

# REPRESENTING CASTE AND GENDER UNDERPINNINGS OF THE ADIVASIS: JOURNEY FROM SUBJUGATION TO RESISTANCE IN MOTHER FOREST

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The vulnerable life experiences of the most marginalized or the tribal people labelled as “adivasis” are less explored by the mainstream society. Tribal narratives unfold the hidden layers of indomitable politics which situate them as subalterns. The alienation, silencing, othering, misrepresentation, and exploitation of adivasis in the name of land as landless, and homeless has been an age- old practice. The paper analyses the marginalized voice of a Dalit woman, and social activist named C.K. Janu through her personal reflections in Mother Forest, which deftly sketches her journey from an ordinary tribal girl to an Adivasi leader, and later as the chief spokesperson to protest the injustices of the government. The study refers to the theoretical underpinnings of Shailaja Paik’s Dalit Women’s Education, and discusses the educational transformation of women from Dalit communities. The tribal woman’s fight against hegemonic forces is represented through the conflict between civilization, and modernization.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Adivasis, Organic Intellectual, Ecology, Feminist Politics & Othering*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The literature of the marginalized addresses issues related to social justice affecting the people who occupy the peripheries of community, and society. The emergence of Dalit literature interrogated the stereotypical representation and portrayal of tribals as practiced by the traditional conventions and dominant discourses. The impact of globalized economy adversely steered the lives of tribals making them experience more instances of injustice. 1980’ and 1990’s witnessed the third world feminist struggles and emergence of independent Dalit women’s organisations. Dalit Feminism intersects between caste, class, sexuality, gender, and power relationships. The confiscation of lands, and exploitation of labour affected adivasis to a greater extent. The protest of the adivasis critiquing the policies of the government become the prime concern of the work. The framework of the prose is structured through Janu’s childhood, and politically active adulthood. Janu represents the organic intellectual who resist hegemony by articulating struggles of their class. Paik recognises that the identity of Dalit women is attributed not only by caste but also by gender. Education brought them out of the village to the urban places but they become political subjects [1].

The interconnectedness of tribals, and nature points to their harmonious coexistence in forest with an emphasis on their community life, eco-system, and indigenous knowledge. The self - alienation from the outside world, and confinement to the pristine nature rendered them

happiness. The journey of tribals beyond their place opened the outside experiences before them. Soon forests become no entry zones, and boundaries are demarcated. Caste oppression started by denying access to the natural resources. As such *Mother Forest* is a Dalit woman's self-journey of gaining a new subjecthood. Balmurli's 'From Jati to Samaj' advocates the need for anti-caste politics to work towards solidarity. He talks about differentialist casteism operating within twin modes- heterophobia, and heterophilia. Sharmila Rege's "Real Feminism" questions whether Dalit resistance can be conceived as cultural or not. The paper maps the grounded histories, and cultural realities to negotiate power, carves their agency, and contribute to feminist thought. The work is a consciousness raising for adivasis to stand together by way of resistance, and to keep their struggle alive.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The distinguishing factor that segregated the indigenous from the non- indigenous in India is caste. The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact has categorized caste-based discrimination as an instance of xenophobia [2]. The mainstream religious communities delimit Adivasi beliefs as inferior, and irrational. Natrajan "takes caste to be neither simply an intellectual puzzle, nor existential fact, but desires its demise as a fundamental social, political, and ethical problem of our times [3]" (p. 54). Casteism becomes a deeply engrained social practice which is described as "a set of monopolization strategies based upon domination, stigmatization (including humiliation), exclusion, exploitation or annihilation on the fact of caste" (Randall 1986) [4]. C.K. Janu's *Mother Forest* is a kind of rewriting or countering the existent ideologies embedded within the hegemonic oppression of the adivasis by the mainstream society [5].

The Sanskrit equivalent of the term 'Adivasis' is "original inhabitants" or indigenous people." The geographically, and culturally scattered diverse group are bounded by unique aspects in terms of religion, language, community bonding, harmonious relationship with nature, abstinence from materialistic culture, and co-existence of community level self- government. The exclusive nature of caste system, and deprivation in the name of hegemony confronts the egalitarian nature of adivasis. MRG (Minority Rights Group) sees Adivasis as decentralized communities and emphasises the heterogeneous nature of Adivasi lives, and pinpoints the transformation in the status of Adivasis of the contemporary era from the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times [6]. The process of colonization, and estrangement from native places pushed Adivasis to the bottom strata of Indian society. The positioning of Adivasis along the inferior lines continues, and becomes an instance of internal colonization.

Prior to British colonization, adivasi areas were independent regions but the abundance of natural resources allured colonizers to occupy their lands there by converting them into a labouring class for the industrial and market system. The Forest Act of 1864 entitled British government to legitimize the possession of areas enclosed with forests. In no time, the true inhabitants become illegal encroachers, and occupants. The resistance of the adivasis against colonial exploitation continues in the post independent era, despite the implementation of the constitutional provisions. The UN General Assembly has accorded states to preserve, and nurture the identity of the minorities. Collu has rightly observed that "post-independence thirst for the rapid development and industrialization of India accompanied by public investment in development projects such as dams, mines and forestry, and inadequate compensation of those affected, has exacerbated inequalities with main stream India in recent decades [7]" (p. 48). Major livelihood sustenance of adivasis on natural resources, and the traditional practice of hunting and gathering decline with their limited access to forest resources, and pushed them into abject poverty.

The displacement of adivasis has triggered poverty, stagnation, unemployment, and even deaths. A Study on the tribals located near Attappadi clearly comes up with the observation that despite

the government schemes implemented for the upliftment of tribals, a very little progress has been achieved by them. The agenda of 'positive discrimination' in education, career, and political sector are enforced by the Indian constitution but most often these provisions miserably fail to meet their ends. The anthropological approach of Indian literature treats adivasis as timeless people which generates the concept of social marginalization, and dispossession. Pathy (2005) observes "In the interests of the Indian nation, adivasis have been deprived of much of their land and natural resources, and their languages, belief systems and cultures have been stigmatized [8]" (p. 42). The landlessness, and homelessness of the adivasis resulted from forest nationalization, privatization, industrialization, inward migration of non- adivasis, and plantation agriculture. Sarini(1993) in *Indigenous Peoples in India* has noted that seclusion, inhibition to merge with the mainstream community, and financial restraints sums up the tribal existence [9]. The contemporary Feminism in the Indian context deals with the issues of social injustice encompassing the broad spectrum of marginalisation of adivasis especially women. Most of the works written as part of Tribal Studies romanticizes the plight of adivasis. But Bhaskaran's life story of C.K. Janu's *Mother Forestries* to represent adivasi politics as relevant to the present -day scenario, and posits the downtrodden group within the contemporary discursive field. The translated text centers around the landlessness and oppression of adivasis, and voices for the subaltern group through the voice of an adivasi woman. In 'Adivasi Mobilisation,' Steur (2009) states; "The famed Kerala model of development forsook capitalist accumulation and global competitiveness in favour of the redistribution of wealth through land reforms, as well as social programmes and labour regulation that provided a basic level of social security [9]"(p. 26). The implementation of economic liberalisation by the government of Kerala in 1991 adversely affected adivasis through encroachment of lands, and exploitation in the form of bonded labour. Balmurli Natrajan's essay 'From Jati to Samaj' discusses "cultural or differentialist casteism" (p. 56) as a modality of casteism. This modality gives importance to difference and hierarchy in the workings of caste today and views casteism as operating within twin modes – heterophobia and heterophilia: "Heterophobia casteism is the historically visible modality of casteism operating along a graded hierarchy for economic exploitation. The contemporary modality is heterophilia casteism which maintains a desire for cultural difference along lines of caste. It does not require annihilation, assimilation, or apartheid of different bodies, but only that the caste Other appear as the cultural other and that the Other remain within the cognitive- socioeconomic place marked by casteism" (p. 56).

In the present- day society, cultural casteism based upon heterophilia represents caste discrimination as cultural differentiation and status distinctions as cultural difference. However, *Mother Forest* explores the close congruence with the twin modalities of hierarchy and difference.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The identity of the adivasis get a broader association with Stuart Hall's concept of "articulated positioning." To Hall, (1996) articulation has a dual meaning: "articulation as the process of making a collective identity, position or set of interests explicit and comprehensible to an audience; and to the process of linking that position towards achieving definite political ends [11]". Kjosavik has observed "The initial positioning of the indigenous people as a monolithic category – the adivasis- can be interpreted as an articulation aimed at projecting a collective identity that would enable them to renegotiate their relations with the state, the settlers and the larger Kerala society in an attempt to reclaim alienated lands [12]" (p. 6). The adivasi ideology has been formulated from the social exclusion of the tribe as political subjects. The rootedness of adivasis to their indigenous place is highlighted by Cohen (1993); "only indigenous people can claim that their culture, identity and existence are inextricably tied up in the unique space

occupied by them [13]" (p. 198). The allocation of lands by the government popped up different resistance strategies among adivasis such as hunger strikes, mass rallies, and demonstrations. The social exclusion of Adivasis from all realms of life continues in varying extents in this postcolonial era. The financial development model which contrasts with the adivasi ethos intensified their plight, and denied their access to natural resources. The constitutional provisions framed for the safeguard of adivasi rights and privileges fail leaving dominant national system, and institutions of governance to overrule the Adivasi's traditional self-governing habitats. Accordingly, assertion of rights and autonomy become the chief concern of adivasis as they remain entrapped within the dominant political, and economic system as well as geographical fragmentation which leads to isolation, and oppression. The adoption of new economic policies like globalization, and liberalization have deteriorated the position of adivasis. The fundamental need to lead a life with justice, right to the means of subsistence, traditional territories, and natural resources is crucial for adivasis.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

C.K. Janu, a prominent tribal woman from Adiya community with no background of formal education, became the leader of the organisation for Tribal Developmental workers like Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha and Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samiti. They work for the restoration of lands back to landless, and starving adivasis of Wayanad. Through the participation in the literacy campaigns, Janu and other tribal women opened before their community the doors of knowledge, differences in culture, and worldviews of adivasis, and the outside world. Married at the age of 17, Janu quits family life for an active social participation, and gradually her voice gets imprinted in the annals of tribal collective. Shailaja Paik highlights the varied forms of discrimination met out by Dalit women. Like Paik, Janu also emphasized how education coupled with agitation, and community mobilization become a critical instrument of change. To Paik, the identity of Dalit women was not weighed down only by their caste but also by gender. The experience of education gives them the need to articulate the identities of gender, and caste.

The text opens with the blatant comment that adivasis have been pushed and displaced into the interiors of the forests; "the worthless wastelands" (Janu vii). The text also discusses in detail the interconnectedness, and harmonious co-existence of the adivasi lives in forests, adivasi's first encounter with the world outside the forest, sense of alienation, Janu's journey from an ordinary tribal woman to a social activist committed to the welfare of adivasis among others. The unspoiled relation of adivasis, who live as a community in agreement with the ecosystem is appealed by Janu "no one knows the forest like we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us" (p. 5). Janu remembers her community's indigenous knowledge regarding weather prediction, preservation of food during monsoon, and herbal medicines. The outsider's intervention makes adivasis feel insecure, and they hide themselves in to the deep forest.

Jenmi or the landlords exercise indomitable power upon adivasis and Janu notes that one thing that remains constant after marriage and passing of generations is the practice of slavery to the jenmi. The helplessness of the tribals is acutely brought out by Janu, "Since the jenmi was the only provider of work, our people were quite frightened of him. In those days we were afraid of almost everything. The backs of our people used to be so bent because we were terrified of so many things for generations. When our people speak, they don't raise their eyes and that must be because they are so scared". (p.12-13). She also reminisces; "Man and woman stay together...they have children. The parents go to the jenmi for work. The children graze his cattle. That's all there is. Frightened of the Jenmi and scared of others, they live on with bowed heads till they slowly turn old" (p. 25). Small measure of paddy substituted the wages for the tribals working in the fields, and they need to go to the forest for their livelihood after the harvest season. She explains how lands become alienated in due course; "After our forefathers had toiled

so much to clear the woods and burn the undergrowth and convert the hillsides into fields, they (the jennis) had taken them over as their own. That's how all our lands became theirs" (p.15). The practice of slavery as being implemented by the local landlords got worsened with the arrival of migrants who even go to the extreme end of transferring adivasi lands on the hillsides in their names thus making tribals mere dispossessors. Having failed to keep a record of ownership, adivasis become labourers in their own lands, gradually lost hold on the forest and later got ousted from jennis's fields.

Structured in the form of an autobiography, *Mother Forest* is a political site of resistance meandering through Janu's childhood, and her socially and politically active adulthood. She laments; "Our people had turned into mere wage labourers. *Mother Forest* had turned into the Departmental Forest. It had barbed wire fences and guards. Our children had begun to be frightened of a forest that could no longer accommodate them. All the land belonged to the migrants" (p. 30). Janu remembers her childhood as relaxed in the serene atmosphere of the forest and she says; "in the forest one never knew what hunger was. We would dig up tubers and eat them" (p.2). Parallely, she recollects the prolonged working hours of adivasis for the landlords; "when we worked in the rainy season we could leave only after planting the whole field. it would be quite dark by the time we reached our hovels. even after reaching them, we would not be able to sleep immediately. we would be so hungry and cold. It was impossible to kindle the fire in the hearth. we would eat some chakka or thina. the little ones would sleep even without that. We would not be able to see each other since we had no lights. any way everyone must look the same when hungry" (p. 14).

Adivasis become trespassers in the pristine ecosystem; borders, boundaries, and 'no-entry zones' are clearly marked to prevent their entry into the forest. The loss of livelihood, and denial of access to natural resources, dependence on meagre wages from the new landlords made them consumers in the era of modernization and liberalization. The sense of alienation crept into the minds of the adivasis, and Janu laments and attributes the cause to be encroachment of modernized culture, and civilization. Even the fallen twigs were forbidden to them, and they remain helpless witness to deforestation; "tree after tree was cut down and transported in lorries down the mountain" (Janu p.38). Indigenous medicine and occult practices become exotic, and the modern society witness the demise of a culture and community in the name of assimilating adivasis with the mainstream society. Janu and women activists protested demanding their rights, and privileges; even the access to burial grounds were denied to them making impossible to perform rituals and rites.

The sexual exploitation of women and girls, existence of typecast and dominated women, perception of othering in the name of civilization, development, and status are the crucial factors that compartmentalized Adivasi women to a greater extent. Wayanad, the northern district of Kerala, is a place that has seen land struggles and crimes against Adivasi women folk including rise in female single parents, false promises of marriage, rape, kidnapping, and disappearance of women. Janu condemns the civil society as a major threat to adivasis "so they transplant us to where there is no space even to stand up straight. Without drinking water or a place to relieve themselves, the image of a group of unclean people was slowly being created" (p.48). Tribal girls get exploited in the tribal hostels, and they were stigmatized as demoralized section after sexual abuse. The text also raises concerns for the ecological degradation, and indigenous life system being disturbed with the construction of resorts, and artificial tourist sites.

Janu notes "our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of women" (p. 47). Adivasi men easily fall to money and liquor and restrain from work and familial responsibilities, and become performers of domestic violence. "In our case, unity in everything emerges from our women. They (our women) have something in common that shelters us from meaninglessly

adopting the ways of civil society. They have enough resilience in them to stand for what they feel is right even though they may have to suffer a lot for it” (p. 53). The solidarity and collective effort of Janu brought 300 adivasi families for 48 days protest strike outside Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram demanding land in 2001. The historical protest also triggered 30 adivasi deaths by starvation, and Mother Forest is a sharp critique against the governmental policies. Adivasis were forced to participate in political rallies by offering false temptations but later Janu realises it as a tokenistic behaviour of political parties for appeasement of vote banks. Janu states “problems specifically related to our people were not discussed much in the party or the union. The party saw us as a vote bank only. Therefore, issues related to our agricultural lands or better conditions of life for us hardly found their way into Party circles. The speeches made in party classes were not what we could easily understand. They were full of strange words with hidden traps. They tried their best not to let us speak... In our area, the Party, the Jenmi and the estate owners had grown to merge into a single giant tree” (p. 34-35).

The tribal agitation against incessant marginalization continued through their occupancy of Muthanga Reserve Forest in 2003 with Janu at the forefront. The event turned violent shedding the life of an adivasi and a policeman. When the government fails to redistribute lands, Janu and her followers continue their struggle until they occupy an appropriate space within the socio-political fabric of Kerala. The nexus of power always subjugates the subalterns, and underprivileged. Janu frankly comments; “It became one of the needs of the Party to keep this community poor, starved and incapable of resistance” (p. 42). She determines to set out her activism beyond politics and party labels to a wider spectrum encompassing the joined hands of adivasis. With the support of both adivasi and non-adivasi communities, Janu built huts and settlements for 45 families on a hill top at Tirunelli. Janu affirms that the biggest threat faced by adivasis is the political intervention; partymen protested against adivasi occupation of land, and landlords denied work to adivasis. She resists “They were not land struggles. They were life and death struggles for our basic rights to live and die where we were born” (p. 54).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Adivasis were situated within a highly politicised context of economic, and social conflict. The anti-casteism rejects casteism as the vital principle of current Indian society, and advocates the need for anti -caste politics to work through identity and solidarity. Mother Forest chronicles the realistic saga of an independent and self- supportive woman who feel the impulse of empowerment and spread the same to her fellow members. Janu recognises the need of the adivasis to stay in communion with nature and work close to land. She also urges her community to keep the flame of consciousness alive, and ignite for collective solidarity. The predicaments of the civil society should be ignored to develop resistance and she exhorts a shift in the perspective. The tribal woman turned into a committed social activist, Janu fits in to the framework of ‘organic intellectual’ who works towards collective upliftment of her community, who have always been at the receiving end of ‘othered representation’ in the mainstream literature and media.

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