

Kerala's Plantation Crisis: Informality, Marginalisation and Labour Resistance.

Joice Varghese

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science University of Kerala

Abstract

This paper critically examines the paradox of informality within Kerala's plantation sector, focusing on the historical and contemporary experiences of tea and rubber plantation workers. Although plantations fall under the purview of organized sector with formal labour laws such as the Plantations Labour Act (1951), systemic neglect, weak enforcement, and political-corporate collusion have resulted in widespread denial of basic rights, including adequate housing, healthcare, and fair wages. The study highlights the socio-economic marginalization of Tamil Dalit workers in tea estates, whose conditions remain colonial in nature. In contrast, rubber plantation workers—primarily smallholders—experience relatively better autonomy and housing conditions, though they too are vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations. The research underscores gendered exploitation, with women disproportionately concentrated in low-wage roles and excluded from leadership positions. Trade unions, once vehicles for labour rights, have often failed to represent workers due to co-option by management and political interests. The paper uses the 2015 Munnar women's strike as a critical case of autonomous labour resistance, challenging both employer hegemony and union inaction. Through this analysis, the paper argues that despite formal classification, plantation labour in Kerala remains deeply informalized, and calls for urgent structural reforms in labour governance, collective bargaining, and socio-economic protections.

Keywords: *Plantation Labour, Informality, Plantation Labour Act, Labour Rights, Trade Unions, Labour Resistance, State Intervention.*

1. Introduction

Plantations are expansive tracts of land dedicated primarily to the cultivation of a single commercial crop. This specialized mode of production thus significantly distinguishes the nature of labour in plantations from that in conventional agricultural settings. Agricultural labour is typically seasonal, with demand concentrated around specific phases such as sowing and harvesting during the kharif and rabi seasons. Following these periods, labourers are often released from employment and re-enter the broader labour market as wage workers. In contrast, employment in plantations—such as those producing tea or rubber—is generally long-term and continuous, rather than seasonal. Consequently, plantation workers experience a degree of relative job security when compared to their counterparts in traditional agriculture. However, this relative stability does not necessarily translate into improved working or living conditions. Hence it may be understood as a coercive institution designed to establish and sustain a hierarchical class structure, wherein a workforce is systematically organized under the authority of overseers and managers who act as intermediaries between laborers and owners. (Bhoumik, Sharith 1980). Furthermore, plantation labour has historically been marked by exploitative systems such as bonded labour and slavery. Notable examples include the forced migration and enslavement of African populations in American tobacco plantations and the relocation of Tamil communities to work under oppressive conditions in Sri Lankan tea plantations. These practices highlight the distinct socio-economic and historical dimensions that set plantation labour apart from general agricultural labour.

Historical and structural origins of the plantation economy in Kerala

The origins of the plantation sector in Kerala can be traced back to the pre-independence era, emerging as a direct consequence of colonial rule in India (Ravi Raman, 1986). The former princely state of Travancore was among the earliest regions in Kerala to witness the establishment of plantation estates, beginning in the late 1860s. The institutional interventions of the British administration played a pivotal role in facilitating the development of the plantation economy in the region (Umadevi, 1989). Various institutional factors—including the state, familial structures, and caste dynamics—contributed significantly to the sector's expansion. Key governmental initiatives, such as the allocation of land under favourable terms and the encouragement of labour migration, were instrumental in

the growth and consolidation of the plantation industry in Kerala during the 19th century. The plantation sector in Kerala serves as a vital source of livelihood for approximately 1.4 million families (Economic Review, 2016). Among the various plantation crops, rubber accounts for the highest employment generation. In its initial phase, rubber cultivation was predominantly concentrated in the districts of Idukki, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta. The declining profitability of traditional crops such as rice and coconut, coupled with the rising market value of rubber, prompted a significant shift among farmers toward rubber cultivation, leading to its widespread expansion across the state. Despite the expansion of the sector, the socio-economic conditions of the workers remain precarious. Compliance with the Plantations Labour Act of 1951, which mandates the supply of essential amenities for plantation workers, remains inadequate, with many plantations failing to meet the stipulated standards.

The legal framework: The plantations labour act (1951)

The Plantations Labour Act 1951 (PLA) represents a significant legislative framework aimed at enhancing the living conditions of plantation workers, who often reside in geographically isolated areas with limited access to essential services. (Government of India, 1951). Recognizing the vulnerability of such workers, the Act mandates employers to provide a range of basic amenities, including housing for workers and their families, sanitation and safe drinking water within labour settlements, subsidized canteen facilities, crèches, primary educational institutions, and healthcare services, including access to specialized treatment through group medical hospitals. Despite these provisions, implementation remains largely inadequate. (Bhowmik, 2015). While plantation associations frequently contend that the obligations imposed by the Act constitute a financial burden, the failure to enforce these standards is primarily attributed to the apathy of both state governments and plantation management (Vishwanathan M, 2023). As a result, the intended welfare benefits outlined in the legislation often remain unfulfilled in practice.

According to the provisions of the Plantations Labour Act (PLA), plantation management is required to convert at least eight percent of workers' housing into permanent structures annually, with regular maintenance and repairs. However, in practice, these standards are rarely met, and many dwellings remain in a state of disrepair, lacking proper structural integrity. The Act also mandates the provision of separate sanitation facilities for men and

women; yet, in many plantations, such facilities are either absent or inadequate, leading workers to rely on public water sources or streams for bathing and other needs. With regard to potable water, the situation remains similarly deficient. A significant number of houses lack water pipelines, and where pipelines do exist, water supply is often irregular, with availability limited to once a week or even once every two weeks (Bhowmik. S K, 2011). The PLA also requires the establishment of primary schools within plantation estates; nevertheless, these schools frequently suffer from severe resource shortages. In many cases, they are inadequately staffed, with a single teacher responsible for instructing all four primary grades, thereby compromising the quality of education provided to the children of plantation workers. Wages and the timely provision of rations are critical determinants of the living conditions of plantation workers. However, in many plantations, both wages and rations are frequently delayed, often being disbursed on a weekly or fortnightly basis, with payments commonly postponed by one to two weeks. In instances where workers report no significant issues, it typically indicates that they are receiving their wages and rations more regularly in comparison to workers in other plantations. This relative improvement, however, should not be interpreted as an indication of satisfactory living standards. Despite payments, these workers often continue to reside in substandard, dilapidated housing with limited or no access to essential services such as potable water and other basic amenities. Critics argue that the implementation of the Act has created an environment where state authority is significantly weakened in areas governed by its provisions. Decision-making regarding key aspects of workers' welfare—such as housing, healthcare, education, and wages—remains concentrated in the hands of plantation-owning entities. In such contexts, the state's capacity to intervene is minimal. This has led to the characterization of certain plantation companies, including prominent corporate groups such as Tata, as functioning effectively as a "state within a state" within Kerala's plantation regions, wielding considerable socio-economic and administrative control. (Konikkara A, 2020).

Living condition of the workers in plantation Sector:

Wages

Wages constitute a critical determinant of the living conditions of plantation workers. In the context of tea plantations, wage levels are relatively low compared to those earned by casual or other unskilled labourers. Following a landmark strike by the women workers of Kannan

Devan Tea Plantations in Munnar, the daily wage in Kerala was raised to ₹301. (The Hindu, 2015) The strike was notable not only for its success in achieving a wage increase but also for the solidarity expressed by the state government in support of the workers' demands. However, despite appearing substantial, this wage remains modest in the broader context of Kerala's labour market, where the prevailing daily wage in many sectors exceeds ₹500. (Economic Review, 2022) The relatively higher wage levels in Kerala have led to an influx of migrant workers from eastern states like West Bengal and Assam, who seek employment not only in plantations but also in sectors such as construction and hospitality

Caste, ethnicity and marginalisation

The majority of tea plantation labourers in Kerala belong to Dalit communities, and their historical landlessness has been a key factor in sustaining their generational engagement in plantation work. Despite their long-standing settlement in the region, these workers have remained largely invisible in Kerala's mainstream political discourse, a marginalization closely tied to their socio-economic and caste-based positioning (Raj Jayaseelan, 2018) Their status as socially and politically peripheral actors has significantly hindered efforts to organize collective resistance or effectively communicate their demands to the state. Although many of these workers are Tamil-speaking individuals who have resided in Kerala for generations, they continue to be perceived as outsiders. This perception has acted as a barrier to their political mobilization and access to institutional support. The term "Pandi", commonly used in local parlance to describe Tamil workers, carries racially and culturally derogatory connotations (Konikkara A, 2020). This intersection of caste, ethnicity, and socio-economic marginalization has contributed to the persistent exclusion of plantation workers from both public recognition and policy attention.

The Pettimudi landslide in Idukki District of Kerala tragically exposed the hazardous and inadequate living conditions provided by plantation companies for their labour force, bringing renewed attention to the urgent need to recognize plantation workers' right to secure housing, land ownership, and a life of dignity. (Konikkara A, 2020) Labourers and their families are often confined to overcrowded, one-room dwellings—many of which date back to the colonial period—irrespective of household size. These settlements, emblematic of caste-based occupational segregation, remain structurally and socially oppressive and the conditional nature of housing, which is tied exclusively to active employment within the

plantation further aggravates the misery of the workers. When younger generations, seeking alternate employment in areas such as hospitality or other professions aligned with their education, choose not to join the plantation workforce, companies frequently issue eviction notices to their families. This practice ignores the deep historical roots of these communities, many of whom were originally brought as bonded labourers nearly two centuries ago and have since lived on these lands for generations. Consequently, their status is marked by a persistent precarity, with no secure claim to the land they have long inhabited.

Rubber versus tea: A comparative labour analysis

However, the nature of labour relations in Kerala's rubber plantation sector differs significantly from the more exploitative dynamics observed in the tea plantation industry. According to data from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), under the Ministry of Science and Technology, Kerala accounts for over 90 percent of India's natural rubber production. The state has a total cultivated area of approximately 3.84 lakh hectares, yielding an annual output of around 3.70 lakh tonnes of rubber. The sector supports the livelihoods of an estimated 10 lakh rubber growers and provides employment to approximately 3.5 lakh workers. In contrast to tea plantations, which typically comprise large landholdings, rubber plantations are generally smaller in scale. The ownership structure of rubber plantations in Kerala is categorized into two distinct groups—small and large growers—based on landholding size as defined by the Rubber Act Rules of 1947, (Rajaseenan D, 2010) Under this classification, individuals or entities owning up to 10 hectares (24.7 acres) are designated as small growers, while those possessing more than 10 hectares are identified as large growers. Notably, approximately 93 percent of the total rubber plantations in the state fall within the smallholder category, collectively accounting for nearly 85 percent of overall rubber production. For the financial year 2024–25, the projected national figures for natural rubber indicate a production of 8.75 lakh tonnes against a significantly higher estimated consumption of 14.25 lakh tonnes, highlighting a considerable supply-demand gap.

Rubber plantation workers, particularly in Kerala, experience comparatively better living standards than their counterparts employed in tea plantations. A key distinction lies in residential arrangements: rubber plantation workers do not reside on plantation premises but instead live in their own homes, which are typically in significantly better condition than the deteriorated and overcrowded accommodations associated with tea plantations. Rubber

cultivation is generally not characterized as a labour-intensive plantation activity (Vijayan D et al, 2024). The demand for labour is primarily concentrated during the initial three to four years of sapling growth, when intensive care and maintenance are required. However, once the trees reach maturity, the labour requirement significantly declines. At the mature stage, the principal labour activity is tapping and demands a certain level of technical skill for which there is often a shortage of skilled workers. Workers typically make incisions in the bark during the early morning or evening hours, ensuring that the cuts are of sufficient depth to extract latex without causing damage to the tree. This procedure must be repeated on a regular basis for each tree, requiring both precision and consistency. (Rajasenan D, 2010). However rubber, once regarded as Kerala's principal cash crop, has experienced a significant decline in value over the past decade. The declining market prices for rubber have rendered the maintenance of such labour-intensive operations economically unviable for many plantation owners. (Gupta P, 2023)

According to data from the Rubber Board of India, Kerala, which accounts for over 90 percent of India's rubber production has seen a marked decline in output, national rubber production peaked in 2013 at approximately 9.13 lakh tonnes. This was followed by a steep decline, with production dropping to 5.62 lakh tonnes by 2016. (Chandran A, 2024). Although there has been a gradual recovery in output in subsequent years, current production levels continue to fall significantly short of the 2013 peak. During periods when rubber prices were high—reaching up to Rs.250 per kilogram—wage rates for tappers ranged from Rs.2 to Rs.3 per tree. Given that a typical tapper can tap approximately 350–400 trees per day, this period was economically favorable for labourers as well. Fluctuations in commodity prices have a direct impact on labour dynamics within the sector, with the recent decline in rubber prices, wages have also decreased significantly, with tappers now willing to work for as little as ₹1.50 per tree. Despite this, many smallholders have opted to either perform the tapping themselves or cease tapping activities, deeming them economically unviable at current price levels, resulting in a significant loss of employment opportunities (Joseph G, 2015). A considerable number of plantations are now being abandoned or converted to alternative crops. This decision has had a direct and adverse impact on tappers, who now face employment insecurity and are compelled to seek alternative sources of income. If the current situation persists, it poses a serious threat not only to the plantation sector but also to the broader socio-economic fabric of Kerala. The decline in rubber prices has already affected household

consumption patterns across the state. In response, the state government introduced a procurement scheme aimed at purchasing rubber at a higher price to support farmers. However, this intervention has had limited impact in alleviating the financial distress faced by growers. The fall in rubber prices has been largely attributed to the unregulated import of natural rubber and the global decline in synthetic rubber prices, itself a consequence of the crash in international crude oil prices. (Joseph G, 2015) Various stakeholders, including the state government, the Planters' Association, and worker representatives, have called upon the central government to take immediate action. Key demands include raising import duties on natural rubber, restricting imports through selected ports, and providing direct financial support to farmers through the Central Government's Price Stabilization Fund. Without prompt and effective intervention, the livelihoods of a large number of farmers and plantation workers remain at considerable risk.

Gendered dimensions of plantation labour

Women have historically played a significant role in plantation labour, largely due to the relatively unskilled nature of the work. They constitute approximately 50 percent of the total workforce in the plantation sector. Women's participation in plantation labour can be partly attributed to the geographical location of many plantations, which are often situated in remote, difficult terrains with low population density. Consequently, a substantial workforce has been recruited from more densely populated areas, leading to the migration of entire families and the subsequent employment of women in plantations. The nature of plantation work, which generally requires minimal technical expertise, has facilitated the inclusion of women, who are also perceived as a lower-cost labour force. However, women are predominantly concentrated in lower-tier positions, with minimal representation in supervisory or managerial roles. This limited upward mobility is often linked to lower educational attainment among women. (Rajaseenan D, 2010). A 2009 study by the National Productivity Council titled "Globalization and Gender"—which examined sectors such as plantations, food processing, textiles, handicrafts, and fisheries—highlights the persistence of gender-based wage disparities across industries, regions, and locations, despite the broader economic transformations brought about by globalization. The report notes that while women's incomes and economic participation have increased, these gains have not translated into substantial improvements in key areas such as real empowerment, equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities, equal pay for equal work, or gender parity in occupational roles.

The study further observes that men have disproportionately benefited from globalization, relative to women. Additionally, a 2009 report by the Ministry of Labour reveals that only 38.9 percent of cardamom plantations provided maternity benefits to women workers, underscoring the continued inadequacy of social protections and gender-sensitive labour policies in the plantation sector.

Trade unions and the politics of representation

The functioning of trade unions within the plantation sector reveals significant limitations, particularly in terms of their responsiveness to the conditions of workers. Trade union activity is largely concentrated in the tea plantation sector, while in rubber plantations it is minimal or absent. This discrepancy is primarily due to the less labour-intensive nature of rubber cultivation, which involves smaller workforces and more individualized labour arrangements. Despite the presence of trade unions in most tea plantations, their effectiveness remains questionable. (Xaxa V, 2019). Trade unions, originally established to safeguard labour rights, are now facing a legitimacy crisis. In the context of neoliberal economic reforms, which have intensified pressures on workers, unions have largely remained passive. In Kerala it is alleged that trade union leaders have reportedly accepted incentives such as permanent housing and bonuses, leading to compromised representation. In Munnar, Kerala, it is alleged that a political-corporate nexus has reportedly emerged between plantation companies and certain political factions. (Konikkara A, 2020). Notably, there have been instances where offices of some political parties are situated on land owned or controlled by corporate entities such as the Tata Group. This close association between political parties—including their affiliated trade unions—and plantation management has raised concerns. As a result, when plantation workers engage in protest or attempt to assert their rights, they often receive little to no support from these political or union bodies, whose allegiance may be compromised by their entanglement with corporate interests. This dynamic significantly undermines the workers' capacity for independent mobilization and weakens collective bargaining within the sector.

However, in a notable shift, women workers in Kerala's tea plantations, particularly in Munnar, mobilized independently without trade union support and succeeded in securing improved wages and working conditions. The strike organized by the women workers of Kannan Devan Hills Plantations, owned by the Tata Group, represents a significant and unique moment in the history of labour mobilization within Kerala's plantation sector.

(Deeksha J, 2025) The protest was initiated by female workers demanding an increase in the minimum daily wage to ₹500 and a 20 percent bonus, citing the disparity between their wages and the prevailing rates for casual labour in the state, which exceed ₹700 per day. Operating under the banner Pembilai Orumai (Women's Unity), thousands of women led the movement independently, deliberately excluding trade union involvement to prevent external interference. The strike garnered widespread public support, with prominent political figures, including veteran CPI (M) leader V.S. Achuthanandan, expressing solidarity. Lasting nine days, the strike concluded successfully when the plantation management agreed to provide the 20 percent bonus. The state government, acting as a mediator, facilitated the resolution and committed to raising the wage issue in the subsequent meeting of the Plantation Labour Committee.

This movement served as a catalyst for broader labour unrest in the state's plantation sector. Drawing inspiration from the Munnar struggle, plantation workers across Kerala launched a mass agitation demanding an increase in their daily wages to ₹500. The movement expanded to include nearly 3 lakh workers and effectively paralyzed plantation operations across the state (Philip S, 2015) In response to earlier criticisms of their inaction, trade unions became actively involved in supporting the workers' cause. The 17-day strike concluded successfully after six rounds of negotiations, during which the Plantation Labour Committee—comprising representatives from trade unions, the state government, and plantation management—agreed to a substantial wage revision across all plantation sectors. These collective actions mark a significant victory for workers' rights and underscore the power of organized labour in effecting change. They also highlight the importance of collective bargaining as a tool for challenging exploitative labour practices and reinforcing worker agency in the face of entrenched capitalist structures. Their grassroots movement underscored the growing disconnect between formal labour unions and the workforce they are intended to represent. The Munnar plantation struggle serves as a case in point, illustrating how traditional trade unions failed to advocate for worker grievances, thereby compelling women workers to organize autonomously. It also underscores the urgent need for trade unions to reorient their role toward genuine worker representation and to resist the influence of capital interests in order to remain relevant in the contemporary labour landscape.

State and management responses

Plantation managements have consistently demonstrated reluctance in addressing the legitimate demands of workers, primarily prioritizing profit maximization. Their approach is typically guided by the rationale that lower wages result in higher profitability. Consequently, there is little concern for the harsh and often inhumane living conditions faced by plantation labourers. Employers frequently justify their resistance to wage increases by citing the depressed market prices of commodities such as rubber and tea, arguing that higher labour costs would render their operations financially unviable. In defense of their position, managements also claim to provide social security benefits including health care, education, insurance, and housing. (Vishwanathan M, 2023) However, as previously discussed, many of these provisions—particularly housing—are either inadequate or poorly maintained, rendering such claims largely symbolic. In Kerala, the relatively high prevailing wage rates and the broader socio-economic context have compelled managements to adopt a somewhat more restrained stance, though largely under pressure rather than out of genuine concern for labour welfare.

Governmental responses to the plight of plantation workers have varied across states, often reflecting broader political and economic considerations. In many states successive governments have shown minimal commitment to addressing systemic labour deprivation. In many instances, authorities have denied the existence of starvation or malnutrition among workers and portrayed marginal wage increases as significant policy achievements, despite the continued marginalization of workers' rights.(Bhowmik S K, 2015)In Kerala however the picture is mixed where the state government in some instances has played a more proactive role, particularly during the labour agitations in Munnar. Recognizing the legitimacy of workers' demands, the government engaged constructively in negotiations and facilitated positive outcomes. Nonetheless, the state responses are often characterized by a general ambivalence—balancing the need to maintain capital investment with the political imperative of retaining worker support, particularly during election cycles. In the lead-up to the 2016 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) introduced a comprehensive 35-point action plan as part of its electoral manifesto. Among its key policy commitments was a targeted intervention in the plantation sector, wherein the alliance pledged to initiate stringent measures against large-scale plantation owners found to be in unlawful possession of land, including encroachments on government property. The

manifesto further asserted that any reclaimed land would be repurposed for public use and redistributed among the landless. However, four years into its tenure, the LDF government has demonstrated a conspicuous reluctance to implement this aspect of its policy agenda (Konikkara A, 2020) As such, government intervention frequently oscillates between passive observation and strategic engagement, depending on regional political dynamics and socio-economic pressures.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

There is a clear and urgent need to improve the conditions of plantation workers in Kerala. Despite constituting one of the largest segments of organized employment in the private sector, plantation workers continue to endure substandard living conditions that remain largely unchanged since the colonial era. Many reside in overcrowded, one-room dwellings lacking access to basic amenities such as potable water, sanitation, and other essential services, resulting in a life marked by deprivation and indignity. It is imperative that plantation workers across the country draw inspiration from the successful mobilization led by the women workers of Munnar in Kerala. Their collective action serves as a powerful model for asserting labour rights and challenging systemic neglect. A coordinated, nationwide movement is necessary for workers to effectively advocate for improved wages, housing, health care, and education.

Governments, rather than adopting a passive or indifferent stance, must take active responsibility in addressing the structural deficiencies that persist in the plantation sector. This includes investing in the improvement of workers' living conditions, ensuring access to quality education, and enforcing existing labour welfare legislation. At the same time, plantation managements must assume the role of socially responsible employers by upholding workers' rights and committing to the provision of humane and equitable working and living conditions.

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