

17. Challenging Capitalist Patriarchy and Negotiating for Women Worker Rights: Exploring the “Right to Sit” Movement in Kerala

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Abstract

The chapter explores the Right to Sit movement in Kerala, through which women workers in the garment sector fought for their right to sit with the support of a women's labour collective and a trade union. This struggle (right to sit) continued even after bringing in policy-level changes for its effective implementation in the commercial establishments. This chapter looks at how the movement that fought for a fundamental human right stood against capitalist patriarchy and, in turn, gendered precarity, and negotiated for the rights of women workers. It also looks at the role of digital technology and social media in the mobilization, organization, and sustenance of the movement.

Keywords: Right to sit, capitalist patriarchy, women worker rights, digital collective action, gendered precarity

Introduction

Recruited as a sales worker in Sangeeth Cottons, a major textile shop in Kozhikode city in Kerala, Latha was deployed in the shop's warehouse a month after starting the job. She and a few other women workers had to carry cloth bundles to the warehouse, separate them, and cut them into pieces. She and three other women, her co-workers, reached the “Penkoottu”¹

¹ “Penkoottu” (women for each other) is a women's collective in Kozhikode, Kerala, that works for the unorganized sector workers.

women's collective office in Kozhikode one day when they were expelled from their job for asking for masks to protect them from the dust of the cloth materials. They reached the organization's office to share their sufferings at the workplace, particularly the restrictions to sit while working at the textile showroom and even at the warehouse.

Latha was narrating her experiences and exploitations they suffered at the workplace to us:

One day, when I was sitting on the floor of the warehouse and cutting the cloth materials, another staff of the shop came running to me and asked me to stand up. She pointed out that the manager spotted me working by sitting through the closed-circuit camera and entrusted her to ask me to stand and do the work (Personal interview).

This was five years post the beginning of the "Right to Sit" movement (Irikkal Samaram) by "Penkoottu" and its trade union, AMTU (Asanghatitha Meghala Thozhilali Union – Unorganised Sector Workers Union), and more than a year after the amendment of the Shops and Commercial Establishments Act by Kerala government in 2018, making it mandatory to provide seating arrangements in commercial establishments. Besides, this is not the sole narrative of Latha or her co-workers. I have been part of the movement after the implementation of the law in Kerala as part of my fieldwork² and have been listening to similar experiences of women who reach the women's collective office to share their woes. We have also paid visits to several textile shops in the city and witnessed this situation first-hand.

This human rights violation prevented workers from sitting at the workplace, particularly in the textile sector where women form the primary workforce, came into public through the movement spearheaded by the collective and their trade union in 2014. The saleswomen in the textile sector had to assume the role of mannequins, being commodified, displaying the dress materials and catering to customers' needs by standing during their entire work time. The movement began with a one-month door-to-door campaign in shops in SM Street in Kozhikode against the violation of the

2 The research explores the communication practices and processes of the women's labour movement organization, "Penkoottu" and AMTU in Kerala. It focuses on how the movement negotiates with the understanding of what it means to be a woman and a woman worker, striving for their rights through collective actions, and individual struggles of the movement members.

right. It was followed by a sit-in and a rally on International Labour Day on May 1, 2014, in SM street,³ where activists and workers belonging to the collective and its trade union carried chairs on their heads protesting the unwritten law in the textile sector, preventing workers from sitting at the workplace. This was followed by several other protests across the state and led to the implementation of a law by the state government assuring the right. The protest at Kalyan Sarees, Thrissur, a major textile chain in the state, against the transfer of six women workers for joining the trade union, AMTU, which continued for more than 100 days, was one of the prominent protests in the movement that gained public and government attention.

Despite the amendment of the Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, making workers' right to sit a legal assurance, it is not a practice in most of the shops. "Penkoottu" and AMTU are still striving to make it a norm, making the "Right to Sit" an ongoing movement. For instance, a protest was held at Kozhikode district labour office after hearing the experiences of Latha and her co-workers, rising against the violation of the right and the law in several textile shops in the city. This led to a series of inspections of shops in the city by the labour officers.

This chapter explores the movement where women workers had to fight for a fundamental right—to sit—and continue with the struggle to attain the right even after bringing in policy-level changes. It looks at how the movement that fought for a fundamental human right stood against capitalist patriarchy and negotiated for the rights of women workers. It also looks at the role of digital technology and social media in the mobilization, organization, and sustenance of the movement.

"Right to Sit"—A Movement against Capitalist Patriarchy?

An excerpt from a pamphlet titled, "Why the textile workers are protesting for the right to sit," distributed among the workers and shopkeepers in Kozhikode by the trade union during a campaign in the beginning of the Right to Sit movement in 2014, states:

Women who form the primary workforce in the textile sector are the most exploited ones as well. Women are being recruited on a large scale

3 SM street (Sweet Meat Street) is a historical and popular shopping street in Kozhikode, Kerala. It is also known as Mitayitheruvu.

in the sector, considering the low wages to be paid to them, expecting that they will not raise voices and use them as ‘beauty elements.’ They are paid very less than men, and there is nothing like equal pay for equal work in the industry. They are not allowed to sit at the workplace and have to stand and work for long hours even while having physical difficulties such as during menstruation. Besides, their long working day starts even before reaching the workplace doing the domestic chores at home and continues till midnight after reaching the home. Moreover, their job market is so insecure and unjust that they lose the job if they are pregnant.

As is clear from the pamphlet’s content, apart from interpreting the issue as a human rights violation, the movement questions the capitalist patriarchy that constitutes the oppression of women both from their gender and class positions, which are manifested through the material and ideological dimensions of patriarchy and capitalism (Eisenstein 1979). Of course, preventing women from sitting at the workplace has more dimensions than that of a basic rights violation. Apart from capitalist connotations that treat workers as commodities, it also has patriarchal underpinnings. Sitting symbolizes power in a patriarchal society, where women are treated among the inferior gender categories. Its negation reflects the hierarchical sexual ordering in society that tries to reinforce patriarchal structuring through such acts.

Like in the content of the pamphlet, the movement talks about the double oppression women workers face and the commodification of their work. Though it may be considered unusual that they need to fight by protesting and campaigning to win a basic human right, the movement was more than that, exploring and questioning the economic exploitation and social oppression women face in capitalist patriarchy. Talking about women’s dual labour at home and the workplace and the lesser value attached to their labour—both economically and socially—the movement addressed the sexual division of labour and society that is evident in the capitalist economy.

“Is there any law that states that workers can sit at the workplace, is what the labour officers asked when a meeting was convened on behalf of the labour commission when we protested for the right to sit in 2014,” Viji P, popularly known as Viji Penkoottu, the founder and secretary of “Penkoottu” and AMTU told me as she spoke about the movement. “We responded to it, asking them if there is any law that prohibits us from sitting,” she continued.

This was the nature of the authorities' response when the movement raised the issue for the first time, and it was the continuous struggle of "Penkoottu" that led to the implementation of the law. Says Viji,

Meanwhile, employers were of the attitude that they are doing enough for these women who are otherwise 'simply sitting at home.' They, as well as the mainstream trade unions, were referring to women workers as those who are sitting idle at home or coming to pass their leisure time.

This account is similar to what Maria Mies (2012) talks about in her work on women lace workers in Narsapur. She says that the manufacturers and local officials considered women as sitting in the house and engaged in crocheting to pass their leisure time, thereby devaluing their labour. She says that the maintenance and propagation of the housewife ideology structured in the sexual division of labour and society lead to the extreme exploitation of women. Making women workers and their work invisible is a feature of capitalist patriarchy that considers women inferior in the sexual hierarchy and treats them as commodities. The feminization of labour incorporated an unprecedented number of women into the labour force with paid jobs, challenging the previous notion of women as mainly devoted to domestic and care work. They were regarded as a cheap labour pool, and their jobs were more precarious (Garrido 2020). The movement questions this gendered precarity and feminization of labour, and resists capitalist patriarchy aiming to ensure secure, valued, and respectful labour for women and to safeguard their rights.

Mayadevi, who was part of the movement at Kalyan Sarees in Thrissur in 2014–15, points out:

It was like an unwritten rule that saleswomen should do their work standing. The men in the sales section will go to the basement and warehouse to unpack new cloth bundles and sit there comfortably. There was nothing like seats or chairs for us to sit at the shop and tired by standing, we used to sit at the toilet steps where there is no camera to watch us when we go to the toilets or during the lunch break. We have been thinking about the exploitations we face at the workplace, especially the gender-based wage gap and the prospects of unionising to fight for our rights and joined AMTU when we heard about the right to sit movement happening in Kozhikode.

She and five other saleswomen started a sit-in protest in front of the textile showroom in December 2014 when they were transferred to a different showroom for joining the trade union, AMTU. The protest

raised several issues in the textile sector, including not being allowed to sit, meagre wages, gender-based wage gaps, long working hours without a break, and imposing fines for talking and taking toilet breaks beyond the specified number. Citing the transferring of the women workers, the movement also questioned why women workers are exclusively targeted for unionizing and standing up for their rights, thereby asking why the precarity in the labour market has a significant impact on women's lives (Standing 1999).

Digital Support in the Mobilization, Organization, and Sustenance of the Movement

Social media played an extensive role in the propagation of these ideas and facilitated offline activism, especially since the protest at Kalyan Sarees, which marked the second phase of the movement. The immense social media support of the Kalyan Sarees protest made it a “connective-collective action” (Bennet and Segerberg 2012) or a social media-driven collective action. The movement itself has been using digital technologies for its mobilization and organization, especially for internal coordination. This raises the importance of looking into the role of digital technology in the movement organization.

Let me quote an instance from my field notes to explain how vital the instant messaging service platforms were for the internal coordination of the movement:

From morning onwards, there was this mood of protest and conflict in the air on November 6, 2019. We were planning to protest at the district labour office in Kozhikode against the violation of the right to sit following workers' complaints in several textiles, including that of Latha and her co-workers from Sangeeth Cottons. Viji Penkoottu sent a voice message in the WhatsApp group of 'Penkoottu' in the morning itself reminding everyone that the trade union is meeting the Kozhikode district labour officer at 11 am at his office to raise issues in the textile sector including the violation of the right to sit and other basic rights including to use toilets. She urged all the members to join the protest and said that slogans would be raised against the labour officer (enforcement) for failing to implement the Kerala Shops and Commercial Establishments Act, which was amended last year.

This was the nature of every protest and campaign of the organization. Conversations mainly in the form of voice messages would flood in the WhatsApp group to ensure participation.

WhatsApp has been the backbone of the internal communication dynamics of the movement and a mobilization strategy amongst its members ever since the movement organization started its WhatsApp groups. The group resembles a sound cloud full of voice notes of the members, discussing and arguing as if in a real meeting room. This is where they get information regarding the decisions taken at meetings in the organization office or about an upcoming or ongoing campaign or protest. This backstage activism or the internal communication that happens backstage of social media (Treré 2015) plays a significant role in the organization, mobilization, and the sustenance of the movement.

Apart from this backstage digital activism, the organization with its social media presence, i.e., with the Facebook pages of “Penkoottu” and AMTU Kerala, though not that active, have been carrying out campaigns at all the stages of the movement to mobilize public support. Besides, the activists who were part of the movement, in the beginning, had compiled the pamphlets and newsletters of the movement in a blog titled, “Asamghatitham” (Unorganized) to further propagate the ideas. The movement, which has thus employed digital technology in its collective action repertoire (Tilly 1993) from its start, is now exploring more social media features such as Facebook Live in recently held campaigns and protests.

The movement gained immense public and political attention when the mainstream media neglected the protest at Kalyan Sarees and when people on social media started campaigning for it. Social media thus aided the movement in sustaining it and in bringing in policy-level changes. With the enhanced speed, flexibility, and horizontal networking logic that connects people with a shared interest (Juris 2005), these online campaigns mobilized many people for the movement who, apart from supporting it through the medium, also reached protest sites to express solidarity. Social media was critiquing mainstream media for being silent despite the movement presenting the inhumane and precarious working conditions at textile showrooms through the case of Kalyan Sarees. They trolled the media’s business mentality, accusing them of neglecting the movement due to advertisement revenues. “Boycott Kalyan” was trending on Facebook at the time. This massive support led to the textile management taking back the protesting workers and agreeing to their demands.

Concluding Remarks

Viji Penkoottu said during a Facebook Live at Sangeeth Cottons, a textile showroom in Kozhikode:

Women in the unorganized sector are treated as enslaved people. There is no value for their labour, and they are not even paid the minimum wages. They are not allowed to sit nor to carry out other basic needs. Women are getting sacked from jobs for sitting at the workplace or asking for masks to protect themselves from dust. They are not even regarded as workers, nor as humans.

It was the first time she and the organization representatives were going live on social media, updating their protest, and seeking support. They were getting them accustomed to social media features and adding them to their collective action repertoire (Tilly 1993) to fight for women workers' rights and challenging the capitalist patriarchy. The movement employed digital technologies for its organization, mobilization, and sustenance, to enforce the fundamental right to sit.

The movement raised awareness of the fundamental right violation, questioned the capitalist and patriarchal ideological structures that constitute the exploitation and oppression of women, and in turn, the precarious and gendered nature of jobs. Here, the very act to sit signified a collective resistance where chairs symbolized power over capitalist patriarchy.

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