



Penkkoottu: A new form of mobilization of women workers in Kerala

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Abstract: Penkkoottu emerges as a pivotal and contemporary form of mobilization among women workers in Kerala, India. This movement signifies a collective effort by women, particularly those in the informal labour sector, to unify their voices, address grievances, and advocate for their rights in the workplace. This paper delves into the origins, structure, and impact of Penkkoottu, examining its significance in the landscape of women's mobilization in Kerala. It explores how this collective movement has provided a platform for women in Kerala for fostering solidarity and empowerment. This study provides a glimpse into the emergence and impact of Penkkoottu, shedding light on its transformative role in advancing the rights and representation of women workers in Kerala's dynamic socio-economic milieu.

Keywords: women, women workers, mobilization, Penkkoottu,

Introduction

Women in Kerala have long been at the forefront of social progress, breaking barriers and redefining gender roles in a traditionally patriarchal society. But women were segregated in the early days from men, all household chores were forced to be done within the four walls of the house, they were denied by right to education and employment and treated at different levels. (Siddhi ,2021). Their existence has been deeply affected by the prevailing system of patriarchy, which often denies them basic rights. Women in Kerala, collectively have made a lot of efforts to gain the rights that were denied to them in house and society. They have mobilised and won rights which is denied to them at house, in society and at workplace. The history of women's mobilization for rights in Kerala spans various movements and milestones.

- **Social Reforms:** In the early 20th century, Kerala witnessed social reform movements that aimed at eradicating social evils like caste discrimination and promoting education for women. Leaders like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali advocated for women's education and social equality.
- **Women's Education:** Efforts were made to improve female literacy rates, leading to the establishment of schools for girls. This laid the foundation for women's empowerment by enabling them to access education and become more aware of their rights.
- **Women's Suffrage:** Kerala saw active participation in the Indian independence movement, which also fuelled the demand for women's suffrage. The efforts for political rights laid the groundwork for women's participation in governance.

- **Communist Movement:** The Communist movement in Kerala played a significant role in mobilizing women for their rights. Women actively participated in various struggles and movements led by the Communist Party, advocating for land rights, social equality, and labour reforms.
- **Reform Movements:** Movements like the Vimochana Samaram (Liberation Struggle) in the 1950s and 60s addressed various social and economic issues, including women's rights. This struggle aimed to secure basic rights for marginalized communities, including women.
- **Legal Reforms:** Over the years, there have been efforts to introduce legal reforms to address gender disparities. The implementation of laws related to inheritance, dowry, and domestic violence aimed at safeguarding women's rights.
- **Women's Organizations:** Kerala has a vibrant network of women's organizations that have been instrumental in advocating for women's rights. These organizations focus on various aspects like education, healthcare, political participation, and economic empowerment.
- **Land and Agricultural Reforms:** Initiatives like the Kerala Land Reforms Act of 1963 aimed at providing women with access to land and property, thereby empowering them economically and socially.
- **Matrilineal Society to Modern Challenges:** Kerala's history of matrilineal societies had an impact on the status of women. Transitioning from this traditional system to modern challenges involved various movements and adaptations to ensure women's rights in changing societal structures.

The history of women's mobilization in Kerala is characterized by a convergence of social, political, and economic movements that aimed to uplift women, promote gender equality, and secure their rights across various spheres of life.

Objectives of the study

- To understand the how the Penkkoottu organization mobilizes women workers in Kerala

Review of literature

- Mularath (2016), "Kerala's first women trade union" explains that although trade union activities have a long history in Kerala, this is the first time the state has officially recognised a women's trade union. One of the key causes of the union's founding is the problems that women workers in the unorganised sector continue to confront from the mainstream, male-dominated trade unions. Penkkoottu is made up of women who work as sweepers, tailors, and salespeople in various businesses on Kozhikode's Sweet Meat Street, sometimes referred to as SM Street. Under the direction of P Viji, an SM Street tailor, they banded together to demand their rights in 2009. The "right to pee" campaign was the movement's initial attempt to address the dearth of restrooms available to female employees in businesses and organisations.
- Velayudhan (2020), "The Labour Side of the Story: Informalisation and New Forms of Mobilisation of Kerala's Women Workers" explains that the Women's Workers Union, established in Kozhikode in 2005, was one of the earliest organisations for women employed in the unorganised sector. Under Penkkoottu, AMTU was established in 2010 with the goal of ensuring worker registration and addressing further political concerns that affect women. Though the effort to install proper restrooms on SM Street and other sections of the city was not entirely successful, AMTU played a significant role in the campaign. Later, 'Right to Sit' was a state-wide campaign spearheaded by women employed in textile shops. Kerala shops and commercial establishment legislation was modified by the Kerala government as a result of this effort.

Methodology

The research design of this study is exploratory. This study review is widely dependent on Secondary data from various articles, journals on the available websites and books. The researcher undertakes the area of this study as the state of Kerala.

Penkkoottu

In a world where women's contributions to the workforce often go unnoticed or undervalued, movements like Penkkoottu stand tall as symbols of empowerment, solidarity, and progress. Born out of necessity and fuelled by the determination to address gender disparities in the workplace, Penkkoottu has emerged as a beacon of hope, championing the rights and mobilization of women workers in a unique and effective manner.

Penkkoottu, a women worker's collective, was one of the first organisations founded by women employed in the informal sector. It was established in Kozhikode as early as 2005 when women workers and salespeople from small businesses in Mittayitheruvu (Kozhikode) started to replace men employed in retail complexes. These women got together to talk about their common issues. (Velayudhan,2020). It represents a novel form of mobilization, one that goes beyond conventional unions and associations. Women workers shared experiences of unequal pay, lack of representation in decision-making, and systemic biases fuelled their collective desire for change.

What sets Penkkoottu apart is its innovative approach to mobilizing women workers. Rather than following the traditional union model, Penkkoottu operates as a network of support, empowerment, and skill-sharing among its members. It functions as a platform where women from diverse backgrounds and industries come together to exchange knowledge, offer mentorship, and advocate for their rights.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Penkkoottu is its advocacy for inclusivity and intersectionality. Recognizing that the challenges faced by women workers are often compounded by factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and more, the organization prioritizes an inclusive approach. By amplifying the voices of marginalized groups within their membership, Penkkoottu ensures that no woman is left behind in the pursuit of equality and fair treatment in the workplace.

The impact of Penkkoottu transcends individual workplaces. Through advocacy campaigns, lobbying efforts, and partnerships with other organizations, Penkkoottu strives to influence policy changes that benefit women workers on a larger scale. By engaging with policymakers, employers, and the public, they advocate for fair labour practices, equal pay, and improved working conditions.

The success stories emerging from Penkkoottu are numerous and inspiring. From securing better wages to implementing family-friendly policies in workplaces, the organization's efforts have resulted in tangible improvements in the lives of women workers. More importantly, Penkkoottu has instilled a sense of empowerment and agency among its members, fostering a spirit of resilience and determination to challenge systemic inequalities.

As the world progresses towards greater gender equality, organizations like Penkkoottu serve as catalysts for change. Their innovative approach to mobilizing women workers not only addresses immediate workplace issues but also paves the way for a more equitable future. By championing solidarity, education, and inclusivity, Penkkoottu stands as a testament to the power of collective action in reshaping the landscape of labour rights for women across industries and borders.

The Penkkoottu organization has been instrumental in mobilizing and empowering women workers in Kerala through several strategic approaches:

- **Creating Support Networks:** Penkkoottu fosters solidarity among women workers by establishing support networks at the grassroots level. They form local chapters or circles where women from various industries come together to share experiences, discuss challenges, and strategize collective action. These circles serve as safe spaces for women to seek guidance and support from their peers.
- **Empowerment through Education:** Penkkoottu conducts workshops and training sessions, aimed at educating women workers about their rights, labour laws, negotiation skills, and leadership development. By enhancing their knowledge and skills, Penkkoottu empowers women to assert themselves confidently in their workplaces.
- **Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:** The organization engages in advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about issues faced by women workers. Through rallies, public events, and media campaigns, Penkkoottu highlights concerns such as unequal pay, workplace harassment, and gender-based discrimination, aiming to influence public opinion and policy changes.
- **Inclusive Approach:** Penkkoottu prioritizes inclusivity by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups within their membership. They address intersectional issues by ensuring that women from diverse backgrounds, including those from marginalized communities, have representation and are included in decision-making processes.
- **Networking and Collaboration:** Penkkoottu collaborates with other organizations, unions, and NGOs working towards similar goals. By networking with like-minded groups, they leverage collective strengths and resources to amplify their impact and advocate for systemic changes benefiting women workers.
- **Legal Support and Guidance:** The organization provides legal aid and guidance to women facing workplace issues, including harassment or unfair treatment. By offering support in navigating legal procedures, Penkkoottu empowers women to seek justice and redressal for workplace grievances.
- **Policy Advocacy:** Penkkoottu actively engages with policymakers, employers, and trade unions to advocate for policies and reforms that benefit women workers. They participate in dialogues and negotiations to push for gender-sensitive policies, fair wages, better working conditions, and representation in decision-making bodies.
- **Capacity Building and Leadership Development:** Penkkoottu focuses on building the capacity of women workers by providing training in various aspects, including financial literacy, communication skills, and leadership development. This equips women with the tools necessary to take on leadership roles within their workplaces and communities.
- **Mentorship and Peer Support:** The organization encourages mentorship programs where experienced women workers guide and support newcomers in navigating their careers. Peer support mechanisms within Penkkoottu ensure that women can share knowledge and advice, fostering a sense of community and empowerment.
- **Online Engagement and Outreach:** Penkkoottu utilizes online platforms and social media to engage with a wider audience, share information, and mobilize support for their initiatives. This digital outreach helps in connecting with women workers across different regions and industries. Through these multifaceted strategies, Penkkoottu has been successful in mobilizing women workers in Kerala, empowering them to confront challenges, demand their rights, and strive for better working conditions and gender equality in the workforce.

Penkkoottu represents a significant contemporary form of mobilization among women workers in Kerala. It's a platform that allows women workers, especially those in the informal sector, to come together, voice their concerns, and collectively address issues affecting them.

Conclusion

Penkkoottu represents a dynamic and evolving movement in Kerala, focusing on empowering women workers who often face challenges in terms of labour rights, fair wages, and workplace conditions. This form of mobilization brings women from various sectors together, fostering solidarity and providing a platform for mutual support. Through Penkkoottu, women can articulate their demands more effectively, access resources, and advocate for their rights as a unified force. This collective effort not only raises awareness but also influences policymakers and society to acknowledge and address the specific issues faced by women in the workforce. The success and impact of Penkkoottu underscore the importance of collective action and solidarity in advancing women's rights in Kerala's workplaces. It reflects a growing awareness of gender inequalities and a proactive approach towards creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for women workers. As Penkkoottu continues to grow and expand its reach, it serves as a beacon of empowerment and advocacy for women in Kerala.

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