

# Situating the Tribal: Mother Forest, the Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu

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## Abstract

The current explosion of lived narratives has necessitated a renewed perception of the canonical concept of expression of the self as a genre. The conventional, patriarchal, western, elitist subject position stands confronted by voicing of the postcolonial, the female, the abject, the surplus, the redundant. Through Janu's *Unfinished Story* the paper proposes to establish how the rendering of a tribal woman's life story becomes a significant slice of the history of Kerala, the state eulogised for its unique model of development. The mobilization of the tribal community by an unschooled tribal woman to establish and exercise their rights in a society that brands them as encroachers and primitives, and evidences women's agency for social change.

## Introduction

The recent proliferation of autobiographical writings with its various monikers like life writing, testimonies, memoirs, personal narratives, auto-fiction, biopic etc. point to the postcolonial positioning of the genre of self-expression. The "heterogeneity of contexts and cultures from which postcolonial life writing has emerged" (Gilbert 2009:xiv) have necessitated a redefinition of the conventional concept of autobiography as western, elite, male-centric. Unlike a conventional autobiography centred on a bildungsroman self, the postcolonial text by a "denostalgizing of the past" and orientation "towards a liberated society in the future" renders itself the calibre of "resistance literature" (Gunn 1992: 77). Most postcolonial systems with a subjugated context of political disempowerment have gained audibility and visibility through personal narratives. They function as a remonstrance against denial of fundamental human

rights, a reclamation of the bulldozed self and articulation of the hitherto stifled voice.

Alternative and diverse practices of female narratives also function as counter narratives. Post-colonial female life writing too faced a double marginalisation until the publication of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's seminal text *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (1992). Women's life writing is characterised by the "politics of fragmentation" and a "dialogical conception of selfhood" as something which is essentially social and relational (Gilmore 1994:xiii).

Though Philippe Lejune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality," (Lejune 1982:192) Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak argues that western psychobiographics cannot be "applied unthinkably to subaltern women in the (former) colonies" (Spivak 1989:227). Unlike western female life narratives that usually engage with collective identities based on gender rather than class, in the Indian scenario the individual defines himself /herself with regard to one's caste, class, or culture: "If a (postcolonial Indian) cannot relate himself meaningfully to his culture, his society, the whole purpose of writing an autobiography is lost" (Devy 1984:65).

## *Mother Forest*

In traditional aboriginal communities, autobiography is never an individual activity, but a collective identity that erodes the boundaries between "autobio" and "bio" (Gilbert 2009: 18). It exposes the ways in which colonial and post-colonial civil societies have encroached upon the autonomous lives of the indigenes with their modes of resilience, coping and resistance (Franz and Abigail 1994:20). Gail A Hornstein remarks: "In ethics there is process called anamorphosis in which an image is distorted so that it can be viewed without distortion only from a special angle or with a specific instrument"

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(Hornstein 1994: 51). *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* is the tale of struggle for survival, a petition for understanding, an attempt at self-expression by an adivasi female from Kerala, India, which offers that particular angle to have a clear vision of the otherwise distorted image of the adivasi as unclean, unethical, uneducated, uncouth. Bound by the milieu of powerlessness, she voices her protest to be heard in the present and in the posterity. A life as lived in the degenerating and revolutionary phases is evidenced through the life of Janu.

Stephen Yeo observes that for the marginalised communities the attempt at expressing themselves, reciting their history is "somehow a political act in itself" (Denith 2005: 61). Neither an extolling nor an enervating, but a neutral recapture of the yester years of the people of the forest by an unschooled woman challenges the current notions/concepts of the aesthetics of autobiographical writing itself. The "impact of the experience itself is so powerful as to transmit power to the writing" (Denith 2005: 76). Denith continues: "The politics of working-class autobiography are not reducible to their contents, but neither can you equate their positions with the simple fact of publication" (Denith 2005:79).

The oral narration which is recorded and written down by Bhaskaran and translated into English by N. Ravi Shanker offers a reservoir of lived experiences concealed from history. "Oral testimony is seen as a cultural artefact, a text embedded in language and which attempts to make sense of a life history" (Murphy 2007: 120). We witness a society struggling through redefinitions and paradigm shifts in an era when the local merges with the global, and the boundaries between the self and the other merge and widen. The forest-based economic base of the tribal society has encountered significant changes through various forces like globalisation, liberalisation, privatisation, industrialisation, technology-centric development programmes, infiltration of non-tribal communities, and apathetic governmental policies. "Struggles for justice, equality and freedom need to be grounded in a process of collaborative inquiry and the co-construction of knowledge that leads to collective social action" (Buckles 2013:2). *Mother Forest* brings to focus the predicament of the tribal communities in Kerala who have been transformed from forest dwellers to forest encroachers in their own land. It also recounts the struggles to exercise their rights in a society that still brands them as primitive.

The booklet is a fifty-six-paged text that divides itself into two parts—Janu's childhood in the lap of mother forest and her politically awakened adulthood as a tribal activist. Elen Turner sees this as "the unconscious, pre-modern, private, tribal childhood half and the rational, political, modern, public half (Turner 2012:336). While

the burgeoning of adivasi consciousness and politics can be attributed to the impact of the civil society among the tribals through literacy programmes and political parties, Turner observes that "the idealisation of adivasi society is resisted" (Turner 2012: 336). The *Mother Forest* is here critiqued as the life history of a tribal woman who spearheaded many a tribal movement in Kerala and its pertinence as expression of women's agency in revolutionising the political and social scenario.

Born into an Adiyar tribal family in 1966-67 in Checkotte, Thrissileri in Wayanad, the northern district of Kerala, India, Janu's schooling started in the laps of the forest that surrounded her. Adiyar is an exonym for Ravula, found in the Wayand and Kannur districts of Kerala. With no initiation into formal instruction, like any other tribal child, she was taken care of by the Mother forest. In her narration, Janu uses the word from the Malayalam language 'nammal' that stands for the plural "We" rather than the singular Malayalam term 'njan', which stands for "I," for both herself and the adivasi community as a whole which highlight the differential consciousness of the adivasi, a name that is preferred in Kerala over the tribal. Even the terms tribal or adivasi are problematic on account of the contentions on the concept of indigeneity itself. While the Government of India uses Scheduled Tribes, both adivasi and tribal are used in common parlance.

The first part of the narration deals with the inner world while the "second was more polemical and belonged to the outer world," (Shanker 2004:xii) which reasons for the absence of any upper cases in the first part of the text against the conventional use of language, while the entry in to the public sphere is marked with the common rule regarding upper cases for sentences. Commencing her narration with the description of the kind of work that was there in her childhood, Janu subtly signals the altering nature of cultivation that their times witnessed consequent on the infiltration of farmers and labourers from other parts of the state: "where we all lived there was time when work just meant pulling out the paddy seedlings transplanting them in the fields as such. Mostly work related to paddy farming. Plantation work became common later" (Janu 2004:1). She was already earning a wage of two rupees at the age of ten or eleven and two and a half or three at the age of twelve or thirteen (Janu 2004:1) for work from before day-break to night when jackals howl close by. The descriptions often have a tinge of ecofeminism in the way she describes the process of clearing the woods for cultivation: "when the virgin earth catches fire it gives out a strange smell...in the night it looks as if a human being is burnt alive...when it rains the hill looks like a woman with her hair shorn, the wild water all blood-red gushing angrily" (Janu 2004:2). To the

adivasi, her life is in communion with nature, which like a mother provided them with all—tubers, fish, and crabs: “in the forests one never knew what hunger was” (Janu 2004:2). With no electricity nor lamps, they would sit around at night listening to the music of the forest: “it used to be extremely dark. There were simply no lamps to be lit. No lamps no kerosene no match-boxes. We used to keep one ember alive to kindle a fire in the hearth” (Janu 2004:3).

The woods around the huts and the fields yielded necessary vegetables, millets or colocasia. The little children too participated in the cultivation activities like scaring away the pigs and elephants by using the makeshift drums from the *erumadam*, a small hut made on tree top. The monsoon brought hunger, the danger of elephants huddling close to their huts, and more work for adults. The symbiotic attachment to nature transcends the apprehension of others. Insulated from school, with their minimal clothing, the forest like a mother offered shelter to the children from any stranger: “no one knows the forest as we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us” (Janu 2004:5).

Whether married or single everyone had to toil in the *jenmi*'s field, but to have bellyful of food, they had to resort to the forest. Hence, the desertion of the father for a second marriage did not affect the family. Janu's exposure to the other world—the world of buses, radio, and umbrellas happened—when she was taken as a helper at the house of a school teacher. Back from there she worked in the field of the *jenmi* and when there was no work, they worked in their own land. Fear crept into their lives with their enforced dependence on the *jenmi*, who became their provider. Janu's reminisces exposes the inhuman treatment meted out to these people: “at noon after work we got some *kanji*...with some salt and chilli to go with it. *Kanji* was poured into a pit dug in the earth with an areca paala lining...when it rained we stood and got wet in the rains. Couldn't even spread one's *chela* to dry. Most of us didn't have a second one to change it” (Janu 2004:13). The fright that hovered over their lives muted their voice and bent their backs: “in those days we were afraid of almost everything. The backs of our people seem to be so bent because they have been terrified of so many things for generations. When our people speak they don't raise their eyes and must be because they are so scared” (Janu 2004:30).

Janu ruminates over their gradual transformation from independent forest dwellers to bound labourers of *jenmies*: “after our forefathers had soiled so much to clear the woods and soil the undergrowth and convert the hills into fields they had taken them over as their own. That's how all our lands became theirs” (Janu 2004:15). The shift from paddy cultivation to plantations

marked the trajectory of feudalism to capitalism. It altered the economy and the feudal landlord-labourer relationship. Mass immigration from the outside world, which proclaimed itself as being civilized, and the commercialisation of land during the colonial regime had deteriorated their status. The social degradation that they experienced through the years was reflected during the time of festivals in the temples, though it provided a distanced audio-visual entertainment for them. The shift from the centre to the periphery is marked by Janu: “long ago our people used to be in all the activities at Valliyur Kaavu. Later their role was confined to the outskirts of the temple. And then don't know when that too vanished” (Janu, 2004, 19).

Without any formal education, Janu was introduced to the world of letters by a Canfed Project of Literacy and later by the Literacy Mission programme of the State through which she became a literacy programme instructor in the 1980s. Her initiation into politics was through the *Kerala State Karzhaka Thozhilali Union* (KSKTU), a union of the Agricultural labourers affiliated to CPI (Marxist) and participation in the rallies conducted by them.

Active membership in the KSKTU Union, does not curtail her to give a sharp critique of the Party, which she observed was on the side of the exploiter: “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 the Party classes were not what we could easily understand. They were full of strange words and hidden traps. They tried their best not to let us speak” (Janu 2004:34). In the political nexus between the Party, the *jenmi* and the estate owners, the problems of the adivasis found no locus.

The accelerating number of unwed mothers is a direct product of the non-tribal penetration into the insulated world of the adivasis. Janu vehemently disparages the Party for vying with the civil society in producing unwed mothers: “The Party and its workers have a great responsibility in creating unwed mothers. I do not know whether it would help the Party to grow if the children of Party men grew up in our hovels. Actually, martyrs could be born of blood in this way too. There were many such women in Thrissieri who bore babies for a pinch of tobacco or a stone necklace or some food” (Janu 2004:35). A survey conducted by KILA (the Kerala Institute of Local Administration) in association with local bodies and the Scheduled Tribe Welfare Department attests Janu's rendering of the violation against the female. The survey, extending from 2008-2011, confirms the shocking number of 887 unwed mothers among Scheduled tribe women (The Staff Reporter 2011: 01).

Political involvement for a woman is and has never been easy in Kerala despite the state having the highest female literary rate in the country. In a community where women never moved out much, in spite of internal freedom in the community, Janu braved all hurdles, which enabled her exposure to other communities. She was inspired by the stories of Verghese, popularly known as Naxal Varghese who led agitations against bonded labour and exploitation of the adivasis from the feudal lords which ultimately led to his murder by the police in a fake encounter in the 1960s.

Disenchantment with the Party boiled within her and she expressed it: "A feeling had started growing within me, even while working for the Party, that nothing much could be done for the people of our community through Party work. ...I also had the feeling that the Party lusted after nothing but power, saw the people of our community as mere exhibition pieces" (Janu 2004:37). Party leaders became big idols adorning as calendar picture on their walls. Growing awareness of their alienation and predicament dawned a new awakening: "The fact that we could no more collect even fallen twigs from the forest, the fact that tree after tree was cut down and transported in lorries down the mountains, that our huts had walls that could crumble any moment, that we could not thatch our fallen roofs, that we had to squat in front of the Panchayat officers demanding drinking water, that our indigenous medicine and occult customs became calendar pictures printed on the newspapers" (Janu 2004:38). Many adivasis who used to associate with the Communist Party for its stand for the working class and the exploited, distanced themselves owing to the bourgeoisie orientation of the Party, despite Kerala inaugurating the first democratically elected government in the world.

The vulnerability of the tribal people extends to their livelihood, life style and spirituality. People Jeffrey Sissons remarks "are rooted in particular landscapes and histories" (Sissons 2005: 13). Eviction from one's own land severs them from traditional modes of forest-based living. Encroachment of even their traditional burial land, where they used to perform certain traditional rites and *gaddiga* rituals, had forced Janu to mobilise her people to protect it. The police' arrest of the adivasis instead of the encroacher prepared the ground for her first public political entry with all the women marching to the police station carrying spades and other implements. The Party's attempt to appease the encroacher through a compromise was turned down realising the political agenda of the Party that it "always stood for money and power" (Janu 2004:40). The projects of the Party and the state created folk art academies and research centres, but the community always remained poor, starved, and

incapable of resistance (Janu 2004:40). Disgusted with the utilitarian agenda of the Party she decided to stay away: "It was when I knew that I could not do anything from my community or even anything else in an honest manner remaining in the Party that I decided to stay away from Party work" (Janu 2004:40). The decision to disassociate with a leading political organization in her commitment to uplift her people from the abysmal depth in to which they have been forced into heralded her striding into a realm of agency.

In post-independent India as the land acquired more and more survey numbers, the tribal people who never knew the intricacies of these numbers, started becoming landless as they failed to prove their ownership; others were victims of indebtedness or other kinds of exploitation. In a desperate attempt to reclaim their mode of existence, she mobilised forty five landless families to encroach 18 acres of land at Tirunelli in Wyanad. The singular move without the support of any political party had withstood all pressures, braving denial of voter's right, ration card, electricity, water supply, work, or anything that sustains normal existence.

The tribal people have always lived in rapport with their surroundings, respecting the laws of nature and never by greed. Through centuries of direct communion with nature, they have created a life style which may not conform to the needs of the civil society, but is a system in itself. The development projects targeting tribal's benefit the civil society rather than these people and alienate them further by denying them the right of self-respect: "But civil society and parties looking for power had to cook up projects apparently for our people, but actually to fulfil the needs of civil society, siphoning off all that money and transforming our people into good-for-nothings" (Janu 2004:47). The consequence is forced transplantation of the forest people into wastelands without any facility like drinking water, toilets, or any other facility conforming them to the constructed image of unclean, uncivilized people.

In the name of development, the girls are put in tribal hostels where they are misused for power and money. Janu observes: "Their greedy, fear-inspiring, powerful hands forced our girls into doing wrong things. They imbibed only the wrong aspects of the civil society. The way they spoke and behaved became a matter of shame and degeneration" branding them as lewd and immoral, stamping them as people destined to fail (Janu 2004:48). Language is another area that has been vitally affected by their geographical proximity to Coorg, contact with migrants and civil society, and the new education system: "Since the people who knew reading and writing were few and since there was no need to write down the language, the script to write them down also did not

exist. Our language is full of Kannada words because Coorg is nearby. Later, the words used by the migrants and by civil society began finding a place in our language. Among our children who studied text books, a rotten new language has also emerged" (Janu 2004:34). But the crux of the problem "mostly relate to our work, our lands and our hunger" (Janu 2004: 34).

All the land that disintegrated into the hands of people, who had documents, became commodities to be sold and bought. The advent of market economy has impacted negatively on their natural habitat. Without any sense of the smell of the soil, Janu says, they fragment and commercialise the land, the state and the media support it through state-funded research, and then cry over environmental disasters, dragging the citizens of the forest further into physical and cultural alienation: "And in colonies our new generation grew up without knowing how to read, washing utensils in restaurants, doing menial jobs in households, becoming unwed mothers, listening to cassette songs and fooling themselves that they were the black power behind the red power of the ten-thousand-strong Party rallies" (Janu 2004:49). They are here deprived of basic amenities to such an extent that their survival is under threat. With no toilets or space to enjoy the breeze, the roads are turned to toilets and they become victims of bank recovery. "When transplanted, we lost not only our lands but also the environment in which we existed" (Janu 2004:52). The new colony life has made them strangers to each other and the joy of togetherness vanishing, a society that was proud of its cleanliness becomes unhygienic.

The comment of Verrier Elwin, the British born Indian anthropologist who lived and worked among the tribals in India, on the cultural and material loss of the tribals when they were compensated with decrepit housing and economic bondage is still valid: "a pitiful instance of what happens when highlanders are dislodged from their mountains" (Elwin 1964: 173). He adds: "to steal colour, beauty and freedom from poor people is just as bad as to exploit them in more obvious ways" (Elwin 1964:336). In the absence of any ownership record, they are often deprived of compensation, which adds to the trauma of the tribal evicted from their moorings. The once-independent, forest-fed people are reduced to a consumerist and dependent society. The edible tubers of the forest that fed this community are declared poisonous. "It is in this situation that we felt we must have some land of our own to keep hunger away," Janu clarifies (Janu 2004:52).

Janu vehemently protests against making their songs, customs, and medical practices mere cultural exhibits, converting in to "paraded pieces for leisure time" (Janu

2004:50) which have no existence in a different system. All these practices, born from an intimate association with Earth, are signs of their presence in this world: "They should exist on their own, striking a balance with the changes that time brings about" (Janu 2004:49). They refuse to be treated as living fossils, fragile relics in virtual museums and exhibition halls or emporiums.

Hailing from a community that practices gender parity, Janu places all her hope in the women who always shoulder more responsibility than the men who surrender their lands for a pinch of tobacco, toddy, arrack, or even a glass of tea supplied by the outsider: "Our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of our women" (Janu 2004:47). She sees women, who bond together for the community and culture, as harbingers of change with immense capacity for resilience: "In our case, unity in everything originates from our women. They 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. It is among our women that our traditions and the way we dress live even now. There is a resolve that is hardened by the wind and the rain of the forest and in the face of other difficulties" (Janu 2004:53). It is this agential capacity that became manifested when she led about three hundred people in Mananthawadi in 1994 to occupy an area and built huts there. Neither brutal corporeal punishment by the police and consequent hospitalisation for twenty-four days nor eviction from the place ever demoralised them. The strength derived from resistance reverberated to encroachments in neighbouring sites despite the brutal forces of both the leftist and rightist governments to break them up for they had no other place to run away to. To them they "were not just land encroachments. They were life and death for our basic right to live and die where we were born" (Janu 2004:54).

As an insider Janu considers herself qualified enough to represent her people and critique the policies and plans of the government machinery. Since the ways and means of the civil society are different from that of the tribal world, she feels: "It is necessary that people who know about our real situations and are willing to work to resolve them should come from within our community itself" (Janu 2004:54). In most aboriginal societies, land is never a private commodity for transaction, but a critical part of their very sense of self. The outlook of the civil society to land and their problems are different: "All our struggles have been struggles to establish the ownership rights of the real owners of this land for the right to live on it. It is true that civil society's traditions and process relating to land ownership are quite different from the

traditions related to our community. That is why, for the sake of our sheer existence on this land, we are forced to struggle against all centres of power" (Janu 2004:55).

The text of the autobiography ends in her mid-career, but the story as the title suggests, is an unfinished story and the misery of these tribal people also continues. The interventions between society and individual life become valid for the rationality of life and for the cultural expression of that life. If history focuses on collective experience, a polyphonic voice, Janu's rendering becomes a significant one in their own sense of history, and the history of tribal revolution and its making. There has been an explosion of discourses on agency in the social sciences today. Apart from the dictionary definition of the term as action or intervention producing a particular effect, the term has ramifications in human epistemology, particularly in women and Dalit studies. Amartya Sen's observation regarding women becomes pertinent in the case of Janu who has become an icon: "No longer the passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help, women are increasingly seen, by men as well as women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of both women and men" (Sen 1999: 189). Janu substantiates that women are ready to shoulder "additional modalities and responsibilities that are inescapably associated with the agency of a person" (Sen 1999:190). The different phases of her life—literacy campaign, political involvement, exposure to the other communities—though appear to be rather diverse and disparate, positively contribute "to women's voice and agency-through independence and empowerment" (Sen 1999:191). When women barge into the preserve of men, they prove their agential calibre which has hitherto been male dominion down the centuries. The opportunities at the highest political levels evade women, but the chances have been invariably seized with much vigour (Sen 1999:200-201). The changing role and agency of women is one of the major mediators of economic and social change as one realises while setting the unfinished story of Janu in motion to its current site.

The historical, cultural and gender significance of Janu's autobiography can be understood in the light of the socio-political scenario of Kerala, the southern state of India with 33.4 (33,406,061) million people as per the 2011 census belonging to diverse religious communities. Tribal communities comprise less than 1.5 percent (1.45) of the total with their highest concentration being in Wayanad (where 35.82 percent are tribals), Palakkad (1.02 percent), and Idukki (15.66 percent). There is decadal increase of 0.36 percent from 2001 to 2011 of tribal population, while the decadal growth of total population is 4.9 percent. Tribal scenario in Kerala remains a paradox within the paradox that is the Kerala Model of Development.

Kerala has been eulogised for the unique Kerala Model of Development with its exceptional strides in social indices of health, gender and literacy despite its low per capita income and high unemployment rate.

The main reasons for tribal backwardness in Kerala in postcolonial India have been attributed to:

1. The low percentage of tribal population in Kerala
2. Negligence in policy making.
3. Lack of data available on the tribal communities in the state.
4. Lack of political mobilization of the tribal communities to receive attention from the governments and political parties for the complete implementation of the Supreme Court Order for the reclamation of alienated tribal lands. (Chandran 2012:2-3)

Absence of effective leadership and bargaining power are other significant reasons for their marginalisation. Heller notices that even the progressive leftist parties of Kerala were apathetic to the political organization of the tribals (Heller, 2000). Although the state tops the developmental index of the country, corresponding pattern is not visible in the tribal scenario, which remains a mockery of the developmental model. The regressive pattern among the tribal setting is visible in all the metrics like education, health, mortality and infertility rate, employment rate etc. It is surprising to note that the differences are more obvious in Kerala than in other states which have low socio-development indices and high tribal population.

The survey conducted by Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) shows the abysmal level of tribal habitation in comparison to any other social or religious community in the State. It reports that about 49 percent tribal houses lack toilets, about 24,289 families lack ration cards, hundreds of educated tribals are jobless, while more than 50 percent are living in dilapidated houses (The Staff Reporter 2011:01). The colonial as well as the post-colonial land alienation has removed them from productive resources and accelerated the rate of deprivation and poverty which leads them to a state of non-affiliation to any mainstream community. Janu's account reveals the challenges faced by people like Janu who demands a thorough re-thinking of the tribal marginality.

The hiatus between the lived-in experience of the adivasis and the constitutional guarantee of equality conscientises one about the social injustice meted out to the marginalised sectors of the society. "Large disparities in living standards, displacement from traditional lands and territorial resources, exploitation in the workplace and humiliation in day-to-day transactions mark the Adivasis as a population apart" (Buckles and Khedkar

2013:2). Caste-based representation, access to education and reservation in government jobs have enhanced the quality of life, but have been availed by the upwardly mobile and dominant sections restricting the entry of others: “constitutional protections have become entrenched and mired in an administrative apparatus not yet endowed with eyes to see or ears to hear. Policy and advocacy failures continue unabated, not because the subaltern cannot speak...but rather because they cannot be heard” (Buckles and Khedkar 2013:2).

Though spiritually rooted in landscapes that have confronted radical revolutions, they have braved the opposing forces of governmental apathy, general indifference and marginalisation by conglomerates by refusing, just like the leaves of grass, to breakdown amidst the mounting pressures around them. Resisting the caucus of a homogeneous modernity, indigenous cultures are actively shaping alternative futures for them and appropriating global resources for their own culture specific needs. Culture for them is not merely heritage, but a continuous process of confrontation, preservation, and revival. The autobiographical rendering of Janu in her book ends in 1994, but the resistance movements triggered by this unlettered, tribal woman continues relentlessly in the political scenario controlled by the patriarchal governance. In 1995, fifty-two tribal families occupied surplus land at Panavally and the government was forced to distribute the land among them, Janu being one of the benefactors. The ownership of land altered the living conditions of the people and restored their confidence as it guaranteed a livelihood too.

In 2001 she launched *akudilketty samaram*--building huts--in front of the political capital of the state “that propelled a tribal movement for land to the centre-stage of political discourse in Kerala” (Nazeer 2011). The historic agitation started in August was prompted by the thirty reported starvation deaths among the adivasis. The protest zeroing on the reclamation of alienated land of the adivasis lasted for forty days till the government acceded to the demands of the agitators through a signed agreement on October 16, 2001 to provide up to five acres of land to the adivasis. Failure on the part of the government to implement the contract forced to Janu marshalled the adivasis to reclaim the reserve forest in Muthanga in Wayanad District in 2003 and establish a tribal settlement. The brutal eviction of these people from Muthanga on February 19 2003 marked a red day in the history of modern Kerala when the police mayhem resulted in the death of a policeman and a tribal.

The Muthanga uprising led by Janu and Geethannandan jolted the complacent other, including the academician and media, leading to a realization of the problems of the

tribal people of Kerala. The Muthanga Tribal Agitation of 2003 can be considered as the prominent tribal uprising in Kerala, after the historic Kurichya Rebellion of 1812 against the colonial rule that literally shocked the British. The agitation emanated from the continuous negative or apathetic attitude of the ruling governments of the state to the problems of the tribal people and their attempts to regain their rights over alienated land reached a violent phase with the death of two people in police firing. “The police unleashed a reign of terror in the region; physical molestation of women was also reported, the latter having been substantiated by the National Women's Commission” (Raman 2004: 126).

The government strategies to dilute the Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer and Restoration of Alienated Land) Act 1975, under which all tribal land transfers before January 1, 1960 were to be annulled, to ensure that only the land which was alienated after 1986 had to be restored to the adivasis. The verdict of the Supreme Court favouring reclamation of tribal land was diluted by the government by incorporating several clauses protecting the claims of the non-tribal settlers over the long-pending demands of the tribals for their land. While the settlers were allowed to remain in their lands, the tribals were evicted from their land by the law. The shattering of their cultural and economic autonomy as well as the poverty deaths aggravated their discontent.

Dissociating with the party in 1991, the determined woman formed *Adivaasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samiti* (Organisation for Tribal Development Workers) and toured throughout the adivasi settlements across the state to comprehend the crucial issues encountered by them. The realisation that landlessness and alienation of land were the major causes for the tribal predicament triggered the adivasi struggle for the reclamation of land. With the same intention *Dakshina Mekhala Adivasi Sangamam* (Southern Region Tribal Meet) was organised in 1992 where prominent tribal leaders of South India participated. For stirring and marshalling agitations Janu had been physically battered by the Police and undergone imprisonment.

Indigenous politics has now emerged as a calculated social movement. They organize politically to make them heard and be visible. Instead of being conditioned to be passive objects of dominant history, they have realised the need to be active subjects shaping their own history. They have aligned themselves to the global indigenous movements where indigeneity has become a political discourse. Spathes of indigenous movements are clamouring for recognition in the public sphere through political manoeuvres including action-oriented practices.

These resistance programmes have affirmed their cultures and re-established themselves as viable political

entities posing unique challenges to states and their bureaucracies (Sisson 2005). They attempt to define their identities by experimenting political and social alliances. The tribal people have been awakened to the need of seeking unique ways of making them heard and seen in order to solve their issues. In January 1999, she toured Europe as part of a delegation to participate in the programme organised by People's Global Action Group to protest against globalisation. When the governments were not keeping their part of the negotiation covenant made between the two, they for the first time realised the need of a political mobilization which resulted in the formation of Adivasi Gotra Mahajana Sabha (AGMS) under the leadership of C.K. Janu and .M. Geethanandan. Following a non-violent, Gandhian path they occupied the Muthanga Wildlife sanctuary, in Wayanad which highlighted the issue. The political apathy and denial of justice and human rights towards these people snowballed into a bigger agitation. However, the violent suppression of the agitation opened the eyes of the media and the general public and the world at large to the atrocities against these citizens of India. In addition to the revelation of the brutal face of the state, the Muthanga incident became a major turning point in the political articulation of the ideas and interests of the tribal communities in Kerala (Janu, 2004). The ripple effect of the uprising generated the birth of many tribal organizations in the following years like *Rashtriya Mahasabha* led by Geethanandan. But the lack of any political ideology or experienced leadership hindered the visibility of them in the political corridors of the state.

For the true agent in her, her personal hardships are indicative of desire for social change: "My personal experiences have no relevance as they are part of a cause that highlighted the collective dispossession and deprivation of the hapless adivasis," she comments (Nazeer 2011). "It was the Muthanga agitation and its fallout that strengthened the political consciousness of the Adivasis. The mainstream political parties started wooing the Adivasis and highlighting the Adivasi causes," Janu observes (Nazeer 2011). It was fitting repartee to the condemnation and indignation that she experienced because of her detachment from the major political organization. She remarks: "When I left the KSKTU to focus my attention exclusively on problems faced by my fellow Adivasis, I was taunted by my former comrades in the organisation with their comments that an illiterate woman like me was not going to solve the problems of the Adivasis" (Nazeer 2011).

In 2014, a 162 day long Tribal *Nilpu Samaram* was organised by adivasi *Gothra Maha Sabha* in front of the Secretariat—50 tribals standing for eleven hours every day—which was called off following negotiations by

Medha Patkar. Earlier about 10,000 Adivasi families have received land following the 2001 agreement, says Janu. Over 4,000 hectares of land including the Aralam Farm land in Kannur district has been assigned to the landless Adivasis. In 2016, Janu floated a new political party, *Janadhipathya Rashtriya Sabha*, an ally of NDA and contested in the 2016 Assembly election from Sultan Battery, Wayanad, though she failed. She has become what Pramod Nayar calls, "the knowing subaltern is the newest entrant into the discourse of rights in the postcolonial nation" (Nayar 2014: 301).  
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## Conclusion

The depletion of natural resources and the systematic forced alienation from their land has led to the destruction of the autonomous nature of tribal culture. Side-lined by history, ignored by the civil society and the indifferent state governments, the tribal community of Kerala have been "without voice in social life or agency in the public sphere" (Chevalier, 2013, xiii). Janu's writings and her actions attempt to give a voice to the dishonour, humiliation experienced and the resistance of a people entangled in the structures of power, poverty and social injustice. "The individual becomes a synecdoche for a community where she is recognized only as a member of her group" (Nayar 2014:299). Though *Mother Forest* appears to be simple, straight forward narration, it offers valid insights into a way of life that established links with the biosphere and exposes some of the gristly problems and provides documentary evidence. It provides valuable insight to a hitherto unrecorded event in the history of the modern state, but kindles and adds to what we think we know.

Ramnika Gupta has opined: "The writing of the tribal people is a testament to their agony and their trials. It is also a medium through which they try to find solutions to their problems. Their writing is an expression of their revolutionary spirit against the 'established' who have conspired to kill their culture and control their resources....Thus literature has proved cataclysmic in positively shaping the non-advasi's perception and attitude towards the adivasis.... It is about man's existence with nature; it is about freedom, equality and brotherhood, about social integration and honesty... (Gupta 2009: 191). Gupta continues: "It expresses the compulsion to speak of one's pain in one's own idiom, breaking the age-old silence and crossing the lines set by the "established to check one's space"(Gupta 2009:192).

The normative history about social change either "are totally gender absent" or male-centric. "They don't take cognizance of the role played by women in bringing

about these changes" (Deka 2013:xxiii). But the current history of adivasis in Kerala is one that is founded on the vision of a woman and her agency. The oral narration of the tribal woman "can help us to both understand the subjective experience of social change, and to bring it to discussions of what is historically significant" (Sarkar 2016:119). The emerging indigenous consciousness is gaining momentum across the world. The regional heterogeneities have been homogenised under the global manner of indigeneity.

*Mother Forest* provides an alternative representation of the adivasi, and hence a counter narrative on its own. The struggle for land is not only for social justice, but also for "the maintenance of past and the development of possible future conceptions of land, its meanings, its uses and concepts of ownership" (Featherstone 2005: 208). By exploring the truth of contemporary life, deliberating about problems and suggesting solutions, adivasi literature "in every sense of the term, is literature of life and not entertainment or fantasy" (Gupta 2009;192-93).

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