchy and comparatively with that of the other plantations in the country, but then again, theirs is also the worst-case scenario in comparison to employment in other sectors. A study of the existence of other factors preventing them from moving out of plantations becomes even more relevant in this scenario. Most of the studies also adopt a partial view of the life of plantation workers or focus on very specific objectives with regard to the plantation studies. With my thesis plan to map out the everyday lives of workers through time, space and their everyday negotiations, with a mixed methods approach, it aims to contribute to a more holistic view of the plantations and the lives of the workers inside it.

1.9. History of Plantations in Kerala

The earliest plantation in Kerala could be traced back to 1792 when the East India Company appropriated large tracts of land in the Anjarakandy villages (Raman, 2010). The first estates were mainly used for planting various spices. A major landmark in the history of plantations is

the passing of the 1824 Resolution. The Imperial Resolution helped consolidate various lands which were earlier classified as 'Waste Lands' into large integrated plantations. As Raman (2010) observes, the Imperial Resolution paved way for the 'plantation-based colonialism' with 'export-crop-producing-peripheries' located in various parts of the Western Ghats. These locations were mostly concentrated in Mysore, Anaimalai and Nilgiris, and Wayanad and Travancore spread across the tri-states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively.

In the 1830s, coffee plantations began taking root in Kerala. The first coffee plantation came up in Pathanamthitta in the princely state of Travancore (Raman, 2010). Coffee was hugely popular and large tracts of land came under it. Coffee subsequently lost its flavour of success among the planters in a few decades' time mainly because of two reasons. The leaf wilt disease which began spreading among the plants across the plantations reduced the productivity of Kerala coffee plantations significantly. Another major reason was the crash in prices of coffee itself during that period due to abundant availability of cheap coffee from the Brazilian plantations.

Coffee plants were uprooted in many places and tried with different variants of plants, chief among them being the Cinchona plant. The extract of the Cinchona plant was found to be used in the cure for Malaria and, hence, there was a huge demand for it. But this demand was short-lived and once the plant was cultivated in large numbers, the planters in Kerala were again searching for ideas to use the space of their plantation estates. A few of them were attracted to the lure of the gold rush which were restricted to Wayanad and Mysore regions. When gold was discovered in this belt in the middle of the 19th century, a few plantations in Wayanad region were given up for the gold hunt. This gold rush too was short-lived. It was at this time when the planters almost ran out of ideas for plantations that tea arrived in Kerala. Although tea plants were experimented in planting in small scales before the 1830s and failed, it was found to be successful when reintroduced thirty years later. It was reintroduced in 1864 in Peerumedu in Travancore state. Once tea was found to be successful, it began to be cultivated in large numbers and became the predominant plantation crop in the state. One of the largest estates of tea was found in Munnar, Kerala. Presently known as the Kannan Devan Hill Plantations, with its sheer size of landholdings, it is considered to be the world's largest integrated tea plantation (Raman, 2010).

The tea plantations have a history of unfree labour that was tapped in through various resources. But to begin with, slavery was officially abolished and this move was a key step to release

labour from traditional sectors to the plantations (Raman, 2010). As noted by the Royal Commission Report of 1931, while other sectors required individuals to work as labourers, the plantation system required families to work on it. Keeping this in view, the Kangany system was established in the plantations. This system appointed jobbers/kanganies to bring families into the plantations. The jobbers were effective in recruiting large numbers of families to live and work in the plantations in Kerala from various places outside the state. They were mostly lured into the plantations with a small sum of advance money and the promise of housing facility and other perks in the plantations. The children and women were engaged in large numbers in the production of tea. As time passed by, these families could not repay the initial advance sum of money and got stuck in the plantations. Thus, the 'free' labour which was abundantly and cheaply available was instrumental in providing the clean profits for the planters.

Another major source of labour was the tribal groups who were thrown out of their forest for the development of the plantations itself. The tribal groups who were dependent on the forests for their livelihood were rendered homeless, jobless and vulnerable with the development of the plantations. This vulnerable lot also added numbers to the large pool of labourers dependent on the plantations for their livelihood. Migrants from areas affected by natural calamities also came into the plantations as labourers. The Great famine of 1876-78 pushed a large number of people from various parts of the Madras Presidency into the tea plantations. Another source of labour was the attached labourers who worked in the traditional sectors, mostly agriculture, who came to work in the plantations in their 'off-seasons'. The abundance of labour worked to the advantage of the planters who could comfortably keep the wages low, consistently. Apart from the abundance of labour, the main component that helped in keeping the wages low was the practice of employing women and children in large numbers. The value of work done by these categories of labourers was always viewed as low and inferior to that of men's work, which again was used by the planters to their benefit. The resistance offered against these unjust practices were minimal as the workers were really not in a position to bargain with the management.

1.10. History of Kannan Devan Hill Plantations

Evergreen forests were given away as concession to the European planters in India. The story of Kannan Devan Hill Plantations is not very different. Kannan Devan Achanatu Mala was sold to J. D. Munro in 1877 under the first Poonjar concession by Punhatil Koyikal Kerala

Varma Valiya Rajan on 11th July, 1877; it was followed by a second Poonjar concession on 26th July, 1879 (Raman, 2010). The area of the Kannan Devan plantations, through the two concessions, constituted 215 square miles (1.37 lakh acres), which equalled nearly one-seventh of the cultivated land of the erstwhile princely state (ibid). Later, the ownership of the hills was transferred to the North Travancore Land Planting and Agricultural Society. In 1880, the ownership was again transferred to James Finlay and Company which held the ownership rights for the longest time. The Tata Company established Tata Finlay in 1964 in collaboration with the James Finlay Company. Thus, the Tatas partly owned the plantation from 1964 to 1983, after which, it became the sole owner as they acquired the James Finlay Company. In 2005, the ownership of all but two estates in Munnar shifted from the Tatas to a new company (KDHPCL). When the new company started, the ownership pattern changed with an Employee Buyout Option (EBO) that was introduced that transferred 68 per cent of its shares to the workers in the estates. This was the way out for Tata to overcome the crisis in the tea industry that was mentioned in the previous chapter. By transferring the shares to its 12000 workers, the company "could not only recover within a year the loss of Rs 13 crore run up by Tata Tea Limited, but could also register a post-tax surplus of Rs 2.37 crore as on 31 March 2006" (Deepika 2010, pp 63). The management has won much accolades[19] for what the management itself describes as a unique and egalitarian model within the tea plantations and has been dubbed as a solution to the crisis within the tea industry (see Deepika 2010)[20].

The transfer of shares to the workers by Tata was to cut down losses the company had been making from the crash in the international tea prices. It started concentrating more on the production of instant tea and the tea bags category which had a huge demand in the western markets. The Tata company made a series of acquisitions putting it on the map of the global tea market. Notable acquisitions include Tetley (UK), Good Earth Corporation (US), and Joekels (South Africa), Jemca (Czech Republic), Vitax and Flosana (Poland); and it floated its own brand of flavoured variations of tea bags called 'Tea pigs' which holds a more premium

[19] See "KDHP, best place to work", The Hindu Business Line, Dated July 24, 2015. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/agri-business/kdhp-best-place-to-work/article7461022.ece

[20] A detailed discussion on the impact of change of the ownership of the company on the workers could be viewed in section 5.2.1.

position than many of the existing international brands under the label[21]. Even in India, it did not give up on the Darjeeling estate, which is famous for the tea under the same name, and even held on to the brand name of 'Kannan Devan', and thus, the Tata made sure that it retained the most valuable assets. Thus, while it was acquiring valuable brands of tea in the world market, the Tatas gave up on those estates in India with less value-addition. Even in Munnar, they bought the leaves at a rate cheaper than what it used to shell out (as the new company managed to keep the average productivity per worker at a much higher rate and reduced the cost of production), as there was no formal obligation for them to buy the leaves for their factories from KDHPCL. When it floated the new company, the Tatas offered to raise the majority share of its working capital in the form of loan US$ 7 million with an interest rate of 8.5 percent (Raman 2010). Thus, while the Tatas were assured a payback of interest, the workers only received a marginal amount in the form of dividends declared over profits. With the transfer of ownership of the company, the workers who were promised big benefits and more egalitarian participation with the running of the company, received only an insignificant raise.

1.11. Tea Plantations in the Larger Political Economy of the State

1.11.1. Locating the Plantations within the 'Kerala Model'

The Kerala story has been told and retold in many different ways. Kerala gained significant attention in the academic world when, in 1975, the UN published the Report of a team led by K N Raj. The Report observed a strange combination of low per capita income and high unemployment levels with high human development indicators in the state. This paradox, later developed to be known as the 'Kerala model of development', was looked at as an interesting case for replication elsewhere. There are multiple narratives attributing diverse reasons for the peculiar course of development trajectory taken by the state. One of the earliest works commenting on the development path of Kerala was by Dreze and Sen (1989). The authors, by comparing the state with China and India (taking the national average), find the social indicators of the state to be performing extremely well and attributes this to the public action of the government. Following this, there has been a vast literature

[21] See "*Tata Tea's strategies for that global cup of tea",* Economic Times, Dated November 30, 2007. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/tata-teas-strategies-for-that-global-cup-of-tea/articleshow/2585865.cms?from=mdr

written on similar lines, trying to understand the 'Kerala Model' (see Franke and Chasin 1992, Kannan 1995, Ramachandran 1996, Heller 1999, Rammohan 2000).

Although the model has been critiqued from various angles[22] and the question of whether this can be referred to as a 'model' to be replicated is debatable, Kerala's development trajectory proves to be an interesting case to study. One of the key components behind the working of this unique model, besides the state's policies on universal and free education, maintaining a good public healthcare system and public distribution system[23], is the successful implementation of land reforms in the state (compared to the rest of the country). However, even in Kerala which has been even called the 'laboratory of communist politics' (Jeffery 2001), the efforts of land reforms almost completely ignored the plantation sector.

While the Kerala Agrarian Relations Bill (1957) completely exempted the plantations from its purview of imposing ceilings, even in foreign-owned ones, the Kanan Devan Hills (Resumption of Lands) Act in 1971, made a weak attempt at confiscating the surplus lands from KDHP, which was foreign-owned by the James Finlay Group at that time (Raman 2010). The latter Act, along with the Kerala Private Forests (Vesting and Assignment) Act of 1971, met with severe opposition from the plantation owners who filed legal cases against these attempts of land reform. Even when the legal verdict was against the companies, the success of the land reform is questionable (Udayabhanu 1973, quoted in Hari P. 2019). The land acquired from KDHP by the state was never redistributed. Ironically, even the Inquiry Commission (1994) which was formed to recommend ways to improve the welfare of the workers in the plantations also made suggestions to the state to restore the lands to the big

[22] The euphoria on the social indicators' literature was challenged by the emerging economic issues and the questions on caste and gender. Kannan (1998) lists out three economic dilemmas that arise out of the failure to transform social achievements into economic progress: '(i) technological choice in the face of high and rising labour costs in labour-intensive activities for maximising long-term growth and employment, (ii) mismatch between labour-supply and labour demand as a result of changing job expectations of the younger generation in a technologically stagnant economy, and (iii) lack of new investment despite growing loanable funds and declining resistance to technological change' (pp 61). Despite the progress made in the social indicators, the status of women in the state has not risen up to the expected standards. There has been a failure to transform social development into gender and caste equality. With the increase in violence against the women in Kerala, there have been studies pointing out the inefficiency of the HDI indicators in capturing the reality, and hence, questioning the model from another angle. There has been a huge volume of literature pointing out this (see Eapen and Kodoth 2002, Mukhopadhyay 2006, Devika and Thampi 2010).

[23] See Ramachandran 1996, Sreeraj and Vakulabharanam 2014.

plantation companies (Raman 2010). Till the 1970s, the company operating in the Kannan Devan Hills was the world's biggest, in terms of size, owning an integrated block of tea plantations that occupied more than 1.36 lakh acres of land (Raman 2010, pp 28). Even after the half-hearted attempts at land reform, the company still remained to be one of the largest, and certainly "the biggest private agriculturalist in Kerala, controlling through lease grant the whole of Kannan Devan hills in Munnar that grew the best tea in the region" (Rammohan 2008, pp 14). In the due process, the estate workers, and the tribal groups, from whose ancestors the lands were taken initially for building the large plantations, continue to remain landless.

There are many arguments made against dividing the huge tracts of plantation land, which normally includes justifications on the basis of economies of scale. However, taking evidence from other countries like China and Vietnam, where the majority of the production of tea is undertaken by smallholders, it can be seen that the productivity is not affected by the size of a tea plantation (Hayami and Damodaran 2004). Even in the case of producing black tea, which requires fresh tea leaves, the vertically integrated large plantation setting with factory is not a mandatory requirement as it could be seen with the examples of bought-leaf factories which enters into agreements with the small tea-growers who supply leaves on a timely-basis. In the case of green tea, the production process is much simpler and does not require large factory settings. It can be produced in small quantities in family farms and is the predominant way of production in countries like China and Japan (ibid). Hayami and Damodaran (2010) argue that the large-scale plantation system was widely adopted to gain benefits from exploiting the virgin lands in the colonies in the 19th century to meet the demands of industrialised countries which necessitated large initial capital investments to build associated infrastructure like roads, bridges, irrigation facilities etc, and not necessarily because of its edge over smallholdings in terms of productivity. Another argument against the fragmentation includes listing its futility by claiming that there is an inflexibility of movement of tenant farmers and landless labourers engaged in agricultural production in the lowlands to start anew in the high lands, in the tea plantation sector with small holdings. Raman (2010) refutes this claim by referring to the historical precedence of such movements that had occurred during the 1930s, in the famine and depression periods (pp 150).

"The massive concentration of land in the hands of the plantation companies – a colonial legacy of over-acquisition – warrants the redistribution of the same at least in small patches to the worker who had been labouring on it for over a century and a half without ever being able to

call it her own" (Raman 2010, pp 149). Besides the sentimental reason of 'never belonging' to the very place they view as 'home' and being called 'migrants' in the same place where their ancestors, even dating back to four generations, have lived and died, the ownership of land also has certain economic advantages to the workers. The ownership of land or building, besides having a functional utility of providing shelter, could also act as a catalyst for socio-economic mobility when it is used to raise capital to move out of debt traps, that could have tied them to a particular job and/or physical location.

Land acts as a material asset and the landlessness of the plantation workers has only compounded their existing vulnerabilities. Needless to say, the plantation space remains an outlier to the rest of the state, even in terms of other socio-economic indicators as well. This could be seen by comparing the statistics of Idukki district, in particular Devikulam Taluk where the Kannan Devan Hills are located, with the rest of the state. Even while taking a few select indicators from the census[24], there is a wide gap with the rest of the state. Referring to the incident of their omission from the section on the 'outlier communities' in the first Kerala Development Report (2008), Raj (2010) points out that the plantation Dalit workers have been generally excluded even from the discourse on Kerala Development Model itself.

1.11.2. The Role of the State

The state has always played the role of the mediator between the plantation companies and the workers largely benefitting the side of the plantation companies over the years, however, the scales have been tipping in favour of both the parties in recent years. The idea of what-ought-to-be the role played by the state has changed over time. One of the first legislative measures adopted in Independent India concerning the plantation sector was the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. Under the Act, along with rules restricting the number of working hours to 54/week as well as ensuring minimum wages for the workers as fixed by the individual state, the plantation companies were also made responsible to provide housing facilities to its employees, adopt welfare measures for its employees in providing decent standards of living, including the provision of health and educational facilities, crèches etc (Plantation Labour Act, 1951). Although the trade unions were strong during the period and had a strong influence in passing

[24] The total literacy rate of Devikulam Taluk is 86.29% according to 2011 census data. The male literacy rate is at 82.02%, while the female literacy rate is at 73.94%. In comparison, the all-Kerala figures for the 2011 census stood at 94 percent, with 96.11 male literacy and 92.07 female literacy. The average sex ratio of the taluk is 995, while that of Kerala is 1084.

the Act, the implementation of it was delayed by three years citing the financial issues of the tea industry (Raman 2010). The minimum wages for the plantation workers were fixed in 1951.

The plantation lobby was already powerful by the time the official state of Kerala itself was formed in 1956. The nationalisation of the plantations to put the interest of the country first and prevent the drain of surplus to Britain, which also translated to better welfare for the workers, was a dominant idea during the time of the state formation. However, when A.K. Gopalan[25] put forward a resolution in the Lok Sabha in December 1956 to nationalise the foreign-owned tea plantations for the greater good of the entire country highlighting its many benefits, it was met with strong opposition and was never passed (Raman 2010). The proposal to nationalise the plantations was again pursued by the first elected state government of Kerala under E.M.S. Namboodiripad, but it was met with little success.

The state's role in actively supporting the worker's side in the strike organised jointly by the trade unions in 1958 that demanded a higher payment of bonus and wages was perceived as so much of a threat that James Finlay persuaded the Prime Minister through the British Deputy High Commissioner "to intervene in the 'local' strike" (Raman 2010, pp 147). The strike, which often had assumed a militant character[26], was not successful and was called off due to the pressure from the centre. However, it left the powerful Planters lobby irked, and representatives from UPASI and KDHP met Jawaharlal Nehru later to complain against the left government and made a strong case against it, one of the many reasons which ultimately led to its eventual dismissal in 1959 – the whole sequence of events was later summarised in the memoirs of Col. Mackay as ". . . it was here (in the High Ranges) that Namboodiripad met "his Waterloo"" (as quoted in Raman 2010, pp 148).

Apart from the earlier albeit unsuccessful attempts at keeping plantation capital in check, the state had not made many active attempts to restructure it. As mentioned earlier, the land reforms in Kerala did not affect the planation sector much. Again, with the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) the tea companies got away with a preferential treatment capping the

[25] The then Member of Parliament of the undivided Communist Party of India (CPI) from Kerala.

[26] The open firing of police against the workers who were armed with household weapons like knives and sickles and had set some estates on fire resulted in two casualties, Pappammal and Hussain Rawther (Raman 2010). The martyrs of the strike are remembered even to this day as trade unions conduct a small remembrance on their death anniversaries every year in Munnar (Mathrubhoomi article, dated September 2015)

foreign participation at a much higher figure of 74 percent. The state chose not actively side with the labourers when it chose to throw away a chance at restructuring the plantations through various legislations. It could have brought in a more egalitarian structure, in the form of workers' cooperatives replacing the large plantation companies. When the neoliberal reforms in the 1990s brought back a cent percent FDI in tea that was earlier allowed in the pre-independent times, it was just a superficial change as the larger structure of the tea plantations in Kerala had more or less remained the same from the colonial-era, even when the ownership had changed hands to either pan-Indian capital (as in the case of the Tatas who owned KDHP) or the local elites (mostly Syrian Christian planters with access to good resources of capital and network). In a nutshell, even though there was a presence of strong trade unions in the tea plantations[27], the state arrived at the stage of 'class-compromise'[28] as proposed by Heller (1999) much earlier than the timeline for the rest of the sectors.

The state's role further evolved in the neoliberal era. As the state opened up for free trade, the hitherto protected tea market and plantations were suddenly exposed to every fluctuation in the international market. As Raman (2010) notices, the inflexibility of the local capital to adapt to the challenges posed by the opening up of the borders led to "the state(s) playing a Janus-faced role in this conflict" (pp 152). There was a crash in the tea auction prices in the world market when the market was flooded with an excess supply of tea in the 1990s. One of the main reasons cited was the influx of tea in large quantities from Kenya and other African nations which considerably increased its production of tea and other tropical crops, even at the expense of its own food security, under the mandate of the new structural adjustment programmes (Hayami

[27] The evolving role of trade unions in the tea plantations is discussed in detail in the later section (see).

[28] Heller (1999) sees peasants and workers as 'active agents of economic and political transformation' and proposes that the development of the state has been 'driven not by market forces or by emerging bourgeoisie, but by the mobilising of subordinate classes' (pp 2). He identifies three phases in the development trajectory. The first phase is characterised by an agrarian transition, produced by the mobilisation of poor tenants and landless labourers. The threat of labour militancy in the second phase results in a 'crisis of capital accumulation'. The third phase is marked by 'class compromises' in both agrarian and industrial sectors. He sees the class compromise as the reason behind the turn-around in the Kerala growth story. He roughly marks the stage of class compromise from the 1980s onwards, when the successive governments in Kerala were forced to consider making the state more investment-friendly due to economic issues. The tea plantations do not follow the same trajectory and it cannot be strictly compared with Heller's proposition. However, the trait of the state siding with the capital more, diluting its strict stance of being labour-friendly, could be seen in the case of the plantations for a much longer period.

and Damodaran 2004, Raman 2010). With the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers, the Indian tea industry could not keep up to the stiff competition in the world market and even saw a huge increase in the import of tea from countries like Sri Lanka and Vietnam as well. The state's response to the crisis was to support the tea industry by offering subsidies to produce more[29], or using the same to contribute to reducing its expenses, without transferring a portion of it to the workers. Tea production was stepped up everywhere in India[30], and with the decline in exports[31] that outstripped the merits of marginal increases in the rate of domestic tea consumption, there was an over accumulation of stocks in the market.

When a large number of tea plantations closed in the first decade of the 2000s[32] as a response to the crash in tea prices, the labourers were left to fend for their own. There were reported cases of poverty and starvation deaths in the tea estates across the country[33]. With reference to the closures of tea estates in the south Indian states, Raman (2010) notes that the state deliberately "refused to acknowledge the workers' rights to a decent living" (pp 155). The

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[29] An instance cited by Raman (2010) is the case of subsidies offered by the Tea Board and UPASI to bring more lands which were under the vegetable production to plant tea in Nilgiris (pp 152-53).

[30] India increased its tea production from 754 million kg in 1995 to 846 in 2000 and then to 928 in 2004 and further to 982 million kg in 2006 (Raman 2010, pp 152).

[31] Besides the competitive prices offered by other countries that were not matched by the Indian tea, the fall of the Soviet Union also adversely affected Indian exports.

[32] According to the official statistics by the Tea Board, 118 tea estates were shut down or abandoned between 2000–2005 across India, affecting about 70,000 workers (The Tea Board Annual Report 2005, quoted in Raman 2010).

[33] "During the past four weeks, at least eight people died at Peerimedu and Munnar talukas in Idukki district" (*Kerala tea planters cup of woes brimmeth over*, Business Standard, dated October 30, 2002; https://www.rediff.com/money/2002/oct/30kerala.htm). The death of Velankanni, the 14-year-old daughter of plantation workers at the Pasumali tea estate, who committed suicide as her parents could not afford a new school uniform which was reported in the local media, was one of them. Her death brought into light the often-neglected conditions in the small tea estates which were suffering due to the crisis and was discussed at length in the media then. Smaller tea plantations suffered more with many being closed across Kerala and the rest of the country. Taking the all-India case, the reports of starvation deaths from West Bengal-Assam tea plantation corridor have been coming in even in the more recent periods (see *Those Lush Tea Estates Are Hiding Death And Despair*, The Wire, dated February 25 2016, https://thewire.in/labour/those-lush-tea-estates-are-hiding-death-and-despair; *Death, hunger stalk Indian tea-estateworkers*, AP news, dated September 29, 2014, https://apnews.com/article/c070c75bfc5f4997bc0ee656e85d6363)

functional tea plantations, like the KDHPCL, reorganised itself in the wake of the crisis and chose to relay it on to the workers. There was an attempt to reduce costs by all means and increase productivity with an intensification of labour. The welfare measures promised under the Plantation Labour Act were quietly ignored and the state also did not step in to ensure the proper implementation of the Act. If at all there were any policies taken by the state, they were in favour of the 'loss-making' plantations and any move that would further pile on to the 'non-productive expenditure' of the existing plantations, which included providing better standards of living for the labourers, were circumvented. As Vijayabhaskar and Vishwanathan (2019) note "[T]he State and capital in this industry responded to such episodes of distress among workers by pointing out that there has been a 'crisis' of profitability among producers and hence, cannot afford to address such concerns of labour welfare" (pp 5).

Even while discussing the role of the state in the most recent episode of a major strike (PO) in the tea plantations, the events leading up to it should also be considered. While the period of the old wage-structure (which provided a minimum wage of ₹232/day for tea-pluckers) ended in December 2014, the state did not strictly enforce the revision of the wages which would have called for an agreement taken in a joint-meeting of the planters and trade unions in the presence of the representatives from the state. When the workers moved to strike against the KDHPCL management, after getting to know that there was a drop in even their bonuses from the previous year besides the non-revised wages, the state again slipped into a mediator role between the protesting women workers and the management of KDHPCL. While the strike ended up declaring a victory for the women's unity (the literal meaning of Pembilai Orumai), the details of the revised deal say a different story. Although there was a revision of 30 percent in the wages, even the newly accepted minimum wage of ₹301 for the women workers turned out to be much lower than what is paid in other sectors, and the minimum quantity of leaves to be collected also was increased from 21 to 25kg. The demand for a bonus of 20 percent was met with a catch – only 8.33 per cent was declared as the fixed minimum bonus and the rest of the 11.67 percent was considered as an ex-gratia payment for just one time[34]. The state and the media declarations of the success story of the PO strike should, therefore, be taken with a pinch of salt. Again, the state was more considerate towards the management side in the equation with the fall in the auction prices of tea that led to the losses in the industry. However, "it is not clear how a 15-20 per cent decline in prices led to a 66 per cent decline in profits, that too

[34] The bonus declared for the previous year of the strike was 19 percent. In comparison to this, the deal was definitely not in favour of the workers.

when the companies' own records show a growth in sales" (Raman October 18, 2015)[35]. However, soon after the 'successful mediation of the strike in favour of the workers', the state was "considering a slew of sops to the plantation industry, including reducing plantation tax by 30%, lowering agricultural income tax to bring it at par with the central rate, and subsidised power for irrigation" (Rammohan et al. 2015, pp 33).

While the preceding sections describe the larger contexts of plantations and the specific history of the present field, along with a discussion on the role of state, the next sections illustrate the analytical framework adopted in the thesis to arrive at the research question presented at the end of the chapter.

1.12. Analytical Framework

My research question, in the broadest of terms, revolves around the topic of women's work and how women, as active agents, negotiate with the burden of it. However, while examining the concept of work, one can see that it is entwined with other elements like the larger political economy context and the norms, rules and expectations of the society. Further, work includes both paid and unpaid labour. While 'work' as such is a purely 'economics' concept, mainstream approaches have a productivist bias in understanding what constitutes work. While a lot has changed recently, it has been a prevalent tendency to equate work with only the paid work component in both mainstream economic approaches and in the general society. In addition, within paid work, there are still the larger questions of whether the wages are truly reflective of the price of labour and if the labour market operates outside of the societal biases.

The framework for the thesis is mainly grounded in feminist political economy, with concepts borrowed from intersectionality studies. Before explaining these further, I shall explain why a class-alone approach is not enough in understanding women's work, let alone one set in the context of tea plantations with a colonial heritage. Many of the Marxist writings foreground class at the expense of other social indicators, which mostly oversimplifies the case. Economic determinism is mostly combined with a top-down approach, where workers are mostly

[35] See "In Kerala, victory for 'Pombilai Orumai'", The Hindu, Dated October 18, 2015. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/state-view-in-kerala-victory-for-pombilai-orumai/article7775034.ece

portrayed to be actors without any voice or agency[36]. While it is important to place the study in the larger political economy context at various scales (international, national and local), it is also important to understand how the social relations are continuously sustained and reproduced at these scales and at what cost.

Marx's writings take us to the 'hidden abode', where he dispels the illusion of relations between commodities, right into the hidden underbelly of production, where notions of freedom and equality rarely operate in the exchange of labour power between the workers and the capitalist[37] (Marx 1992, pp 279-80). In essence, he recognises the social relations that underpin the capitalist economy and the key to the success of such a system lies in an unequal exchange where the value generated by the workers for their employer exceeds the value received for their labour power. In contributing to the labour theory of value, he places supreme importance on labour power, but does not delve deeper into how this is (re)produced. Feminists critiqued this limitation in the Marxian theory, and have shifted the focus from the production floor to inside of the households to address the issue.

While the unpaid reproductive labour of women has been crucial to the sustenance of the capitalist system, it received its due attention only in the 1970s in the academia when feminists began questioning why the 'productive' spheres were being restricted only to paid work and, thus, began the origins of what is now known as the social reproduction theory. This is different from Marxian social reproduction, in which he mostly talks about the societal reproduction of classes and focuses on the relations of production, and here, the reproduction of labour power is restricted in meaning to subsistence value rather than including a more comprehensive set of factors and relations. The core concern of the earlier works in the field was a critique of the Marxian view that value was generated only in the productive realm (See Dalla Costa and James 1972; Mies 1986, etc). The Marxist feminists in the 1970s and 1980s engaged in a production/reproduction debate (a term borrowed from Bezanston and Luxton 2006) that increasingly got caught up in the technical debates surrounding value generation that it became altogether neglected later on in active academic discussions. The discussions, however, also contributed to the formation of the patriarchal mode of production (see Hartman 1979) where patriarchy and capitalism were seen as dual systems that systematically led to the subordination

[36] The previous sections in the chapter have already given a detailed critique on the top-down approach undertaken by various studies on plantation labour.

[37] See Capital Volume 1, Chapter 6 for a detailed description.

of women in various spheres. The dual systems theory was inherently flawed to explain the nuances of reproductive labour (both paid and unpaid) and the theory left the 'mode' of patriarchy out to dry as a concept without accounting for the regional variations of it or for the intersectionality of other factors that play a role in affecting labour. Alongside, during the same period, there was also a discussion about the domestic labour which was required to replenish labour. As a category, domestic labour also fizzled out in its attempt to theorise what aids the capitalist mode of production by narrowly concentrating on technicalities (for instance, placing importance on the household tasks itself), rather than on the social relations. The category of domestic labour distanced itself from class, racial and other axes that it became inadequate to make any meaningful observations of reality.

The renewed interests in social reproduction theory started with the publication of Bhattacharya's edited volume (2017), which focuses on the reproduction of labour power itself, the sole commodity produced outside the Marxian circuits of capital. The newer iterations of the theory have mostly stayed away from the discussion on value creation and dual-systems theorisation, and instead, have focused on amalgamating the older versions into a unified theory. Katz's oft-quoted description of social reproduction as the 'fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001, pp 711) captures the essence of it. For the purpose of this thesis, borrowing from the literature, I use the term social reproduction to include both productive and reproductive labour, paid and unpaid, that is used to sustain and reproduce the labour power as well social relations on an everyday and long-term basis (Katz 2001, Bezaston and Luxton 2006, Katz 2017, Rao 2021, Rao et all 2021). To quote Katz, "Social reproduction is the material social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which the material bases and social relations of capital are maintained, invigorated, and renewed" (Katz 2017, pp 9).

Fraser (2017), basing her insights in the global North, talks about the crisis of social reproduction which has been borrowed by many feminists to understand the crisis of care during the pandemic (see Rao 2020). Fraser's proposition of a crisis is the result of increasing capitalist tendencies to make profit while not bearing the cost of the reproductive labour as well as the resources to maintain and reproduce the labour, which are important to maintain the labour force in the first place (see Fraser 2017). "The rupture between life-making and profit-making under capitalism" results in an inherent tendency of crisis within the capitalist system (Rao 2020, pp 4). However, the view from the Global South disagrees with this picture, where

informality is the norm rather than the exception, and when the cost of social reproduction is routinely by-passed and never borne by the capital[38]. With the absence of the state to step up and fill the gap, the burden falls on the most marginalised of social groups and individuals within the households to carry it forward. Even at the cost of withdrawing from the labour force or digging deep within themselves to carry the extra burden, the women are often forced to buckle to the pressure. The customs, practices and norms of the society on which social reproduction materially bases itself are reproduced and are used to deepen the inequalities along those axes, like caste, class, ethnicity, patriarchy, race, sexuality etc., that benefit the case for capital accumulation.

The framework of social reproduction compliments the literature on intersectionality[39], which places importance on the multiple social identities that interact with each other, shaping an individual's lived experience (see Crenshaw 1991). The intersectionality approach that has its origins in the black literature in the antebellum South is particularly useful in studying the case of women workers in the tea plantations in the context of South India, placing importance on their lived experiences. Workers' identities are multi-faceted and, as these get socially reproduced, mostly aimed at marginalising them, there is a simultaneous multiplication of the workers' burdens by a number of constraining factors. The 'time poverty'[40] literature which talks about the double burden of women could be, in reality, far worse, depending on the context. Women workers could be carrying multiple burdens of work with the restrictive conditions imposed by their class and other social identities. However, by placing importance on the lived experience of women through an intersectional approach, one could perhaps see that they are also actors with agency, trying to make positive changes within their limited circumstances for their own benefits, perhaps even using the same lines that are used to divide them. This is not a celebration of agency, and it does not gloss over the exploitation and alienation faced by these marginalised communities, but rather, it attempts to understand their agency within the context. In the thesis, I term this as 'negotiations' engaged by the workers.

[38] For a longer critique of Fraser's stand on the crisis of social reproduction, see Mezzadri 2019.

[39] My approach is different from certain niche strands of literature within SRT that is critical of intersectionality based on detailed technicalities (see McNally 2017). I find the exercise deeply restrictive and vain attempt to distinguish the SRT branch of literature as unique, instead of drawing rich insights from an interdisciplinary approach.

[40] See section 4.1. for a detailed discussion on this literature.

The active and passive actions of negotiations could range from visible acts of resistance portraying the agency of individuals to the simple everyday acts deployed by the same for the sake of survival, managing difficult tasks and so on. To understand social reproduction constituted by everyday acts, as it is being employed here, there is a need to understand the categories of time and space also in the micro and nuanced sense, and not in the more standardized and generalized sense, as employed by meta theories. The standardization and generalization of time and space have, in turn, been employed towards developing metrics for the valuation of labour power. While the valuation of labour power is an important aspect, an abstract homogenous valuation metric may not be very helpful in analysing gender-mediated relations and valuation of labour power. Further, this concept of value, while presenting the process from the vantage point of aggregations, has: one, a restrictive relevance only to paid work, while ignoring unpaid work, and two, it misses out on several disaggregated social and relational dimensions of the problem that are of immense value for the analysis from a gender perspective. In what follows, an alternative analysis of time and space, as seen from the framework of everyday activity, is presented.

1.13. Moorings of the Thesis

While the theoretical framework on social reproduction, with insights from the literature on intersectionality, provide an overarching structure to study the field chosen, I employ two related sub-themes to anchor the thesis. I chose to look at the field through the lenses of time and space to better understand the nuances in the field. The political economy of time and social space provide the essential layers to understand and analyse the observations from the field and help me to connect back to the framework.

1.13.1. Political Economy of Time

In the context of the thesis, I use the concept of time in two ways; one, as a method- time-use survey to understand the nature of paid and unpaid work along with other details on social reproduction[41], and two, as an overall setting in the context of the everyday. Before circling back to this in detail, a quick description on the earlier works in the area is given here. Studies

[41] I use the method of time - by employing the time-use survey (TUS - a method which is used to list out all the activities done by the respondents in a 24 hours period, along with contextual details) to map everyday patterns and rhythms as well as to understand the sites of social reproduction. Refer section 4.1. for a detailed discussion on time-use survey and literature on time poverty.

on temporalities, rhythms and routines have not been new. E. P. Thompson (1967) talks about how the invention of clocks and other time devises were necessitated by industrial capitalism to move out of the notion of time interpreted on the basis of the competition of tasks and other natural resources. He also notes the patterns of routines and rhythms in an everyday context, that certain works and rhythms fall outside the industrial time, to a pre-modern pattern- '… the rhythms of women's work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of"pre-industrial" society' (Thompson 1967, pp 79).

Writings on the everyday can also be gleaned from the works of Henri Lefebvre and James Scott. Lefebvre treats the everyday as an object itself and has written extensively on the critique of everyday life. He recognises the rhythms and routines of everyday, but places importance on the critique of consumption practices in the everyday that enables and sustains capitalism. Lefebvre's work has been critiqued by feminist studies for its non-recognition of the gender angle that plays a role in the production and reproduction of everyday life. James Scott's (1985) *Weapons of the Weak* talks about the everyday while talking about small acts of everyday resistance, which throws light on the elements of protests in the simple everyday acts of gossiping, foot-dragging, pilfering, slandering, etc (see Scott 1985)[42].

One of earliest feminist works making a notable contribution to the literature on the 'everyday' is that of Dorothy Smith's. She critiques Lefebvre's treatment of the everyday as an object that distances itself from the experiences of people. Her work (1987) places importance on the everyday as a 'problematic'. She critiques the tendencies of academic disciplines to place importance on the 'male voice' and alternatively views e/veryday as an entry point to understand the lived experiences of women. Her approach views everyday as a part of being 'embedded in a socially organized context' (Smith 1987; pp 90).

Taking inspiration from these previous studies, a recent branch of feminist literature in International Political Economy has emerged that deals exclusively with the 'everyday' as a framework. Elias and Rai (2018) wrote one of the seminal works in this field that deal with the concept of everyday to study social reproduction and violence. They suggest 'viewing social reproduction as the everyday and everyday as social reproduction' bringing the realms of

[42] See Section 5.1.2. for a more detailed discussion on Scott's everyday resistance.

production and reproduction closer. Mezzadri and Majumder (2020) work within the framework of feminist political economy of time to understand exploitation in an industrial setting (garment sweatshop) as well as the social reproduction of the workforce. The gendered experiences of the workers while trying to meet the productive and reproductive demands are explored in the paper.

In the context of the thesis, I use the everyday as a setting, to understand the nature of social reproduction and negotiations by the actors. So why does the 'everyday' matter? The everyday patterns of life look mundane and mostly repetitive, but when looked into closely, the everyday reveals the deeper layers of meanings attached to the routines of one's life. Take, for instance, one of the mundane and repetitive acts performed in a household like cooking. As feminist literature already points out, the question of 'who cooks?' is deeply political, as the burden of unpaid work mostly falls on women[43]. Even when one sets aside this question for a moment and assume that it is the woman who mainly cooks every day in the house, this routine act can reveal a lot more than it seems on the surface. The preference of what is being cooked may not entirely be on her own. The preferences of the male members/ elderly/children/sick members may affect the process entirely, sometimes forcing her to cook more than one type of food to cater to the needs and preferences of the various members even for a single meal. When the resources, either time or money, are low, she negotiates those hurdles by adjusting the methods of cooking or substituting the ingredients. What food gets cooked and put out on the table is as much political as who makes them. How she prepares the meal is another factor, as multitasking to complete different chores together or attending to childcare while preparing the meal indicates the level of work intensity experienced by the woman or how time-poor she is. While she cannot shirk off from her responsibilities of cooking, there could be additional members helping her in the meal preparation, depending on their availability. Sometimes external factors, like the day of the week or the occurrence of festivals may affect her cooking time as weekend or festive meals could end up being more elaborate, adding more steps to her cooking or extra items to be prepared. Thus, in the context of daily cooking, the simple everyday acts could unveil a multitude of characteristics when observed and analysed in detail. The 'everyday' is, thus, a useful category in observing the layers of meanings hidden in mundane acts.

[43] See the Chapter 4 for lengthier discussions on the topic, based on more data from the field.

1.13.2. Social Space

Space can be viewed as being socially-constructed. This approach, which is also the foundation of the approaches in human geography, releases space from being tied down with physical features and dimensions. Space evolves with the nature of institutions and the social interactions, and the characteristics of a space may be spread out more generally than in the place from which it may have originated. Social space has a two-way causal relationship with social relations as well.

There are different works that have come out starting from the second half of the 20th century on the concept of space. Outside the critical theory tradition, space has often been regarded as neutral and devoid of politics. This preoccupation with the space question stems mostly from the Marxist tradition, as Marx himself talked about the 'annihilation of space by time' through the expansion and intervention of capital. *The Production of Space* written by Henri Lefebvre (1974; 1991) is a seminal work in this regard. Lefebvre (1991) posits that there are spatial illusions that shrouds and complicates the image of a space itself; Soja (1989) terms them as illusions of 'transparency' and 'opaqueness', where the former projects the idea of an innocent space that is open to comprehension and interpretation, while the latter is the idea of a space that is defined and comprehended by certain primordial or essentialist, material characteristics. "Through the operation of these two "illusions" space is stripped of both its historicity and politics and the material environment is either seen as a neutral passive backdrop against which social life is played out, or, in more socially oriented spatial practices, space is seen as a reflection of society - a product of a particular social order/organisation" (Ranade 2007, pp 1519). Lefebvre also introduced the concept of the spatial triad, in which 'space', he argues, must be viewed as constituted by spatial practices, representations of space and spaces of representation, where it is simultaneously dominated by the physical, mental and social fields.

David Harvey (1990) developed Marx's argument to conceptualise space-time compression, where the distance between spaces gets reduced, through the development and innovations in global communication and transportation technologies. Doreen Massey (1994) was critical of the conceptualization, as she argued that it did not problematize the question of space adequately to include the local actors and processes that went into the making of a place. She distinguished between 'space' and 'place' as the former constituting a global, modern and masculine image which is more abstract, and the latter as indicating a specific location that is local, bounded, and restricted, characterising the same as 'feminine'. Thus, the space needs to

be separated from the place, as they are constructed and distinguished by gendered notions of the same.

In the thesis, I employ the category of social space to understand the nuances of the sites of work and social reproduction. I view space as gendered, reflecting the gendered nature of the social practices occurring within it. For instance, within the context of the household, the gendered nature of the space is produced and reproduced on an everyday basis through the actors and the tasks performed within it. The household is not the only site of social reproduction, but it is nevertheless analysed here to understand the nature of everyday as proposed by Smith. However, it is not just the experience that is embedded in the social setting that is studied, even the physical nature and materiality of the household play an important role in constructing the everyday. These spaces are gendered, just as much as the social relations, actions and exchanges that take place in them. Even outside the household, especially in the context of the plantations where a strict hierarchy exists, the spaces reflect the social relations embedded in it. Public spaces like village commons and market areas are good examples in this regard.

Such an exercise is imperative to anchor the objectives of the study in the context of these different gendered spaces to identify the patterns of reproduction of the everyday in its many gendered forms.

1.14. Research Question(s) and Objectives

With reference to the detailed discussion above on the existing literature on plantation and the analytical framework, the thesis places itself within a feminist political economy framework to understand the social reproduction of the worker households, using the twin categories of social space and time. In doing so, the thesis focuses on the following research objectives:

1. To contextualise and analyse the relations between gender, space and time in the tea plantation in the present-day.

2. To find out the nature and perceptions about women's work from the point of view of the various stakeholders.

3. To understand how the women workers negotiate with their limited resources in the different spaces of the plantation.

In operationalising these objectives, the thesis finds itself in a position to address the main research theme of the thesis: to understand the nature of everyday for the workers. The main research question emerging out of this is: *How does the everyday enable and resist against the gendered sites of production and reproduction?* The question posits everyday as a setting in itself. While there are different facets of the everyday, it also needs to be emphasised here that the thesis mostly focuses on the work aspect of it. The research question also gives way to a number of associated questions in the context of the tea plantation, which would, in turn, elucidate the main question better: How do the gendered hierarchies and structures of power operate and control the labour force within the spaces of a tea plantation? What are the different gendered aspects of paid and unpaid work that are performed in the spaces of the plantation? How are gendered spaces created within the household and outside with these everyday practices? How are the restrictive spaces of the plantations brought forward as well as created, and how do the women workers negotiate with them?

The overarching framework of the thesis helps to understand the questions raised here as well as the outlay of the thesis in pursuit of the answers to those questions. The question(s) raised here also addresses a major lacuna in the existing vast literature on the plantations as well.

1.15. Outline of the Thesis

Together, the concepts of the social space and time, when examined through the lens of the everyday, as well as the actors and social relations that constitute and embed the same, helps to explain and theorise the deeper layers of the nature of the plantations. The rest of the chapters attempt to do exactly this, at the same time, answering or meeting the objectives listed out at the onset of the thesis. The second chapter discusses the methodology followed in the study, starting with a description of the field itself, the methods used to collect data for the study, based on the characteristics of the demography of the study universe, and finally ends with my positionality and experiences as a researcher in the field, and the ethical concerns and decisions that guided the study.

The third chapter deals with different aspects of the paid work performed by the tea workers in the space of the plantation as a jobsite, including the (gendered) hierarchy of the plantation, the job description, the skills and entry of the workers into their job and so on, as well as the perception of the various stakeholders inside the same and outside about the nature and difficulty of the work performed by the women. The fourth chapter in the thesis begins with a

detailed description and review of the deployment of Time-Use Survey as a qualitative tool for data collection, using which the tasks performed by the women workers within their households is analysed against their time poverty. The chapter also deals with the availability and utility of time by the male members of the households, and ends with a discussion on the intra-household dynamics of the workers, by assessing the gendered division of household chores as well as decision-making powers. The fifth chapter begins with a reassessment of how the space of the plantation is reproduced in the modern context, especially with the intervention of the state, and reads the different narratives of the field together to understand the different types of negotiations that the workers engage within the context of the plantation, in the bounded space of the households, the different issues that arise in their everyday as a result of their work including financial burdens, post-retirement options and even using Pembilai Orumai and the social ties available to the women, as well as rumours and gossip as negotiation tools to navigate their life in the plantation. The sixth chapter concludes the thesis.

CHAPTER 2

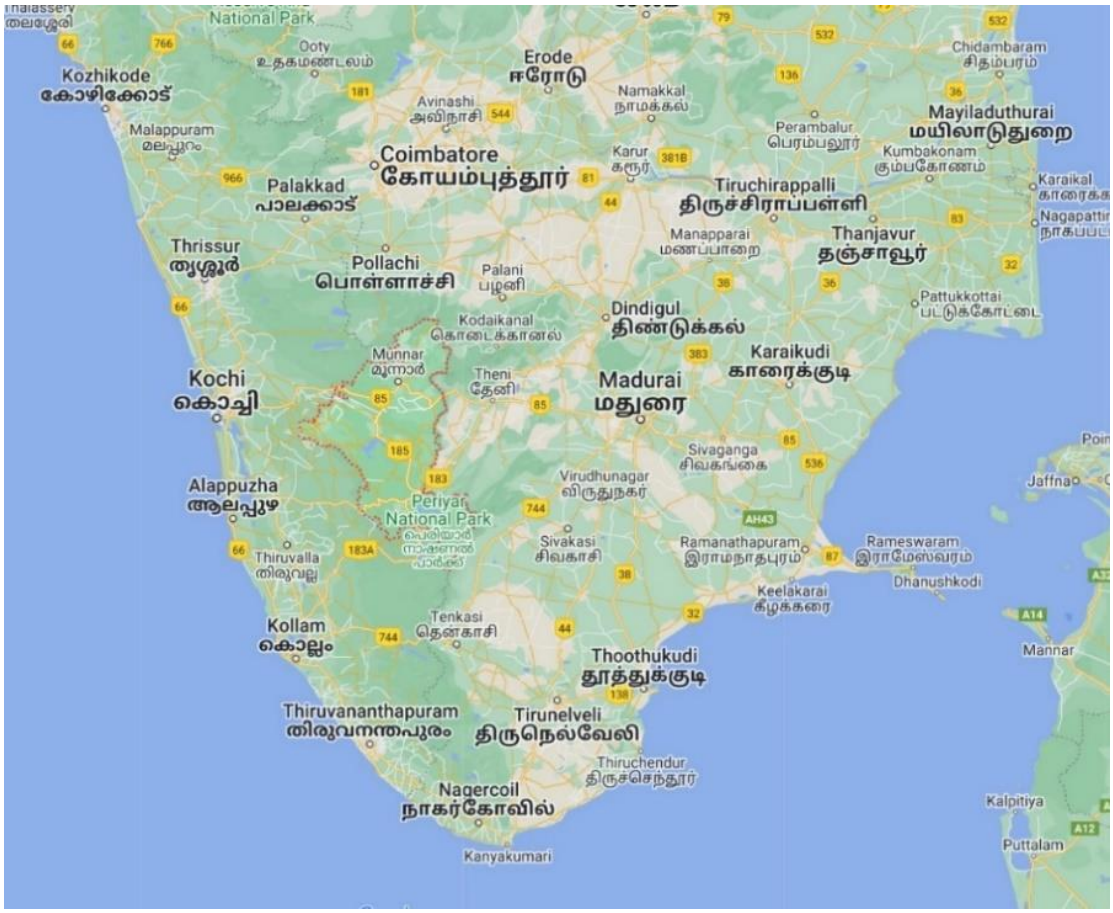
Methodology

The field site that was chosen to conduct the study is the tea plantation under KDHPCL in Munnar, Kerala. The present chapter deals with the methodology adopted in the thesis, starting with a brief introduction to the field, a discussion on the background of the workers, elaborating on the multiple methods used for studying the same, and finally, positioning myself as the researcher in the field site. The chapter also makes a list of natural disasters that occurred in the chosen field during the time of the study. The study uses mixed methods – socio-economic survey, time-use survey (TUS), focus group discussions and in-depth interviews – to answer the research question raised in the previous chapter. The sample size of 300 households was selected for the socio-economic survey, while the TUS had only about 30 respondents, about a tenth of the initial survey sample, to focus on the everyday mapping of the workers. There were six focus groups and 33 in-depth interviews with the workers, besides interviewing the trade union leaders in the area.

2.1. Munnar

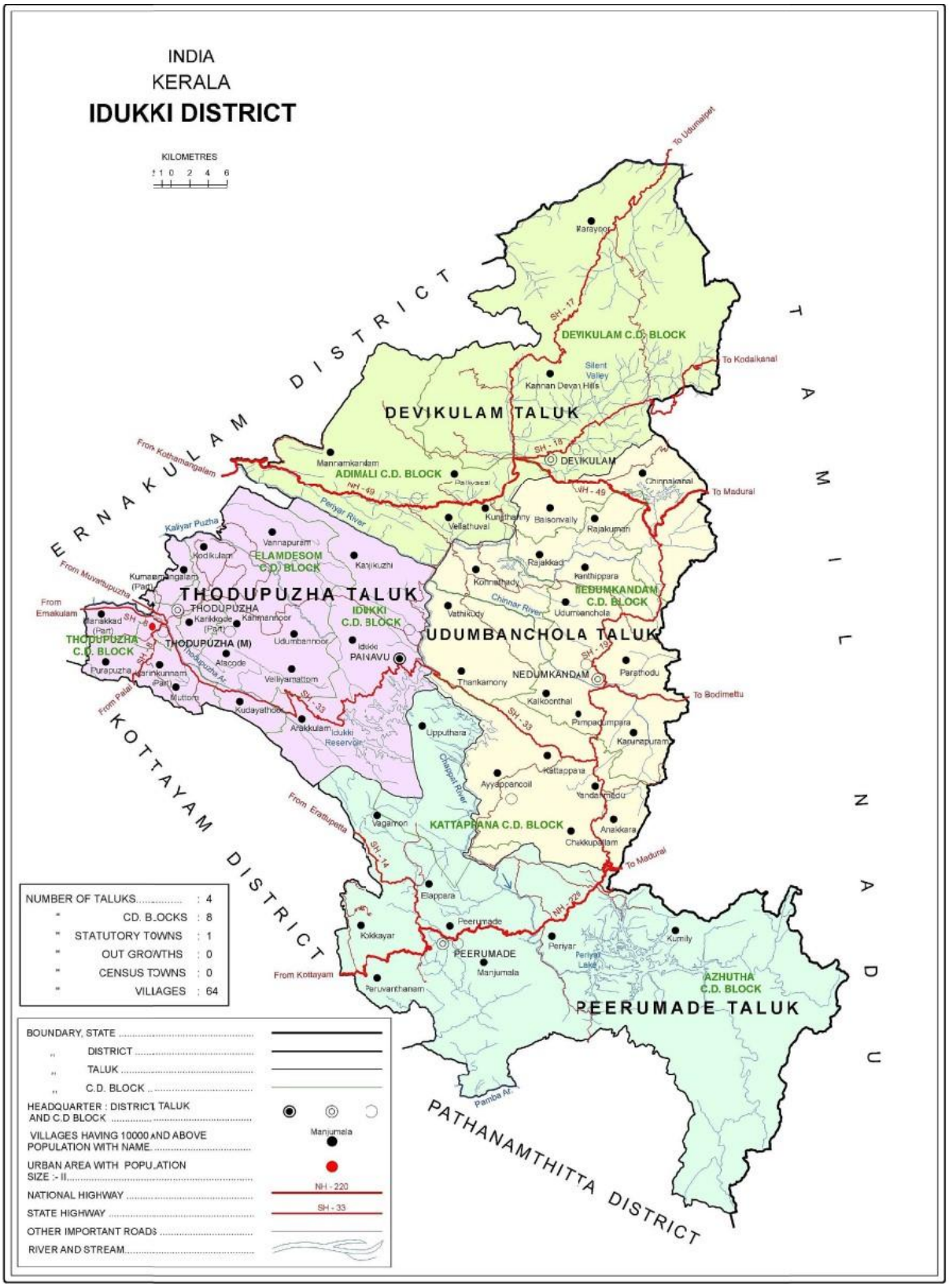
Munnar, which is referred to in the context of the study is a larger area than its actual geographical location. It is used to refer to the tea growing areas in the Devikulam Taluk in Idukki district, Kerala (on the maps presented here, see 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 to locate these respective places).

Maps 2.1. Locating Idukki and Munnar within Kerala



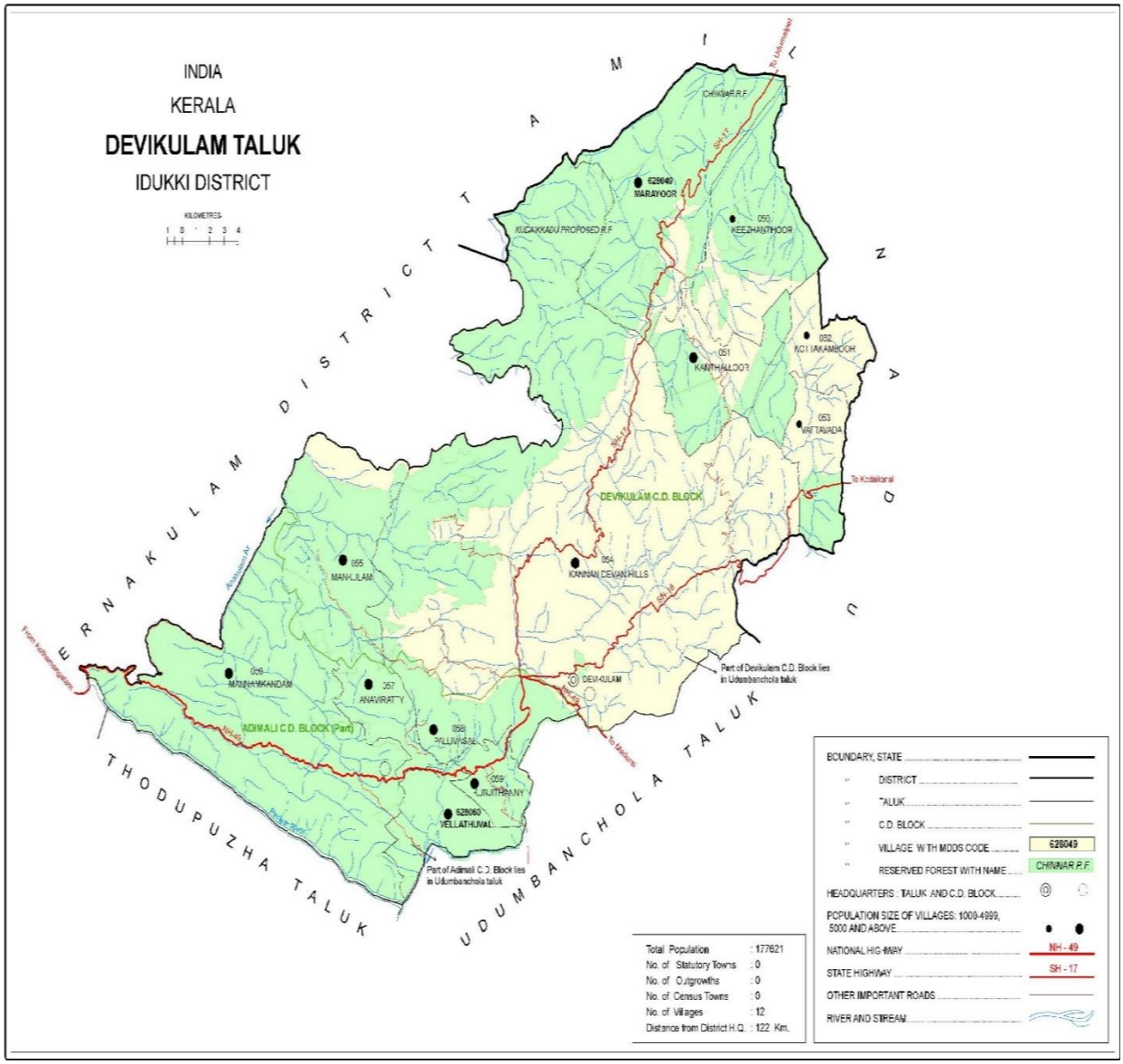
***S**ource: Idukki District Website, Govt. of Kerala* https://idukki.nic.in/en/map-of-district/

Map 2.2. Locating Devikulam Taluk within Idukki District



Source: Census Report, 2011, Idukki District – Part A, pp 2.

Map 2.3. Detailed Map of Devikulam Taluk



Source: Census Report, 2011, Idukki District – Part A, pp 126.

Discussions with the respondents often includes mentions of the place in the field called 'Munnar town'. Munnar town has been locally used to refer to the market and surrounding areas. In the strictest definition of the term 'town' according to the latest census, it is not one, and is only part of the Devikulam Taluk. The town is the centre of activities for all the workers in the various tea estates. On a Saturday evening, the town is filled with workers after their half day of work. They often access the various co-operative societies operated by the trade unions which lend money to workers on a credit basis are located in various parts of the town. They also go to the market, which is located in the heart of the town, and purchase groceries which

would last them for a week. Sundays are also busy market days. Fresh stocks of vegetables, meat, and fish make way to the Munnar market for the weekend. Most worker households interviewed could afford to spend time (and even money) to prepare non-vegetarian dishes only on Sundays.

Every corner of the street in Munnar town has an autorickshaw-stand with autorickshaws lined up to pick the customers. Sometimes the opposite sides of the streets will each have a stand, with autorickshaws parked facing each other. Although any autorickshaw should take a customer to whichever place he or she demands, there is an unwritten rule regarding the general route taken by the vehicles in each rickshaw stand. Only a resident of Munnar will know which stand will have rickshaws running in which direction. The occasional tourist meandering into one of these stands without knowing the rules is generally charged a higher fare.

Mostly, young men below the age of thirty are found driving these vehicles. It is one of the most commonly-taken up jobs by the younger men in Munnar, especially amongst the households of tea workers, as it emerged in the survey that I conducted here. As the number of such autorickshaws has increased manifold over the years, the drivers are given shifts to be at the rickshaw-stands to pick up customers. It is a common sight to see an older man act as the leader of a rickshaw-stand directing the younger drivers and monitoring their time to ensure that every driver gets an equal time-slot. For the drivers, each day's earnings depend on the slot he receives. And these earnings heavily depend on tourists, mostly the low-profile ones who visit Munnar without their private vehicles.

For most residents of Munnar, the common means of transportation is using a shared auto-rickshaw service, and if the destination is a far-off estate, a shared jeep-service. The cost of these rides mostly averages between ₹10 and ₹20, depending on the distance in a small auto-rickshaw that carry a minimum of six passengers. Although the main roads of Munnar are maintained well, the interior roads leading towards the worker households are mostly dilapidated and not easily-accessible for outsiders. This is mostly the case for estate divisions which are located away from the town centre. Only the auto-drivers who are from the respective areas would be willing to take a ride on those roads. The workers mostly walk from the main roads to their homes along these roads and engage an auto only in case of emergencies. Buses are mostly relied on for longer journeys, both within Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Both Kerala and Tamil Nadu state buses come into the town area to collect the passengers. The plantation belt is not connected via railways, even though Munnar was one of the first places in the country to

have a mono-rail, which started in 1902. The Kundala Valley Railway[44], as it was called, was mainly used for tea transportation between Munnar and Top Station, and later converted to a light rail. However, the colossal floods of 1924 washed away the tracks and destroyed most of the Munnar town, and since then, there was no track laid down in the area to revive the rail transportation. The train station of the earlier rail project functions as the regional office of the KDHPCL in Munnar today[45]. Interestingly, there are now proposals to revive a rail route in the area which was announced in 2019[46], mostly aimed at boosting the tourism industry.

The primary schools set up for the children of the estate workers teach in Tamil medium and it is free of cost. However, most of the parents in the estates were reluctant to send their kids to the school as they saw English education as the way forward. The percentage of parents with children of school-going age that sent at least one of their children to English medium schools was about 73%. The cost of sending the children to the private schools averaged to about ₹1700 per month. Most parents also sent their kids for tuition, mostly taken by someone in the neighbourhood as a part-time profession. The cost varied from ₹100 to ₹200 per kid per month for lower classes and for high school students, it went up to about ₹500 per subject per month for a student. About 57 percent of the households had at least one child studying outside Kerala, presently or in the recent past. These students were sent outside Kerala to reduce the cost of education, which is slightly less in certain places in Tamil Nadu, and that too, only when the workers had maintained some connections with the relatives there.

Every estate division has a small clinic within it. However, almost all the respondents uniformly informed me that the clinics only had a nurse most of the times and they relied on going to the Tata hospital in Munnar, which was right next to the market area in the town. The

[44] More details regarding this project can be found at the Tea Museum in Nallathunny, Munnar.

[45] Some of the photos of the old railway project and the remains that exist in Munnar town can be seen at https://www.irfca.org/gallery/Heritage/Kundala/

[46] Tourism promotion trumps other reasons while considering this new project. For more details see *Monorail may return to Munnar,* The Hindu, dated June 23, 2019; https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/return-of-the-rail-in-munnar/article28110616.ece ; *Monorail, the British-era engineering marvel, to be back in Munnar,* The New Indian Express, dated June 20, 2019; https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2019/jun/20/monorail-the-british-era-engineering-marvel-to-be-back-in-munnar-1992586.html ; *Munnar heritage train project gets a boost,* The Times of India, dated January 16, 2021; https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/munnar-heritage-train-project-gets-a-boost/articleshow/80291722.cms

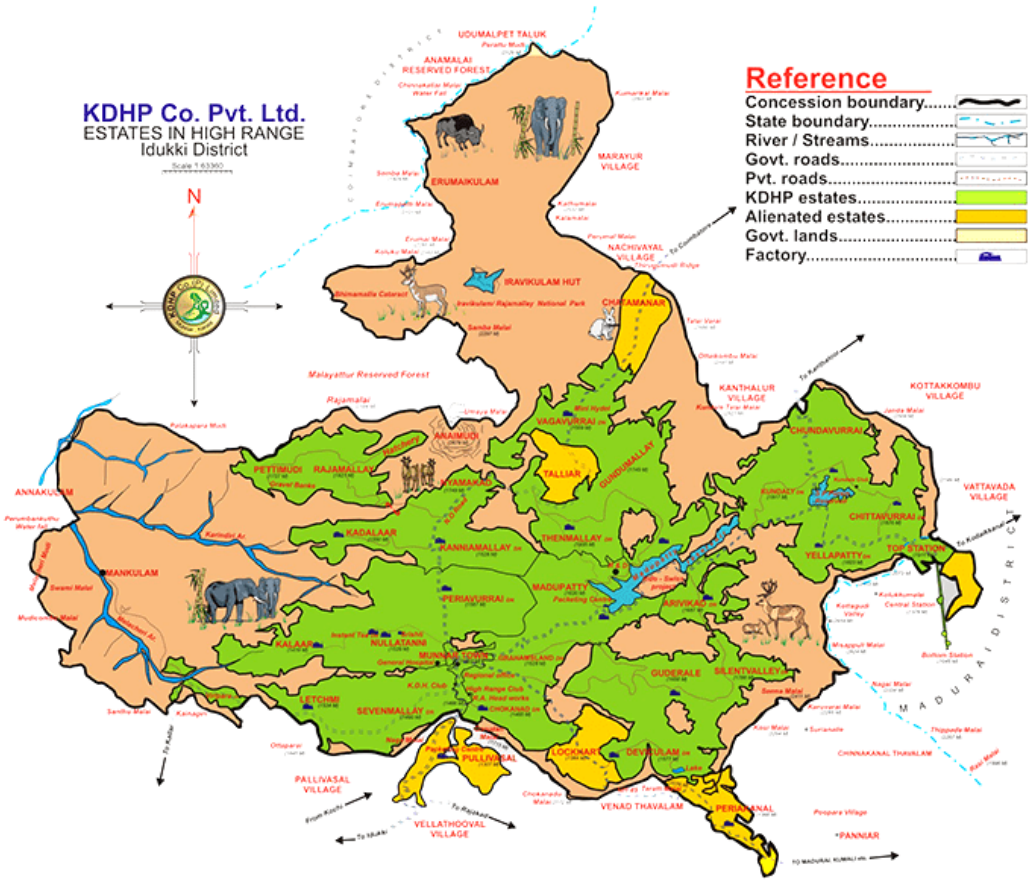
treatment is free for the workers and their families (only minor children up to the age of 18 years) in the hospital. For pregnancy-related hospital visits, most of them preferred going to the hospital in Adimali, which was roughly about 30 km from the Munnar town. Going to Adimali using the bus from their homes would take a minimum of one hour or 1.5 hours, depending on their location. For far-off estates, the timing increased significantly more. For serious illnesses or even in the case of accidents, they are sent far off to medical colleges in the nearby district of Kottayam, about 135 km away from the town centre. At the time of the study, there were three members in different households, taking treatment in the far-off hospital that required follow-up check-up as well. Taking a cab to go to a far-off place for treatment would be reimbursed only for the patient and it was an expensive affair.

2.2. Details of the Field

KDHPCL is organized under seven estates – Letchmi, Nullathanni, Nyamakkad, Gundumallay, Guderale, Chundavurrai and Madupatty. The smallest of the estates, Letchmi, is about 1612 Ha and the largest, Chundavurrai is about 3195 Ha. Each of the estates have sub-divisions under it for ease of function. For my fieldwork, two estate divisions were chosen to study. These two divisions belonging to two different estates were identical in the physical features of the area and were almost similarly placed away from the Munnar town centre. The distance from Munnar town was an important factor in determining the ease of access for the residents in a hilly terrain like the Kannan Devan Hills. From the pilot survey carried out in three other estate divisions as well, I could see that the social composition was almost the same with minor differences, and that the job description and other related features, including the wages and other benefits, were identical in every estate division. However, the opportunities for securing a secondary job or accessing healthcare, educational facilities and other amenities are slightly better for the estates closer to the town centre. The selected estates and the results of the survey, therefore, shall indicate a slight bias towards showing the best-case-scenario for the workers available within the Munnar region as they are comfortably placed away from the town centre, when compared to the rest of the estate divisions. And in that sense, one can read into the results keeping this slight bias in mind and also understanding the nature of the extent of issues faced by the rest of the workers if these indicated better options available for the workers. As mentioned later in section 2.6., since the management was reluctant to grant permission to conduct the study, my selection of the two estate divisions was also based on the ease of

accessibility to conduct the study among the households, after the workers returned home from their jobs.

Map 2.4 Various Tea Estate Divisions Belonging to KDHPCL



Source: KDHCL website. See https://kdhptea.com/plantations-map/

2.3. Background of the Workers

There are about 12,000 workers employed by KDHPCL in various operations. As mentioned earlier, the discussions of the present section are based on the results of the socio-economic survey conducted in 300 worker-households in two divisions of the KDHPCL estates. The households belonged to various marginalised social groups - 44% of them belonged to the Scheduled Castes (SC), 37% to the Other Backward Classes (OBC), 19% of them belonged to Other Eligible Communities (OEC). OEC mostly comprised of Christians who converted from the Scheduled Castes. The variations in these figures between the estate divisions surveyed were marginal. About 78 percent of all the respondents of the survey were women.

About 70 percent of the workers employed in the estates were women and they were all tea pluckers. Men's jobs in the estates mostly included that of maintenance works in the estates, being employed as drivers for various estates and being employed in the factory floor. The work in the mechanised factories of the estates exclusively fell on men. As the men were employed only for half a day as maintenance workers, a small proportion of them managed to find secondary jobs in the Munnar town after their first job. It was difficult to ascertain this number as the nature of these jobs were not regular in many cases and men, in general, went to Munnar town in the evenings as part of their socialisation routine, so it was difficult to get an accurate figure.

Table 2.1. Number of Workers Employed in the Tea Plantations

Estate Workers	Estate Division A	Estate Division B
Men	59	64
Women	145	148
Total	204	212

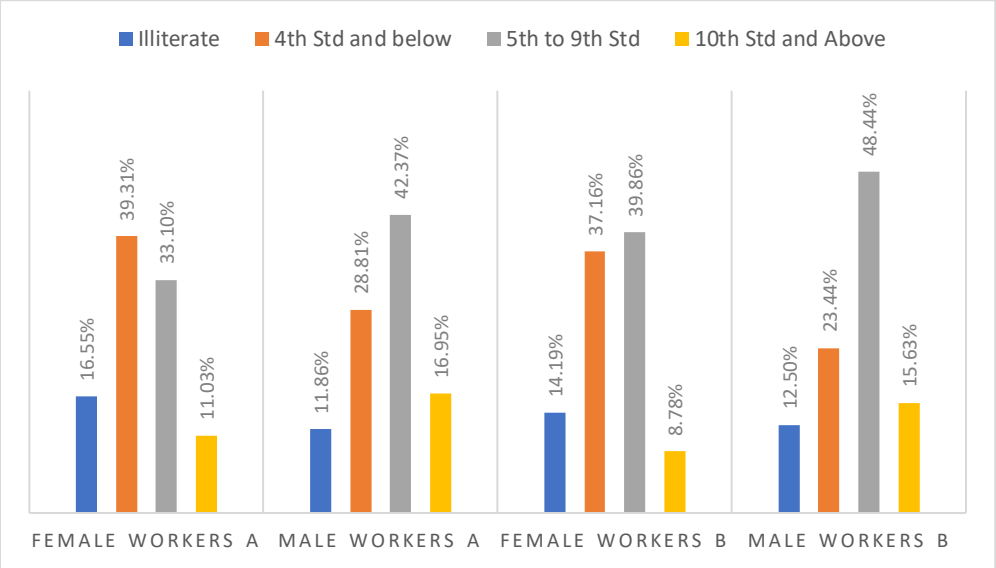
Source: Field Survey, 2017- 2019.

Apart from being employed in the estates, the other major employment opportunities for men within Munnar included being employed as temporary workers in various jobs including construction work (which included being employed as electricians and plumbers also), being autorickshaw/taxi drivers in Munnar with either owned or borrowed vehicle etc. About 3 percent of the adult men who were not studying or retired were reported to unemployed. There could be a downward bias in the numbers reported by the respondents. It was difficult to get a correct estimate of all the temporary jobs that the respondents undertook. Only with supplementing questions, some of the part-time and home-based jobs were reported. This was especially true for women who did not report their home-based jobs, like sewing, owning a small shop within the household, taking tuitions for neighbourhood kids etc, when I first asked about their job status. The bias was even more strongly observed when women estate workers were the primary respondents and they omitted side-jobs undertaken by other women in the households. In contrast, there was a slight tendency to over-report the job-status of the men by women and only very few admitted that they were unemployed. During the survey, in many

cases the women reported men in the household being busy and outside the household, mostly in Munnar, and were reluctant divulge the information regarding the job until specifically asked. About 13 percent of the adult women were reported to be homemakers, about 7 percent domestic workers, about 5 percent in temporary jobs within Munnar and nearby areas as sales girls.

The educational qualifications of the workers were low. About 15 percent of women workers were reported to be illiterate. Together with those who completed only primary level education, this figure exceeds 50 percent in both the divisions. The corresponding figure for male workers is about 38 percent for male workers. Along with the low educational qualification, only about 37.5 percent of women workers knew how to talk in Malayalam. Although the level of proficiencies varied[47], the corresponding number for male workers were higher, about 82 percent. Knowing Malayalam has immense advantage in accessing the government schemes and other benefits. The workers are marginalised within the state due to the differences in language they speak.

Table 2.2. Level of Education of the Workers



Source: Field Survey, 2017- 2019.

[47] Holding a basic conversation in Malayalam is the basic minimum that I have considered for arriving at this figure. Most of the workers did not know how to read in Malayalam.

Except for three households in estate division A, every household had at least one permanent worker employed in KDHPCL. The three households had retired workers who were staying back in those houses[48]. About 94 percent of the women workers surveyed during the fieldwork were permanent workers and lived in the 'line' houses that were allotted to them. Some of the respondents have been living in the same houses for at least three generations. Their residences were referred to as 'line houses' locally as they were literally extremely small houses built in a row. A line normally consists of six to eight houses, each sharing a wall with another house, or on both the sides. The tradition started with the colonial times to house the workers next to the tea bushes within the estates. Some of the workers were also employed as personal staff in the Bungalows of the estate managers also in the earlier times. This model of housing the workers within the estates which was convenient for the maintenance of the colonial plantations is not very different from the ones observed around the world. In the post-independence period, the passing of Plantation Labour Act in 1951 ensure the continuation of this model. The Plantation Labour Act mandates the provision of housing facilities within the plantations.

The conditions of these houses were extremely cramped for a family of five, which sometimes went up to eight members also in one case. The roofs were made of asbestos sheets. It was a common site to see the roofs which were broken in some parts due to low maintenance. As a temporary fix, tin sheets or even tarpaulin were used to cover the broken parts. The repair works on the houses which ought to have been done more routinely under the provisions of the PLA were mostly neglected by the company. The workers claimed that these were more regular even during the direct ownership of Tatas. At present, the works were undertaken by the workers themselves and depending on their financial status, the maintenance works were attended to.

The area of the line-houses roughly averaged to about 150 square feet[49]. Slight differences in the area comes from the slight variations in the design of the house, and also whether the toilets were attached to the house or not, in which case the area went up. In older constructions, the toilets were constructed outside the house in a line, next to each other in another row.

Household income has always been a category that is considered difficult to assess in household surveys due to biases in reporting. There were two main issues that I faced while taking the larger socioeconomic survey. One was that most workers could only remember the

[48] For a more detailed discussion about the retired workers, see section 53.2.b.

[49] Based on observations in the field, and not based on measuring the entire length with a measuring tape.

net amount after deductions as their monthly income. The deductions included that of provident fund, insurance, pension fund etc along with that of the charges that came as part of PLA provisions like electricity charges, provision of tea leaves and any other foodgrain at discounted rate, livestock charges (if applicable) etc. The second issue was the tendency of the women workers to under-report their income in the presence of other men in the household, especially for the peak seasons. While this was a tendency commonly seen in the younger workers more, many of the older women workers did not even know the details of their income and mostly asked other members, in many cases men in the households, to take over answering that part of the interview. In any case, the average reported (net) income was roughly about ₹7,000 per month (rounded-off). The peak season provided more income to the households, to the tune of even up to ₹12,000[50], but the peak months lasts for only about 4 months in a year. The household income mostly depended on the number of working members and therefore, I have clubbed it based on the employment status of the members. The households with 3 working members had an average income of roughly about ₹ 17,000 per month. The figure dropped to about ₹11,500 in the case of two working members.

2.4. Methods Followed and Selection of Respondents

The data for the study was collected using mixed methods, over a period of 2 years from November 2017 to December 2019. While the discipline of Economics largely works with quantitative data and analysis, feminist methodologies are necessary to understand the universe of the study, namely, the women workers of Munnar. And while it is necessary to describe and analyse the micro-level intra-household, inter-personal dynamics to better understand the working of a heteronormative patriarchal structure, it is equally pertinent to locate the same in the larger hierarchy and structure in the space of a plantation.

One of the most defining aspects of feminist methodology that needs to be mentioned here is Sandra Harding's 'standpoint epistemology'. She argues that social reality is subjectively constituted by lived experiences and perceptions of different sections of the population and that there was no truly 'objective' narration of truth possible here. However, this does not mean that one cannot strive to get to an interpretation of generalized truths on all counts, or a 'stronger objectivity', which can emerge only from the lived experiences of the most marginalized

[50] Self-reported by respondents. The average figure reported was lower (by nearly ₹1000) for older workers who could not manage to harvest as much quantity of leaves as the younger workers.

sections of the population, who, in most cases, would be at an intersection of multiple margins- including the social locations of gender, social class, race, ethnicity and caste.

The multiple methods used to look into the same research problem served the additional purpose of being of use to triangulate the data as well. However, while in certain cases the methods complimented each other, in other instances the differences in the lived experiences and perspectives showed contradictory outcomes as well. The four methods followed in the field – socio-economic survey, time-use survey, focussed group discussion and in-depth interviews – and the selection of the participants are detailed below.

2.4.1. Socio-economic Survey

The first part of my fieldwork was to conduct a larger socio-economic survey of the households to get a broad idea of the field. The earlier pilot survey conducted provided the background information that helped me choose the sample. As mentioned earlier, the social composition of the households did not vary much across the estates and the workers were mostly employed formally by the company and resided within the estates. Since the job description and other details regarding the paid work were almost the same in every estate, I could not find any significant variation along these lines while conducting the earlier pilot study. The worker households were in were in small clusters of 6 to 8 houses along the tea hills and I chose to focus on interviewing the respondents within each of these clusters. The sample size covered was representative of about 4 percent of the total clusters in the entire plantations[51]. About 150 households were covered in each of the two estate divisions in the process, while covering about 49 clusters.

These houses were placed very close to each other within a line (as the cluster is referred to, locally) and mostly shared at least a wall. There was no resistance to participate in the survey on the part of the occupants of the households as they were curious to know the reason as to why I was talking to members in the adjacent households. The only exceptions, therefore, in which I missed households in a line were when they were unoccupied. By following this selection process, I came across a divergent set of participants, both present and retired women tea workers

[51] This is an approximate figure, calculated statistically based on the number of workers in the plantations 12,000 and the average number of workers of about 1.4 workers per household.

My training in the discipline of Economics prompted me to take the conventional route in the beginning and I stuck to a structured questionnaire while undertaking the survey. Even while the questionnaire was flexible enough to accommodate qualitative responses with a few open-ended questions, during the fieldwork, I realised that there were several issues associated with such an approach. While it gave me a very broad picture of the field, it also restricted me to a given set of questions, instead of having longer conversations regarding certain issues raised by them as I had to prioritise on finishing the questionnaire. It was not an easy task to complete a questionnaire given the limited amount of time that I had with the workers. I was mostly focusing on the women workers as respondents to get their perspective regarding various issues. As I could only interview them after their working hours, that mostly gave me time with them after 5:30 PM on weekdays when the women came back from their jobs. They were mostly busy with their household chores during that time and sometimes ended up talking while performing some of these activities too. They were keen on getting back to their work and there were many instances where I had to cut short my interviews. Even on the weekends, the household chores and other domestic responsibilities came to the forefront. Additionally, when the men were around the house, the women mostly were not willing to talk about certain aspects listed in the questionnaire like income and other details. They sometimes even asked the men to take over answering the questions, for that part of the questionnaire, mostly citing the reason, that they were better equipped to answer the questions than they themselves were, as the men handled the decisions related to financial matters.

2.4.2. Time-use Survey

After conducting the first larger sample based socio-economic survey, I conducted a time-use survey with a small group of 30 women[52], to understand how time gets allocated for various activities in a day. The TUS employs mostly two methods for collecting data – time-diaries and questionnaire/recollection method[53]. The field that I worked with threw up unique

[52] The number was deliberately kept low to allow in-depth qualitative interviews. The rest of the section also narrates the challenges that the field threw up in terms of 'availability' of respondents for this kind of survey.

[53] While time-diaries were filled up the participants themselves keeping a tab of the activities of the day, the second method required the participants to answer the questions posed by the researcher, based on their recollection of the day's activities. Recollection of data posed its own challenges in providing elaborate details of activities or omission of activities.

challenges for collecting the time-use data, and the methods were altered to rise up to the challenge. First of all, as many workers in the tea-estates had low educational levels[54], it was impossible to employ time-diaries for collecting data. On the other hand, collecting the data through recollection method by asking questions out of a structured questionnaire regarding the activities of the past day seemed equally difficult. While the method of recollection itself has issues regarding accuracy, it further demands a large quantity of time from the participants themselves in answering all the activities they performed in the past day. My participants could barely afford to provide me with 30 minutes at a stretch, for answering questions, as they were always under pressure to attend to household chores, even after their paid work time. As I often talked to my participants while they were cooking or washing clothes or performing any other household chores, I truly understood what they considered as 'free time'. Multiple visits to the same household seemed like a possible solution to collect data about a single day. However, it would not have provided the desired results as a detailed recollection of the actions for a particular day was not entirely possible with a larger time-gap. The time pressure endured by the participants to keep up with their daily work schedule observed during the pilot TUS survey necessitated some improvisations to the method.

In making changes to the initial method, my first challenge was to reduce the time taken for collecting data using questionnaires. As a solution, I used a combination of both work diary and recollection methods to reduce the overall time spent by the workers in participating in my study. However, as they themselves could not fill up the diaries in most cases, I enlisted the help of another member from the respective households to fill up the details for them while they were engaged in various activities. These additional members were all exclusively younger women, mostly their daughters or daughters-in-law, who knew the working schedules and chores of the workers as they themselves commonly shared the same working space in the household with the participants. The work diary filled by the second member in the household provided details of the various activities of the workers, along with additional information regarding the nature of each activity – being paid work or not, location of the activity and whether the activity was done alone or with the help of any other person. After the filled time-diaries were filled and collected, I visited each of the households to talk to the workers themselves to get a better picture of the activities described in the diaries by the secondary member. Since the activities were already listed out with all the essential details, the subsequent

[54] As already mentioned in section 2.3. in the results of the socio-economic survey to discuss the background of the workers.

visit(s) consumed less time than the original recollection method. Following this method, time-use data of 30 women workers was collected for a typical weekday and weekend, both in the peak and off-seasons of leaf harvest[55].

2.4.3. Focus Group Discussions

As I used to wait for women workers to come home, for both my surveys, I came across other members in the households who were relatively free and available. One significant category of such participants was the retired workers. They were mostly engaged in lighter household chores and care activities, while the women workers were at the jobsite, but were available to talk more with me without time constraints. In the early evenings or mid-mornings, I engaged in conversations with them, mostly in a group. I had not planned for these group conversations before reaching Munnar for fieldwork, however, the obstacles and delays experienced in data collection made me improvise the initial plan.

The retired workers[56], all women and neighbours, mostly sat in groups to catch up with each other. I started as a non-participant observer of these groups while being in the neighbourhood and waiting for the workers to return to complete the surveys. Later, I approached them with a semi-structured questionnaire to elicit their views on various topics. While I initiated discussions, I did not force them to stick to a topic and the conversations took their own turn and even shifted to various topics, including gossips about the neighbours, managers and others in Munnar town. For the most part, I was simply an observer in the background while the conversations flowed, rather than playing the role of a moderator.

The results of the group discussions helped me identify three key informants who were separately interviewed at length to understand the changes in Munnar from their perspectives and to know more about their lived experiences. This group exercise also prompted me to think of other groups as well for discussions. There were six groups that were engaged with for carrying out the study. Besides the three groups of retired women workers, I conducted a discussion with a group of men to understand their perspectives, as well as with two sets of women workers on a weekend. Regarding the selection of the members for the groups that

[55] For a discussion on peak and off-seasons of leaf harvesting, refer section 3.3.

[56] These participants were members of the households that were considered for the larger socio-economic survey.

were formed for the discussions, they were all organic and not forced upon. These were the same groups that used to meet regularly for conversations once a day or less occasionally (only in the case of women workers). There was a group of 6 retired women workers in estate division B, and two groups of 4 and 3 in estate A. All of them were in their sixties and seventies. With the men's group, aged 48 to 66, they were more diverse – some of them were still working, while the others were retired. This group used to meet regularly in the evenings and frequently go to Munnar town. The other two women worker's groups met less frequently. The first group of women workers in estate A were numbered around 5 people, between the age-group 33 to 45 years old, and were all part of the same Kudumbashree unit and met regularly once in a month. The second group of women workers, of 8 in estate B, were friends and family members who used to meet once a month. Five out of eight members were also part of the same Kudumbashree unit. Their ages ranged from 28 to 55 years.

2.4.4. In-depth Interviews

The socio-economic survey could only give me a very peripheral view of the everyday lives of the women workers. To get a better understanding of their lived experiences and their own-take on various external issues, I conducted further in-depth interviews with the participants. I chose to do these qualitative interviews with the 30 participants of the TUS and three key-informants from the retired workers groups. By the time I was conducting these interviews, the participants became familiar with me as a result of my repeated visits, and the nature of these interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire evolved into more of informal conversations. While the time constraints were still holding them back from longer conversations, I could only complete the interviews with repeated visits. I avoided the peak season as much as possible for conducting these interviews.

While all the 33 interviews were rich with insights from the participants' lives, about 12 of them, including the interviews of the three retired workers, were longer. I had not deliberately planned to have these interviews to be longer, but it happened as a result of the longer conversations I could afford to have with the participants. The life histories of these participants were discussed along with their personal ambitions for the future as well as for their next generation(s).

2.5. Interviews with the Trade Union Leaders

I interviewed the leaders of five different registered trade unions in Munnar. Besides interviewing the Pembilai Orumai union leaders, I also interviewed representatives from the three biggest trade unions in the area – AITUC, INTUC and CITU, as well as BMS, which has a comparatively low number of members. Longer and repeated interviews were conducted with the leaders of Pembilai Orumai (PO). By the time of the fieldwork, the PO trade union had split into two and I interviewed both the faction leaders. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire and were primarily aimed to understand the views of the trade union representatives towards women's work and the PO movement, among other things. Apart from the two leaders of the PO trade union, the rest of the representatives that I interviewed were all men.

2.6. Management's Attitude with Regard to the Study

I had contacted the management of the KDHPCL, on two occasions in 2018 to conduct the interviews and getting to know their side of the story. However, I had not received any response from their side. While meeting with an executive with the senior management regarding this, his response was that the company's board members decided on such issues and that it would take time to get a response. Not only did the management not agree for an interview, I could also feel that they were extremely uncooperative with regard to conducting any studies with any connection to PO in particular, undertaken in Munnar. While talking to workers in their jobsite, the supervisor told me that I was not allowed to do that and asked me to leave. This was in stark contrast to allowing the tourists to take photos and videos along with the workers among the tea bushes in the estates. On another occasion, while I was talking to the members of the household to fill in the details of the survey in the morning hours when the workers were not present, a field officer that passed by the area noticed my presence and asked about my details, including my phone number. After making a few phone calls, I was asked to report to his senior officer in the estate office nearby. When I reached the office, the senior manager made no introductions and asked me to handover the questionnaire. While reading the semi-structured questionnaire I had prepared (which had questions regarding PO), he asked me the details of the study I planned to undertake as well as my credentials. After that, he took a photograph of the questionnaire using his camera in the phone before returning it to me and asked me to take the permission of the management to conduct interviews with anyone in the

estates. I could not engage in an interview[57] with him as he said he was busy and asked me to leave immediately. When I came out of the building, the field officer 'insisted' that I take an autorickshaw back. He hailed an autorickshaw from the nearby stand and gave instructions to the driver, before I entered it. As I reached the location of the line houses where I was conducting the interviews earlier, the autorickshaw-driver did not stop despite asking him repeatedly. The driver told me that he was specifically asked to drop me back in Munnar Town and not anywhere near the line houses. While I got down safely in Munnar town, a bit shaken from the events that happened within a span of just half an hour, I also became quite aware of the extent of paranoia that the management had towards studies undertaken in the area and the interaction of outsiders with the workers in the aftermath of the PO movement.

2.7. Positioning Myself in the Field

I had no previous contacts in the field when I first arrived in Munnar in November 2017. My friend Deepa who had just joined as a faculty in the Government Arts and Science College, Munnar, was the only person I knew in Munnar itself and I stayed with her for the first month before moving out on my own. Although she did not know the area at all, she was of huge help introducing me to other faculty members from the college, some of whom were natives of Munnar. The then-principal of the college, Prof Nagarajan, and a few teachers from the same college introduced me to two trade union leaders in the area as well as a few students from the tea workers' households. These were my initial contacts in the field and they helped me with my pilot study. The people were also warm and welcoming and that helped me establish contacts on my own. After the first few visits, I became comfortable with the field and started undertaking the household surveys alone in newer divisions as well.

During my initial visits to the field, I went to the workers' houses and tried to explain the nature of my study before obtaining their verbal consent for participation. The oft-repeated response from the participants came in the form of condensing my lengthy introduction of the study to a single word they knew very well, "project". The term "project" was the local reference to conducting an academic study, not undertaken by the state for official purposes. As I moved from one house to another, I realised that the term was familiar with almost everyone, across

[57] I tried to ask his views on the change in the ownership and exit of the Tatas to which he tried to answer in one short sentence saying that the company takes pride in treating the workers as owners.

estate divisions, including the older people who knew only Tamil. Sadly, this only meant that the estate workers were subjected to many such "projects" in the past.

When I enquired about the previous studies conducted in the same geographical areas, I found out that most of them were done by undergraduate students in the local state-run college. As part of their course curriculum, undergraduate students were required to team up into small groups mostly consisting of five or six students and complete a short report involving a field visit[58]. A large proportion of the students also come from the worker households in the plantations. Most of these student groups, year after year, ended up conducting small-scale surveys in the neighbourhood line-houses trying to make short reports on various aspects of their lives. The surveys conducted by these student groups far outnumbered any other studies conducted in the area by journalists or any other academicians.

On the one hand, the estate-workers in the field were all too familiar with surveys and were mostly not hesitant to participate. And on the other hand, they also had a pre-conceived notion of the pattern of questions to be asked and even the answers 'expected' of them. The most common example around the theme of expectation from the participants was with regard to their income details. A single question regarding the income is mostly expected, but not additional details regarding the variations in seasons. There are seasonal variations in the amount of income received from harvested tea leaves as the quantity collected is much higher during the peak seasons. Most participants had an answer to the income from the estate job, mostly a fixed figure. When further details regarding the quantity of leaves, on an average, plucked during the peak and off seasons, many participants refused to divulge the information. Some of them had even questioned the requirement of these details for a 'project' before answering them. One of the older participants, when asked further details regarding her income across various seasons, directly told me *"Project thaane? Ithupothum."* (*Isn't it for a project? This would be enough.).* Her comment pretty much summed up the general association of a 'project' with the non-seriousness on the part of the local college students with their collection of data using questionnaires.

[58] When enquiring about the nature of these projects to two of the teachers in the Economics Department, Government College Munnar, I was told that these were unpublished reports that the students were required to undertake for completing their degree. The mandatory nature of these assignments interfered with the quality of the studies that were undertaken.

One of the main challenges I faced in the beginning was to establish that my study was different from that of a college-level 'project', besides working on building a rapport with the respondents. During the introduction to the larger survey, I mentioned that I had come from Hyderabad to do undertake the study in Munnar. While that had established that I was more serious about doing the survey, it also worked up quite a bit of curiosity among the respondents as to why I was interested in their lives! Some of the women, both younger and older generations, even asked me whether I was scared to travel alone as they had not seen too many women travelling alone to unknown areas. Those questions prompted conversations regarding their perspectives on women's travel.

As a non-native of Munnar, I was definitely an outsider to the respondents. My outsider status definitely had its issues doing the fieldwork. As a non-native speaker of Tamil with a heavy Malayalam accent, it was truly not working in favour of establishing a connection with the workers. However, being a woman and alone in my visits initially stirred up their curiosity, and these factors eventually made the women workers see me as less of a threat and they were open to conversations. The increased visits certainly made the respondents more comfortable in opening up to me. Being an outsider also had an advantage as many of my respondents thought I knew nothing about the history of the area and other details of the company and even the strike, and they shared their perspectives on all of these events and histories, even without being asked. Multiple sources on the same events and various perspectives of them were ideal for my research. During the in-depth interviews, the respondents also shared details regarding the plantation grapevine, neighbourly feuds and gossips, and other details regarding their everyday lives as they also found it easier to share with an outsider like myself.

The conversations were two-way and the respondents also asked about my details when they became comfortable with me. Initially, the older women folk in the estates were curious to know about my marital status and other details regarding my roots in Kerala, and when they got comfortable with me later, even advised me to get married! The younger generation of women asked more questions regarding Hyderabad city and the job prospects after my studies. In the later visits, the respondents were asking about what I did in the period I had not visited them and the like. The conversations turned more friendly and more like catching up after a while. On the flipside, there were a few questions whether my study would be helpful in improving their conditions and if they would receive any benefit later on. Although I had to disappoint them with my answers, I tried to help them in whatever little ways I could. I also

provided useful information, like where to apply for health insurance provided by the government etc. to the respondents. Many times, I read or translated the Malayalam messages they had received on the phones regarding the availability of commodities in the nearest PDS shop. A few times, I helped the women to operate the ATM in the town as well.

2.8. On Recording

As I had mentioned earlier, the residents of the estate line houses were all too familiar with the process of taking photographs of the tea hills with the workers in it by the visiting tourists. These photographing occurred only when they were working nearer to the main roads that were leading to the tourist destinations, and not in their interior jobsites. A lot of tourists get excited to see the women workers harvesting leaves and even try to do it themselves. It was very common for the tourists to take videos and photos of the workers "performing the act of tea plucking", and mostly insert themselves into the frame as well. Sometimes the workers were asked questions about the details of leaf plucking on camera. The whole process reduced the workers to being props in the gaze of the tourists in an exotic locale. While some of them enjoyed this experience, they all considered tourists as outsiders who did not take a serious interest in their real lives. I deliberately chose to stay away from taking photos and videos of my respondents to reduce the space between the researcher and the 'subjects'. However, I took photos of the general area and a few line houses on the side of the road, from afar.

Regarding the recorders in the field, I started recording in the beginning with their consent. However, I noticed that the conversations in the in-depth interviews flowed freely without them. Given the increase in surveillance in the aftermath of the strike, a few of the workers were reluctant to talk with the recorders on. I then abandoned the recorder and used a small-sized note-book to take down quotes and quick notes during the interviews and about the observations that I made. I made larger field notes regularly to not leave out the details of the interviews at the end of each day. The respondents were more comfortable with me writing in the notebook than recording them.

2.9. Ethical Concerns

While conducting the fieldwork and afterwards, I had adhered to the strictest ethical standards expected of me. As I approached every respondent, while explaining the nature of my study, I also informed them that they were not compelled to participate in it. Informed consent is an ambiguous and difficult concept to carry out in a field like this one. Although I had explained

the objectives of my thesis and the purpose of carrying out the survey(s), many of them were not interested in listening to the finer details regarding the study. I had to explain all this in shorter sentences before losing my audience. However, they were times when they were curious to know more about the study as well. With regard to TUS, many of them were curious to know why I needed to know about their routine and work details as they had never heard of such surveys before. I had to give them more detailed explanations regarding the study objectives. However, after hearing a bit about the imbalances of carrying out the work within the households based on sex, the younger respondents and the assistants to the other respondents who were also younger in age, were more enthusiastic to participate in the survey.

Since the education levels of the participants were low, I obtained verbal consent from every respondent before proceeding to involve them in the study instead of asking them to sign on papers which they were extremely suspicious and uncomfortable with. As part of the TUS, I also took the verbal consent of the second person helping out with the data collection. As mentioned earlier, I did not get the permission to conduct interviews from the management. However, I talked to the trade union leaders[59] (of all the trade unions) who assured me that I did not require the permission of the company to talk to the workers or conduct a study while done within the premises of the worker households.

I have also changed the names of all the participants used in the thesis to mask their identity. I also removed any trace of evidence in the thesis that would lead to their identification. I, therefore, even removed the names of the two estate divisions to maintain their anonymity.

2.10. A Note on Natural Disasters in the Field

In August 2018, the rains battered Munnar pretty badly. By the beginning of August, I had to suspend my fieldwork and leave as it began increasingly difficult to even commute to the closest of areas. The following week was even more disastrous in Munnar. The increase in dam water levels led to the opening of shutters of the various dams in Idukki, including Mullapperiar. The Muthirappuzha river which flows through the town area flooded and submerged the lower parts of Munnar. The continuous rainfalls from the month of June created many landfalls, both big and small, around Munnar. Devikulam Taluk alone witnessed around

[59] The trade union was a layer higher up in the plantation hierarchy, placed in between the workers and the management.

12 landslides in those months and in August alone, it resulted in 10 fatalities and as many as 131 houses were fully damaged while 763 suffered partial damages[60]. One of the line houses with five members were wiped off with only one member who survived. There were many smaller landslides with no casualties that were not even reported. The government estimates available for the district of Idukki identify 143 landslides[61] between June to August 2018 in the district with 54 fatalities[62] in the district in the month of August alone.

By mid-August, rains isolated Munnar when the connecting roads were blocked and a bridge collapsed. Power went off in most parts of the high ranges and Munnar, along with the destruction of many cell towers, so much so that no one I knew in Munnar could be contacted. The hostel building where I used to stay in the Government College, Munnar was completely wiped away in a massive landslide[63]. There were about 52 relief camps in Devikulam Taluk alone[64].

In the beginning of September, when I returned to Munnar, it was a ghost town. The usual roads with tourists were all empty and there was an air of disappointment that I could see in people's faces. Some of the shops were not even re-opened by then. The traders were gearing

[60] Rebuilding Munnar after Kerala Floods an Uphill Task, Times of India, August 27, 2018.https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/rebuilding-munnar-after-kerala-floods-an-uphill-task/articleshow/65556579.cms

[61] See pp 12 of *Kerala Post Disaster Needs Assessment Floods and Landslides August 2018*, Report of the study jointly undertaken by the Government of Kerala, the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority, the United Nations agencies, the European Commission (and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO), October 2018.
https://sdma.kerala.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Kerala-Post-Disaster-Needs-Assessment.pdf

[62] See pp 20 of *Additional Memorandum; Kerala Floods – 2018 1st August to 30th August 2018*, Report by the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority. https://sdma.kerala.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Memorandum2-Floods-2018.pdf

[63] As the students and teachers had relocated to a higher ground, there were no casualties. However, there were major property damages, as the other buildings inside the campus also suffered damages, and so, the college was shut down for a few weeks. The teachers of the college were struggling to find locations to resume classes for the students when I met them later in September.

[64] See *Kerala floods: Idukki struggles with relief efforts as death toll climbs to 51*, The New Indian Express, August 20, 2018. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2018/aug/20/kerala-floods-idukki-struggles-with-relief-efforts-as-death-toll-climbs-to-51-1860292.html

up for an upbeat tourist season with the famed Neelakurinji flowers scheduled to bloom in full-scale on the valleys in Eravikulam National Park after twelve years between mid-August and mid-September. During my field visits in June itself, I had heard rumours of the resorts being fully booked and the respondents were talking about the possibilities of an upcoming 'packed' tourist season. However, the disasters led the tourists to cancel their visits.

Many of my respondents lost working days due to rains. Everyone had something to say about how they were affected by the disaster or of those people they knew who had suffered damages or had died in the landslides. Most of all, they were scared by the uncertainties that the monsoons brought into their lives. They were making attempts to get over the memories of a disastrous August when I met them again. I slowly began resuming my surveys by the end of September when the workers had all returned to their full-time jobs in the tea estates and a semblance of the 'regular' everyday returned in the field with their daily routines taking precedence above all.

A second major disaster that shook the Munnar estates during the course of this thesis (after the I wrapped up my fieldwork) was the massive landslide on August 7, 2020 in Pettimudi, which is part of the KDHPCL estates. The disaster took away seventy lives, and five of the bodies were never found[65]. The frequency of these disasters in the area is another vulnerability the workers have grown to deal with on a regular basis.

[65] The victims were all workers or family members that were associated with KDHPCL. The rescue operations started almost 12 hours after the incident took place as it took a while for the outside world to even come to know about the disaster. The place was marooned with no network coverage and the power connections were disrupted almost a day or so before the incident because of torrential rains. There were four rows of line-houses that went under and only 12 people could be rescued by the team of experts.
Pettimudi, which was not considered as a disaster-prone area, had a massive landslide of mud and other materials which gathered momentum over a two-kilometre journey that finally went down on the slopes of the estate. The disruption to the natural vegetation in the Ecologically Sensitive Zone (to which the area belonged) due to human activities is the main reason for the disaster. However, most of the explanations given were centred around the unusually heavy amount of rainfall received in the region. The price paid for the changes made in the area was borne by the workers and their families. As with the other estates, these were families living in the same place for generations in the same old houses with limited facilities, located in an estate that is far away from the Munnar town centre. One of the rows of houses was built in 1910 and the rest of them were built in the 1980s. The disaster took away members from 26 families and 31 members belonged to a single family (extended), all of whom were living in adjacent houses. The sixty families living in the estate which the disaster spared were later

relocated to two other estates as it was notified in the Geological Society of India Survey Report that the Pettimudi estates were unfit for human settlement.

The media attention was (unfairly) divided between the incident in Pettimudi and the accident in Kozhikode Airport which claimed the lives of 21 people and when the state government announced compensations for the deceased in both the events, it awarded ₹10 lakhs each to the victims of the airport accident and only ₹5 lakhs to the victims of Pettimudi. The government announced that the surviving members were eligible to receive 5 cents of land, which have been routinely promised to the workers of Munnar under various schemes earlier itself. However, with the new announcement only five families ended up getting the land on which houses were built by KDHPCL.

There was some protest against the injustice meted out by the state, and there was an effort from the side of leaders from the community to redress the issue, by submitting a petition to the Chief Minister of Kerala, and by filing a petition in the High Court demanding for land redistribution, but the case was dropped by the court quite recently. Even the ₹5 lakhs announced were tied up in complications making it difficult for the victims to access the amount fully and on time. Adequate aid did not reach the victims of the disaster even as the central government announced a compensation of ₹2 lakhs along with the TN government announcing an additional ₹3 lakhs to the workers' families; the workers' families remained in their extremely vulnerable conditions.

CHAPTER- 3

Paid Work and Organizational Structure of the Tea Plantation

The tea plantation itself functions like a firm with clear vertical hierarchies, even when excluding the activities related to the factory-based processing of tea. "However, the plantation labour force is differentiated from its industrial counterpart by: the seasonal nature of their work; low wage levels; permanently settled residence on the plantations; mode of payment; mechanisms of labour control; and geographical location away from the cities. As a result of these variations, the plantation labour force sits between agriculture and industry." (Sharma 2016; pp 111). A discussion on paid work in the tea estates, therefore, cannot be strictly restricted to economic elements of the job alone. The primary intention of the chapter is to find an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a woman worker in the tea estates in Munnar?"

The first objective of the chapter is to bring together various discussions related to the hierarchy in the job-site – the structure of the plantations in general and the feminist interpretations of the hierarchical workspace, which would be used to understand the observations from the field. The concepts of the 'universal worker' within a disembodied and neutral organisational structure employed in mainstream economics are challenged in this chapter. A second objective is to bring in a discussion on paid work, along with a description of the labour process and the various methods of labour control in the context of the field. Since the job of a tea-plucker is physically daunting, yet highly under-paid and gendered, the third objective of the chapter is to uncover the extra-economic factors that determine the 'worth' of the job. The section contains a discussion regarding the 'perception' of the job itself from various angles.

There is a strict gendered division of labour in the estates. The theoretical discussions regarding the gendered division of labour in both paid and unpaid works have not been new. The German Feminist School[66] looks into the creation of surplus from both paid and unpaid work. I draw

[66]The German Marxian feminists Maria Mies, Claudia von Werlhof and Veronika Bennholdt Thomsen have dealt with the origins of the gender division of labour extensively. Maria Mies (1986) observes that men's/women's nature evolves out of a continuous interaction with nature and one another. The definition of maleness and femaleness, according to her, differ in each of the historical epochs based on the respective principal mode of production existing at that period. Mies also talks about

on these earlier discussions to comment on the very structure of organisation of the tea plantation. Besides these, based on the in-depth interviews, I also try to understand the everyday paid work for the women workers from their point of view.

3.1. Gendered Division of Work

Acker's work on gendered organisations (1990) debunks the myth of disembodied categories of job in a hierarchical organisation. She discusses how there is a division of work along the lines of gender, and to reinforce these stereotypes of gender, certain images and symbols are constructed and commonly used in organisations. In her work, she narrates the example of how top-level management executives are associated with symbols of masculinity in an organization. So is the case of technical expertise, which is perceived to be more masculine in nature. Acker comments that the abstract and non-gendered version of a worker that is considered in a textbook version of organisational theory is actually that of a man. Women's jobs are often devalued based on the belief that women cannot commit to a job as a result of their responsibilities at home, including childbearing (Acker 1990). Such a segregation of work based on gender is justified "by the necessity to control sexuality, and [so] women may be barred from types of work, such as skilled blue-collar work or top management, where most workers are men, on the grounds that potentially disruptive sexual liaisons should be avoided" (Acker 1990; pp 152). However, Acker points out that certain other positions in an organisation are objectified and mostly reserved for women, like that of a secretary, when the job description includes serving mostly men. She argues that organisations are inherently gendered in nature. Borrowing from Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, she explains how a certain masculine culture is developed within the organisations to help sustain their gendered hierarchy.

While discussing about the division of work between men and women, Connell suggests that it goes beyond merely assigning jobs to men and women as soon as they enter a workplace and that it is part of the larger structure. She talks about how the differential access to skill training and practice makes the sexual division of labour a 'powerful system of social constraint' (Connell 1987; pp 100) and that it becomes impossible for men and women even to compete

'housewifization' of work. She observes that women lace-makers in Andhra Pradesh who worked from home were always considered as 'housewives'. Labour is extracted from them, but the society considers them almost like a 'natural resource'. They can be exploited with impunity since they are considered to be doing their work during their 'leisure time' (Mies 1986, Custers 1997).

on the same page. This extends beyond the scale of an individual job-site to become a social process that involves the categorisation of 'work' and making of 'workers'. She argues that this process constitutes a "part of a larger pattern, a structure of gender-structured system of production, consumption and distribution" (ibid, pp 103). The structures of labour control operating in the work-place, along with solidarities of men in maintaining these demarcations along with the allocation of unpaid care services to women within the households – are the larger systemic characteristics of the gendered division of labour that is based on the gendered logic of accumulation of the political economy of masculinity (ibid, pp 105-106).

Jayawardena and Kurian (2015) coined the concept 'plantation patriarchy' which describes "the extensive and intensive system of male domination embedded in the labour controls on the plantations and sustained by planters, the state, the community and the society at large" (ibid; pp 12). They also use Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe the cultural consent that is attained, and not necessarily through the use of brute force, in enforcing male dominance within the plantations. The existence of 'multiple and overlapping patriarchies' (Jayawardena and Kurian 2015; pp 13) subject women to a subordinate position within such a patriarchal order.

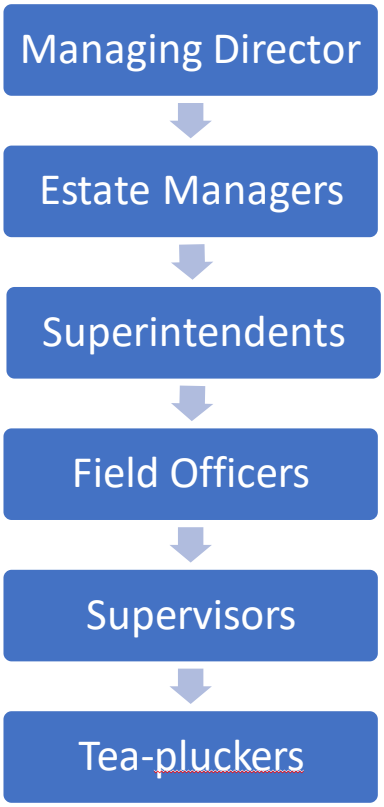
Historically, they note, the slave mode of plantation production incorporated the feudal nature of the households as well into its structure. This subjected women to an extra degree of vulnerability arising from sexual and domestic violence, apart from the strict disciplinary measures that were used to control all workers at the work place. While slavery disappeared over time, the patriarchal elements of the same remained ingrained within the plantation structure resulting in "women being systematically discriminated against in terms of opportunities and capabilities, including access to education and health" (ibid; pp 14).

3.2. Gendered Hierarchy of the Plantation Structure

The organisation of the tea plantation, excluding factory activities, is such that at the base of the hierarchy ladder are the tea-pluckers. Women workers exclusively form this lowest rung of the tea commodity production chain. They constitute roughly 70 per cent of the workers in the plantation in Munnar. The tea-pluckers are mostly overseen by male supervisors, and the chances of the former to attain upward mobility in the hierarchical order are very low. Although there has been no written rule regarding the employment of male supervisors officially, mostly men get filled into the post. With the recent introduction of the test-based system to fill-up the

post, a few women have also been appointed as supervisors[67]. However, within the two estates, I could barely spot such women supervisors. The skill-requirement for the post and the age-limit imposed on the same make most women workers ineligible to even apply for the post[68]. Thus, the gendered commodity chain of tea has its lower-most level almost filled up exclusively by women workers, and the supervisory level above that taken up almost entirely by male workers.

Figure 3.1 Flow Chart Showing the Hierarchy in the Plantations



A supervisor's role is to be present with the tea-pluckers at all times in the field and oversee their work. In the case of the estates where the fieldwork was conducted, each supervisor was assigned a 'gang' of forty women workers. The supervisor maintains the muster rolls and keeps

[67] While the tests were in place for almost a decade or so, with the PO strike of 2015, these tests were looked into more seriously and filled by the management, and even encouraged by other trade unions.

[68] The applicants should be 35 years or below and must have qualified 10th grade in order to be eligible to even write the test. The 35 years age-limit is a criterion that does not, in any way, reflect the requirements of the role performed by a supervisor as most male supervisors work till the age of their retirement, at the age of 58 years. However, for women workers, this age criterion severely restricts their entry into the post as many women do not prefer to enter the job when they are younger.

tabs of the volume of tea leaves collected by each of the workers. The supervisors are overseen by the field officers, who regularly visit the field. The field officers are exclusively men and these employees try to distinguish themselves from the supervisors. The main job of the field officers is to assign specific areas of the tea hills to the supervisors every day for the collection of tea leaves by the members of the group under him/her. The field officer is also ultimately in charge of the muster rolls and other details collected by the supervisor on a daily basis.

The field officers are held in high regard as they act on behalf of the estate managers in solving petty issues in the field and hearing the grievances of the workers. As was observed during the fieldwork, the field officers also dressed differently. In continuing with the long colonial tradition of yester years, these officers wore short pants that were of knee-length and wore long khaki-coloured socks that almost reached their knees. This sartorial preference of the field officers is deliberate in that they portray the image of a colonial authority figure, like an officer of the law, that separates them from the other workers in the field, including supervisors. The field officers report to the superintendent in the estate. The superintendent is the in-between person for the estate manager and the field officer and fills in the role of the manager in his absence. The estate manager is in charge of the estate as a whole and reports to the managing director of the company. In the hierarchical order of the company, from the level of the field officer and above, all the posts are entirely filled by men. Although there is no formal rule discriminating against women occupying any of these posts, there has been an unwritten rule enforcing such a strict sex-based segregation.

3.3. Description of Work – Collection of Tea Leaves

The plucking of tea leaves used to be manually done with hands. Even today, this practice continues during certain times of the year (in a few estates only), especially after the pruning of tea plants and the leaves have just begun to grow back. It is also the chosen method for high-valued variations of tea like in the production of white tea[69]. However, in recent times, tea leaves are collected mostly by shearing them. A worker wields a large pair of scissors with a small bag attached to one of the blades for the purpose. She repeatedly moves one of her arms holding the shears to collect the leaves in the bag, which is attached to the unmoving blade. The moving blade has a small iron piece attached to it vertically (which acts as a small wall-

[69] White tea is processed only using the buds and newly-unfurled leaves of tea plants which are tender. It is delicately handled and not intensely processed, unlike the normal CTC variation of tea.

like structure) and it helps in smoothening the process – pushing the leaves in the opposite direction as they are being cut which ensures that the leaves fall into the small bag itself. After the small bag gets filled, the leaves are then thrown inside the large sack that the worker carries with her, tied with a rope, and placed on her hips. This large sack can carry a huge amount of weight of up to 50kg and the worker walks up and down the slopes of the tea hills with this sack. With continuous practice, a worker moves the shears really fast and fills the small and large sacks repeatedly, giving the on-looker the false perception that her job is too easy and requires very little skill.

The small bag, which the worker uses for collecting the leaves at the end of the shears, is given by the management – twice every year, one for each peak season. The other bag tied to the hip is mostly made by the worker herself. As was evident in the survey, most of these were made out of old rice-sacks. While repairs to the small bag are met by most workers themselves with a few stitches made on the sacks to make them last longer, they sought the help of local tailors to re-purpose the rice-sacks. The costs of some of the other items worn by them while doing their jobs, like gumboots, raincoats etc., are all met by the workers themselves. During the rainy season, when the workers are commonly found to be shearing leaves amidst drizzles, these are absolutely essential for them to work. The gumboots, especially, protect them from the leeches that are usually found everywhere on the tea hills during the rainy season. As was observed in some of the households where both the spouses were working in the estates, the women workers mostly used the old and used pairs of gumboots which were earlier given to their husbands by the company. Instead of spending around ₹100 on the rain coats, the workers used old tarpaulin or similar materials which could be re-purposed into rain-protective gear. The use of these 'fixes' to find ways to deflect costs has been common in all the worker households. In contrast to the out-of-the-pocket spending for essential items for tea-pluckers, the protective gear of the male workers (who do the maintenance work in the estates like those of whom working with chemicals) like gumboots, coats, eye-glasses etc. are provided by the company. The 'essential' nature of these items seems to be decided by the company only on the basis of handling toxic substances and those that are absolutely mandated and enforceable by the law.

A worker, on an average, collects around 80 – 90kg of tea leaves per day[70]. When the leaves are very less after the pruning of the plants, it can go down as low as 40kg. During the peak

[70] This figure emerged out of the field survey (conducted between 2017-2019).

season, it can go up to 150kg for a worker. These figures represent the actual volume of tea leaves that are being considered for the worker's wages. The net volume is arrived at after deducting roughly 18 percent as wastage from the total volume of leaves plucked by the worker. The leaves are weighed at around 11:40 AM every day and completing the process takes about 20 minutes for the group, after which the workers take their lunch break for an hour. A second weighing happens at around 5 PM, before they leave for home. During the peak seasons, the higher volume demands weighing three times during the day- at 10 AM, 2PM and 5PM.

However, as was evident from the fieldwork, many workers do not know the exact amounts of the volume of leaves they collect in a day or even the exact amount deducted as wastage from the gross volume. It is entirely possible to have the weight of the leaves collected to be recorded less or for a higher proportion of the wastage to be deducted. It was expressed by many workers that the wastage reduction during light drizzles was far more than necessary. The logic of the wet leaves being heavy with the weight of the water is not really much at times in those cases and the weight of the water being reduced may cut into the actual volume of the leaves itself, leaving the workers at a loss. With the exception of the younger generation of tea-pluckers, most workers do not even know the break-up of their net wages received in a month or in some cases, even the total wages received. In some cases, only the husbands of the tea-pluckers would know the details of their wages.

3.4. Wage System – Piece-rate and Time Components

Tea-pluckers are paid Rs 301[71] as daily wages. This is the fixed component of their wages for plucking a minimum of 27 kg of tea leaves a day. The workers are incentivised to shear more leaves than the minimum amount by offering Rs 2.67 on every additional kilogram they collect[72]. Despite the piece-rate component in the wage structure, the workers are expected to be punctual and stick to the work timings set for them from 8 AM to 5 PM. Hence, workers

[71] This was the prevailing wage rate during the time of the fieldwork. The wages had just increased from Rs 232 to 301 in 2015, after the 'Pembiliai Orumai' strike in Munnar demanding for higher wages and bonus. The demand by the protesting women workers at the time, however, was to increase the wages to Rs 500 per day.

[72] The weights referred to here, are taken to be the net weight of the harvested leaves, after deducting the standard wastage component.

could not leave right after plucking the required 27 kg of tea leaves to claim their full wages of the day.

Besides the strict enforcement of the work timings, the workers also have to be concerned about achieving the targets given for the 'gang' that they are a part of, which also acts as an additional constraint forcing them to work more. Each 'gang' consisting of 40 tea-pluckers under a supervisor are also assigned a specific area of the tea hills every day for collecting the tea leaves. Since the maintenance of tea plants also involve other activities like spraying of chemical pesticides, pruning, applying fertilisers etc., which might be undertaken after the shearing of the tea leaves, the worker-gangs are expected to finish the allotted area within the particular time-slots. Even in normal situations where such activities are not followed, targets are expected to be achieved within time to maintain the productivity levels. Although there is a monetary incentive to pluck more leaves, the younger members of the group might work faster to cover more area for the entire gang to reach the target. During the peak seasons, the workers start their work day much earlier than the usual hours to complete shearing the leaves in their assigned area.

Many participants mentioned about the additional incentives that used to be regularly offered by the management during the peak seasons – a competition of sorts among all the tea-pluckers of the company, the winner being the person who collected the maximum quantity of tea leaves in a day during the peak season. Such a competition is about achieving a sense of recognition among their peers, and stretching one's own physical limits in the process, which drives the workers to embrace the spirit of the competition. There is hardly very little monetary benefit in winning the competition apart from their slightly increased wages.

Apart from the incentives, the other main component that ensures efficient working from the labourers is the strict supervision. The supervisors are always with the 'gang' in the fields. Sometimes, two gangs of forty workers each work together and there will be more than one supervisor in the area. Besides the supervisor, the field officer regularly visits the work place to inspect the progress of work. Even when the supervisory staff are not present in the line of sight, the labourers are compelled to follow discipline and work efficiently, as they are under the constant watchful eyes of the fellow members of their 'gang' who are also supposed to achieve the target set for the group.

3.5. Skills Required, Entry into the Job and Training

The skills required by tea-pluckers for manual plucking used to be more appreciated than the present method of shearing. Except for the youngest workers in the sample, the rest of the workers started their jobs by manually plucking the leaves. While they differed on their answers regarding how long it took to be modestly efficient in their jobs when manually plucking the leaves for one to two months, they all agreed that the shearing technique required lesser time than they used to take– around a week's time. Carrying around the heavy weight of the tea leaves on the hill slopes took more time to get used to than to learn the technique of cutting the leaves. Some of the workers reported that it took them almost a month to get used to carrying the weight of the leaf sacks.

The average number of working years for the women workers in the sample chosen was 17 years. Only three women (all younger) had reported being employed elsewhere before entering the tea plucking job. Most women workers in the study have been doing the same job of being a tea-plucker for as long as they were employed in the estates. Eighty percent of the workers had been introduced to the job at a young age by being around tea bushes while growing up in these same estates. Mostly belonging to the third or the fourth generation of workers in the tea plantations, almost all of them have already had their mothers or other elder female members in the households working as tea-pluckers while growing up. Narrations about their entry into the jobs for three women workers who were interviewed during the fieldwork are mentioned below.

Geetha, 43 years old and belonging to a Scheduled Caste, has been a worker in the tea estate for more than 21 years. She has lived in Munnar all her life. Her mother has been a tea-plucker and she never wanted to continue in the same path. So, she never learnt to pluck tea leaves when she was young and was living with her parents in a line-house in one of the tea estates in Munnar. However, her plans changed when her family fixed her marriage to a driver who lived in another tea estate after she failed her 10th standard exam. She moved into the residence of her husband's family which was also a line-house in that estate. Her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law were both tea pluckers and encouraged her to join the same job as well. She was trained by them and was introduced to other women workers in their circles. Her in-laws decided the workers' union for her to join and other job-related matters. Although she has kept her husband's family traditions going and continued living in the same house the

family has been living for four generations, her own children, both daughter and son, may not work in the tea estates at all, and she does not want them to be employed in the estates either.

Mary, who is 69 years old and is a converted Christian (OEC), is a retired tea plucker. She grew up in a tea estate, and both her parents were employed in the estate. In terms of education, she had only completed her 4th standard schooling. She learnt how to pluck tea leaves when she was very young, when she was about 7 or 8 years old. She and her friends, other girls in the neighbourhood of similar ages, started learning to pluck tea leaves from the bushes that were closest to their line-houses, mainly when they were playing. They could not pluck large quantities as the elders would scold them and so they used to pluck only very small quantities by hand and used to be competitive amongst themselves, about who would be the fastest to pluck the leaves. What started out as a fun activity for these girls, later turned out to be their job in their teenage years. She and her friends did not need much time to master the plucking as they had already practiced it many times. However, Mary recalls taking almost a month then, when she started working, to get used to moving up and down the hill fast with the weight of the plucked tea leaves. Mary worked for a few years in the same tea estate as her parents and friends, before getting married off to a tea worker in another estate, where she was employed later, until her retirement. She had taken off only for three years, when her youngest daughter, who is differently-abled, was born. She became a permanent worker only when she was 38 years old and moved into their present line-house then. Her experience as a tea worker was calculated to be nearly 50 years (excluding the break years), and she joked that she probably knows more about tea-plucking than one worker should know in a lifetime. Her sons still work in the same estate and one of her daughters is also a tea plucker in a neighbouring estate.

Muthumaari (who belongs to an Other Backward Class group) is 36 years old and has been a worker in the estate for four years. She completed 12th standard, while growing up with her mother who was a tea-plucker in an estate in Munnar. She then moved into her maternal uncle's family in Coimbatore and started working as a sales girl in a textile shop there, before getting married. Her husband, being a driver in one of the tea estates, forced her to move back to Munnar. She had tried her hand in a variety of jobs after her marriage- as a call centre employee, as part of the cleaning staff in a resort, and as a sales girl in a shop in Munnar. However, none of the jobs was permanent. After both her children started going to school, she needed a more permanent source of income to meet the family expenses. She decided to join

the estate as a tea-plucker then. She had only seen other women in the family working in the estate, but had never tried her hand in plucking before. However, she managed to quickly pick up the skills with the help of other women workers in her gang, who were all older than her. She does not want her children to ever learn the skills of being a tea plucker and hopes that they would find employment anywhere other than the tea estates.

The above narratives clearly describe the different paths taken by these women while entering into their jobs as tea-pluckers. Geetha, Muthumaari, and Mary grew up in the tea estates and had seen their mothers working in the estates as tea-pluckers. However, only Mary had tried her hand in plucking the leaves at a very early age. She is also the oldest among the three women described above and has the lowest level of education as well. Both these factors may have influenced her perspective and outlook of what a job looked like at a young age, prompting her to try out plucking tea leaves from a younger age itself. She was also influenced by her peers, who in fact, trained her to be a better tea-plucker. On the other hand, both Geetha and Muthumaari never wanted to be tea-pluckers, to begin with. Geetha never tried out other jobs, probably because of her lack of opportunities as well as the circumstances and perspectives of other members at home, and she was influenced by her in-laws who also trained her to be a tea-plucker. In comparison, Muthumaari had a few years of experience of working in other jobs. However, owing to the lack of employment opportunities in Munnar that would have given her a permanent job in some other field, she was pushed into the present job. She was trained by the other older women workers, not family members, who are her neighbours as well as members of her work group in the estate.

These narratives bring forth one of the most factors that sustain the low-paying jobs in the tea estates of Munnar, namely, the lack of permanent economic opportunities in the closed space of the tea estates as well as the main town itself, which is exacerbated by the socio-cultural restrictions that bar many of the women born and raised in these spaces to go outside their households and towns to attain educational qualifications and then look for jobs. Even when Mary could briefly escape the space of the tea plantation in her younger years, her marriage and her subsequent lack of choice and agency pushed her back to right where she started. In the narratives above, one also sees that these women (and many of the other respondents that were interviewed) were married off to young men who grew up or worked in the same spaces, where the worldviews of the in-laws are also influenced by their upbringing and work in these

same closed spaces. Thus, the life chances of the women (and men to a certain extent) revolve around the social relations of work and their households in these tea estates.

3.6. Perceptions About the Job – Stakeholders in the Field

This section deals with the perceptions associated with the paid work of tea-plucking among the various actors and stakeholders in the field. As much as the description of the labour process is important, the perceptions about the job itself from various parties are also important; these views illustrate the extra-economic factors involved in fixing the wages, or as it can be seen in this case, a clear devaluation of work performed by the women workers. Here, I have included the views of the trade union leaders, the male members of the family/estates and the women workers themselves. The differences in these views emanate from the differences in the locations of these actors with and without negotiation powers, as insiders and outsiders to the economy and space of the tea estates, and finally, as men and women. Representatives from the management were tellingly not available for a direct comment, even when contacted repeatedly.

3.6.1. Trade Union Leaders

The trade unions affiliated to the various political parties organised in all the tea estates have been instrumental in speaking for the rights of the workers and acting as intermediaries between the workers and the top-level management of the various tea companies operating in and around Munnar. The trade unions have been important to the workers in their day-to-day lives because they also extend loans to their members. The loans provide a much-needed breather for the workers and their families, who are often caught up in debt-cycles[73]. The trade union leaders from the various political parties have been mostly men, except the newly-formed 'Pembilai Orumai' (PO) union, which only has women leaders.

At the outset, all the trade union leaders had very similar opinions regarding the jobs in the estates and the demands they raise; I could see a pattern in all the semi-structured conversations I had with the leaders from various parties. While I had initiated the one-on-one interviews in

[73]Almost all the workers I had interviewed had taken loans from the credit societies established by the various trade unions. The maximum limit of the loan at the time of the fieldwork was fixed at ₹50,000. The trade unions offered educational loans and even scholarships to meritorious students, who were dependents of the workers. This option was also heavily utilized by the workers. The repayment of the loans was directly deducted from their monthly wages.

an unstructured manner with all six of them to establish a rapport, four of them started their conversation with the demand for land for the workers to build their own houses; the remaining two, both PO union leaders, touched upon the same subject mid-way into the conversation as they were eager to start the conversation with the subject of the strike itself that led to the creation of their trade union. The prominence of the topic in the discussions could have been because the issue of non-ownership of land in Munnar as well as the burning questions centred around the identity of the tea workers – of being 'migrants' in the very place they have lived all their lives – were in the forefront of every major political meeting that happened in Munnar during the fieldwork period. In this context, while mentioning about the demand for land, most of the leaders touched upon the subject of the hardships of the labour process the workers had to endure while mentioning the unfair treatment meted out to workers. Glimpses of this pattern in the discussions could be seen the two quotes from the trade union leaders mentioned below.

"Maadine pole paniyedukkanvara ivideyullavar, ennal oruthundubhoomi polumilla ivarkkivide". (People work like cattle here, however they do not own a single piece of land here.) - LS

"Chaavanvendi Tamizh Naatil pono? Njanum theyilathottathil ninnum vannathaanu. Avaru parayunnathu satyama. Kashtappadu aanuivarude joliyum jeevithavum". (Do we have to go to Tamil Nadu to die? I also hail from one of these estates here. Whatever they are saying is true. Their work and life are filled with hardships.) - MA

While focusing on the perception of the nature of these jobs, the above two statements by the trade union leaders reflect a sentiment of sympathizing with the hardships of the labour process and the life of the workers, in general. While LS is still a tea-plucker and knows the process all too well, MA identifies with the workers' hardships by bringing into picture his background of being raised in a tea estate line house. Both of them agreed that the work itself could be difficult/hard. It was interesting to note a change in their views, almost a contradiction of their own earlier views, when I asked directly about their perceptions regarding the nature of the job.

"Pani padichedukkan prayasamilla. Pakshe ivideullavarkkee jolionnum venda. Ippozhathe thozhilalikal poyaal pinneini Bengalikal varum. Ippol thanne Bengali kudumbangal chila estatekulalilundu" (It is not difficult to learn/master this job. However, no one over here wants

this job. If the present workers leave, Bengalis[74] would take their place. There are already Bengali families living in certain estates here.) – AC

Almost all the trade union leaders echoed the same sentiments about the younger generation of women in Munnar not entering the jobs. Some of them, as it could be seen in the above statement by AC, did mention about the migrant workers from other states that could take up the jobs in larger numbers. Even while mentioning that the newly joined workers from the other states have become permanent workers after a year and that some of them are a part of their respective trade unions, the trade union leaders commonly referred to them as 'Bengalis' only, a term that constantly reminded that they are 'migrants' or 'outsiders' to the land. In contrast, the rest of the tea workers, mostly third or fourth generation Tamil workers settled in Munnar, were referred to as 'thozhilalikal' in Malayalam, a term which means workers or labourers. It should be noted that these newer workers from other states were considered as occupying the status below that of the present workers by the trade union leaders as well as by the tea workers themselves[75]. It is in this context that the earlier statement by AC needs to be examined for clues regarding the perception of the job – the last part of the statement that the present workers could be replaced by migrant workers when they retire/leave only reinforces the view conveyed in the first part that the job itself is considered to be very simple and that it could be easily learnt and performed. While the leaders agreed that the job could be physically demanding for the workers, they did not see the same as requiring any 'skill' or 'expertise'. While different types of formal and informal manual labour which are generally clubbed together as unskilled work exist in the space of the plantation, it is particularly the jobs of the women tea-pluckers that are looked down upon by these male Union leaders.

The opinion about the workers further deteriorated when the male trade union leaders began to talk about the PO strike. Except for one person[76], the four others had a very low opinion about

[74]Bengali is a slang for referring to migrant workers coming into Kerala from the north, east, and north-eastern Indian states, not necessarily from the state of Bengal alone. There have been many recent works covering the details of this inter-state migration pattern within the country (see…). The sub-par treatment of the migrant workers and considering them as outsiders were more pronounced and instances were reported more widely across the country during the Covid-19 pandemic.

[75]See section 3.6.3. for more details of the women workers' views.

[76]OU, belonging to a left trade union, was an outlier to the group of trade union leaders I had interviewed in Munnar. In all three of the detailed interviews, his answers did not change or contradict. He mostly stuck to the party's views while answering the questions which were politically correct. Being in

the strike and the women who organized it. While this sort of a view regarding the strike was to be expected from the leaders of the other trade unions (as it was not organized by them and portrayed an inefficiency of their unions), what was interesting to notice was that they even changed their opinions regarding the tea workers' job itself in this context. The opinions about the labour process suddenly became 'not too difficult' and the workers were now viewed to have had a lot of 'free time' as they supposedly did not have anything else to do. An example of this sort of opinion among the male leaders of the trade union can be seen in the below statement.

"Pani illatha kure pennungal ellamkoodi chernnuundakkiya oru samaramaanu athu. Athil vallya kadhayilla" (This strike was organised by a bunch of women who were jobless; it does not mean much) - AC

In this statement, the description of the 'jobless' women only indicate the perception regarding the nature of their work and not in a literal sense, as the women who attended the strike were mostly the permanent employees living in various tea estates. Common responses about women workers in the context of the strike ranged from dismissing them completely to trivializing them and their work.

"*Ee pennungal parayunnathu chummatheyaa. Njangal venam enthekilum cheyyenengil. Niyamathinte adisthanathil venam oronnum cheyyan, athivarkku onnumariyilla.*" *(What these women are saying is nonsense. They need us to get anything done here. All of this have to be done on the basis of laws; they don't know anything about that.)* - MA

While talking about women workers in the context of the strike, the male trade union leaders mostly had the opinion that they neither understood the gravity of the political issues and 'laws' on the subject nor had the ability to make informed choices themselves. AC even added that most of the women workers realized their mistake about leaving their former trade unions for PO and reversed their decisions soon after joining.

In contrast to these views, the women trade union leaders of PO had a very different picture of the strike and the workers to offer here. While they were interviewed separately, both the leaders almost gave a similar description regarding the strike and the women workers who

Munnar for a very long time, he could remember the history of the place and the company very well. Recalling some of the past events were the only notable personal additions he had to his methodical answers.

participated in it. They both said that the strike ignited a spark of 'dhairyam'[77] (a word that was used by both the women) among the workers, or rather, they found it within them to join the strike. Both of them talked about their own difficulties during the strike and afterwards, as well as the difficulties of the women workers who had to manage their household work also while being on strike.

It can be observed that while the male trade union leaders always remained disassociated from the workers while talking about their work (as in the case of OU), or portrayed different levels of association with the workers' lives according to the context of the conversation (as in the case of MA), the women leaders managed to keep a level of consistency with regard to how strongly they relate with the workers. However, even with leaders of the PO, there was always a thin line of distinction that they maintained, distinguishing themselves from the workers. For instance, even while narrating the hardships of the daily lives of the women workers, GG always referred to the workers in a general way like 'people who live in the estates' or mostly as 'them'. The same pattern could be observed in the previous statement by LS as well, who mentioned the workers as 'them' and never 'us'. This distinction was more pronounced in the conversations with the other trade union leaders.

Apart from these views, the trade union leaders also had expressed certain opinions regarding the women workers, in general. Despite being a successful trade union leader and a woman who earned her own living, GG was heavily criticized by the leaders of other trade unions, and fellow PO leader LS, for living separately from her husband[78].

"Aadyam kudumbam nannakkanam; pinne mathi bakkiyellam…naatukarude preshnathil idapedunnathu". (One first needs to take care of the problems in the family before everything… before interfering into the problems of other people.) – LS

It is clear from the above statement here that the male leaders did not see the women leaders as their equals or as even fit to be leaders in the public sphere, as they primarily view the place of these women as belonging to the domestic, private sphere of the household and familial

[77]In the context of the conversations, the word reflects the meaning of being courageous and brave, and even to an extent the quality of being fearless.

[78]LS and GG, due to difference of opinions, were leading two factions of PO, during the time of fieldwork.

responsibilities. Although this was an opinion about GG[79], this mirrored the expectations regarding women workers in general. There was an air of constant encouragement in the conversations with trade union leaders about the 'empowered' women workers of these days earning more money than the previous generations of workers and being more independent than their mothers to make their own decisions (it should be clarified here that the common examples of independent decisions, or rather, the boundaries of these empowered decisions cited revolved mostly around the purchases of gold and other consumption utilities for themselves and the family). In line with this opinion, they also talked about how important is for women to look out for the family and being there for them. When talking about the problems that are caused by alcoholic men in the households within the estates, LS mentioned about reporting such cases to the police in order to reform them; however, the option of the same women living their lives independent of their families was not mentioned at all.

The views expressed by the male Trade Union leaders here conform to the existing norms and practices of the patriarchal society here in Munnar and by extension, to the larger context of Kerala, which favours a certain domestication of women, to remain in their positions of oppression and docility in the private sphere, or even in their paid work which is viewed as 'easy to learn', and where the female workforce is 'replaceable'.

As much as the family unit constituted an important element of being a woman worker in the field site, caste identity also played a role in influencing certain decisions they made as workers. When asked about the influence of caste networks in their decision-making regarding the choice of trade unions, none of the respondents denied it. However, the scale of responses varied. While OU talked about the importance of family members and relatives of workers having an influence on the workers' decisions, LS and GG both independently opined about caste making a dent in the unity among women workers. LS explicitly said that the allegiance to the caste networks influenced women workers' decisions regarding trade union membership, and it was utilized by other unions in breaking up the PO.

[79]One of the common remarks about GG among women workers also included her marital status. Opinion about GG as a trade union leader was deeply polarized mainly because of this factor. While there were people who valued her commitment to her responsibilities to workers, there were an equal number of people who hated her because she 'left' her family for other things.

It is important to note that these varied opinions about women workers and their work existed together, at the same time. It may appear that the respondents contradicted their own views about the same question in various contexts. However, underneath the layers of contradictions, these opinions have also formed patterns in the larger patriarchal space of the plantation as well as the town of Munnar with regard to women's work. While talking about women's paid labour in the context of the land question, all of them agreed that the work they do was difficult and that their lives were difficult. The labourers who did not own land in Munnar and hence felt like they did not truly 'belong' to the place had much further implications to talk about than just their lives as women workers, as this particular issue affected generations of workers (both men and women workers, present and retired) and their families. Talking about women's paid work in this context was weighed down by the baggage of these larger concerns, and in the process, it even acquired better visibility and a deeper sense of appreciation (than it was normally attributed with), especially from the male trade union leaders. Apart from this instance, the work performed by the women workers was consistently seen as 'not difficult'. The questions about women workers and women trade union leaders may have also garnered an extreme reaction from the male respondents because the PO strike, in many ways, threatened their credibility as successful trade union leaders. Even so, these narratives that came up during the interviews exposed their underlying views with regard to women's work and capabilities as leaders.

3.6.2. The Men in the Estates

This section is based on a discussion I had with a group of six men on their perceptions regarding women's paid work as tea-pluckers over three meetings, two of which were conducted in consecutive weeks in June 2018, and another one after five months. Among the six of them, two were maintenance workers in the estates, one was an electrician in the tea factory, two of them were retired workers and one was unemployed. Their ages ranged between 48 and 66 years. I met this group, by chance, sitting under a tree, in a common area outside the line houses, catching up with each other before going to Munnar town in the evening, an activity they did on a daily basis. I did not have individual conversations with them, but the nature of these semi-structured group discussions resembled more like an informal exchange among them.

All of them knew the details of the tea-plucking job that the women performed in the estates. The present workers were even able to tell me about the average weight of the tea leaves

sheared in a day. All six of them were also aware of the average sum of the daily wages received in a month by the women workers. Muthu, one of the retired workers, clarified that the larger sum of wages they received mostly depended on the season, and the additional kilograms of tea leaves that were plucked. He tried to break-down the issue of the monthly wages that the worker households received, in the simplest Malayalam-Tamil language possible in a slowed-down tone for me to understand the situation correctly.

Anpilakku vela illa. Appol pembilai mattume joli seynju sambadikkanam. Athukku ee kooli kammi thaane? (Men in the estates do not have permanent jobs. So, the women alone have to work and become the sole income-earners. In that case, these wages are low, right?)

The group, at this stage of the discussion, seemed to be concerned more with the difficulties of meeting household expenditures than the details of who gets more income, or for that matter, who seems to be the breadwinner in the family. However, when the discussion shaped further into the topic of whether it was feasible to collect more leaves on the job to earn more, Palani again reminded of the seasonal nature of the job affecting the quantity of the leaves collected. Gopi, a retired worker, also talked about the health issues women face in their old age because of the nature of their job. All in all, they unanimously agreed that the women workers were already working to their maximum capacities to earn their wages.

However, the difficulty level with regard to the labour process itself was considered to be extremely simple by this same group. They described the job as simple and that it could be easily learnt by anyone within a very limited period of time. Raja mentioned that the women just went into the tea bushes and started shearing, and there was no training that was required for the job. When asked about the difficulty of carrying the weight of sheared tea leaves around on the slopes, Muthu explained that it was something which women in Munnar were quite used to doing and it could also be easily gotten used to. He talked about how women during his mother's time used to carry more weight when collecting firewood and walked for long distances, in addition to their job as tea-pluckers, and that such practices have mostly stopped for the younger women in the present day leaving them unaccustomed to carrying heavy objects. Raja chipped in saying that the younger generation of women did not want this job at all to begin with, as they do not like doing these kinds of tasks. When I asked about why even the younger men do not want to enter the estate jobs as well, and not just the younger women as mentioned, Raja again replied that the men could get better paying jobs outside Munnar or other jobs within Munnar, whereas the women do not have those options. He went on to say

that he found the attitude of the younger women not going for tea-plucking even when they do not have other jobs as nothing but laziness, as they only seem to want to be at home and watch TV.

When asked about the nature of the men's jobs in the estates, which were mostly identified as the maintenance work in the tea estates including pruning and spraying pesticides, they talked about how different each of these tasks were and that they required precision and training for each of them. Palani and Siva, both maintenance workers themselves, mentioned about how important it was to use the protective gear while handling chemical pesticides and that the job needed to be done carefully, as too much or too little quantity of spraying may affect the survival of the plants; even the height of the tea bushes at which they were pruned also mattered a lot as they have to be maintained at a uniform height, they said. The group collectively opined that a random person cannot start working as a maintenance worker without learning the job first and training themselves for it. Even though the maintenance workers, who were only men, were found to be working alongside the women tea-pluckers, they viewed the men's jobs to be more difficult than that of the women.

The men who work in the tea estates had first-hand knowledge of the demands and hardships of the work site where the tea-pluckers were engaged. While some of them did express sympathy towards the hardships that the women faced with regard to factors like low wages, health conditions and so on, this was the extent of their solidarity here. Not unlike the views of the members/leaders of the trade union that were discussed in the previous section, the men in the estates also devalued the skills required by the women workers to carry out their assigned tasks, especially compared to the 'precision' skills and 'dangerous' jobs that they themselves held. They trivialised the paid and unpaid work of the women workers of the present day comparing them to their parents' generation, and deemed the younger generation of women workers as 'lazy' for not wanting to take up a physically demanding job like tea-plucking.

3.6.3. Women Workers' Views

Waged employment and unpaid work in their homes are interconnected for the women workers in the tea estate. The logistics of the job sites to the tea-pluckers households is spatially significant. The mere identity of being a woman in the estate requires that she does not shirk her 'responsibilities' at home. Being in a close-knit community where your neighbours are also your co-workers, there is an added pressure to conform to the norms of the society for a woman

to be seen as a '*good, responsible, and morally upright person*'. When asked about their 'joli', Malayalam word for 'work', it was natural for the women to start talking about their 'waged work' and its physically daunting dimensions, and not their work and contributions inside their homes.

"The most difficult part of the job is to carry sacks of leaves which may weigh an average of 50 kgs. The rainy seasons are the worst. The weight of the bag just goes up with the leaves being wet. And the final weight of the leaves calculated for wages is often very less after deducting the standard weight of water in the leaves." (Rajani replied, when asked about the most challenging aspect of her paid work.)

"The repeated motion of the right hand while shearing the top layer of leaves for many years results in shoulder pains. For the last couple of years, I have not been able to even move my hands during winters. I cannot work at all on those days when my hands are not functional." (Vijayamma speaks.)

Letchmi, who had to undertake additional responsibilities of care work and chores in her household with the birth of her two young children, added:

"The peak seasons of harvest always leave me exhausted all the time. It takes meticulous planning and execution to leave the house at 6 or 6:30 in the morning after finishing all the cooking and other household chores till I come back from work at 5:30 or so in the evening. I would be seeing my kids for the first time in the day when I return in the evening and I still will not have the time to spend with them as I will be involved in cooking dinner and preparing vegetables and other chores for the next day."

The women workers that I interviewed belonged to different age groups and had different years of experience in the present job, and so, they had different responses when asked about the most difficult aspects of their job. Other than their responses regarding household chores which came later, the primary concerns of Vijayamma and Rajani were about the strenuous labour they rendered for years, which resulted in their health issues in their later years. As she was the youngest of the three and bore an uneven burden in her household when it came to providing care to her young children, Letchmi complained about the difficulty in managing her paid and unpaid work. This was much more intense during the peak seasons, when she had to solely manage household chores and pluck leaves for longer hours, and as a result, was often fully exhausted by the end of the day.

Rajani only considered her physically laborious, paid work as 'work', as she believed that there was no such thing as 'light' work. She held the view that the affairs of the household were to be managed by a woman as her 'duty' and so, she did not categorise her household chores under work. As a 'good' 'married woman', she carried out her unpaid household chores as her 'responsibility' without complaint.

These three different viewpoints of the participants highlighted in the section indicate towards the degree of internalization of the different patriarchal norms in the community which, in turn, dictates their perception on what constitutes 'work', and the (expectations of) aid received from different members in the household. The gendered expectations of the women in the household also spilled into our conversations surrounding monthly incomes. Rajani and Letchmi were the primary income earners in the household, but mentioned this to me in a hushed manner. When Letchmi's husband was around, she further downplayed the income figures as well. This stems from the underlying gendered expectation that the man has to be the breadwinner for the whole family, while the woman has to play the submissive role. In reality, many of the women in the tea estates earned more than their husbands, or were even the sole earners in their households. Moreover, they were not happy to share this picture with me, who is an outsider to their situation. Interestingly, it must be noted that Letchmi and Rajani did not hold higher bargaining or decision-making powers as a result of their higher incomes in their respective households.

3.6.4. Views Regarding the Estate Order

The workers considered their ability to work as their biggest asset as one, it affected their status of being a tea worker to be able to perform their physically demanding paid jobs, and two, without this asset, they will not be able to perform their work or earn an income, which would add on to their precarity. However, in the interviews with the tea workers, especially those who were older than 45 years and/or retired, it emerged that almost every one of them suffered from debt and health issues.

Besides the stigma associated with the estate jobs done by the women, part of the reason why the older women in the estates were reluctant to let younger women join the same job was because of these health issues associated with the job. In the in-depth interviews and group discussions, many of them complained about the lack of toilets and other facilities in the field resulting in vaginal infections. During the interviews, the women talked about other women who underwent hysterectomies. Women's health issues were not talked about openly during

the interviews; it was only implicit in many of the discussions. The creches were severely under-utilised as many young mothers withdrew themselves from the labour force, or joined the estate jobs or other kinds of jobs outside only after their kids started attending school[80]. Many older women also did not object to the younger women in their families joining the job after their children reached the school-going age. The idea of women bearing healthy children seemed to be important in the discussions with the older participants.

The most repeated health issues were related to the orthopaedic problems arising out of the repetitive shearing and carrying of heavy bags of tea leaves. There were also other health emergencies that cropped up from time to time based on their area of work in the hill sides, like snake bites and attack from wild buffaloes, boars etc, the cost of which were also borne by the women themselves.

Their financial precarity and health problems only seemed to worsen with the number of years that they spend in their job in the plantation. The issues that these permanent women workers faced are brought on not only the nature of their job itself, but are also compounded by the socially necessitated obligations of care-giving and financial aid, as well as their identities of gender, caste and 'migrant' workers.

As the tea estates constituted as both their spaces of residence and jobs, the women had mixed feelings regarding the estate and its internal order. Since the older generations of tea-pluckers were bound to the estate through their debts, they forced their children to drop out of schools to utilise their labour as well, reducing their odds of escaping from the space of the plantation. In this manner, while the newer generations are not bound to the estates in the same manner, they continue to work for low wages like their ancestors. One significant incentive for the newer generation of women workers to stay as permanent employees in the present day was the provision of housing, which keeps them rooted to the estates financially and emotionally. Even when they had alternate job opportunities, some of them did not want to relocate from the place; as Rajani said, it was difficult to imagine a life without those tea bushes around.

[80] During the fieldwork, I came across 4 young women who complained about how they were not allowed to join a job by their in-laws. These four women used to work earlier before their pregnancies, outside the estates in temporary jobs, but were forced to quit the jobs afterwards.

As the physical space of the line-houses served as their home to different generations of workers, the workers revere the jobs themselves that have sustained them and their ancestors. Vijayamma calls the tea hills, "a blessing that nurtured her and her family for all these years". This is an odd position considering that the ability to work or the demanding nature of the job that the workers criticised earlier take a backseat when it comes to evaluating the job itself. This was further complicated by the Company that acted the role of a 'benevolent patriarch' in their lives. The Company, for instance, provides yearly supplies of rice and tea estimated as needed for the whole household, as well as blankets and firewood, all mediated through the trade unions. While there is some subsidization in the price of rice, the rest of the supplies are, in fact, not freebies, and are deducted from the wages of the workers. Letchmi was the only respondent who knew how much these monthly instalments that were taken from the wages were, as she had more educational qualification than her counterparts. This facade of the 'kind' employer who "has been good to all and looks after them" (as Vijayamma reiterated), together with the reverence to their job, makes it very difficult for the workers here to come together for the problems that they suffer.

The women workers did not find the internal order in the estate problematic, as this was the way that things have always been there. While Vjayamma considered the men's job in the estates, even that of maintenance workers who worked in the same spaces, as more difficult than hers, Letchmi only thought that the supervisory posts required more skills and training and believed that she would be able to do the same one day. The respondents who engaged in tea-plucking have, thus, internalised the gendered and unequal structure of the estates, and conformed to their position at the bottom of the rung in the hierarchy.

The workers face added expenses in the form of social and family obligations, which cannot be fulfilled using their wages. Their wages barely cover their own essential expenses, including safety gear or the repairs that they make to their sacks which they use to collect the tea leaves. The workers continue to rely on their labour and work in their low-paid jobs to solve their financial woes, in the comfort of the knowledge that their hardships are contributing towards securing the future chances of their children and grandchildren. To the workers, it is a conscious decision that they make to continue with their jobs in the estates.

Here, one can safely conclude that the job hierarchy and the opinions of the women workers on the space of the plantation are overwhelmingly determined by non-monetary factors, including the patriarchal values of the society that they occupy. With almost no chance at

promotions, even for a qualified woman like Letchmi, they do not challenge the gendered order and division of labour within their spaces-both at the job site and inside their households. While there are financial and emotional reasons involved for the workers to continue in their strenuous jobs, which includes their feeling of belongingness in the line-houses that were occupied by the previous generations of their families, the thought of contributing to the improvement of the lives of their children seems to be the main motivating factor that sustains them in their routine hard work in the long run.

3.7. What does it mean to be a woman worker in the tea estates?

For the tea-pluckers in Munnar, how they view their job is often entangled with multiple non-economic factors, that it is both difficult and reductive to sketch a purely economic characterization of the same. However, if one must make an attempt of it, one important takeaway here is that the jobs in the tea plantations in Munnar have the rigid structures of a firm and the seasonal changes that are generally observed in agricultural jobs. There is a temporal element in describing the nature of work, for instance, regular working hours and extra time during the peak seasons, alongside the piece-rate system followed while fixing the wages for the day. The seasonal changes also demand the workers to be available for longer working hours, and thus, mandatorily stretch their absolute working day, regardless of their personal preferences. The job also has an element of uncertainty as the workers cannot predict the earnings from the work beforehand as there are a myriad of factors that determine the actual quantity of leaves plucked during a day. For instance, most women workers who were interviewed for the study did not know their precise wages for a day or even a month, which is a behaviour mostly associated with low-levels of education. However, this is mostly because of the different rules that are applied to the deduction in the weight of the leaves with the changes in the weather, more than ignorance on the part of the workers. And for the same reason, as weather conditions cannot be predicted beforehand, their earnings also vary from day-to-day, even when collecting the same quantity of leaves over different days in the same time period.

In describing the structure of the tea plantations, the tea-pluckers are at the bottom of the hierarchical order and theirs has become a women-only job. So, the question that needs to be asked here is, ‘how does a particular job becomes a woman’s work?’ The tea plantations, with their colonial history, have more-or-less remained the same in their overall structure. To answer the earlier question, one could argue that it is a case of simple path-dependent behaviour that

the women today continue to perform the jobs that were traditionally done by women workers. However, there is a slight difference in the way that the same has been characterised in the earlier days to the present times. If there was a celebration of the 'femineity' of the work done by the women in the past with the association of 'nimble fingers' and such that suited the description of the job, with the shearing technique that has been used in collecting tea leaves in the modern context, the same tea-plucking has come to be perceived as an 'unskilled' and 'easy' job that could be done by anyone. The chapter has laid out the many instances of this view of the job as being 'easy' and 'not difficult', from the trade union leaders and the men in the workers' households to even the women workers themselves who have internalised this perception. Both these contradicting perceptions of wanting a specific 'feminine' skill-set of 'nimble fingers' as essential to the labour process at the same time as calling it 'unskilled' are the two paths that lead to the same goal of characterising a job as suitable for women. However, it is interesting to note that there has been a switch in people's perception to the latter view more and more in recent times, particularly since the PO strike and its institutionalization. In this context, it should also be noted that social factors like caste and the perceived status of an 'outsider' matter a lot in gendering a job. This sort of 'construction' and 'assigning' gender to a particular kind of job is part of the larger process of devaluing the same and would remain unchanged even with the entry of men into these jobs to fill in the demand (see Standing 1999).

For the women workers who engage in tea-plucking in the estates of Munnar, their boundaries are blurred- between paid and unpaid work, and their spheres of domestic living and workplace. It is not easy for these workers to separate these different categories and view them dispassionately as, for most of the respondents that I talked with, they also have sentiments of nostalgia associated with these spaces that were occupied by multiple generations of their family. These spaces also bring a sense of comfort and security to the women here, as their marginal locations in the caste hierarchy and their status as 'others' and 'outsiders' in the larger society of the Munnar town do not enter inside the line-houses, or the hills of tea bushes. Thus, a tea plantation woman worker embodies these multiple facets and intersections of social identities, and so, every one of them requires attention in their plurality and cannot be made sense of in isolation.

CHAPTER- 4

Unpaid Household Labour and Household Space

The plantation space is different in many ways, as the workers also live in the houses allotted to them within the estate. While this practice was started by the colonial planters, as already suggested, to extract personal services post-decolonization, it was enforced as a social protection measure by the provisions of the PLA. While the planters have always been reluctant to bear the 'additional costs' of this arrangement, it also has been supremely beneficial to them. The workers have been readily available for them to expand the working day without much resistance from the side of the workers. This chapter tries to explore the interconnections between the jobsite and the household, the way each affects and shapes the other. As can be seen from the previous chapter, the women workers perform their paid work under the supervision and control of the vertical hierarchical order within the plantations marked by strict segregations based on sex. This chapter explores the household in a more detailed manner, yet another realm where the women workers are controlled by patriarchal interests. This chapter employs a Time-Use Survey to understand the working day of the women workers, which includes their paid and unpaid work.

Time-use surveys (TUS) measure how time is spent among various activities in a 24-hour period. The results of such an exercise helps in estimating the duration of each activity performed during the day, both paid and unpaid. There are mainly two methods of collecting data for TUS, either through self-reported time-diaries or through the recollection of the activities by the participant while answering a previously prepared questionnaire. The chapter adopts a modified approach which is arrived at by the combination of the two methods.

The main objectives of this chapter are – (i) to understand the time-use pattern of women tea estate workers, (ii) to analyse the allocation of tasks within the households in the broader context of social norms and economic status of the households and (iii) to understand how the everyday practices create gendered spaces within the household and outside.

4.1. Why Look into the Time Use Pattern of Workers in Munnar?

Although there are a number of studies related to tea workers in India and even within the context of Munnar, none of them have looked into the allocation of time and activities of workers by employing a TUS. In the tea estates of Munnar, where women workers constitute the majority in terms of numbers, it is important to look into the daily workload of these workers and the time allotted for it. In the estates where their living arrangements are in close proximity to their job-sites, one can find instances where women return home for lunch to finish up their chores at home. It is as though there is a continuum between the spaces of home and their jobsite, not just physically but also in terms of their flow of work.

In implementing TUS and assessing the time allocation for various activities over the period of a normal working day for a worker, one also stumbles on the data estimating the approximate number of tasks performed daily and the intensities of each type of activities. While the importance of unpaid work is generally underplayed in a patriarchal society, the respondents were surprised to find themselves engaged in a number of activities, far more than they have anticipated at the end of the study. With additional information arising from the context variables that are collected, like location of the activity, nature of the activity undertaken being paid or unpaid, whether any help was received for the competition of the task etc., TUS also delves deep into the nature and intensities of various activities performed, apart from just counting the number of tasks.

It has been noted in the literature[81] that women bear the brunt of an unequal distribution of unpaid activities at home. Societal values and internalisation of patriarchal beliefs impact on the degree and nature of the distribution of unpaid activities. In the context of the tea plantations, the gendered division of labour of work extends operates not only in the space of the formal job-site, but also in the households as well. The data from the TUS also helps to capture the extent of unequal distribution of unpaid chores, including care activities, in the workers' households. In addition, the results of the TUS also provide information regarding the gendered spaces created by the rhythms of the everyday.

[81] See Chapter 1.

4.1.1. A Concise Introduction to the History and Studies using TUS

Studies employing time diaries, which is a method used in TUS for collecting data, have been in place for more than a century. The earliest interests in time diaries were shown by the researchers of rural local administrative units of Russia (zemstvo) before 1900s to study the peasant households[82]. There were other soviet studies as well with varied objectives conducted in the early decades of the 1900s. In 1925, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) collected data from the time diaries of women, farm and town, to bring out the earliest surviving individual TUS data (Bauman, Bittman and Gershuny, 2019). After the1920s, the interest in TUS peaked in the US as the home-appliances revolution in the country completely changed the patterns of time-use at home. The unpaid work at home increased for women considerably with the introduction of these appliances as the standards of hygiene increased dramatically (Mokyr, 2000) along with the changes in the care activities associated with bringing up the children. American economist Kneeland's study in 1929 extended the USDA data to include time diaries of town and elite college-educated women to show the differences in time-use patterns (Bauman, Bittman and Gershuny, 2019).

Becker's work recognises the efficient allocation of time as an important element contributing to the utility maximization of the household. As mentioned earlier, his models were heavily critiqued later on for the reductionist approach they took on. However, his work acknowledges the importance of unpaid activities within the household which were earlier clubbed under the 'unproductive' category. Ester Boserup's account is another early work that looks into unpaid activities. Boserup (1970) notes the clear gendered aspects in the lop-sided allocation of such activities, both within the household and in the farm-related works. Over time, the importance of the contribution of unpaid activities to GDP has been recognised even within the mainstream economics. The measurement of unpaid activities has been clubbed with the regular socio-economic surveys in many countries, within the confines of the limitations of large quantitative surveys, to better understand the gendered dimensions of unpaid work.

The concept of time poverty is another strand of literature within economics that prompted the growth of studies using TUS. First coined by Vickery in 1977, time poverty, in the general sense of the term simply refers to the state of inadequate time for oneself in engaging in vital

[82] Bauman, Bittman and Gershuny (2019) makes this observation based on the work of Chayanov (1966) who had made use of such findings that were available for the period to note the different kinds of peasant works.

activities of personal care such as rest, sleep etc. Vickery (1977) tries to provide a measure of time required to process goods and services at home to reach a certain level of consumption of the household. In the trade-off between money and time, according to her study, a household would come under the category poor if it falls below a certain combination of the two. A number of works in the area of identifying leisure time and time poverty emerged after Vickery's contribution[83].

In an attempt to distinguish between being time-poor and the illusion of time-poor, Goodin et. al. (2005) differentiate between 'free' and 'discretionary' time. 'Free' time is identified as the actual time left after spending time on paid labour, unpaid labour and personal care, whereas 'discretionary' time is the residual time left for an individual after spending on the minimum necessary time for each of the activities – paid and unpaid labour and personal care (Goodin et al., 2005). According to the conclusions of the study, most individuals are only under the illusion of time-pressure as they spend more than necessary on one or more kind of activities as their discretionary time is not negative. Based on the Australian TUS data, the study proposes that single mothers are truly time poor with the negative discretionary time. While the distinction between the two kinds of residual time is an important contribution of this study, there are fundamental flaws in the definitions associated with identifying what is 'necessary time' for an activity. By loosely defining the necessary time for paid work as the amount of time absolutely essential to reach poverty-level incomes, the paper reduces its approach to absolute rather than relative measures in identifying the same. Where there is uncertainty regarding the availability of one's contractual paid work in the future (as in the case with a majority of Indian wage workers) or taking into consideration the outstanding financial debts of the family, an individual's 'necessary' paid labour time might be far greater than what is prescribed by that of the absolute measures. The same goes for other kinds of activities, for instance, the number of hours for taking care of a sick child is more than what is normally needed. Thus, spending more time on an activity may not be always out of 'choice' as argued by the authors.

Bardasi and Wodon (2010) makes an important differentiation between time poverty based on choice and out of need. The authors make two distinctions based on the number of paid work

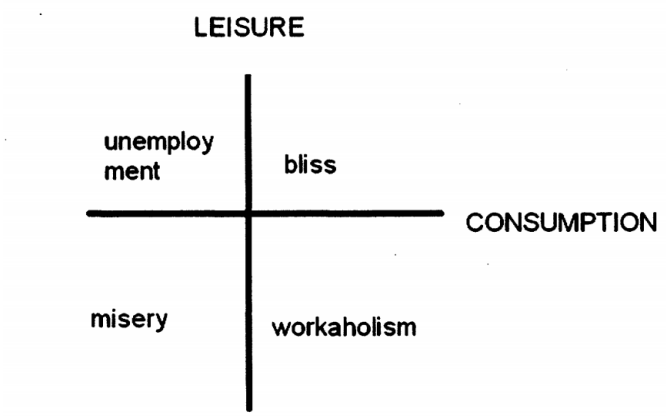
[83] For instance, see Bittman and Rice (2002), Folbre and Bittman (2004), Harvey and Mukhopadhyay (2007), Floro and Pichetpongsa (2010), Gammage (2010), Zacharias, Masterson and Kim (2014) etc. for an overview of various approaches utilising time-use data sets.

and unpaid hours. When an individual works for a greater number of hours than what is considered needed, the individual is considered time poor. However, when the individual works for more hours as a result of being in a poor household or risk falling below the poverty line if the number of paid hours is reduced, the authors then define that as a case of 'time and consumption' poverty. It has been noted that the households that belong to low-income category or who are 'consumption-poor' are also time-poor. As 'the alternative would be (even deeper) consumption poverty' (Bardasi and Wodon 2010), there is a compulsion to engage in longer working hours on both paid and unpaid activities. While the multi-dimensional nature of poverty is explored in the paper, a wider application of the same approach shall be severely constrained by the limitations of the choice of consumption poverty line measurements in various contexts.

A short piece by Folbre (2009) neatly summarises the various possible scenarios while juxtaposing consumption levels with time-use data. In this theoretical exercise, the simple category of leisure is taken as an indicator of the free time available after all other work. The two categories, consumption and leisure, are considered to be indicators of living standards. If at the origin, the median values of these two categories are considered, then the upper right-hand quadrant represents a region of 'economic bliss'. In this region, individuals enjoy greater than median values of both leisure and consumption levels. At the other end of the spectrum, represented in the third quadrant, is a region of 'misery' where individuals experience lower than median levels of both leisure and consumption. The fourth quadrant represents 'workaholism' where an individual could be enjoying greater than median value of consumption, but with less than median value of leisure. The time-pressure experienced by individuals in this quadrant could be 'out of choice'. In the second quadrant, individuals experience 'unemployment or underemployment' with greater levels of leisure and less than median consumption levels.

Figure 4.1. Juxtaposing Leisure, Consumption Levels and the Possible Combinations of Both[84].

[84] The figure is taken from Folbre (2009) pp 79. The origin represents the median values of both categories.



Besides the discussion on studies using TUS, this section also warrants a short introduction to the available data series that could be used for TUS. While many countries have been undertaking regular TUS, there are individual organisations also that undertake such activities on a large-scale. For instance, the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS) conducted by the Oxford University has the largest comparable TUS data with inputs from 26 countries that are collected over 85 surveys. In India, a large-scale TUS was undertaken once in 1998-99. The results from this single study have been used extensively to understand the time-use patterns of the consumption poor in the country. The next large-scale TUS was undertaken almost two decades later and the results were published in 2020. There are also micro-level studies employing TUS as a method in the Indian context as well. Swaminathan (2020) undertakes one such study to understand the time-use pattern of a sample of women workers in rural Karnataka, while Rao et. al (2021) provides useful qualitative insights into the time-use pattern as well as division of work observed among couples in rural Punjab.

4.2. Characteristics of the Households- Profile of the Respondents

To carry out the TUS, the sample of households was limited to 30 and were mostly restricted to those households with the availability of a second member who was willing to help out with the study[85]. While the time-diaries were filled up by the secondary member as and when the activities happened, the follow-up survey on the day's activities was conducted later, mostly within a two-days' period. To suit the convenience of the workers, the survey was conducted

[85] Three of the participants offered to fill up the diaries themselves. These three participants were much younger in age (all below the age of 32 years) and had completed school, thus being more educated than the other participants. Although they completed most of the entries themselves, more time was spent with them afterwards to check whether they had missed out any activities. During the peak season, the three workers had some help from kids in the neighbourhood to complete the entries.

after the job-hours, in the evenings, when they were relatively less busy. Women workers were found in their homes attending to the household chores after their longer job hours as tea pluckers[86], while most men were not available at home in the evenings. Men sometimes take up a secondary job after their first job as maintenance worker which ends at 1PM, or go to the market for the purchases in the household or simply remain outdoors spending time with various social circles. While men's activities were difficult to be traced by a second person within the same household, the broad patterns were shared while collecting the TUS data. Also, while discussing the participants' responsibilities within the households for a wide-range of activities, the list of activities shared by the spouse emerged as a by-product. While these broad patterns of work and time-use of men within the household have been discussed later[87], the focus of the TUS remains on the women workers for more precision regarding the details of activities within the household.

To carry out the TUS, the sample of households was limited to 30 and were mostly restricted to those households with the availability of a second member who was willing to help out with the study[88]. While the time-diaries were filled up by the secondary member as and when the activities happened, the follow-up survey on the day's activities was conducted later, mostly within a two-days' period. The earlier larger socio-economic survey gave an overall picture of the composition of the workers which gave the compass for the selection of participants. The selection was severely constrained by many factors- the willingness to participate and share details regarding the dynamics within the household, availability of the participants themselves after the job-hours and the presence of a secondary member to fill out the time diaries. By meeting the said constraints on the already interviewed 300 households eliminated most of the households available for TUS from the pool. The rest was selected according to purposive

[86] This is in comparison to other (men's) jobs in the estates like being a maintenance worker, a position of similar status in the job hierarchy within the estates.

[87] See section 4.8.

[88] Three of the participants offered to fill up the diaries themselves. These three participants were much younger in age (all below the age of 32 years) and had completed school, thus being more educated than the other participants. Although they completed most of the entries themselves, more time was spent with them afterwards to check whether they had missed out any activities. During the peak season, the three workers had some help from kids in the neighbourhood to complete the entries.

sampling to get as much diverse a smaller sample as possible in terms of household composition, age and caste of the participants.

The 30 workers selected for the TUS belonged to various age groups and caste categories. The percentage of younger workers, who are less than 30 years of age, is the least in all the categories (around 17 percent in the sample), reflecting a larger trend seen in the tea plantations. See Table 4.1 for a detailed break-up of participants according to age-group and caste composition. The youngest person in the survey was 23 years old who was married with two kids and belonged to the OBC category. Her sister-in-law who just completed her nursing diploma and stays with the family helped in filling out the details of the time-diary. The oldest participant of the survey was 54 years of age and also belonged to OBC category. In this case, the participant's daughter-in-law helped with the data entry. The retirement age for tea-pluckers in the estates is 58 years old. In the sample, participants belonged to the SC category the most (47 percent), followed by the OBC category (37 percent). Other Economically Backward Communities (OEC) had the least representation of about 17 percent.

Table 4.1. Profile of 30 Participants According to Caste and Age-group

Caste	**Age-group**				**Total**
	20-30	**30-40**	**40-50**	**50-58***	
SC	3	4	5	2	**14 (47)**
OBC	2	3	3	3	**11 (37)**
OEC	0	2	2	1	**5 (17)**
Total	**5 (16.67)**	**9 (30.0)**	**10 (33.33)**	**6 (20.0)**	**30 (100.0)**

Source: Field survey, 2017- 2019.

The figures in brackets represent percentage equivalent of various groups.

**58 is the retirement age for tea-pluckers.*

Most participants were married and lived with their spouses, except five – 3 of them were widowed, 1 was unmarried and another participant was separated from her spouse. The average household size was about 5.2 person per household in the sample. This figure does not vary significantly among the various caste categories. The average number of economically dependent members per household was about 2.5 persons. Among the 30 households chosen for the survey, about 6 households had members who were children of 10 years of age or below, 4 households with elderly members who were above 60 years and another 6 households which had both children and elderly. These 16 households demanded more care activities from the participants.

Regarding the educational qualification of the participants, most of them had not even passed 10th grade. Among the ones who had passed, all 6 of them were below 35 years of age. Only 2 had completed 12th grade and joined the job. The remaining participants have all had some years of schooling, except two participants. The participants above 50 years had the least number of years of schooling, with their maximum educational attainment capped at 5th grade. Taking the rest of the sample, most participants had completed their 7th grade[89]. The average number of years on the job was around 17 years, with modal values of the same reflecting a higher value of 25 years. The highest number of years working as a tea-plucker was about 32 years by a senior participant.

4.3. TUS Categories

This section explains the definitions of the broad categories of activities that were used in the TUS. Although the categories are borrowed from ICATUS 2016[90], the definitions of the terms discussed in this section have been modified to suit the field conditions.

The six main categories used in the current TUS were employment and related activities, unpaid domestic services for the household, unpaid care giving services to other members of the household, personal care and maintenance, leisure activities, community participation and religious participation. Most workers had the same number of hours spent on employment and

[89] Modal value of educational attainment for 24 participants was reflected to be 7th grade, whereas passing the 8th grade became the median value for the group.

[90] International Classification of Activities for Time Use Statistics 2016 released by the United Nations Statistics Division in February 2017.

related activities during the weekdays. This category also included the time spent on travelling, in this case walking, between the two sites of work – home and jobsite. In domestic services rendered, various unpaid but productive activities undertaken by the participant for the household were included – mainly cooking (including preparing the vegetables and/or meat/fish), cleaning, washing utensils and clothes, and other value adding activities outside the space of the household like collecting firewood, shopping for household consumption etc.

Although care services offered to other members in the household include a wide-range of activities, it was restricted to explicitly include the time taken to attend to the needs of the members of household who are 10 years or below and/or elderly members who are above 60 years of age. Although there were many houses which had children above 10 years, the care activities that were reflected in the schedules of the participants were more for those with younger children. If there was any explicit mention of tending to a sick child (above the age of 10) or any other member of the family, that was also included. As many care activities like cooking and washing clothes often came under the general chores undertaken for all members of the household, these were included in the category of domestic work. The kind of care activities observed in the TUS included feeding children, help with handing out the medicines and applying medicinal oils on aching limbs of the elderly etc. The quantitative approach followed has limitations in capturing the extent of emotional support offered by the women workers to other members in the household, which is definitely not a small task and has important bearings on the well-being of the participant and other members.

In personal care and maintenance, activities like sleeping, eating and drinking, personal hygiene and care were included. The main leisure activity observed among participants was viewing television. Community participation among participants included social visits to friends and family, participating in meetings, the common instance being that of Kudumbashree meetings on Sundays. Religious participation observed among few members was also restricted to Sundays as well.

Multi-tasking of activities was a common occurrence with all the participants. It was not uncommon to see a list of activities mentioned for a single time-interval of half an hour. I have resorted to taking the quantum of time spent on each of these activities as a relative measure. To illustrate, if a participant were to be attending to three activities in the same time-slot of 30 minutes, say cooking dinner, attending to a young child, and watching television, I divide the time equally among the three activities. Ideally, it should have been divided according to the

weights assigned to each of these activities. However, further clarification on which activity required more time and attention seemed to be a difficult information to obtain from the secondary members who filled in the time-diaries and even from the participants themselves in the follow-up interviews. Resorting to using equal weights was the best option available to understand the time-use pattern of the participants.

In dividing the time equally among multi-tasked activities, one can only know an approximation of the actual time spent on each of these activities. Additionally, there could also be a downward bias in the time spent on each activity. Going back to the previous example, assigning 10 minutes for each of the three activities could have been a serious under-cutting of the time-spent on each of the activities. For instance, a participant could have been feeding her kid with snacks and cutting vegetables for dinner, all while watching the television in the background. All three activities would have required the whole 30 minutes, instead of the 10 minutes assigned. Alternatively, if I were to assign the whole 30 minutes to each of the multi-tasked activities, then the total number of working hours of a participant shall definitely exceed 24 hours due to the numerous multi-tasked activities performed each day! While going through the results of TUS, therefore, one must keep in mind that the attempt at TUS is only aimed at providing a broad picture of the time-use patterns.

4.4. TUS Results for a Weekday

The statistics of time-use pattern observed for a weekday both in normal (non-peak/ off-season) and peak seasons are compared in this section.

Table 4.2. TUS Results for the Weekday for Both Seasons

Description of Activities	**Time-use Values for Normal Period**		**Time-use Values for Peak Season**	
	Mean	**Median**	**Mean**	**Median**
Economic and Related Activities	8.75	8.75	10.50	10.50
Unpaid Domestic Services	4.10	3.94	2.90	2.75

Care Services*	1.14	1.92	0.80	1.21
Personal Care and Maintenance	8.73	8.75	8.88	8.75
Sleep**	6.92	7.00	6.57	6.50
Leisure Activities	1.28	1.23	0.93	0.88

Source: Field survey data (2017-2019) and subsequent calculations from it.

**Values for Care Services are reflective of the entire sample of 30 households and not just the 16 households which had elderly members and/or young children.*

***Sleep is a sub-category within personal care and maintenance.*

The category economic and related activities reflected more or less the same pattern for time-use data for all the participants in a given period. As it has been mentioned earlier, this category also includes the commutation to and from the place of economic activity. It should be noted that the time taken for tea breaks in the mid-mornings and afternoons during the job, for 15 minutes each, has been deducted from the overall 8 hours of work recorded in the normal period and has been added in the category of personal care. In the peak season, the participants recorded an increase in the time spent on economic activity by an average time of 1 hr and 45 minutes.

The unpaid domestic services took an average time of 4 hr and 6 min to be completed in a household, while it the value was shown to be significantly lesser during the peak season, an average of 2 hours and 54 min. The median values were lower than the average time taken by 10 min and 9 min for normal and peak seasons respectively. One of the reasons for the lower average time taken for this category during the peak season was because participants spent lesser time on household chores during the lunch break. Participants skipped coming home during the lunch hour, almost in half the cases, as they were assigned to farther off areas for harvesting leaves. Secondly, since the workload was already high for the peak season, the participants also tried to push those chores which could be postponed to the weekend, when they did not have their paid work. A third reason was an increased participation of other members of household in completing domestic chores during these months that had reduced the burden for the participants. However, it should be noted that this was not a uniform

incidence and it was most clearly found in larger households[91]. Even though one observes a lesser time spent on the domestic services during the peak season, the same cannot be said for the intensity of the household work experienced by the workers. They expressed worrying about completing their household chores on time during the period in the interviews. Simplifying the nature of their housework, like making simpler dishes at home and postponing activities like washing etc, along with an increase in multi-tasking of activities had been their solutions to their worries of time management in the peak season.

The mean values for the care services have a downward bias as a result of the way the category of care services in the household has been defined[92]. As there was no mention of sick members who required tending to in any of the households during the days of the survey, this category automatically was restricted to only those 16 households with elderly members and/or young children. The average time spent on care services in these 16 households was around 2 hr and 6 min during the normal season, and about 1.5 hours during the peak season. There was an increased participation from the other members of the household during the peak season in childcare activities.

Participants spent about 8 hr and 44 min, on an average, in an off-peak season for self-care and about 9 min more for the same in the peak season. This value includes the time taken for sleep as well, for which the average time spent went down by 21 minutes to reflect a mean value of 6 hr and 34 min in the peak season. However, the spending the lunch hour at the job-site itself for almost half the participants had increased time spent on themselves. The priorities of domestic chores come into the fore while the participants went back home during the lunch break. Only approximate values were available for this category as workers and observants who filled up the time-diaries did not keep an exact record of how much time was spent on various personal care activities, except sleeping. The values for this category had been arrived only after the interviews with the workers.

Workers spent, on an average, about 21 min more on leisure activities during off-season. The median values for time spent on leisure activities were much lower than the mean values and stood at 1 hr 14 min and 53 min for normal and peak seasons respectively. Watching

[91] See section 4.9. for a discussion on the general division of chores among household members.

[92] See earlier section for a discussion on this and for viewing the break-up of the households according to the presence of elderly members and/or young children.

programmes on television was the main activity that was recorded for leisure among the participants. The activity was rarely ever done alone, apart from other domestic and/or care services in the households.

4.5. TUS Results – Sunday

The time-use pattern observed on Sunday, the off-day from the primary economic activity, was entirely different from the weekday patterns. For most participants, it was the day for completing a number of domestic chores that were postponed from the weekday schedule, especially during the peak season. The table below shows the time-use data for Sunday that emerged from the survey.

Table 4.3. Comparison of TUS Results for Normal and Peak Seasons

Description of Activities	**Normal Period**		**Peak Season**	
	Mean	**Median**	**Mean**	**Median**
Economic and Related Activities	0.67	0.0	0.0	0.0
Unpaid Domestic Services	8.76	8.9	9.4	9.3
Care Services	2.21	2.6	2.4	3.5
Community and Religious Participation	1.20	0.0	0.9	0.0
Personal Care and Maintenance	8.58	8.5	8.5	8.5
Sleep**	7.02	7.0	6.9	7.0
Leisure Activities	2.59	2.5	2.8	2.7

Source: Field survey, 2017-2019.

***Sleep is a sub-category within personal care and maintenance.*

Unpaid domestic services occupied the most of the time during a Sunday for the participants. On an average, this took up about 8 hr 46 min during the normal period and about 38 min more during the peak season. As it can be seen from the table, the median values calculated for both the periods in this category were higher than the mean values. The median values stood at 8 hr

54 min and 9 hr 18 min for normal and peak seasons respectively. As mentioned earlier, this category included all unpaid productive domestic activities that are undertaken for the household, for which the location of the activity may not necessarily be within the household itself. Undertaking purchases for the household and gathering firewood are examples of such activities located outside the household itself. Even when these activities located outside the household were excluded, a woman worker spent an average of 7 hr and 46 min during normal period and about 8 hr and 31 min within the household itself attending to various domestic services. During the peak season, no one had reported to gathering wood outside. During the normal period, this activity was only recorded among 4 women, who were 45 years of age or above.

Time spent on care services was 2 hr and 13 min during the normal period and about 11 min more during the peak season. If accounting only for the 16 household that had dependent members who demanded more services, elderly and/or children, the average time spent on care services went up to 4 hr and 12 min during normal period and 4 hr and 26 min during peak season. The time spent on care activities by women in these 16 households was at least more than double than that was recorded on weekdays.

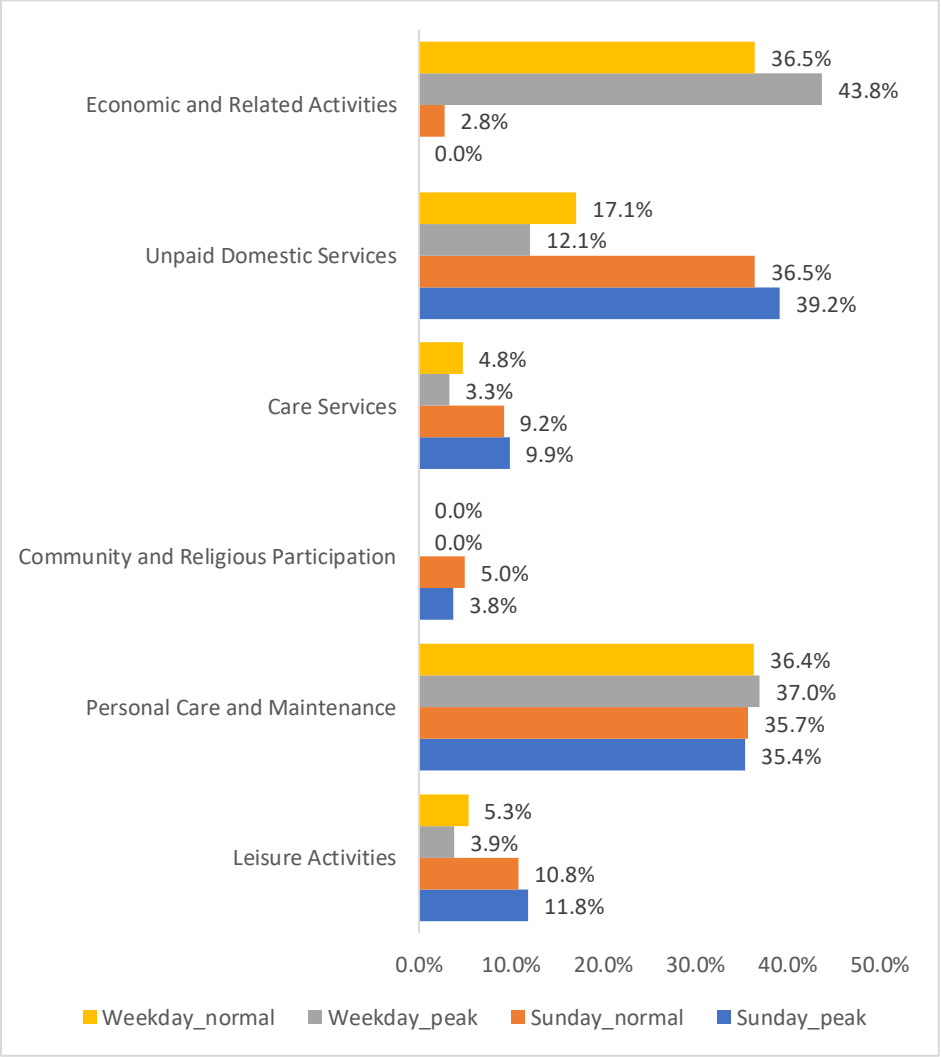
Participating in religious activities and other social meetings took an average time of about an hour and 12 min during normal period and about 18 min less during peak season. 7 of the participants had attended local level Kudumbasree meetings on Sunday (normal period) during the time of the survey. Since these meetings were scheduled according to the convenience of the attending members, they were mostly avoided during the peak season. Only 3 participants, all below the age of 40, had reported paid work on Sunday in the normal period. They reported and average of 6 hr and 40 min for the contract job they had secured for the day. None of them reported work on Sunday in the peak season.

Average time taken for personal care and maintenance, on the whole, remained almost the same during both the periods at roughly about 8.5 hours. However, the time taken for sleep had reduced for the participants on an average by about quarter of an hour in the peak season. Time spent on leisure activities was higher on Sunday than during weekdays. It stood at around 2 hr 36 min during normal period and about 12 min more in the peak season.

4.6. To Sum up

In summing up this section on the TUS results, it would be interesting to look at how much time, on an average, each of these activities took proportionately in the duration of a day during various seasons. The chart below summarises, in percentage terms, the average time taken for each of the major categories of activities during weekday and Sunday for both the periods.

Figure 4.2. Time Spent Across Various Activities



Source: Field Survey, 2017- 2019.

The paid economic and related activities took most time 36.5 percent and 43.8 percent of a weekday, on an average, during the normal and peak seasons respectively. On Sundays, while unpaid domestic services occupied the most time for the participants, there was a notable increase in the proportionate time spent on care services in both the periods. While the graph

demonstrates the larger patterns of time-use that was observed among the participants, the next section throws light on some of the details regarding these patterns which had emerged during the interviews.

4.7. On Time-use Patterns

Although each participant had a unique distribution of her time over various activities, there were some commonalities that could be drawn from the patterns. This section attempts to paint a broad picture of how a typical day looks like, qualitatively, for the women tea workers in Munnar.

The day starts very early for the women workers in the tea plantations. Each day, the assigned plot of tea estate for plucking changes for the workers, but mostly these sites are within a half-an-hour distance to reach by foot and women workers start walking towards their site by at least 7:30 AM from their homes. During the peak seasons of harvest, they leave home as early as 6 AM. The men who work along with them on these sites on maintenance jobs leave homes only much later as they mostly cycle to work. Regardless of the time they start for work, women workers experience comparatively busier mornings at home than their spouses. Letchmi, a 26-year-old worker with two children aged 5 and 8, narrates her morning routine on weekdays thus:

> *"The mornings are a struggle. I have to cook two meals, clean the house and get my children ready for school before I leave for work. Even though I wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning every day, I hardly manage to get time to eat my breakfast."*

Most respondents reported that they multi-task between chores to finish preparing both breakfast and lunch for the entire family, while attending to the care needs of the children and elderly family members, if present. Women workers have lunch break for an hour and most of them try to make it home during that period, if their worksites are nearby. On other days, when they are assigned to far-off locations of the tea estate for plucking, they carry their lunch along with them. In any case, when they manage to come home, they get less than half an hour after walking back and forth from the site. Most workers prefer going home rather than packing their lunches as they would get some extra time to tend to a few chores at home even for that short duration. Latha, who is 42 years old, explains why she likes to go home for lunch even though she manages to get only about twenty minutes at home:

"It is not for the lunch primarily that I go home during the noon-break. I have other things to attend to. I reheat or finish cooking the meal which I prepared in the morning. The house must be in a mess after everyone has left in the morning and I try to tidy up the place a bit. After I finish eating my lunch quickly and wash some of the vessels, I leave home immediately even before my husband arrives after his work. But I make sure that I keep his lunch hot and ready on the table before I leave."

The close proximity between the job-sites and houses translate to women workers being 'expected' to go back to their homes for lunch. And for most of the women respondents, going home for lunch meant being engaged in some tasks at home as well. It looked like they tirelessly transition between one site to the other only to continue working in both the places.

In the afternoons, they continue working on the job site until 5 PM. They reach home mostly a little after 5:30 PM. Having a cup of tea after work is a commonly observed practice among all the participants and they mostly try to sit, at least till they finish their tea, after their long day of work. With houses quite nearby in the lines, this is also the time they catch up with the neighbours. However, even during this time, most of them were observed to be attending to 'light' works like filling up water for use in the house with water hoses from the shared common pipe, attending to children's needs etc. Cooking dinner for the family is the most important job for them in the evenings. Although in the evenings do not have the pressure of the morning rush, the participants mostly multi-task to finish their household chores. Even while watching television, they are either cooking their meals or attending to care activities. As such, there were not many periods of quality time spent for themselves to relax and unwind after their physically demanding work at job and home.

In the peak seasons, shearing leaves for long hours leave them exhausted. They try to reduce the domestic chores as much as possible, making their Sundays busy with work. The other members of larger households, especially other women members, also pitch in to share the workload during weekdays in the peak seasons. The responsibility of childcare gets increasingly distributed among members of the household, irrespective of the size of the household, during the peak periods. That is also one of the few responsibilities which is shared by men. Mercy, 53, talks about her load of domestic work during peak seasons thus:

"I always get body aches from carrying higher loads of tea leaves during these months. When I get home, I end up making only kanji[93] for the family. Thankfully, these days my daughter-in-law is there to help me with all the domestic work. She does most of the housework during these months when I need to rest more after coming home. But on Sundays, I am in-charge of cooking non-vegetarian meals for the family."

Like in Mercy's case, most households cook elaborate meals on Sunday, which mostly includes preparing non-vegetarian dishes. Sundays are busy days for women in the estate around the year, catching up on all the chores that were postponed during the week. Washing clothes, detailed cleaning of the house, household purchases that could be postponed – all get pushed to Sundays regularly. This is also the day when women visit Munnar town, if they need to go. All the shops and even workers cooperative banks are open on Sundays in Munnar as they get the most visits during the weekends, starting from Saturday afternoons. All activities and meeting related to trade unions and Kudumbasree are also held during the weekend. During the peak season, however, most women workers end up staying at home itself, trying to finish the household chores.

4.8. Some Observations on Time-Use Patterns of Men in Households

As mentioned earlier, it was difficult to trace the time-use data of men in the family in detail and hence the TUS was restricted to women workers. However, a very broad pattern could be discussed to get a better idea of the time-use of the entire household. In the 30 households interviewed, men either worked within the estates or outside. The most common job within the estate for men (in 7 out of 30 households) is that of maintenance worker, whose main job involves attending to the tea plants – spraying pesticides, pruning the bushes etc. Two of them also worked as drivers for the same company in the estates itself, driving the trucks that carry the harvested leaves at noon and at the end of the working day. The others who worked outside had a variety of jobs – drivers for other shops/ persons, plumbers, electricians, shop-keepers, helpers in shops, construction workers, auto-rickshaw drivers etc.

For a maintenance worker, the job starts at 8 AM and ends at 1PM in the estates. After that they come home and eat lunch, which in most cases must have already been prepared by women

[93] The term means rice porridge. The underlying meaning conveyed by Mercy in the sentence is that the rice porridge is usually accompanied by other dish(es), and that making 'kanji' alone is a very simple meal that is avoided when she has better health and more time at hand.

in the household and rest for the afternoon, if there is no errand to run or a secondary job that starts soon after. After their evening tea, which may be even before the women return from their work, they start from home for their second job, if they have any. Even otherwise, they leave the house after the women reach back, to go to the main town of Munnar or some nearby place, if the town is too far from their respective estates. There are many reasons for these visits – selling milk in the cooperatives (if they own cows or buffaloes), household purchases, trade union meetings, both official and unofficial etc. While most of these visits contribute to unpaid domestic services and some even generate a secondary source of income for the household, there is also a component of social interaction with others outside the household in these visits. Socialising with others, outside the immediate neighbourhood of their house-line, is an important everyday activity for most men, working within and outside the estates. A lot of jobs for men in the households, have variable time-shifts in working. They adjust their day accordingly to accommodate these shifts and try to squeeze in a socialising time, according to their convenience. This could be considered a privilege enjoyed by men in the community as most women in the survey could not leave their homes even on Sundays when they have chores to attend to.

4.9. Intra-household Dynamics: Distribution of Unpaid Work and Decision Making

Within the household, the distribution of unpaid domestic work and other activities were lopsided, with most of the responsibilities falling on the women in the household. The following table shows how some of the main categories of unpaid domestic services are distributed within the households among various members. This was arrived at using the additional information provided by the context variables in the time-diary and the subsequent interviews with the participants. In all the categories, majority of the participants completed their domestic works alone. The most likely case of receiving assistance from another member was from another woman member present in the household, most likely a daughter or daughter-in-law, if present in the house. The category of others in the table reflects the category of sister or sister-in-law present in the household.

Table 4.4. Distribution of Unpaid Domestic Services[#] among Household members.

Household Member(s)*	Activity

	Cooking	Cleaning the House	Washing Clothes	Washing Vessels	Purchases (Weekly)
Self	14	11	16	13	9
Husband	0	5	0	0	7
Self and Husband	1	0	0	2	8
Daughter/Daughter-in-law	1	2	8	7	0
Mother/Mother-in-law	0	2	2	1	2
Self and Daughter/ Daughter-in-law	9	8	2	3	0
Self and Mother/Mother-in-law	3	0	1	2	3
Self and Others	2	2	1	2	1

Source: Field survey, 2017- 2019.

#The main categories of unpaid domestic services are alone mentioned here in the table.

**The relations to the members described in the has been taken from the view-point of the participants of the TUS, the women tea-pluckers.*

A husband present in the household helped the most in making purchases from the market on a weekly basis. The number of men who took-part in cooking is low as it includes everyday cooking only, not the occasional help provided at home which was sited in some of the individual interviews[94]. Childcare is a category where most husbands pitched in, especially during the peak period. It has merged from the interviews that sons did not help out much with the main categories of domestic work. They mostly helped in smaller activities like filling the

[94] When asked further on the kind of assistance received for cooking, the respondents later clarified it was either occasional cooking of a whole dish or part of it.

water in the vessels from the common pipe the households share using a water hose, lend a hand in looking after the younger children in the house when others are not present etc.

With regard to decisions regarding on various household issues, the participants had more authority over comparatively smaller purchases and expenses. For instance, in deciding what to purchase for the household for the week (or even for a lesser duration at times) and allotting the budget limit for it, the participants had a greater say in the matter, 67 percent decided on the matter alone. However, in deciding the durable assets for the households (furniture, television, vehicle etc), decisions were made by the husband or others, if the husband was absent from the households (in 5 out of 30 households, the participants did not have a husband living with them). However, it should be noted that the frequency of purchase of such assets was very less and none of the women in the survey decided on purchasing such assets alone. Other members who helped in deciding regarding such purchases were the sons present in the house and in two cases the elderly in-laws present in the household.

Table 4.5. Participation of Various HH Members in Decision-making

Who Decides?*	**Decisions Regarding****					
	Weekly Purchases for HH	**Purchase of HH Assets**	**Own Job**	**Husband's Job**	**Savings**	**Borrowing from Various Sources**
Self	20 (66.67)	0	18 (60.00)	2 (08.00)	11 (36.67)	5 (16.67)
Husband	5 (16.67)	16 (53.33)	5 (16.67)	16 (64.00)	9 (30.00)	19 (63.33)
Both	5 (16.67)	7 (23.33)	3 (10.00)	6 (24.00)	6 (20.00)	3 (10.00)
Others	0	7 (23.33)	4 (13.33)	1 (04.00)	4 (13.33)	3 (10.00)

Source: Field Survey, 2017- 2019.

**The relations to the members described in the has been taken from the view-point of the participants of the TUS, the women tea workers.*

*** Figures in parenthesis represent percentage equivalent of the values.*

With regard to decisions on one's own job – availing leave, availing extra provisions from the company etc – 60 percent of the participants decided alone. However, it should be noted that in all the 25 households where the husband of the participant was present, the response to the question 'who handles the money in the house?' was the husband. Around 6 of the participants even admitted to their husbands collected the money for the both of them together from the company, even though it is a practice discontinued by the company, at least on paper. More than half of the participants did not know the exact amount of money in various reductions, including the amount paid back for the repayment of loans taken from the worker's cooperative society, from the gross amount of the wages[95]. In many cases, the husband or any one of the kids helped with cross-checking the calculations of the wages. On the other hand, most participants had little role in making decisions regarding their husband's work.

With regard to household savings, the participants had a bigger say in the matter. This was because most of the households considered purchasing gold as their main savings option. It was a common practice for the households to pawn their gold with the local money lenders, or financiers as they are locally known, when there is a shortage of money. Besides, owning gold ornaments is considered as a status symbol and the participants mostly had a say in deciding the pattern and make of their ornaments. As it can be seen from the table, in around 30 percent of the households, even various decisions related to purchase of gold was made by the husbands of the participants.

Eighty percent of the respondents could not remember their household being out of debt for as long as they could remember. Important decisions regarding borrowing from various sources are made in almost every household in the estate. Men were generally considered to be better-informed on matters of borrowing by most respondents. In those women-headed households, matters were consulted with either sons or other relatives, mostly men, regarding these options even if the final decision was made by themselves. Out of the 5 women who independently made decisions to borrow by themselves, 3 households were headed by women.

These results contradict a little with even some of the feminist theorisations of bargaining power within the households. Although some of the feminist interpretations have been far superior in capturing the essence of intra-household relations when compared to some of the

[95] Since the wages vary from month to month, 12 participants did not even remember their previous month's total wages.

neo-classical theorisations of it (see Becker's (1981) comparative advantage reasoning in maximising the joint utility function of the household) or even some of the Marxist interpretations of the household which characterises it as feudal (see Fraad, Resnik and Wolff 1994), these are sometimes inadequate to capture real-world complexities. For instance, Kabeer (1999) talks about the access to resources that provide an important entry point for understanding women's bargaining power within the households. However, even being the main income-earners in a majority of the households, women workers in the study did not have a major say in the decision-making process within the households. As articulated by Agarwal (1997), there are many external factors that determine the woman's bargaining position within the household[96]. While the conditions have been different, the theorisation opens up the boundaries of the household to be influenced by external factors, which is closer to the observed reality here. In the particular case of the plantation household, the time-poor women workers, who are burdened with multiple boundaries imposed by their marginalised identities, are also guided by the logic of the plantation patriarchy where the men in the spheres of both paid and unpaid work have an upper hand in controlling the various aspects of their lives.

4.10. Concluding Observations

While the previous chapter dealt with the gendered hierarchy of the plantation as a jobsite, the current chapter began with a discussion on the household as a gendered space that is constructed within the boundaries of the plantation. This provides an important anchor to contextualise the time poverty of the women workers outside their paid working hours, inside the tea estates.

The findings of the time-use survey reveal how the gendered expectations of performing household work falls on the shoulders of the women in a very lopsided manner. While similar stories may be heard of in lower income category households across different sectors, what is interesting about the stories of the women workers in the tea estates of Munnar is the discernible variation in the pattern when it comes to the peak season. The women workers had more time for their personal care during the peak seasons, mostly because they did not come home to finish their chores during their lunch-breaks. As it was mentioned in the chapter, lunch-breaks

[96] Agarwal (1997) lists out a set of diverse factors that affect the intra-household bargaining power apart from access to employment – access to private resources (arable land in the rural setting) and communal resources (village commons), support of caste and kinship ties, support of the state, external agencies like NGOs, social norms, altruistic behaviour and so on (pp 8-9).

were not about having their meals, but about finishing their pending household chores. While the women tea-pluckers almost entirely performed all the major household activities of cooking, cleaning, taking care of the elderly, children and other dependent members of the family, even completing shopping, banking and other transactions outside the space of their residence on their off days, these dynamics change during the busy peak season, when the husband and other members of the family pitch in to take a larger share of the household responsibilities. In many ways, it shows that the gendered division of labour in the household is not fixed in a given way, and if anything, the women's condition of being time poor in most days around the year is avoidable, if the male family members chose to do their part. This shows that the families of the women workers mostly understand the demands of the job, but do not acknowledge the same outwardly, as it would inconvenience them otherwise. One can read this as a reluctance to accept the importance of paid work performed by the women outside the domestic sphere of the household, or the idea that the women workers may even be the primary income earners, in fear of tipping the scales in favour of the women in the existing norms of their intra-household power dynamics. This is also the reason behind the oft-repeated narrative in the field that the husbands of the women workers handled the money, or even collected their wages on behalf of them.

This resistance to 'giving' more power to the women is also visible in the process of decision-making inside the household. The women have more say in the purchase of small commodities, but the men are involved in the purchases of the more expensive commodities like gold. This was also observed in the previous chapter, where the husbands and the in-laws had more say in the decision of the women to formally enter the job of tea-plucking in the estates. The women workers see these dynamics as 'normal', and follow the same as their 'duties' as 'good wives and women'.

One more notable observation that came up in this chapter is the fact that cooperative societies operated by the trade unions and other commercial establishments stayed open on Sundays. This cannot be dismissed as an inconsequential event here, as it is quite rare to see, if at all, a formal lending establishment to stay open during a Sunday. In a town where most individuals in other jobs can take time off to finish their banking or other financial activities, this points to the significance that these institutions accorded to the workers of the tea estates, for whom it is not possible to take time off on a normal weekday. Capital bends and accommodates its ways according to the social relations of the space that it occupies.

Thus, the women workers in the tea estates of Munnar were doubly burdened with the expectations of work in their paid work of tea-plucking, as well as the unpaid labour they performed in their households, and were found to be extremely time poor, with little or no time for their personal use or leisure activities. In spite of the amount of work they performed in their everyday, they were also resource-poor, with little or no say in the important decisions that were made by the family. The women workers, however, managed their work by negotiating with their many layers of constraints, which is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Plantation Space and Negotiations

As the previous two chapters elaborate on the paid and unpaid work of the tea estate workers, this chapter attempts to provide a detailed view of their everyday lives by adding a third component, their everyday negotiations with the restrictive spaces. Before addressing the negotiations of the workers, the chapter first characterizes the plantation space itself, trying to place it in the present context. Unpacking the complex layers of the plantation space – that simultaneously act as an enclave while being connected to the outside world and which appears to have a foot in the colonial past while always changing – is necessary to understand the impact it has on the everyday lives of the workers and how they try to negotiate with it.

The chapter is divided into three broad sections. The first section addresses some of the theoretical underpinnings of the term 'negotiation' itself. The second section focuses on the space of plantations and tries to find an answer to the question, 'how has it been reproduced in the modern context?' How the plantation space continues to marginalize the workers at the lowest rung of the hierarchical order even further, and how it latches on to non-economic parameters to become an alienating space are also explored here. A related theme that is discussed here is the role of state in the context of the plantation space and everyday lives of workers. The third section operationalises the concept of negotiations, and deals with the negotiations of the workers in the space of the plantation- inside the gendered space of their households, the different ways and strategies through which they tackle the issues that arise from their work, including Pembilai Orumai as a labour union, as well as their informal social ties in the neighbourhood and among relatives used to combat time crunches, manage tasks, achieve their personal goals, or even merely acquire information.

5.1. Everyday Negotiations

Getting along every day is no easy task, especially for the women plantation workers who are resource- and time-constrained, along with other social factors which do not particularly work in their favour. They perform an array of actions, which includes passive actions, to help them navigate their everyday. I term these different types of actions collectively as negotiations. Negotiations are very much a part of their everyday lives, just as paid and unpaid works form

crucial components of the same. The term 'negotiations' is a derivative of other well-established concepts in the literature, and it is therefore, imperative to have at least a cursory discussion of these earlier concepts before delving into the details of how the term is operationalised in this thesis.

5.1.1. Agency and Empowerment

There is no dearth of literature covering the concepts of agency and empowerment, pitched from various angles and contexts. Consequently, numerous definitions of the same concepts also exist, conveying various shades and layers of meaning. One of the most widely-quoted definition is the one proposed by Sen (1985) as "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important" (206). Agency is linked to 'well-being' and 'freedom', and is instrumental in 'bringing about personal and societal change'[97]. Kabeer (2008) addresses this third component as the one that leads agency to empowerment, especially when it involves questioning and challenging the existing regressive norms and institutions. Following Sen's definition, there is a rich body of research linking agency and women's empowerment and using indicators of empowerment to measure agency as well as for comparative purposes between individuals and countries[98]. While there are differences in the various approaches regarding the measurement of empowerment and agency, one of the critical elements underlying both is that of choice. The choice elements within the agency have been nuanced in Alkire's (2008) take on it by adding layers of complexities, like those of choosing actions or values that may benefit only others' well-being or by including the case of effective power[99]. However, even while these dimensions are included, there remains the question of choice and freedom exercised by an individual when they run out of options. This is especially true of the economically disadvantaged individuals. Kabeer (2008) addresses this issue when she proposes that an increase in the resource base or access to resources lead to an expansion of agency and achievements. However, there could be instances where access to resources may not lead to an increase in agency or mark empowerment

[97] See Alkire 2007.

[98]See Kabeer 1999; Alkire 2002; Ibrahim &Alkire 2007

[99] Effective power is where a group influences or makes the choice of achieving a particular goal no matter what the individual chooses, making their choices (in the ordinary sense) redundant. Alkire has based her argument on Sen (1985) to arrive at the component of effective power. See Alkire, 2008 for a detailed discussion.

indicators as described in a lot of these studies like the results of household decision-making process in the previous chapter[100]. Even the choice to not engage in a paid work or move out of a job or the choice to not do unpaid work may not exist in the real world as there could be constraints restricting or even expectations of gender roles for the individuals to perform. Thus, while exercising a choice, it may be laced with elements of coercion and compromise, depending on the context. This discussion is not to dismiss the concept of agency altogether, but to read into the success stories of agential behaviour and empowerment with a pinch of salt.

5.1.2. Everyday Resistance

James Scott's work provides an understanding of challenging the hegemony from the below. His ideas were influenced by E. P. Thompson who also did not believe in an uncontested hegemony by the poor. Thompson (1978) argues about how the hegemonic discourse is in a constant state of flux with the pressures exerted from below.

Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) discusses about protests or resistance that are not large-scale, based on his observations of peasant resistance in a village undergoing the effects of 'Green Revolution' in Malaysia. The simple acts of engaging in gossips, rumours and slanders, feigned ignorance, false compliance, foot dragging while on work, pilfering, etc. act as everyday resistance (Scott 1985, pg xvi). The cloak of anonymity provides a shield while resorting to many of these forms of resistance, giving the oppressed safer channels to express their discontent. These acts do not require as much planning and coordination as the large-scale revolutionary protests, but requires a tacit understanding between the resisters. These forms of resistance do not openly challenge authority. Scott even mentions the cases of magical aggression and spirit possession that are forms of outbursts against the dominant class and uses the elements of magic as a shield in protecting the persons engaging in it (See Scott 1990). In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott further discusses about these resistances that are sometimes not-so-anonymous and uses the popular culture to express discontent. He

[100] Another example to elucidate the same argument is to consider a case where two individuals have comparably equal access to resources in the same locality, like the same income level or have ownership of an equal area of land etc. Going by the argument of an expansion of resource base leading to an increase in agency for the individuals to choose or have the power to choose options for themselves resulting in a greater level of empowerment also means that having the same level of resources should indicate an equal level of empowerment. However, in the example, these individuals may not have the same level of agency to exercise certain options or any other measurable indicators, leading to different levels of empowerment.

notes the use of oral tradition or even popular tradition of the oppressed that would have hidden subtexts or even a different meaning ascribed to it compared to the official (elite) interpretation. He even ropes in the examples of carnivals and festivals where the local culture is relied on to invert the order of things that are normally practiced.

While everyday resistance covers a whole range of techniques resorted to while confronting the authority indirectly, it normally does not include what Kandiyoti (1989) would term 'patriarchal bargains'. Kandiyoti defines these as a set of strategies which women device to survive the patriarchal systems when they are presented with a different set of rules within the society. While Scott's resistance normally operates at a larger societal level, the latter operates either within or outside one's homes, and both happen on a daily basis.

5.1.3. Negotiations

The term 'negotiations', the way it is used in this thesis, borrows elements from the aforementioned concepts, adding and modifying them along the way. While some of the negotiating acts celebrate agency of the individuals and portray characteristics of resistance, some of them are merely performed by the individuals to survive the everyday. The agency exercised by the individuals could also be read as an 'organic agency', where the acts initiated by the same are not with the hope of radically transforming the structure. The Gramscian understanding of accepting the hegemony works in a different way here, in the context of the everyday lives of the workers in the plantations. The workers have their own rationale in accepting certain structures that are already existing within the plantations that ensure a sort of stability in their lives, as they could be even more vulnerable when they are outside of it. The lived experiences of the workers, along with the community life within the plantations, are very much entwined with the structure as well. The workers, in the most cases, only aspire to be within the constraints of the same structure, carving out smaller forms of improvements in their quality of life, and striving towards more equality in their lives. They braid these aspirations of equality into the realm of their everyday lives.

I operationalize the term 'negotiation' to include a wide range of actions performed by the workers in their everyday lives in the hopes to survive, get-along or simply manage a difficult task or aspect of life, and which at the end, may or may not work out in their favour. Big and small acts of negotiations include both open protests and other techniques masked in anonymity- like gossiping and spreading rumours– navigating the physical space and order of

the estates in their personal ways, engaging in various techniques like multi-tasking to survive the days' time crunches, performing passive actions in a variety of situations within the households and outside, giving and receiving help within the close network of allies, etc. Negotiations form a big part of their everyday. It also forms an integral part of their social reproduction. Before discussing some of the everyday negotiations that the participants were observed to engage with in the field, the nature of the (un)changing larger plantation space is discussed below.

5.2. Plantation Spaces – Changing, yet Continuously Reproduced

While the plantation companies have been creative in bringing forward the colonial roots into the modern context, the estates sometimes provide an illusion of being stuck in the past. While it is partly true, there have been changes in the physical and social spaces in the plantations as well. In this section, I have summarised three major changes or events in the recent past in the place they live which had come up often in the discussions with the workers in the estates. These views on the changes came up while talking about other aspects of their lives, and mostly have been their opinions on change in their surroundings from popular memory. These have been talked about in the context of the estates in particular, as well as Munnar, in general. The change in the name of the company often came up while talking about the changes in their job descriptions in the last decade or so. A second event from the recent collective memory that was often recollected was the PO strike. The transformation of Munnar as a popular tourist destination was mentioned the most while the workers were discussing about alternative job prospects, for themselves as well as for their children. Changes in the environment were often mentioned as well, in the context of heavy rains and associated flooding and landslides in the region. This section explores how these large changes have made a way into their daily lives as well.

5.2.1. Change of Company Ownership and Its Impact on Workers

In terms of major differences that could be observed in the tea estates in the last two decades was a 'billboard-sized' change in the name of the company that owned most of the estates in Munnar, and it has been reflected in the name boards everywhere.

When KDHPCL started, the ownership changed from Tatas being the majority shareholder. Introduction of an EBO transferred 68 per cent of its shares to the workers in the estates. This was the way out for Tata to overcome the crisis in the tea industry that was mentioned in the

previous section. The Tatas retained the Kanan Devan brand name and the new company started selling tea under the brand name of 'Ripple'. The company constantly promotes itself as the 'participant management model' where workers were considered as partners in the running of the company. The website of the company still advertises the recognition it received in 2015 as being one of the "top 100 great places to work in India" according to a study conducted by the Economic Times based on random employee satisfaction survey. Ironically, this was the same year that the PO strike happened.

The well-appreciated 'participant management model' might provide the illusion that much has changed for the better for the tea workers as well as the internal dynamics within the tea plantations. However, these are only superficial ones, barely scratching the surface of the layers of life and order inside the estates. Life mostly went on inside the line-houses, which also were the ancestral houses for many of the workers, pretty much the same as before, with no significant improvement. When shares were transferred to the permanent employees initially, most workers did not understand the process of owning shares entirely and sometimes were not aware of the value of the share certificate they held which declared the number of shares they owned. Even when I visited the households almost 12 years after this transfer of ownership, most workers I interacted with informed me that they only knew it as a paper that could be encashed when they retire and did not know the exact monetary value of it. I was even told that some of the workers who retired soon after the new company was formed did not realise the value of the paper that they held and had given the certificate to others or lost it entirely.

By making the shearing technique the dominant method of collecting leaves after the new company had formed, it brought in changes in the work lives of the women workers. The new method increased the volume of leaves collected per worker per day, definitely benefitting the company's side. This was particularly welcomed during the period of crisis in the tea sector when the ownership change occurred in Munnar, and when many large tea plantations in India were closing down due to non-profitability. However, the lives of the women workers had only gotten worse in the process due to the intensification of their work. Before the change of hands at the top, the company introduced voluntary retirement options for workers and trimmed down the number of workers. As a result, the per day target given to a gang of tea-pluckers increased, making the workload per worker increase significantly. With the changeover to the shearing technique, the process of collecting leaves was considered more of an easier job and consuming

less-time, and this change in perception about the job significantly reduced the wiggle-room for the workers to negotiate their increased target set by the management.

Another approach used by the new company to increase productivity among the workers was to introduce competitions among them. The worker who plucked the maximum quantity of leaves in a day in a peak-season was declared the winner and was awarded a small token of a gift, like items of household utility like containers etc. Almost everyone participated in these competitions with vigour as it was a chance to showcase their strength and abilities of being 'good workers'. Some of the retired workers I interviewed recalled tales of friendly competitions getting intense to claim the prize. By introducing these competitions, the company easily achieved the targets for the collection of leaves with a smaller number of workers and minimum supervision. The large quantities of leaves collected per worker in these peak seasons also acted as proof that quantities like 150kg or above per worker, which were thought of as impossible goals earlier, was 'easily' achievable.

The workers definitely earned higher wages due to the higher volume of work, which was a progress that both the management and the trade unions pointed out. As Raj (2022) points out, the dominant logic always used by the trade unions and the management was that the company should earn higher profits for the workers to earn better. However, the increased physical strain that the new method entailed, both in terms of the continuous and repeated motion of their dominant hand and the higher volume of leaves that they carried around in the sacks, contributed to their health issues. These health issues mostly took away the positive aspects from the increased income. Most older workers told me that they could not even participate in such competitions any more as they have grown older in spite of its higher stakes, as they did not think that they had the physical strength to do it anymore. Rosamma even told me that it was only in her better working years that she could think of such things, and that most workers wanted the fame more than the prize of the competition, as the details of the biggest quantity that was ever plucked was always discussed amongst the workers in all the estates. Such competitions have been discontinued by the company for a few years.

Another measure from the company in the recent years that affected the women workers was the employment of migrant labourers, both men and women, from other states in India. With the appointment of these new migrant labourers in the last few years, the management has increasingly kept a check on the Tamil women workers. The threat of being easily replaceable

was always there for the workers[101]. In the due process, the absolute number of working hours have progressively increased during the peak seasons for the women workers. The extra-time during these seasons became more mandatory than optional in nature. For the male workers in the estate gardens, the sheer number of jobs as maintenance workers was cut-down. These jobs also ended after 5 hours at 1 PM for them. During the last decade, there was an increased out-migration of men to other districts within Kerala or to other states in search of better opportunities. However, with the threat of eviction from the line-houses after the retirement of their parents, some have returned to Munnar as well and accepted the lower paying jobs within the estate[102].

When the Tatas transferred their shares to workers in 2005, it also helped them to cut down on the losses they were having from the crisis of the tea industry that arose from the crash in the international tea prices. While the Tatas had an assured payback of interest[103], the workers receive a marginal amount in the form of dividends declared over profits. In the whole equation of the transfer of ownership of the company, the workers who were promised benefits received a paltry raise, while their hardships in the everyday paid work increased substantially. When the workers even resorted to borrowing the money to buy the equity shares, the real benefits flowed to the capital.

5.2.2. Changing Nature of Trade Unions in the Plantation Belt

One of the reasons why the PO strike was required in the first place was because of the inefficiencies attributed to the trade unions in the recent times. On the same note, the PO strike was seen as a success by many, mostly because of the participation of the women workers in it. Women's participation in the trade unions in India, especially in the plantations, had a tendency to be limited or even excluded from it entirely (see Rohini P.H. 1988, Menon 1992,

[101] Please see the next section for a longer discussion on the subject of the Tamil identity of workers.

[102] While I have seen mostly women entering the estate jobs, mostly at the threat of being evicted during my field visit, I have seen only two households where the men had returned to Munnar. However, it was during my fieldwork that I was told that there were others like them in other estates. Also see, "*Generation after generation, why Kerala's plantation workers don't have their own homes",* NewsMinute, article dated September 9, 2020. https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/generation-after-generation-why-kerala-s-plantation-workers-continue-be-homeless-132690. See Section 5.3.2.b for a detailed discussion.

[103] See section 1.10.

Sarkar and Bhowmik 1998 etc.). While some of the reasons for the lower participation of women in trade union activities range from less education among the women to the availability of less time for women to attend political meetings due to the burden of the household chores; the patriarchal structure of the trade union itself should be closely examined to understand this phenomenon better (see Menon 1992, Lindberg 2000).

Historically, as the Kannan Devan Hills began to unionize under various banners in the 1950s, much later than the other planting regions in Wayanadu and Nilgiris, it followed the path of avoiding the women workers from its organizations. In the early years of its formation, they were influential in negotiating for higher wages for the workers and were instrumental in maintaining better standards of both wages and living conditions of the workers in the plantations. One of the key points of success of the trade unions that has often been mentioned is the statistics of the highest level of wages paid for tea workers in India, even during the time of the strike (see table). AITUC and INTUC are the trade unions with the largest membership in Munnar plantations, followed by CITU[104].

As they became more influential in the local region, the role played by the trade unions in Munnar evolved over the years. From being mere representatives of the workers who negotiated with the management to find solutions to their issues, the trade unions assumed a more powerful intermediary status. The workers, as it was evident in the interactions with them during the fieldwork, saw the trade unions as 'higher authorities' who wielded more power. The management also consulted more with the unions on any matters relating to the welfare of the workers before taking any decisions. The distance between the workers and trade unions grew further in the years, with less direct interactions between them, as even the yearly contribution[105] was directly deducted from their wages and there was no need to visit the workers door-to-door even for that. To alleviate the cash-strapped situation of the workers, the trade unions linked also operated individual cooperative banks that provided a maximum of ₹50,000[106] as loan to the workers. The repayment of the loan was also directly deducted from

[104] This pattern which was observed during the fieldwork is reflective of the larger pattern in the Munnar region (see Harshan 2015).

[105] The yearly contribution rate was uniform across the trade unions and it was roughly fixed at an amount equivalent to the wages received for a day. It was about ₹200 during the years leading up to the strike.

[106] That was the prevailing cap on the amount of loan during the time of fieldwork.

the wages, before it was disbursed to the workers. From the workers' point of view, the deductions to the trade union made directly from their wages were akin to the various other payments[107] made to the company from their wages. The workers, especially women, did not even attend the meetings on a regular basis[108] as they were pressed for time and felt more disconnected than before with the unions.

The PO strike was a supposedly an answer to the disconnect the women workers felt with the unions. However, the transition from PO from being something of their own to being a trade union that the workers did not recognise themselves with took very little time. While the participation of women was high with the PO movement and the subsequently formed trade union and there was a huge support for them locally as was evident in the results of the local elections that occurred soon after, the PO as an organization failed miserably to ride on the momentum created by the movement. Granted that the PO was a small union with limited resources and there was additional pressure from powerful interest groups like other trade unions and the management to break them up, the leaders of the newly formed PO could not keep the interests of the workers above their own personal differences that caused the union to split into various factions. Each of these in-house fights and rumours regarding the leaders reached the grapevine pretty quickly. By the time the news of Gomathy, one of the PO leaders joining CITU after the split was reported in the media, the support of the workers had already eroded for the new union. During the time of the fieldwork, the official membership of the PO was told as around 2000 workers by one of its leaders. However, I could not find any member in the estate division I was conducting my fieldwork.

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[107] Permanent workers had various deductions from their wages including payment for LIC, PF etc. The company also cuts from the wages, the payment for rice, tea, etc. which have been provided at subsidised rates to the workers. Many of the workers did not understand the deductions written in their payment slip, as was revealed in the interactions during the fieldwork.

[108] This was on the basis of the conversations with the participants. Whenever there were large meetings, mostly political meetings and rallies organised in stadiums and nearby areas, they went in large numbers in the mode of transportation arranged for them by the unions. Except for these large ones, when the show of numbers became important for the trade unions and the political parties backing them, the regular small-scale meetings aimed at improving the welfare of the workers and hearing their grievances became sparsely attended ones. The decisions taken at these smaller meetings were communicated to the workers through the plantation grapevine. For a more detailed discussion on the plantation grapevine, see the sub-section 5.3.3.d.

Providing credit by the unions to its members became its most important role in a place like Munnar where household debt is a constant feature. The newly formed PO did not have enough financial resources to cater to that. Combined with the other reasons stated above, the PO union did not have a chance to survive in Munnar. Along with it, the state of women's participation in the unions went back to as it was earlier. Every union has designated a few positions to be filled by women workers. However, to the women workers in the field, they never felt being part of the change or trade union. Trade union leaders, to them, filled the top positions in the plantation hierarchy and were disconnected from their lives.

5.2.3. Being a Descendant Tamil Worker in the Tourism Hub of Munnar

On the outset, there have been changes that could be observed about Munnar, say in the physical space itself. The place as such, has become increasingly a tourist destination, with domestic and international tourists visiting the picturesque tea hills. This growth spurt in ecotourism has made many changes to the place as well as the lives of the people. Besides changing the town, making it abuzz with activities and large crowds of people almost throughout the year, this also provided new job opportunities for the people in Munnar.

Better opportunities from the flourishing activities of tourism have certainly benefitted the people, but looking into who receives the most out of these changes may tell a different story. The landless Tamils benefitted very little from the trade activities and had to depend on the Malayalees who owned land in Munnar[109]. Even when some of them had their Tamil networks and could manage to bring in cheap perishable goods at reduced transportation costs from Tamil Nadu, they relied on the Malayalees who owned the shops to sell it (Hari P, 2019). Even the ownership of the resorts, which were hugely profitable, were mostly with Malayalees only who had the capital and contacts within the state governments to establish the resorts. When the Tamils from the estates worked in these resorts, they mostly did so in 'unskilled' and temporary categories of jobs, like cleaners, maintenance workers, etc. When there were demands for an extra set of hands during the peak tourist seasons, a few women workers in the estates sometimes could find an additional source of income by working a secondary job. The jobs that arose as tour operators also fell into the hands of mostly Malayalees who had their networks in other tourist destinations in Kerala, which put the Tamils again at a

[109] See Hari P (2019) for a detailed discussion on the topic of Tamil-Malayalee conflict and negotiations in the Kannan Devan Hills in Munnar.

disadvantageous position. In terms of social mobility, the workers' families in the estates did not hugely benefit from the changes in Munnar. It is as though they had moved laterally from one kind of job to another, without moving up the social ladder.

5.2.4. A Note on Plantation Spaces

While changes have been taking place in the plantation spaces, they also seem to have a foot thoroughly placed in the past, refusing to move forward. At the end of the day, the women workers at the bottom of the hierarchy seem to be pushed into a more vulnerable position even with the changes taking place in the plantations. The management and the state do not act enough to help them come out of their situations.

The state's direct role as an intermediary between the tea plantation companies and the workers have evolved over the years. From being a strictly labour-friendly state, Kerala has almost taken a U-turn in its approach later. However, what is interesting to notice is that the state has also been increasingly trying to bear some part of the cost of the social reproduction of the workers in the recent years. For instance, there is a provision in the Kerala Development Report (2021) that the state shall divert funds to building houses for the workers in the plantations as part of its LIFE mission[110]. It has been increasingly trying to spend more on the educational outlay in places like Munnar, where the basic facilities are lacking (Rammohan et al. 2015). While these are welcome changes and could be viewed as the measures taken by the state trying to balance its scales of being 'just' to both plantation companies as well as the workers, it should be also noted that there has been an increased demand for the state to step in and share the cost of social reproduction of the workers from the planters' side as well. For instance, more than a decade ago, the Planter's Chronicle (September 2009) mentions the President of UPASI calling for the state to remove "outmoded legislations such as the plantation labour act

[110] The LIFE ((Livelihood, Inclusion and Financial Empowerment) Mission was introduced by the Kerala Government over different phases from 2017. The primary aim of the project is to provide houses for those who have existing property or provide a permanent house for those who do not own a property. Under the LIFE mission, beneficiaries are identified based on financial and other social factors and even migrant workers from other states who have been inside the state for a few years are eligible to receive the benefits of it. The state pays a sum of ₹4 lakhs to the beneficiary for constructing a house, out of which, the central scheme PMAY pays ₹72,000 in rural areas and ₹1.5 lakh in urban areas. The workers in Munnar mostly do not even own land. While some of them have been identified under various schemes earlier to be distributed land elsewhere, most of them have not received any benefits under the previous schemes. The positive outcome of the LIFE mission scheme on a large scale is yet to be seen in the tea plantation sector.

and minimum wage act" that hamper the competitive edge of the Indian plantation products and asked the "state to share the social cost of reproduction" (from the Presidential Speech of Mr. D.P. Maheshwari at 116th Annual Conference of UPASI in Coonor, quoted in Raj 2010, pp 84). Given the tendency of capital to try to externalise as much cost as possible, the state's renewed vigour to share the cost of social reproduction must be seen in a critical light.

Workers have come to believe that there is no other alternative than to rely on themselves and their labour power to survive their everyday struggles. However, with the social conditions and precarious financial situation, they seem to be running inside a wheel, constantly repeating the cycles of misfortune, over successive generations.

To survive the restrictive plantation spaces and the spaces within their homes, they have been engaging constantly in strategies, big and small. Some of them require planning and cooperation from others in the field, while some others require little effort of planning and happen almost spontaneously. While a few of these have failed, a lot many have succeeded. Some of them end up being compromises. These have definitely become part of their everyday survival measures. In the context of the thesis, I call these negotiations, and shall be elaborated in the next section.

5.3. Women Workers' Everyday Negotiations

As mentioned in section 5.1., the purpose of the everyday negotiations is mostly to get-by or survive for the workers. It is a constant process that they engage in and has become a big part of their everyday. The demands arising out of their paid and unpaid work often leave the mentally and physically exhausted. During the peak seasons, the intensity of the paid work is high, demanding more time and effort from the part of the workers. The repeated usage of the shears and carrying of extra heavy sacks leave the workers physically exhausted. Even some of the older workers who complained of severe health issues arising out of this kind of activity could not, however, stay away from their paid work. Their households' debts as well as the uncertainty that awaits them post-retirement often compel them to work extra hard during the peak seasons to earn more. This comes at the cost of their own health and even some of the other household obligations that they have. Within the households, even when they are away for a longer time at work, the women are expected to contribute to the household chores. The financial situation of the households often plays a role in the households compromising during

these times as well[111]. Although there is an increased participation of men in the household in these unpaid works during the season, the burden often falls on other women/girls in the household, when they are present.

During these times, when the workers' time, effort, and attention are competingly demanded by their responsibilities towards both their paid and unpaid works, which are also often mediated by the financial situations of the household, they negotiate as individuals and groups to get-by. When the physical space of the plantation acted as restricting and gendered, the women workers found their ways around the same to personalise the space and use it for their daily needs. There is a constant exchange of services and goods between the neighbours and the larger community within the plantations. Neighbours often pitch in by offering care services and there is a constant exchange of food items as well as lending/borrowing items for short periods among them. Even the goals and activities of Pembilai Orumai, and Kudumbashree, were mixed with the needs of the women workers in the tea estate in this manner. Women's work burden is sometimes reduced through these mediations and active participations.

These negotiations form a big part of their everyday as well as the social reproduction of the spaces within the plantation. When the state and the company fail to provide the adequate resources for the households to even sustain themselves, they rely on themselves and their informal arrangements within their community (caste, kinship, neighbourhood, friendship ties) to stay afloat. The negotiations that were observed in the field are elaborated in more detail in the following sections.

5.3.1. Negotiating with the Limited Physical Spaces

When the limited space of household became a constraint, the workers resorted to various ways to create a new space, either by making additions to the house or partitioning the existing space for specific purposes. For instance, creating a shed in front and/or in the back of the existing line-house, either adjacent to the structure or independently of it. These additional structures serve a variety of purposes- from being a place for sleeping at night for the extra members of the household or guests to being a parking shed for the vehicles to a roofed space for drying

[111] As was mentioned in an earlier discussion on the preparation of easier/ plain dishes during these times as well as postponing the work for weekends, when the women get a holiday from their paid work.

their clothes during rains. A few of these examples that were seen in the field are mentioned below.

One of the line-houses I visited had a physical partitioning made in the main room of the house made of plywood and other materials. Even though it reduced the space within the main room, this newly made partition served as an additional room with a door and a latch for the guests in their house. However, their real intention was to rent it out to paying guests, for short and long periods of time. The young couple, Letchmi and Arun who lived with their two children below the age of 10, could afford to make this adjustment as they could easily fit into the rest of the space. They have had only one visitor who lived with them for a week paying rent, a foreigner who wanted to experience Munnar life away from the tourist places. They were really excited to talk about this particular event that had become the talk of the neighbourhood. Even though a few of the houses in the neighbourhood were rented out when the occupants were not there, there were not instances of a foreigner (sayippu, as they referred to him in Malayalam, mostly describing a white man) living in any one of them. The foreigner was met by chance in Munnar town when Arun went to town like any other evening to sell the milk of the buffaloes. This was one of the few partitions made with the intention of bringing in additional money to the household.

While parking sheds in front of the houses were more commonly observed with houses that owned three-wheelers and four-wheelers, these transformed into places for washing (as they are mostly adjacent to the common water tap) or common areas used by women and children during the daytime. The courtyard is equally used by both men and women, but there were differences in their accessibility based on the time of usage. Except for filling water, there is very little use of the courtyard for the women in the mornings. During the evenings, however, the courtyard is abuzz with activities, as it is also the place where one could see women catching up after their jobs. Men who had their shifts ending at 1 PM as well as those who started their other jobs in the evening, would be found in the courtyard before the women-folk returned from work. Most of them left the house for some activity or the other to Munnar town, either to start a second job or to sell milk or simply to catch up with others, before the women arrived. Hence, in the evenings after 5:30 PM till nightfall, the courtyard is a space occupied by mostly women. In some of the line-houses, women opened stores selling essential cooking items like masalas, oil, snacks, and other groceries and stationeries in a very limited scale. So, in those cases, the courtyard also became the ‘market’ place where other women from the

neighbourhood came to buy these goods. Although the goods were stocked inside the house, women either waited before or after the purchase in the courtyard to have conversations with other neighbours as well. The evenings, when the vehicles were taken out from the sheds, was also the time when women accessed the sheds constructed in the courtyard to wash clothes and sometimes to dry them as well.

Another kind of extension to the line house observed was the building of a shed adjacent to the house independent of the main structure, as was observed in the case of Rosamma's household. Rosamma who had retired almost seven years back lived with her son's family, including her son, daughter-in-law and two young grandchildren, in the same household. Moreover, her daughter and her two kids mostly used to visit and stay overnight as well. To accommodate everyone comfortably, Rosamma built a shed in the back of her line house about three years ago. The shed was mostly occupied by Rosamma and her friends from the neighbouring houses during the day. While they kept an eye on whatever was being cooked in their kitchens, which could be accessed through the back doors of the line-houses, they sat inside the room, talking and preparing vegetables and performing other household chores which could be taken along with them. These retired workers also had young grandchildren to look after. In the evenings, the shed turned into a bedroom occupied by Rosamma and her daughter's family, whenever they visited.

Courtyard is also the space that transforms into a space of gathering and festivities during times of special occasions in these houses. During one of the visits to a set of line-houses in estate division B, the neighbourhood was lit up in colour on the occasion of a marriage in one of the houses. The entire courtyard, not just restricted to the wedding house, was lit up with a series of colourful illumination bulbs. Peppy Tamil music was also played at a loud volume and the whole neighbourhood had an air of festivity. This was one of the occasions where I could see the courtyard in front of the line-houses transforming into a shared space, where individual demarcations in front of their respective houses did not restrict the nature of festivities. I was told that the boundaries did not matter during wedding and funeral occasions, as everyone understood the necessity of sharing the space.

More than half of the verandas were all closed-up, converting it into a room, leaving only the one or two steps to the house uncovered. These steps or the occasional open verandas were the spots that were mainly used by women in the evenings, where they sit with a tumbler of black tea and have long conversations with their neighbours. The veranda and the courtyard act as

spaces of social networking for these women. The evenings are the only time when they could afford to do it, in a space close to home or a part of the home itself. Apart from the social nature of the verandas in the evenings, it also acts as a space for welcoming guests. It is mostly occupied by men in other times, when they are at home. Verandas were also spaces where the women conducted Kudumbashree meetings, away from the sounds of the television and children who occupied the living room.

There were many temporary partitions observed inside the houses as well. Vijayamma had partitioned her main room with curtains to create a private area for her pregnant daughter-in-law. Rajani's daughter made a space for herself in a corner of the house with a curtain she made out of old clothes. The small area contained her bed, and her study area and the walls were covered with photos and other wallpapers. These kind of cloth partitions, made of sarees and curtains, were more common than the partitions made of hard materials.

Not everyone could build additional structures due to the lack of extra space available or monetary constraints. The ones who could build something tried to gently push the physical boundaries of the house without moving out of it and spent the minimum amount of money on the additional structures as, technically, the line-houses do not belong to them, but the company. The management turns a blind eye to these small additions as long as they are not very large and inconveniencing other occupants in the row of houses. Others who do not own resources try to negotiate with the space inside through make-shift partitions that could transform the utilities of the room as and when required. Personalising the homes could also mean applying additional coats of paint every year to the house in a colour of their choosing. It is not uncommon to see bright and fluorescent colours[112] of houses within a row that stands out. While the management provides the basic cost for whitewashing only, so most households end up shelling an extra bit for buying paint, depending on their budget. In their own ways, the workers tried to negotiate with the limited space of the line-house and personalised their homes. While these modifications/additions brought comfort to the households who could afford to take up these additional expenses, improving their social status within their community in their own ways, the same things brought pressure and aspirational goals for those who could not afford it.

[112] The weather-proof paints, which are a bit more expensive than the normal paints, come out in bright colours, like neon pinks and green. They tend to stand out more in the rows of line-houses, and there was a preference for such colours among the households in the field.

Physical spaces only appear to be gender-neutral. With closer observation, one can see the politics of gender operating within micro-spaces, like inside a room within a line-house where there are physical boundaries. In the description of the different portions of the living quarters and other physical spaces near the line-houses, one can see the gendered nature of their function and accessibility, and also, how they are negotiated by the residents in the estates. In this context, the word 'negotiation' is used to reflect the meaning 'to get by' or 'navigate through' these limited spaces. The gendering of work spills into the spaces that are occupied by the women. These spaces are restrictive inside the domestic sphere of the household, as well as within their work sites on the tea hills of the estates. Through the accounts and narrations of the women workers briefly mentioned here, one also gets a glimpse into the everyday lives of the women here, and the different ways in which they engage with these spaces to negotiate with the conditions and circumstances that they are embedded in.

Not only are the domestic spaces gendered, but also is the space of the tea plantation itself. When the gendered bodies move into these public spaces, they are governed by different sets of rules and norms. Therefore, they are expected to perform differently in these various spaces. Although the tea bushes and hills were visible from most houses built right in between these hills, walking through those portions of hills for other purposes and going for work generated two different kinds of emotions. Stepping outside the home, in the work attire, mostly in old shirts and plastic sacks wrapped around them, invoked the feeling of formal work. It was almost like the shirts and rags channelled a sense of urgency in keeping with the time, of complying with the company rules, and transformed the bodies of the women into disciplined workers. The hills then transformed into spaces of discipline where the women workers engaged in the job of collecting the leaves, while they were supervised by mostly men[113]. While the field officers were in sight, they were mostly quiet and concentrated only on their work. However, the camaraderie among the women workers also brought in a space of lightness. When the supervisors were not around, they did not mind talking amongst them while working.

Even while participating in their paid and unpaid activities in the private and public spaces of the plantations, the women balance out their burdens by indulging in conversations, venting out and even watching TV from the corner of their eyes at the same time as they prepare meals or take care of their family members. The space of the household is also one of nostalgia to the

[113] See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion on the hierarchy of the plantations and gender segregation of work.

workers who grew up in the same estates and houses. Even though their workplace had an air of formality to it, with the work being constantly supervised, it also provided a sense of familiarity that almost all the workers associated it with.

5.3.2. Negotiating with Paid Work

The following are a set of 'individual' issues that were commonly observed to rise in the lives of the women workers, as a result of their paid work in the plantation sector. The women were found to deal with these issues in different ways, both individually and collectively, according to the need of the hour.

5.3.2.a. Navigating through Financial Issues

Financial woes were common among the worker households. Actions like resorting to pawning gold jewels and taking out loans to repay loans were commonly heard during the fieldwork. The workers and the family members also resorted to taking up temporary gigs, whenever they were available to supplement the family income. Some of the negotiations made by the workers helped them to manage their debts better, while for some of them, their woes only compounded, backfiring upon their strategies.

Arulmozhi (OBC), 38 years old, lived with her in-laws. She and her family of three moved into her in-laws' house a few years back. The line-house allotted to her when she became a permanent employee had been given for rent to a relative, which brings them an additional income of about ₹3500 a month. While the physical space crunch is acute while sharing the house, Arulmozhi finds the extra income to be a help, especially when her eldest daughter is studying outside the state. Not a lot of respondents could afford to rent out their house nor find takers for their houses, even if they could afford to move out.

There were quite a few respondents who entered the job due to pressure from the family, to earn an additional income as well as to maintain their place of residence. While most of them belonged to the older generations of workers, only three of them below the age of 35 admitted to such family pressures to take up this job. Like in the case of Lisamma's daughter-in-law discussed in the earlier section, they waited for as long as they could for a better job opportunity, until they had to finally give in to the family's insistence to be a tea plucker. While there were benefits received in terms of an increased family income, all three of them see these as compromises made from their side and have mostly come to terms with it.

Vijayamma retired as a permanent employee from the company two years back and now works on a temporary basis. Her husband had a few years left in his service before his retirement when he died almost 18 years ago. Although her son took up a job in the tea estates soon after that, the household debt situation only kept mounting. Her husband's alcoholism already had a bad impact on the family's financial situation. The expenses incurred for both her daughters' weddings, the birth of her three grandchildren and her husband's medical bills pushed her to take multiple loans with exorbitant interests. Vijayamma lost most of her gold jewellery that she had pawned as she could not pay back the loans taken with her wages. She and her son, the only two members of the household then, decided to buy a cow by selling the last of her gold jewellery and taking another loan to meet the rest the of the expenses. As there was a common facility provided by the company, they could easily maintain the cow despite their limited space in the house. Owning two cows currently, they have a steady flow of income from an additional source, besides their main jobs at the estate. Vijayamma helps take the milk to the cooperative in the evenings, while her son milks the cows. Even as they have improved their financial situation, they have never gotten free of the debt cycle. Vijayamma admits that her age is catching up to her and that she is not capable of doing things as she used to do earlier. Carrying heavy weight in the field is now an agony with her joint pains. As her daughter-in-law is now in her final stages of pregnancy, she also has to manage the household chores after coming back. But she is determined to continue working for at least two more years this way, as it would provide her with some savings finally.

Stories of pawning jewels and not being able to take them back were commonly heard during the fieldwork. Taking out loans for purely consumption purposes plummeted a few households into debt cycles from which they were never able to escape. Rajani and Arulmozhi, both admitted to taking multiple loans from the local loan sharks, or 'financiers' as they were called. The demand for such loans and pawning increases during the festive seasons. While Rajani could pay back the money, Arulmozhi could not and lost her jewellery, and soon after she moved into her in-laws' house. As Rajani reasoned, since her daughter was staying with their relatives for studying, they could not afford to spend less for the relatives during the festive season. Like Rajani, many of them found festive occasions like Deepawali to bond with their relatives in native places. Or even otherwise, occasions of death and marriage in the local community also were reasons for them to extend financial help to the particular household, putting a financial strain on the close relatives, neighbours and friends.

Latha, 35 years old, was able to find an additional job as a cleaner during the tourist season in the nearby resort. She would work on Sundays and Saturdays, if required. Her aunt who lives nearby would cook food for the nearby B&B, when the tourists start pouring in. She and her sister-in-law sometimes joins her aunt in catering to larger meal orders during the weekends too. In another instance, Rosamma had once taken up a job that lasted for three months as a full-time nanny to a new-born child in the neighbouring district of Kottayam. She said she got the job through her contacts in church and it was difficult for such jobs, which paid better than being a maidservant, to come by. There were, however, more instances of a relative or acquaintance working as a full-time maid in other districts during the fieldwork. In any case, the number of men in the households who have gone in search of work outside Munnar seemed to be more than that of women. The busy tourist season in Munnar saw additional demands for cooks and cleaners, which were taken up by women, apart from drivers and tour guides – jobs which mainly went to men.

Many units of the Kudumbashree have engaged in the household-based production of small commodities to provide an additional income to the women members in Kerala, along with the provision of small loans to its members. This has been reduced to microfinance activities alone in both the estates studied as the women did not have the time to engage in other activities of the Kudumbashree programme like in the rest of the state. Most members had taken out a loan of ₹10,000 from the Kudumbashree and regularly paid it back from their wages.

There were always multiple reasons cited for taking out the loans. During the qualitative surveys, it emerged that children's education, marriage-related expenses and health reasons were the main reasons for taking large loans amounting to one lakh rupees or more. Smaller loans were taken far more commonly and multiple times during the times of festivals and other mandatory social and family contributions of money during deaths and marriages, and for the purposes of purchasing household articles. During some of the later interviews, some women also mentioned that alcoholic men in the households have contributed to larger loans in the families. In their own opinion, children's education loans were considered as the most productive loans taken out by the families. The multiple loans did not seem to bother most of the participants as they have almost normalised it as a way of life inside the tea plantations and mostly rely on their labour power to repay their loans.

The loans taken from the cooperative societies of the various trade unions (a maximum amount of ₹50,000 per worker) were the most prevalent method and the repayment of the loans were

directly cut out of the wages of the workers. This ensured prompt repayment of the loans and the management's role in helping out with the smooth running of the process show how the trade unions and management have been helping out each other. This method of borrowing is so prevalent that the workers often did not even recall this as a separate loan they had taken out along with the multiple other ones they have taken from other resources. They mostly clubbed it along with one of the many deductions made by the company on various accounts they did not fully understand.

Money borrowed in the form of loans mostly cater to the social reproduction of the households. It is a necessity, rather than a choice, for most households. The advancement of loan by the trade unions is a prime example to show how these loans have been considered as 'official' deductions rather than optional ones. The trade unions also cement their position of importance in the hierarchy of the plantations in the process, with ensured repayments of the loans. The old ways of trapping workers in the plantations via bondages of money advances handed out by the Kanganies are re-enacted in the present-day context and setting. The management hugely benefits from this deal as the workers met their expenses by taking out loans which are repaid by them again, instead of being pressurised to increase their wages or bear a larger proportion of the cost of social reproduction. Everyone, except the workers, seemed to be bearing the cost of social reproduction in this arrangement.

5.3.2.b. Post-Retirement Options

The retirement age of the permanent workers were 58 years and they were paid a lumpsum amount[114] at the end of their terms. If they had any family member working in the estate as a permanent worker, they could continue living in the same line-house. Or else, they were required to turn in the key to their house, after vacating the place, to collect their retirement fund. The amount they received, on an average as I was told, came up to a mere ₹2 lakhs, which was only a meagre sum to buy any property in Munnar. There were a few who went to Tamil Nadu to live in their ancestral villages, if they still had good ties with the place. The rest of the workers who retired and did not have a property to go to elsewhere were in a fix. They resorted

[114] Gratuity, provident fund and other benefits. The amount of money was dependent on the number of years they worked.

to various ways to cope with their situation – of being landless in Munnar and of having no source of income suddenly. A few of those instances are mentioned below.

Girija, 59 years and belonging to SC, had retired a year ago. She and her family, consisting of her daughter and a granddaughter, did not have anywhere else to go. They decided to stay back along in their house. She had the support of her neighbour, another tea-plucker (who was Girija's same age and her relative as well) who decided to stay back with the family as well. Girija said that she would not have survived alone with just women in the family, if not for her neighbours who were there with her in the journey. Both the families were asked to vacate repeatedly by the management. The electricity supply to their lines were cut to force them to vacate. However, the neighbours managed to draw electricity from the posts illegally to run their house. They helped Girija's family also to secure those illegal electricity connections. Both the families take water from the common tap below their houses for their day-to-day activities. Girija acknowledged that their present lives were difficult and they had added pressure coming from staying back in their houses. But she also said that she had to be brave and survive this ordeal as she had no other choice. She then showed me the two houses in the same row that were unoccupied as the workers had left them after their retirement as well as a few empty houses in the next row. She mentioned that the company had many unoccupied houses elsewhere in the estates as well and that it was not because of the lack of houses for the new workers that they are forcing people out of their homes, but only because they owned their houses. "For them, it is a just another house which looks the same and has no real value to them. But for us, this land and this house are very much part of our lives". She did not want to leave the place that she was born into and she really did not have any alternative as well. So, she and her family, along with her neighbours, were ready and waiting to take further steps in the process. They had asked their trade union for help in fighting for their cases legally. Girija mentioned that she knew another family who got permission from the court to stay back, on the basis of humanitarian grounds. She was hoping for that to happen to their cases as well.

Lisamma, 64 years old belonging to an OEC group, retired six years ago. For a very long time, before her retirement itself, she and her husband had been asking their three sons to get a job within the estate. However, as that did not work out, she asked her youngest daughter-in-law to start working in the estate as a tea-plucker. As she was reluctant to work in the estate initially, Lisamma mentioned how she had to bring in incentives for her daughter-in-law to give in. The prospect of securing admission in a good English medium school, a little away

from their place of stay that would ensure her grandchildren's better future was brought up many times in the discussions as an incentive. She could manage to save some money from her retirement fund as well as ensure financial help from her church network to pay for the school. She was even willing to take loans for them to meet the expenses, when they reached higher classes. She had also asked her church members, including her pastor, to intervene and talk to her son's family so that they would not lose their house. Lisamma had so much to say about her church members, who were also workers in the estates, who 'stood by her and prayed for her in her moments of uncertainty'. Her daughter-in-law finally gave in and began working in the estates almost two years prior to her retirement. Her son still stayed away for his better paying job as an electrician, and moved with the construction crew based in Kochi. Lisamma told me that she felt lucky to be able to live in the same house and have her grandchildren near her in her old age. She sees the family retaining the house as nothing short of a 'miracle' as everything fell in place for them. Her daily schedule mostly involved performing activities of household chores, including physically demanding work like the collection of firewood, whenever she could.

Pazhaniamma, 61 years old belonging to the SC category, had been working as a temporary worker for more than two years after her retirement. A widow living alone at the time of her retirement, she did not know how else to survive but to keep working. Being a temporary worker after retirement helped her to retain her house. Although her daughter lived with her family about two hours away from Munnar, she did not want to leave her line-house, which she considers her own home. She was not comfortable living in a place which she was unfamiliar with – she liked being in Munnar amongst the tea hills where the climate was always pleasant and she could understand the language of the people. Moreover, she was really scared to cut ties with Munnar entirely and start a life being dependent on her daughter's family. She was hoping to retain her house for a few more years until she could not work any longer. However, she mentioned that she would soon quit working as her health issues had worsened in the past year.

Staying back after their retirement was a big risk for the retired workers. The act of staying back in what they consider their own (ancestral) homes became illegal in the eyes of the company. However, when left with no option to go elsewhere, they did try to stay back, as was visible in the narratives mentioned above. But even to do that, they required the backing of the trade unions to help with their legal cases, as most of them could not afford to do it themselves,

one, as they could not meet the cost involved and two, they did not possess the required legal knowledge to navigate the system. The other options were to either rely on their own labour for a few more years and working as a temporary worker like in Pazhaniyamma's case or to ensure that another member of the family started working in the estates to retain their homes. While the former ensured their guarantee of stay only for a few years as it was rather difficult to continue working in the same capacity after retirement, the latter provided a more long-term solution.

There were many like Lisamma who had forced their family members to enter the lower paying jobs available in the estates. Even though, in most of the cases, the parents sincerely wanted their children to escape the drudgeries of the plantation job, when left with very little choice, they had to make compromises – first with their own hopes of seeing their children move up the social ladder and then force their children to accept their situation and return to Munnar. In Lisamma's case, the hope of her grandchildren obtaining a better future than the previous generations was used as an incentive to convince her daughter-in-law to enter the job.

It can also be observed here that the workers did resort to their existing social networks, either caste- or religion-based, to negotiate with these situations. Girija's family needed the help of her relatives in Munnar as it was difficult to survive alone, while Lisamma pulled the weight of her church prayer group to force her decision on the daughter-in-law. While these snippets from the lives of the retired workers illustrate a few of the options that they had exercised – be it negotiating with the management, with their own family or with their health issues, they were all acts of survival, when left with little or no choice.

5.3.3. Important Tools for Negotiations

These are some of the tools that the women workers were observed to have deployed on a daily basis in the field to decrease their workload and carry out their responsibilities.

5.3.3.a. Pembilai Orumai as a Negotiation

Organizing a large-scale protest against the company and going against the existing trade unions, both of which enjoyed a definite privilege and power in the existing hierarchy of the plantations' social order, was not a small task for the women workers. This was not a method regularly resorted to for their negotiations. They had never done it before, but came in large numbers, extending support after getting to know that it was started by a handful of women on

September 2, 2015. The present retirees talk about the hope that the protest brought to the workers in the initial days. Being pinched by financial issues, they were hoping that the protest would change their situation and even some of their other issues at home. Rosamma talked about the post-protest days, of how women thought that having a strong women's trade union would bring an end to the rampant alcoholism among the menfolk in Munnar. The trade union leader LS also talked about how the PO leaders were called to intervene in domestic violence cases and counsel chronic alcoholics. She even talked about how the PO leadership team used to patrol in Munnar in a jeep regularly at night in the months after the protest to instil a sense of fear of being watched among the alcoholic and abusive husbands of the women workers. LS claims that there were successful in bringing down the cases, at least for some time.

The hopes were high and the problems to solve were many and diverse, and it was almost wishful thinking that the PO could be the solution to multiple problems at the same time. The PO was a young organization with a lack of experience and resources to provide solutions to almost any of the issues, and existed in a space where the prevailing powerful entities wanted them to fail. As mentioned earlier, they started failing as an organization not too long after the formation. However, the protest and the subsequent formation and decline of the PO had an impact on the lives of the workers who participated in it.

There was an air of suspicion and surveillance in the period after the protest. Rajani mentioned how, in the days following the protest, the chatter in the fields during the work hours almost quiet down as there was an increased surveillance of their work. The workers could feel that the management and trade unions were displeased. She also made her observation that after a few months, women went back to the original trade unions as if nothing changed. Manju added that there was increasing pressure from the relatives to continue being with a more 'reliable' trade union after the protests and therefore, she never joined the PO union. Letchmi, on the other hand, talked about how she made sure that she stayed away from the PO activities and anything associated with it after the protests because of personal reasons, as she wanted to climb up to the role of a supervisor and she was sure that being associated with other trade unions gave her a better chance. In various conversations with the participants, individually and in groups, it emerged that more than half of the participants relied on the male members in the household or in the extended families to keep themselves updated about the union activities and by extension, even the decisions related to it.

Although the increase in wages were declared as a success of the movement, the women workers rarely talked about the success of the movement while on the field. There were many who were angry and disappointed with the movement and the leaders. Rosamma talked about how the leaders were not there for them and made only personal gains from the movement. Being an older woman in the community, she personally asked many workers to join the protest and was present at the venue for all the days, despite her personal inconveniences. During the fieldwork, it appeared as though Rosamma could not stop talking about her disappointment of the present condition of the PO. Geetha mentioned about how she liked the days of the protests where she felt like the whole of Munnar came together for a cause. She mentioned how small traders in the town and other organizations sometimes provided water and food for the protestors, which she had never seen before. However, she made it clear that she was not part of the 'fighting and unstable' trade union where no one really knew who the leaders were any more. Arulmozhi said that she had the support of her entire family and everyone she knew in Munnar during the time of the protests. Her relatives from far-off places had called them to know about the protests when they had seen them on TV. However, things changed after the protests as none of her relatives in Munnar town had a good opinion about the newly-formed trade union. She said that she did not believe them until she changed her own opinion, seeing the in-fighting amongst the leaders. Smitha was more sceptical and opined that she no longer believed in any of these trade unions to bring change to Munnar.

In terms of a strategy to bring change, the PO movement did not provide the intended results to the workers who believed in the cause and protested. The leaders of the PO soon crossed over to being 'them' in a way that almost all the participants did not identify themselves with. However, despite the collective sentiments of disappointment, there were certain elements of the movement/period that workers remember fondly and coped in their own ways they could afterwards. They made 'safer' choices, in general, while choosing their trade unions. The displeasure towards the PO leaders was aired angrily and repeatedly by some, while others chose to ignore talking about it altogether. For most of them, the PO movement was a short period of optimism about change – which turned out to be nothing more than a temporary disruption to their everyday routine.

5.3.3.b. Maintaining Ties with Relatives

While it was attractive to have marital relations with the plantation workers in Munnar in the past as there was a promise of a free housing facility whenever one takes up a job with the

company, it no longer has been the case in the last few decades. The relatives of the workers who had remained in Tamil Nadu had climbed up the social ladder with better opportunities that became available to them, while the plantation workers and families remained marginalized within Munnar in Kerala (see Thampi 2015). While the number of marriage prospects from different places in Tamil Nadu that would have ended with migrating into Munnar had reduced considerably, the reverse prospect of migrating out of Munnar through marital relations became highly preferred. Having a relative in Tamil Nadu has become an important survival mechanism for the worker households.

Smita, 28 years old and belonging to SC, says that her husband has been using the connections of his extended family to work as a foreman in a factory in Pollachi. Her husband, 33 years old, who could not find a stable employment in Munnar had been working in Pollachi for the last three years. He could only get the job with the recommendation of his brother-in-law, who is also from the same area. The promotion to foreman has been recent and she hopes to migrate to Pollachi with the family within two years, as soon as the financial situation improves a little further for them.

Manju, 36 years old and belongs to OBC, has her daughter staying with her uncle and cousins in Tiruchi studying nursing. She says that the daughter has been staying with them for the past two years, since her 11th standard, and the extended family in Tiruchi has been extremely helpful in taking care of the kid's accommodation. Manju plans to send her son who is now in 9th standard as well to Tiruchi soon for completing his school education there. For Sujata (51 years old, OBC), Rajani, Ambika and Selvi – all have their children who are presently studying or have completed their college education while staying with relatives in Tamil Nadu. Most of them also opined that the quality of education that their children had received was much better in the neighbouring state, when compared to what they had as options in Munnar. This, along with the reduced expenses of education due to the presence of a relative, made the option of having higher education in Tamil Nadu very attractive.

However, not everyone had such family or caste network to depend on for helping out with their children's education. Many families have remained isolated in Munnar, and had not maintained active ties with their faraway relatives in Munnar, that could be used to call in favours. Rajani said that it was a costly affair to maintain such ties with the relatives outside the state and it also used up a considerable amount of monetary and other resources to do so. Rajani reminded of the loans taken during the festive seasons before meeting the relatives.

Ambika even mentioned that she could not send her second son to Theni for his education to be with her husband's relatives as they were not willing to take him in, after helping out with the first kid's education. She then had to spend extra on hostel accommodation as she sent him to a technical college in Madurai, which was not a planned expense for the family and that led to more loans from the local financiers.

5.3.3.c. Informal Arrangements with Neighbourhood Groups

The line houses are an integral part of the lives of the workers. While the small physical space of the houses are constraints that the workers deal with on an everyday basis, the same arrangement also provides neighbours that share the courtyard and other common facilities like the drinking water pipe, etc. The close proximity of the houses has provided a case for shared friendship and sharing of resources among the women workers in the neighbourhood. The neighbourhood groups also include members from other 'lines' in the nearby areas as well. In most cases, the neighbours are also part of the same 'gang' of workers under the same supervisor. In some cases, the neighbours also belong to the same family or the same caste, which brings additional ties for the relationship. However, the friendships between neighbours are not based on caste networks alone. Although there have been instances of neighbourhood feuds that I came across in the field, strong community ties within the neighbourhood are the norm, rather than the exception.

In the space of the plantation, these friendships translate into valuable resources for the women. The provision of care activities for the young and older members of the households are sometimes managed with the help of these other workers, when the women are busy or away from home. As mentioned earlier, Letchmi's kids were looked after by the neighbours for a few hours every Sunday, when she was busy preparing for her exam for landing the job of a supervisor. Sometimes, retired workers like Rosamma and her friends keep an eye on the neighbourhood kids along with their own grandchildren, when the kids are home after school or during school holidays. Similarly, the older kids in the lines also take care of the welfare of the elderly. This was seen more among the girls as they were entrusted with all types of care responsibilities from a very young age. Rajani's daughter who was at home during the period of the study made sure that the older woman next door who was alone during the day-time had her food and medicines on time. During the fieldwork, I could see that the neighbours walked in and out of the houses in the lines with extreme familiarity. The provision of care activities as well as exchanging food and other items occurred regularly among these households.

Another major utility that these groups provided was in terms of providing necessary monetary resources. As was narrated by the women's groups in the focused group discussions, they met regularly at least once a month to discuss Kudumbashree activities. In Munnar, women workers caught up on their unpaid work on Sundays and was struggling to make time to even attend a single meeting of the Kudumbashree, let along engage in any of the numerous activities that were taken up by other Kudumbashree units across the state. They utilised Kudumbashree exclusively for microfinance activities. The chit funds were also very popular among the women workers. Oftentimes, it was noticed that the neighbours were part of the same Kudumbashree groups and chit funds groups. Since the members are often neighbours and friends, there were informal arrangements between them as to who would be allotted the monthly sum, based on the needs of the households. The neighbours also compulsorily contributed money during every social function held in the households in the neighbourhood, including marriages, deaths, birth of a new-born etc, lightening the burden of the cost of these functions on the households.

While there are certain visible monetary and other benefits in maintaining good ties with the neighbours, in most cases, the neighbourhood relations are a part of life inside the plantations. The neighbours who have known each other for generations also find comfort in simply maintaining the ties. There are older members like Rosamma who could talk about the history of the place and the members of any household in the area as she has stayed in the same community for decades together. In maintaining these relations, there is a way of life within the plantations that also gets reproduced and which even the younger members of the plantation households adhere to. This is more pronounced for the women members in the household who generally do not travel outside the space of the household and the job-site as frequently as the male members. These informal arrangements, thus, inevitably transformed into tools for survival when the women workers were pressed for resources.

5.3.3.d. Plantation Grapevine

For the workers, the plantation grapevine is one of the most effective ways of communication about all things within and outside the estates. The locations for the channels of communications occur at the jobsite and outside. Within the workplace, the women workers only had two breaks- one at 10:45 AM, and another at 3 PM. The regular tea-breaks are almost always looked forward to, as the most important news, a mix of facts, rumours and gossips, are caught up then. While the plantation workers mostly confined to the job-site and the line houses

which made them secluded in their own estate divisions that are scattered geographically in the hilly terrain of the area, the grapevine played a role in bringing down the distances by keeping them updated about the happenings in other estates as well. It also helped women to acquire new knowledge regarding certain issues that were happening, and use it for their advantage.

For instance, Maari mentioned that it was through one of these discussions that she heard that it was the last day for applying for a student scholarship with the trade union office and even the process was explained in detail to her by one of her group members. This helped her secure a fellowship for her son, who completed his 10th standard with good marks to continue his education. In another instance, Vijayamma recalled hearing about the government health insurance scheme and other benefits available for retired workers through her group members. As a temporary worker, she greatly benefitted from this information.

Vijayamma mentions that she came to know about some important information on Aadhar card and later regarding health insurance while she was on the job from her co-workers. She says that as she was getting older, she increasingly relied on the group during the tea breaks to stay updated regarding the many social security programmes. “The younger workers know more about these things than us and it is so useful for us, older workers”, she says. Her circle of friends mostly includes retired workers and other older women in her neighbourhood. She says that she passes on information to them as well when she gets to know something. Since she is one of the few workers working even after the retirement, she says that her friends mostly envied her for all the news she got to hear while she was at work, not the job per se. Rajani mentions that she came to know the last date to apply for her daughter’s scholarship when she was on the job. The financial help she received from the trade union was crucial for the family, who was going through a financial crunch. However, Vijayamma also warns about some of the workers in the group who have closer ties to people working with the unions and not passing on the information regarding certain benefits. “They would talk about everything else but the news regarding these matters, and then use that information for themselves alone”, she says. Ambika talked about how she came to know about the activities in farther off estates, both tea and cardamom estates in around the area, through her work colleagues. Updates regarding the protests in other estates and the bonus were almost always first heard while she was at work through the connections of her co-workers. Smitha claimed that no new updates escaped the grapevine, with a few them having WhatsApp these days. Rosamma told me that this was

hardly a new phenomenon and that the news travelled even in her younger days, when there were no cell-phones even.

Rumours and gossips about the people in Munnar, both inside and outside the estates, are key components of the job-site conversation. Any news regarding the trade union leaders and estate management workers reaches the grapevine with all the details. Details of houses and shops on rent in Munnar that belong to the politicians or trade union leaders, new cars used by them, details of the visits by the extended families of estate managers were all stories that I had been told by various participants in a group, all of which they claimed came through the grapevine. Some of the participants prided themselves in knowing the details regarding what happens in Munnar town and other estates, as was evident in the group interactions, while a few of them were only catching up with some of the stories. Rosamma clearly enjoyed the attention that she received in the neighbourhood when women went up to her to get the latest gossip and any other updates. She told me that even though she is retired, she hears news because of her old contacts. Not just the news regarding the top tiers of the plantation is circulated, but also regarding other workers. Any important updates in the locality or any worker households reaches the grapevine. I myself witnessed the effectiveness of the grapevine while I was travelling alone when I was new to the field and came across people I met for the first time, who already knew many details regarding me. However, the grapevine has a few downsides to it as well. The threat of any unpleasant news of the families which would bring down the status of the worker households looms large for the workers. Ambika summarised the sentiments of the workers neatly, “We really like to talk about the good things happening in our lives, but inevitably, the negatives also reach the grapevine and travel fast”.

The trade unions also use these channels to communicate to the workers. The leaders of the trade unions increasingly reduced their visits to the estates over the years. As most women workers attended only a few trade union meetings or did not regularly go to Munnar town, these channels were relied on by the trade union leaders to relay any information regarding meetings, protests or any other updates. With these channels were already in place, it was also easier for the other trade unions to try to stop workers from joining the newly-formed P.O. After the protests, there were direct and indirect requests made by the earlier-established trade unions to not leave their organization. Alongside, other gossips and rumours regarding the ‘unruly’ leaders of the P.O. travelled fast through these networks as well. While the grapevine initially must have helped the P.O., it definitely played a role in its declining popularity as well.

While some of the news reach the household through the men in the households who travelled more frequently towards Munnar town and other areas, the women workers mainly rely on their own sources for most of their updates. While useful information came through the channel, it did not spread as easily as the gossips and rumours. It was interesting to know about the two contrasting types of behaviour regarding the women who had information and was part of the grapevine. One group, like Rosamma, prided in knowing about the latest updates, gossips and rumours, and easily shared with other women. They enjoyed the privileged position they received when people in the neighbourhood looked up to for information. The second set of people, much like the ones against whom Vijayamma was complaining about, used the grapevine for their benefit, while retaining information that may of be of service to others all to themselves. Both these types of behaviours pointed to bettering the individuals' own positions within their social circles. However, as women workers grapple with the limited options than to restrict their movements to the estates and their houses because of resource constraints, both monetary and time, they find the grapevine to be windows into the outside world and their own communities and take joy in being part of it.

5.4. Conclusion

Different systems of oppression and domination converge on the space of the tea estates in Munnar- from the colonial remnants of power hierarchies to those imposed by the global commodity chain of tea production- all of which were and have been shaped and influenced by the gendered norms of a patriarchal structure.

The first half of the chapter clearly shows that the space of the plantation has been continuously reproduced in the modern context, even though there are some visible changes. While the state slipped into the role of a negotiator and not an enforcer of the law, and as the management underwent several ownership changes, even resulting in labelling the workers of the estates as the owners, and at a time when Munnar itself became the centre of a tourism-bloom, the workers remained marginalised as ever, only to be cruelly reminded of their landlessness and their identity of being an 'outsider' to Munnar. It appears as though these external changes have somehow failed to make any changes in their relative position in the society.

Here, the space of the plantation simultaneously acts as the job sites and residences of the workers here, and so, the social relations forged on the same transcend the line between 'public' and 'private'. The women tea pluckers are colleagues and neighbours, and share the same social

location- with regard to their identity as a Tamil descendent, migrant worker from SC, OEC and OBC categories. They are outsiders to the general Malayali society of Munnar town, even though they were born and raised, and married off within the same line houses of the tea estates for generations together.

The women workers negotiated with their residential spaces by modifying/augmenting and personalising the same, sometimes even compromising their individual comforts for the needs of the family. These spaces, thus, remain gendered in multiple ways.

The workers negotiate with their restrictive positions in their own ways, trying to survive and move upward, socially and economically. The women workers saw their paid work as necessary to provide better opportunities for their children and grandchildren, and their unpaid work as their duty as 'good women'. As a result, they were generally left time-poor, as was seen through the results of the Time-use Survey elaborated in the previous chapter, forcing many to work without taking a break, even during simple leisure activities like watching the television. Many of the women continued in their strenuous paid (and unpaid) work in the plantation to deal with their financial problems and the uncertainties of post-retirement options.

The women workers negotiated with these constraints in their personal lives by relying on taking help from their network of fellow workers and neighbours, who helped each other in their times of need, including securing loans, lending a hand in taking care of the children and elderly dependents, providing valuable information through the plantation grapevine, arranging for legal and other help for the retired members to negotiate with the company to extend their stay in the estates, and so on. These social networks of the workers sometimes extended beyond one estate to another, depending on the presence of extended families, in-laws and so on in those spaces. The Pembilai Orumai was also one such tool of negotiation that the women workers hoped would bring solutions to a wide range of their everyday issues, not just their financial woes. While some of these negotiations did not provide them the intended results, these various types of negotiations form a part of their everyday life.

CHAPTER- 6

Conclusion

The thesis set itself out to find out more about the 'everyday' of the women workers in the tea estates of Munnar, Kerala, and how sites of production and reproduction operate within it. The preceding chapters covered various aspects of their 'everyday' and the present chapter attempts to highlight the interwoven threads of the seemingly different dimensions together to arrive at the overall picture.

The historic, socio-economic relations that characterise the space of the plantation have been much discussed in various studies across the globe, with respect to their colonial legacies and long histories of indentured and exploitative labour conditions, as well as the role that they play in the global commodity chains in the neoliberal economy today. Beginning with a review of the existing literature on the same, the first chapter of the thesis contextualizes the tea estate chosen for the study by tracing the historical trajectory of the ownership of the tea plantation in Munnar from the colonial times till the present day. While the plantation in Munnar is no longer a closed enclave (as mentioned in some of the earlier characterisations of the structure of plantations) as it is clearly connected to the outside world through various conduits, there are certain aspects of the older structure that continue to operate to this day. The chapter also describes the history of the present plantation that is studied in the thesis within the context of the larger. This chapter crucially constructs the space of the plantation itself that anchors the narratives and findings that come out in the subsequent chapters of the thesis. The chapter then moves on to talk about the analytical framework that is used in the study. The thesis employs the twin categories of social space and time as a setting to understand the social reproduction of the worker households, daily and inter-generationally. The intersectionalities of the workers' identities and lived experiences are foregrounded to understand their negotiations with the competing demands that arise from their paid and unpaid work. The everyday of the workers is understood here in terms of three components: their paid work, unpaid work and their negotiations. This understanding of the everyday helps to answer the question raised in the thesis: *How does the everyday enable and resist against the gendered sites of production and reproduction?*

The next chapter describes the background of the social actors that constitute the said space, which provides a backdrop to better understand the social relations that are forged and lived out here. The workers, who are semi-literate, continue to live in the same tiny houses allotted to them within the plantations as their ancestors. The lower wages of the workers in the plantations have often been justified by the non-economic provisions of welfare under their job contract. The welfare provisions of the PLA which guarantees them a place of living as well as access to basic health care and educational facilities have been diluted and the costs of the material bases of their social reproduction are often borne by the workers themselves. The majority of the workers who have entered into a formal employment contract with the management often find their households in a constant cycle of debt. The worker households also belong to socially and linguistically marginalised groups within the mainstream Malayalee society. The majority of the workers are Dalits. The various responsibilities of their paid and unpaid works confine the women workers to the household and the job-site and, hence, only a small proportion of them even understand or speak in Malayalam, alienating them further within the Malayalee society. These multiple and intersecting identities of the workers, along with the weak economic positioning of their households, place them in a precarious state of existence.

The paid work forms a big component of the everyday for the women workers, which is explored in detail in the third chapter of the thesis. The continuities of the structure of the plantation from the colonial times is reflected in the gendered hierarchy of the job-site. Women who form the majority proportion of the workers, about 70 percent, are tied down to the lowest rung of the plantations as tea-pluckers. The gendered division of work operates in the site. Women work for long hours in a physically strenuous job that also give rise to multiple health issues for them. Their wages barely cover their daily living expenses, let alone to cover the cost of buying and owning land or property for their post-retirement life. The upward mobility in the job for the women workers is rarely observed, even while a few women who have passed 10^{th} standard are now recruited as supervisors, based on an exam conducted by the management. This could also be seen as a move to break the unity of the workers, by giving a small promotion to the workers, rather than making any significant changes.

The ‘plantation patriarchy’ (Jayawardena and Kurain, 2015) operates in a significant way within the plantations. The narratives and experiences of the women workers in their paid and unpaid work present the picture that these aspects are indeed two sides of the same coin in their

everyday lives. The dividing line between the two gets blurrier still as the physical space of their residence and job site converge on the site of the tea estates, which then makes it easier for the structure of the plantation to keep the women at work beyond their official work time especially during the peak season. Within the household, the heteronormative patriarchal structure that has been accepted and passed down multiple generations once again orders the lives of the women, who are burdened with the majority of the work and caregiving responsibilities. Whether or not the women accepted their roles in both the spaces, they could not afford to wage a full out war with these oppressive structures without securing their future, or that of their children. The most common response recorded as the motivation for the women to continue in their physically demanding paid work was their concern for their children.

By deploying the tool of the time-use survey, the chapter on unpaid work brings forth the intra-household dynamics of the workers who lived and worked in the tea estates. This method was crucial in highlighting the time poverty of the women workers through most days of the year, which, paradoxically, only slightly improved during the peak season of tea harvests. The women workers were found to have more personal time during this time, as other members in the family, particularly their husbands, went out of their way to perform a larger share of the household chores. However, the time poverty of the women workers in Munnar, while not acknowledged directly by the larger society, including their male counterparts in the tea estates or the trade union members of the area, is accepted indirectly, which is evidenced by the fact that most commercial establishments that cater to the needs of this social group stay open during their off days, including Sundays.

The perception of the men in the area in other matters, including their views regarding the nature of the job of tea-plucking and the mobilization and leadership of the women in Pembilai Orumai, were recorded to show that they appreciated and acknowledged the importance of the women's work only when it conformed to the larger norms of the patriarchal structure that cushioned their position as above the women in the gendered hierarchy of roles. They ensured that the status quo remained so by retaining their position as the primary decision-makers in the family, and by almost exclusively managing the wages of their women.

The restrictive spaces of the plantations, which are created and maintained by various factors operating together – the state, the global capital, male-headed trade unions and even the oppressive structures within the society in terms of barriers created based on divisive linguistic and caste lines, along with the patriarchal norms – leave the workers with very little choices.

However, within the boundaries carved out by these oppressing factors operating within the plantations, an institution which has retained some of the features from the colonial period, the women workers have engaged in their own forms of resistance in the form of everyday negotiations. These negotiations which are acts of survival in many cases, are varied and diverse in nature, and are carried out individually and collectively. The workers negotiate with the issues that arise from the space of the plantation using different tools, including their informal ties within the neighbourhood, the larger community within the estate spaces as well as their relatives in the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu.

6.1. Understanding Social Reproduction in the Plantation

> *"Events take place, moods ebb and flow, people and situations come and go, but looking back during these rare junctures in which we are, for whatever reason, lifted up from the circular daydream of everyday life, we are slightly surprised to find ourselves in the places we are, as though we were absent while everything was happening, as though we were somewhere else during the time that is usually referred to as our life."* (A Passage North, Anuk Arudprasagam, 2021, pp 6)

While the pages in a book of fiction might romanticise and liken the everyday as a fleeting daydream, in the lived experiences of realities for most of the women workers that I met in the tea hills of Munnar, the everyday denotes a state of constant struggle that they engage with consciously. Granted that some of the negotiations may have become a part of their daily routines, which may have become habitual or even mundane for the women here, these repetitive actions, nevertheless, stem from planning ahead, prioritising tasks, managing chores and time crunches as well as compromising on their own wants and needs for the sake of their families and social obligations.

The sites of production and reproduction are tightly interwoven within the space of the plantation. When the everyday of the women workers is mapped on to the spatiality and temporality of the plantations, one sees the close-knit connection between the two. Capital benefits from having workers readily available to extend the working day as and when required, as seen in the case of the peak seasons in the tea hills. The close-proximity of the living quarters within the estates where they also engage in paid work also extends the measures of labour control beyond their paid work. Besides the presence of superiors in the same area as their living space, as well as having their work colleagues as also their neighbours, the disciplining

and control of workers extend beyond the 'job-site'. The neat boundaries of the home and job-site disappear within the space of the plantation. In a similar vein, the unpaid work responsibilities of the women also tend to subtly shape their paid work. The women going to their homes during lunch breaks to attend to their household responsibilities is almost an accepted norm within the paid-work-culture of the plantations, so much so that there is a leeway given to them for about 15 minutes while re-joining the job-site for the afternoon shift.

The non-economic ties blur the boundaries between the two sites even further. The idea of viewing the quarters provided by the company as their home, as the one shared with their ancestors, simultaneously invoke the senses of 'belongingness' and alienation to the place as they do not 'own' their homes. The status of being a migrant 'other' in a place that they call home is another contradiction that they deal with on a daily basis. The linguistic and caste identities of the workers are often used against their favour to marginalise them further within these gendered spaces.

Within these larger contradictions and marginalisations, one needs to carefully place and understand the position of women workers. Access to financial resources and contributing to the lion's share of the household income (in a majority of the households) do not re-align the intra-household decision-making power in favour of the women workers. The women workers have a subordinated position within both their spheres of work. Further, with the limited resources of time and household debts, the women workers dig deep within themselves as well as their network of allies to negotiate and survive the same. Within these everyday acts of negotiations, along with the work they repeatedly perform in the gendered spaces of the plantations, the women workers contribute to the daily and inter-generational reproduction of labour power as well as towards maintaining and forging new social relations within the plantation spaces.

In certain cases, the very divisive lines along with which the workers have been marginalised within the larger society are used to their advantage to form ties to survive and overcome their circumstances. Caste, kinship and linguistic ties, not only within the plantation, but also outside the state have been utilised to negotiate with these situations. The gendered social reproduction of the workers, thus, is not merely limited to subsistence and the reproduction of labour, but includes a range of intangibles as well.

It must be noted here that the negotiations listed out in the thesis may not exhaust the list of conscious decisions and actions undertaken by these women workers in the space of the plantation and outside. A lot of these actions are also performed by the women simultaneously, according to the multiple situations and roles that they juggle in their everyday lives. As was mentioned earlier, the negotiations engaged with by the women workers are, in most of the times, about simply getting by or surviving, which means that they may be forced, or even choose, to prioritise their needs and wants every once in a while, resulting in the trade off of certain negotiations for the other. The women may, thus, negotiate with their negotiations just as much as they engage with the space of the plantation.

While the findings of the study attempted to present a nuanced discussion of the everyday of the women workers in the tea plantations of Munnar, the scope of the present study cannot adequately answer whether the negotiations that the women workers engage in are 'permitted' by the structure of the plantation itself for the sustenance of the same, as a permutation and combination of different factors act and clash simultaneously to reproduce the gendered space of a plantation.

6.2. Limitations of the Study

The study was severely restricted in terms of the way in which data was collected. As mentioned in chapter 3, the women workers were available for interviews only after their paid work. If the management would have allowed me to be a silent observer in the jobsite as well as ask questions during their break period, it would have provided a richer ethnographic analysis in the thesis. I could only observe their work a few times from a distance, like one of the tourists in the area. I also could not get the management's response on various issues discussed in the thesis as well. Being an important stakeholder in the field, their response would have certainly provided a different perspective of the issues discussed. Being a research student constrained with monetary resources, I was forced to limit the area and the number of households covered in the sample. As workers were available only for a short time-interval after their paid work, multiple visits to the same households were more or less warranted for qualitative in-depth interviews. A larger sample which included participants from every tea estate under KDHPCL and Tata in the region would have provided a more diverse sample and different points of comparison in terms of the experience of the workers. However, as just one researcher here, it was almost impossible to undertake such a large sample study within the time-limits imposed by the course. In a similar vein, a study stretched across various tea

plantations within the state of Kerala or South India as a whole could have provided a contrasting picture as well.

6.3. Future Directions of the Study

As PLA has officially been scrapped in 2020 by the Centre and has more or less left it to the state governments to figure out the provisions/laws governing the welfare of the plantation workers, it remains to be seen how this change would affect the lives of the workers. Even when the provisions of the Act were previously neglected, the companies were still held accountable under the law for these provisions. Now that the situation has changed, one also needs to look at what lies ahead for the companies and the workers. While there is an increased possibility for the casualisation of labour in the estates, the structure may not change altogether as there is a certain benefit for Capital to have workers available at any time next to the jobsites to stretch the working day as well as control the labour force in other ways.

The scope of the present study is limited to the confines of the plantation space alone. One area that could add a richer analysis to the same would be to look at the movement and everyday lives of the workers who aspire to move out of the plantation, including that of the retired workers. It will be interesting to explore not only the employment opportunities available to the next generation of the plantation families, but also the persistence of the social ties and intangibilities that are presently retained and enjoyed by the workers here. Whether such a movement is a desired goal to the workers here or forced like in the case of retired employees, such an analysis would aid in understanding the depth and value attached to the intangible and social aspects of their everyday.

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Appendix-1

Questionnaire - Workers

Estate: Panchayat:

Date:

Name of Respondent:

Primary language spoken:

Caste/ Tribe:

I. a. Household Composition

Sl. No.	Name	Relation to respondent	Sex	Age	Education	Primary occupation	Secondary occupation	Languages Spoken
1.								
2.								
3.								
4.								
5.								

II. Household Assets

1. Details of house and basic amenities

a.	Basic structure of the house	Type 1/ Type 2/ Others (Specify)
b.	Additions to the house (if any)	
c.	Were the extensions to the house externally funded?	
d.	Attached toilet available	Yes/ No
e.	Type of roof	
f.	Total area of the house (approximately)	
g.	Any separation in the space (for privacy) within the living room	
h.	Yearly expenses on the house (painting, repairs etc.)	
i.	Electricity available	Yes/ No
j.	Source of drinking water and distance from the house	
k.	Source of water used for general purposes other than drinking	
l.	Distance to the nearest bus/jeep stop	

2. Details of Kitchen Garden Plot

a. Do you possess plot allotted by company for kitchen garden - Yes/ No
b. If yes, details of the land (area)-
c. No of times cultivation is done in a year – _____
d. Do you sell your produce outside? If yes, details._____
_____
e. Total income from kitchen garden in a year_____

3. Details of Livestock Owned

a. Do you own any livestock? Yes/ No
b. If yes, details._____
c. Total income from livestock owned._____

4. Details of Ownership/Lease of Land or Building

a.	Own land/building	Yes/ No
b.1.	If yes, details (cents/ built-area)	
b.2.	Details of income generated from owned land/building	
c.	Leased-in land/building elsewhere	Yes/ No
d.1.	If yes, details (cents/ built-area)	
d.2.	Details of income generated from leased-in land/building	

5. Consumer Durables and Other Amenities

For the following table, mark either yes or no and record the number if more than one is present:-

Landline (a)	Basic cell phone (b)	Smart phone (c)	Desktop Computer (d)	Laptop (e)	Internet Connection (other than mobile) (f)	TV (g)	Set-top Box (h)	Radio (i)	Refrigerator (j)
Mixer Grinder (k)	LPG Connection (l)	Cycle (m)	Scooter (n)	Motorbike (o)	Auto-rickshaw (p)	Car (q)	Jeep/ Van (r)	Sewing Machine (s)	Others (Specify) (t)

III. Expenditure Incurred by the Household

1. Details of source of purchase of major food items for consumption by the household:-

Sl.No.	Source	Main Items Purchased	Total Expenditure	Avg. no. of visits	Primary hh member who makes the purchase
1.	Estate store				
2.	PDS*				
3.	Neighbourhood stores				
4.	Munnar Town Market				
5.	Others (Specify)				

* Specify the type of ration card in possession:- _____

2. Details of major expenses incurred by the household on various items

Expenditure Head	Monthly Expenditure	Expenditure Head	Monthly Expenditure
Food Expenses (total)		Electricity	
Daily Commutation		Water	
Children's Education		TV Connection	
Healthcare		Mobile Connection	
Clothes		Repairs & Maintenance (house)	
Footwear		Festivals	
Weekly/Monthly Travel		Automobile Expenses	
Kerosene		Alcohol, Cigarettes, Pan…	
LPG		Any other Expenses	
Firewood		Total Expenditure (appr)	

1. Has the household incurred any expenditure shocks in the past? _____
2. If yes, how did it meet the expenditure? _____

IV. Household Income from All Sources

1. Income and other Details of All Earning Members

Sl. No of HH Member from Table 1	Income from Primary Occupation (Daily/ Monthly)	Income from Secondary Occupation (Daily/ Monthly/ Yearly)	Time Spent on Primary Occupation (Daily)	In case of tea plucker, avg daily kg of tea leaves plucked

2. Income from Household Businesses (if any):
3. Income from Kudumbasree unit (if any):
4. Income from Seasonal Occupation (if any):
5. Total income reported from livestock owned and kitchen garden:

IV. Borrowings and Savings in the Past One Year

1. Details of credit availed through various sources (including pawning and EMI payments for assets):

S.L. No. of the HH member who availed credit & Date	Amount (in Rs)	Source	Purpose	Annual/Monthly Int. Rate	Whether Promptly Repaid/ Renewed

2. Has the household been completely out of debt for anytime in the past?
3. Details of savings of the household:-

Type of Savings	**Amount (in Rs)**	**HH member primarily responsible for the saving**
Recurring Deposit		
Chitti		
Gold Schemes		
Gold		
Shares of the Company (number of shares & amount worth)		
Any other (specify)		

V. Government and Company Benefits Received by the Household

1. Access to other Government Schemes/ Subsidies

Sl.No.	Scheme	Benefits Availed (Yes/No; if yes, details)

1.	MDM Scheme	
2.	ICDS	
3.	MGNREGS	
4.	LPG Subsidy	
5.	Health Insurance	
6.	Various Scholarships for Children	
7.	Disability Allowance	
8.	Other Schemes	

6. Access to KPHPCL Benefits

Sl.No.	Scheme	Benefits Availed (Yes/No; if yes, details)
1.	Free Education to Children	
2.	Srishti (Education and Employment of Physically/ Mentally Challenged Members of Household)	
3.	Blankets for Household (EMI basis)	
4.	Rice at Concessional Rate	
5.	Tea at Concessional Rate	
6.	Free firewood	
7.	Concessional Healthcare	
8.	Any Others (Specify)	

2. Access to Healthcare and Education by Members of the Household

1. Access to Health Facilities:

a. Health System followed: Allopathic/ Ayurvedic/Indigenous Medicine/Other (Specify) _____

b. Nearest hospital/ PHC (distance in km):

c. Most common ailments of the hh members:-

SL No of the hh member	Ailment	Treatment taken (if any)	Cost of treatment covered under insurance (Y/N)

d. If there is no insurance, how is the expense covered?

e. In case of pregnancy during tenure as an employee of KDHPCL, were the benefits claimed?

_____

f. Were care facilities (for children below 6 years) provided by the company/govt availed? If not, why?

_____

g. History of hysterectomy among family members who are (were) tea-pluckers:_____

h. Any other work-related ailments:_____

2. Access to Education

Mark Government School, Company School, Private School, School/ College in Native Place, Staying in Hostel (within the state) and Attending School/ College , Staying in Hostel (outside the state) and Attending School/ College as 1,2,3,4,5 and 6 respectively.

Sl no of hh member from 1	Primary School	Middle School	High School	Plus Two (11^{th} &12^{th})	UG	PG	Distance from Home	Details of Scholarships/ Concessions and other Benefits Availed

VI. Trade Union Membership

a. Details of Trade Union Membership of all Working Members of the Household:-

SL no of the HH member	Name of TU associated with	Change in TU membership in the past (Y/N)	If yes, how many times and names of the previous TU associations

b. Any other membership details:- Kudumbasree _____

Any local party_____

c. Do you go for trade union meetings regularly?
d. Do you participate in the process of election of TU leaders?
e. If not a member of any of the trade unions, reason for not joining:

_____

f. If a member, reasons for joining a TU:

_____

g. Reasons for change (if any) in the TU membership in the past.

_____

h. Do you think you have chance of being a trade union leader?

_____

i. Perception of the function and the role of trade unions:

_____

j. Do you believe whether voices of workers are heard by trade union leaders?

_____

k. What was the last issue (you remember) that was successfully intervened/solved by your trade union?

_____

VII. Other Details:-

1. How was the introduction to the present job made? Years of job experience.

_____

2. How was the training for the job received? Who was primarily responsible for the training?

_____

3. How many years did you take the perfect skills of tea plucking? In your opinion, what how much time does it take to become a skilled (expert level) tea plucker? _____
4. Do you consider your job difficult? If so, what do you not like about it the most?

5. _____
6. Have you considered yourself for a supervisory post? If yes, how far has it progressed? If no, reason.

   _____
7. Do you think trade unions play a role in the promotion of workers?

   _____
8. Do you want your children to enter into jobs in the tea plantation?

   _____
9. Where do you plan to settle after retirement?

   _____
10. Views on owning a piece of land in Munnar:

    _____
11. Do you perceive the new migrant workers as threat to the present job?

    _____
12. Who collects the weekly wages from Munnar town? If others, reason for doing so.

    _____
13. Who handles the money in the household?

    _____
14. Perception of unity of workers in the same team.

    _____
15. Views on the recent strikes in the plantation. Any perception of change after the P.O. strike.

    _____

Appendix- 2

Questionnaire: Trade Union Leaders

Name:

Trade Union:

1. Membership of the TU – Details:-

Details	Number of workers		Total
	Female	Male	
Permanent Workers			
Tea Pluckers			
Other Jobs			
Contractual Workers			
Migrant workers (Permanent)			
Migrant workers (Contractual)			
Total			

2. Number of women holding a post in the trade union:_____

3. Major achievements of the TU in the past three years:

_____
_____

4. Details of any credit channels open to the workers via the trade union:

_____
_____

5. Opinion on the management:

_____
_____

6. Opinion on other trade unions:

_____
_____

7. Opinion on Pembilai Orumai and the strike:

_____
_____

8. Strategy followed in solving major issues (e.g. cooperating with other trade unions):

_____
_____

9. Opinion on allotting a piece of land to workers:

_____
_____

10. Opinion on migrant workers:

_____
_____

11. Opinion on the introduction more technological innovations on the estate (at the stage of plucking of leaves):

_____
_____

Annexure A: Papers Presented in Conference

Certificate of Presentation

Given to

ANU PHILIPOSE

to certify presentation of the paper

Negotiating with the Gendered Spaces of Tea Estates

at the

28th IAFFE Annual Conference
27-29 June 2019 | Glasgow, Scotland

NAILA KABEER
President, 2018-2019

CHERYL DOSS
President, 2019-2020

CERTIFICATE OF PARTICIPATION

This is to certify that

Anu Philipose

presented her paper 'Triple-burdened Women Workers in Tea Estates: A Time-use Survey' at the

YSI ASIA CONVENING

held on 12-15 August, 2019 in Hanoi, Vietnam

Jay Pocklington
Manager YSI

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Annexure B: Paper Publications

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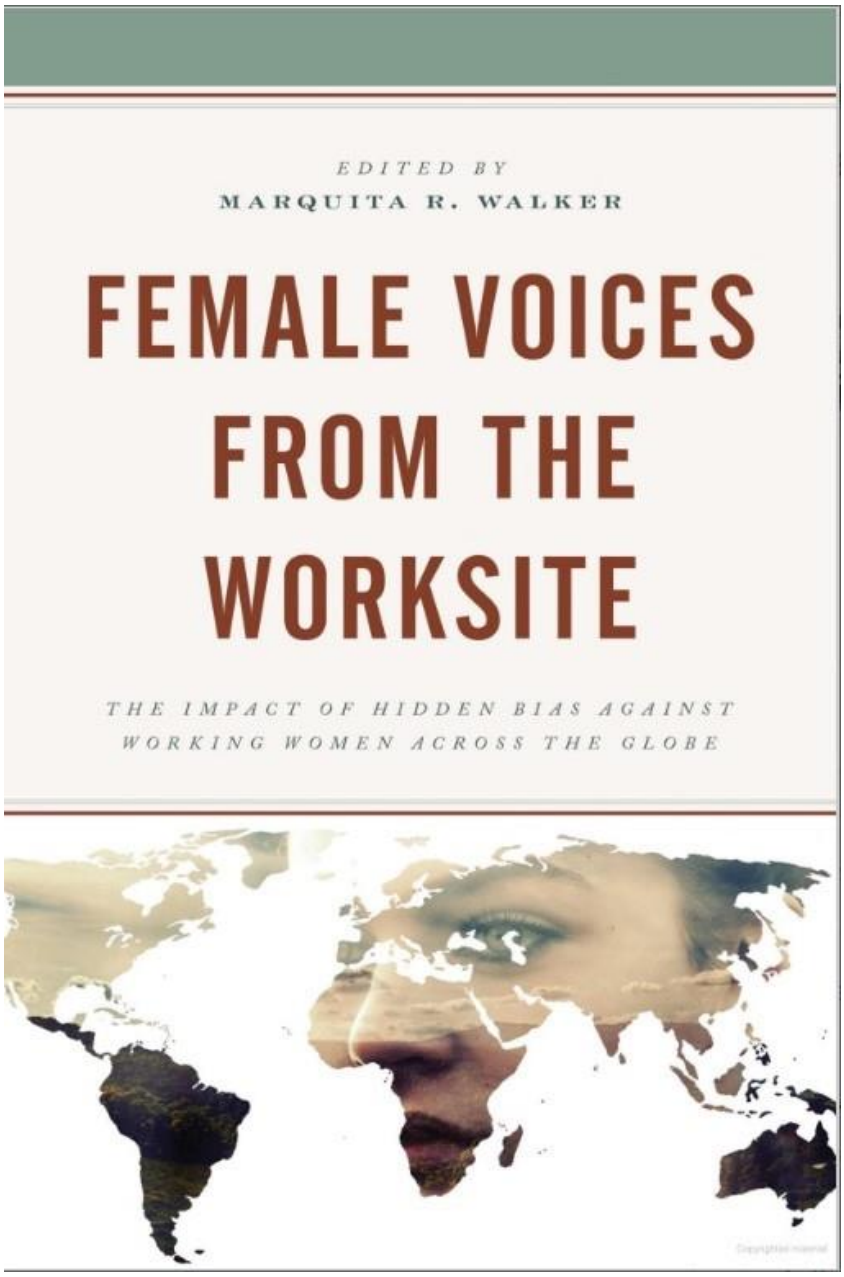

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Contents

Chapter 2

Women Tea Workers of Munnar

Daily Negotiations with the Restrictive Spaces

Anu Mariam Philipose

BACKGROUND

There are many studies[1] based on the workers in tea estates in India, but very few are positioned from the workers' perspectives. Most of the studies have taken on a top-down approach which recognizes that the workers are being exploited but discounts their role as active agents. One cannot make full sense of these workers' lives unless their voices are given due importance, placing their lived experiences first. Engaging with a phenomenological approach, the chapter tries to address this gap precisely by placing itself in the everyday lives of women workers and attempting to understand their perspectives on work, the various choices they make, as well as their strategies of daily negotiations with their circumstances.

Set within the tea plantations of Munnar in Kerala, a southern state in India, this chapter explores the challenges of work in the context of a workplace-household continuum. This becomes particularly pertinent in the setting of the chapter, as the women workers, who form the predominant share of laborers in the lowest rung of the chain, live in houses allotted to them within the premises of the estate. Even though the field site is unique in various respects, the precarious conditions of the workers here and their active negotiations with them could bear resemblances at large to other contexts as well.

The chapter consciously adopts a phenomenological approach in finding answers to the layers of meaning attached to the term "work" and other related concepts used by women workers in the tea estates. At times, some of these views appear contradictory as they denote the different shades of interpretation of the same concept by the women. However, these subjective

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The Issue of Gendered Access to Credit in India: Is Microfinance the Answer?

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The Issue of Gendered Access to Credit in India: Is Microfinance the Answer?

Abstract

With a significant number of adults owning a bank account, 78 percent according to the latest Findex Report released in 2022, a large percentage of the population still depends on informal channels of credit, which in most cases have led to situations of debt-trap with the interlinked nature of the credit, labour and goods markets. Women's accessibility to formal credit channels remains even lower, and predominantly depend on informal sources of friends and family. And with the falling female labour force participation rates over the years, there has been an argument for higher financial inclusion of women to reverse the trend. Primary among those solutions that have been hailed to plug in the credit accessibility gaps is microfinance. There is a widespread assumption of equating financial inclusion of the poor with accessibility to credit through microfinance, which would eventually set the economy directly on a path of higher and sustainable economic growth. Despite the mixed results generated in various countries, even the World Bank has given its blessings on pushing forward the 'shortcut' of microfinance in achieving women's empowerment. In India, the growth of microfinance institutions have only increased in the recent years, even in the aftermath of the pandemic. Given the scenario, what the paper intends to do is to first critically analyse the very nature of microcredit through Harvey's framework and expose the deeper issues of exploitation and gendered process involved with it. It then proceeds to suggest alternatives to the present policy orientations, both in terms of treating microfinance as an institution as well as other approaches to financial inclusion.

Keywords: Microfinance, Poverty Reduction, Women Empowerment, Neoliberalism

1. Introduction

Financial inclusion of the masses has been relentlessly pursued by each changing government at the centre. Even the elusive goal of 'empowerment' of women has more often been hinged on financial inclusion, specifically to credit accessibility, than on other factors. The Global Findex Report for 2021 released by the World Bank this year shows a total of 78 percent of the adult population owning a bank account in India[1]. The gender gap has also come down considerably to almost a negligible proportion. While the recent increase in bank account ownership from the figures from a decade ago may look promising, India also has one of the largest numbers of inactive bank accounts in the world, about 35 percent (Findex Report, 2021). The same report also mentions that the number of inactive accounts is higher for women by about 12 percent. The inactive accounts point to the reliance on informal methods of saving and borrowing. These non-institutional methods mostly involve borrowing money from moneylenders, which are more often connected to other markets of labour and produce as well.

Women's accessibility to formal credit channels remains lower than men in India, with more reliance on friends and family for source of funds, other than the regular non-institutional source of money lenders. The Findex Report 2021 shows that only 13 percent adults have formally accessed credit, with a gender gap of 5 percentage points. With the falling labour force participation rates (LFPR) of women, there has been a greater emphasis on making credit accessible to them to improve their market participation. There are many studies which suggest a positive correlation between LFPR and women's access to microcredit (see Field et al., 2016).

Microfinance institutions (MFIs) in India can be broadly classified into two as the ones regulated by the RBI and the ones that are not. MFIs operating with a profit motive, usually registered as companies and NBFCs, mostly come under the purview of RBI regulations. The other not-for-profit NGOs registered under trusts, and cooperative societies are regulated under different laws in various states. With the impact of demonetisation and the earlier microfinance crisis put in the past, the microfinance institutions have registered a substantial growth in 2018. The Report of the Microfinance Institutions Network (MFIN) released in 2018 shows that the microfinance sector had registered a year-on-year growth of 39 percent for the year. Even after the lockdown period and uncertainties that pandemic brought to the economy, the microfinance industry has only expanded and is predicted to keep growing at CAGR of 40% through 2025[2].

---

[1] This figure for 2017 is an overall jump of 27 percentage points from the last survey conducted in 2014. The Pradhan Manthri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) has been given credit for the increase in the numbers. The scheme claims to have 53 percent of its account holders as women and mostly in rural and semi-urban areas.

[2] See *As microfinance takes off in India, attention to detail is the need of the hour*, Times of India, dated Dec 9, 2022.

Annexure C. Plagiarism Report of the Thesis

Work, Social Reproduction and Negotiations in the Everyday Gendered Spaces: A Study on Tea Plantation Workers in Munnar, Kerala

by Anu Mariam Philipose

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