

The Indigenous Ethnicity and Its Related Issues in C. K. Janu's *Mother Forest*.

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Abstract

Indigenous studies today have been gaining world-wide attention, initiating and promoting inter-disciplinary research. The conceptual framework of postmodern theory, with its multi-glossia and pastiche, has created the needed space to negotiate the dynamics of identity, margins, ethnicities, race and gender, in terms of socio-political realities and aesthetics of culture. The term Indigenous is applied to the original, first inhabitants or occupants of a particular geographical area. The Indigenous agenda develops alternate ways of understanding the world through Indigenous experience. The Indigenous people of India are known as Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes. 30% of the tribal households in India are landless. Abject poverty and misery plague their lives, coupled with landlessness on the rise. The Muthanga agitation, spearheaded by the Adivasi activist and writer C. K. Janu, proved to be the herald of many land struggles undertaken by the marginalized subaltern people of Kerala for arable agricultural land. This paper

focuses on the dynamics of ethnicities and Adivasi cultural encounters in C.K.Janu's novel *Mother Forest*.

Keywords: Adivasi, Indigenous, ethnicity, culture, postmodernism

Progression of deprived, marginalized and weaker section of the society is essential for the overall development of the country. Indigenous study initiates and promotes cross-disciplinary research and teaching in a wide range of areas of relevance to Indigenous people. It is therefore imperative to have an understanding of Indigenous cultures and histories and ensure that Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and experiences are respected, valued, accessed and incorporated into all learning environments in the context of an increasingly globalized world. Recognized as "Aborigines" in Australia, "Maori" in New Zealand, "First Nations" in Canada, "Indigenous" in the United States, "Janajatis" in India, "Tribes" in anthropology, "Notified Communities" in the administrative parlance of many countries, and "Adivasis" in the terminology of Asian activists, these variously described communities are far too numerous and dispersed in geographical locations to admit in a single inclusive description. Today the Indigenous concerns and many of their traditions have been subjected to destructive presumptuousness, distortion and ignorance and hence, a sensitive, historical, a different construction in reading, learning and understanding the Indigenous practices is needed to explore issues related to Indigeneity.

The conceptual framework of Postmodernism, with its rupture of a rigid centre, has created the space for multi-glossia, mini narratives, cross cultural awareness, and pastiche, enabling the subalterns to move from the periphery to the centre. There is "renegotiation of the dynamics of identity, margins, territorialisation, ethnicities, race and gender in terms of socio-political

realities and aesthetics of culture” as observed by DebashreeDattaray in the editorial of *Littcrit*.(5) New conversations, new models of critical thoughts and new hopes related to Indigenous Studies as a discipline and as a pedagogic practice have made the Indigenous people as agents rather than objects of change.Cultural studies have long been engaged with and integrated new concepts and approaches such as deconstruction and postmodernism. Some areas of cultural studies have meandered into political relativism and "postmodern" conceptions of the subject and emancipation and at its core, cultural studies provide a significant conceptual and methodological framework for cultural, social and economic critique. This critique is designed to "deconstruct" the meanings and assumptions that are inscribed in the institutions and texts and produce and re-present culture.

India has the largest body of literature on tribal of anywhere in the world yet much of this fails to treat adivasis as modern subjects who live in a country impacted by globalisation, development and their attendant processes. The word “adivasi” originates from Sanskrit “Adi” means “beginning” “vasi” means “resident of” meaning “existed from the beginning”. This coinage has the dynamics of ethnicity. It is frequently used by the tribal people and they have a sense of pride in calling themselves so. It is also said to be an equivalent of English “aboriginal”. However the tribal people, the original inhabitants are subjugated by the encroachers. Having lost their land to outsiders they work for meagre wages.

“TheMuthanga agitation, spearheaded by the Adivasi activist and writer C. K. Janu, proved to be the herald of manyland struggles undertaken by the marginalized subaltern people of Kerala for arableagricultural land” says Tom Thomas.ChekotKarianJanu,popularly known as C.kJanu , born in 1970, is an IndianAdivasi writer and social activist. She is also the leader of AdivasiGothraMahaSabha, a social movement that has been agitating since 2001 for

redistribution of land to the landless tribal people in [Kerala](#). In 2016, she had announced a new political party, JanathipahyaRashtriyaSabha, which contested Kerala assembly polls in alliance with BJP. Janu was born in Chekot, near Mananthavady, a tribal village, in Wayanad to poor tribal parents who were from Ravula community, called *Adiya* due to their historical background. Her tribe was one of the several tribal groups in Kerala who used to be indentured labourers. *Adiya* literally means slave and are mostly landless agricultural labourers. She did not have any formal education but learned to read and write through a literacy campaign that was conducted in Wayanad.

Janu started her career as a domestic servant at a local school teacher's house, at the age of seven where she spent five years. By the age of 13, she started working as a labourer for a daily wage of Indian rupees two. Later, she learnt tailoring and started a small shop which, subsequently, had to be closed down due to financial constraints. She was influenced by her uncle P K Kalan, a famous native artist and a member of Communist Party of India and became a part of the left party. She stepped into the arena of activism through Kerala State KarshakaThozhilali Union (KSKTU) associated with the Communist Party of India in the 1970s who led a tribal uprising in Tirunelli forest in Wyanad and started her social career by speaking out from personal experience. Soon she became identified as the voice of tribal people. She worked as a campaigner for the Union till 1987 when she quit the party after becoming disillusioned with them as she felt the party was less interested in the cause of the tribal people. She then embarked on a tribal tour to understand their problems and to mobilise them for struggle. She led agitations by the tribal people to recapture the lost land by encroaching upon it. Janu was jailed and physically assaulted nine times by the Police. In 1994 she was awarded in by the Kerala Government as the best tribal social worker but she declined the state award. She was also the

only ambassador of India in the UN tribal conference. Januhas travelled widely and delivered speeches in 120 countries.

Artist Bhaskaran wrote down her biography as C. K. Janu narrated it to him. The translation *The unknown Adivasi* is based on that publication which appeared in the Bhashaposhini Vol.25, No.7, December 2001. *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K.Janu* is a translation by Ravi Shankar. *Mother Forest* reveals how an unknown adivasi, Janu was first introduced to the world when a literacy worker entered her name in a register at the age of seventeen as ChekotKarianJanu. Illiterate till seventeen, Janu was part of the forest like her people. It is from the wastelands in Wyanad that this tribal woman named Janu has pushed her way through. She never went to school as a child, yet, according to the author this Janu is one of the wisest people he ever met. Like the more publicized MedhaPatker, Janu calls for forest preservation, as it is for her, a preservation of life itself.

According to Prathama Banerjee, “The land question is now recognised as a pressing environmental question. Many social groups, especially tribals, today explicitly demand rights not just to land but to land-forms, forests, biomaterials and rivers”. The dynamics of ethnicity centres on a deep sense of belonging to the native soil. Land alienation is the biggest threat faced by the adivasis and Janu too has undergone it. Land alienation commenced during British colonialism and they exploited the natural resources of tribal region. Following the British people, the colonisers, the money lenders, Zamindars and traders occupied the tribal lands. Mines and factories in tribal habitats result in destitution and displacement. Forest policy of the British government shows more interest in commercialisation rather than in human resources. Forest department permits authorized contractors to fell trees and the aborigines get isolated within their habitation. They show more interest in plundering the natural resources rather than

in raising their economic and educational standards. Outsiders' intervention greatly disturbed the tribal life.

In *Mother Forest* Janu describes her community's closeness with forest and nature. She says:

We used to eat wild berries from the forest. Searched for honeycomb in the big trees. Gathered twigs. Amidst bamboo groves we tried to see if we could make out the elephant's footsteps. Sat idly by the waterfall. Digging under rocks we searched to see if there was water underneath. Collected cane. Once in the forest, we don't feel hunger. We pull out tubers and eat them. When our people work in the fields we catch fish from the watering canals. We catch water snakes by planting traps; look for wild fowl in the pandrus forest. They are caught in traps that we keep.

Janu narrates that in Kerala, South India, there are still some tracks of forests and remote areas left, where even in our days tribal communities are existing although pushed back by the invading middle-class farmer of the mainstream Indian society to the least fertile places and into worthless wasteland. She says, "So if anyone came to our place we ran and hid in the forest. No one knows the forest like our people. The forest is like a mother to us. Because the forest does not go anywhere; it is more than a mother to us."

Janu described the situation as "The new migrants divided the land into fragments and used them for different types of agriculture. They began to extract profit, instead of yield from the land." That was always the problem with man exploiting the lands. "When our lands were encroached upon and the fields became scarce, we had to look for other kind of jobs." And this is the end of all indigenous people apparently. The jungle is not giving earnings for a living any more except

it is turned to agriculture in which the same once free people can work as laborers and agricultural slaves.

This influx of migrant populations displaced the tribals and led to further deterioration in their living conditions. In the encounter between the so-called “civil society” and the ethnic culture has been destroyed. Janu sees the struggles of the tribals not as a political one, but as a struggle against the invasion of the dominant culture and its hegemonic grip on her native culture. The tribals want nothing but to preserve their own culture and a small place where they can live. Janu is proud enough to state that she is not interested to liberate women since tribal women are already liberated. The women seem to be the guards of their culture and their own gods. The tribals are not Hindus. They have their own ancestral Gods and worship the heroic forefathers of their clan. Due to the destruction of their culture and way of life they have to buy in shops and they get indebted to the shop-keepers. More needs rise up and more money is needed. Janu notes, “And you have to buy medicine where the forest was your medicine man. And you have to give your children to a school, in which you learn to adapt to the Hindu society”. The tribal children are alienated from the hills and forest. “Our children studied up to fourth or fifth and began to hate the forests and the earth. Our people were completely caught up in applying to whomever for whatever.” She further says, “Our songs and rituals originated and can be preserved only in our life pattern. In other lifestyles our traditions cannot survive. It is all connected to our farming, to nature, to the earth.” Her request is “The customs and traditions of our community should not be wrenched out and taken to their recreational life, or their celebrations. All this came from our land, forest and nature and our relationship to them. It can only exist in that environment”.

Janu and her followers, all women, occupied waste, hardly accessible land for 54 families. They built huts and started to live there. The police tried forcefully to drive them away. But they stood the ground. Politicians started a smear campaign against these primitive people. They even went to court. For this they were denied drinking water, electricity and ration cards. The government ridiculed the people for failing in competitive tests. The tribal society was stamped underfoot as a group of people who always fail. The aftermath of the atrocities against the ethnic culture is clearly brought out by Janu. “Now the pictures of different gods and cinema stars deface the walls of their huts. In earlier times they sat in the courtyard, telling stories, enjoy the breeze and the sunshine, and the forests, the streams and the fields exist all around it. No more. All is gone. Disharmony strikes in the huts because of arrack and toddy. The village people have become enemies, quarrelling over small things.”

In *Mother Forest* efforts have been made to preserve the oral style of narration as the story is not of Janu alone but of her people. Janu herself has admitted that their language never had a script. Many of their words probably evolved from tribal names for objects in the forest, which may not exist beyond the woods. All her statements have alluded to the plural ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, as it reflects the communal thinking and care. It seems to reflect closeness to the forest where individual possession is non-existent. All Janu’s experiences are also those of her people. The style reflects a simplicity and frankness that is so much a part of a people untouched by sophistication beyond the forests.

According to a study conducted by Malathy, tribal population which exceeds more than 40 million in India expects attention from the government. Isolation and minority in number prevent their movement with the main stream society. Though the government takes steps to mingle the minority groups into the mainstream society, it is doubtful whether these tribal people will enter

the main stream society preserving their social and cultural beliefs. The Government planners consider education as an indispensable one for the tribal people. It can bring improvement in their status, can form the basis for their integrated development and can lead them to prosperity and success in life.

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