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Journey with Janu through Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu

S. Sumathi

Department of English, J. K. K. Nataraja College of Arts and Science, Kumarapalayam, Namakkal – 638183, Tamil Nadu, India; sumiengjkk@gmail.com

Abstract

This article aims to throw light on the life of the indigenous community, Adhiya, who lived peacefully in their forest, Mathunga, at Wayanad. C. K. Janu, a tribal woman and activist, has described in her autobiography the life of the tribes with nature. Almost separated from the outside world, they enjoyed their own way of life without any facilities. They were completely one with nature. Agriculture was their occupation. No Gods were worshipped. Men from the outside world were scary to them. Their world was the trees, streams, fish, birds, roots, rain, *etc*. Forest gave them all they needed. But their life was a topsy turvy when the outsider encroached their forest. When disturbed, they not only lost their mother forest but also their life, culture and environment. As natives, they have been left as vagabonds, with no place to rest.

Keywords: Adhivasi, Encroachment, Forest, Indigenous Community, Nature, Paddy Farming, Political Parties, Rituals, Tribes

1. Introduction

Chekot Karian Janu was born in1970 in Chekot, near Mananthavady, a tribal village in Wayanad. She belongs to the Ravula community, known as Adiya.

They are one of the tribal groups in Kerala who are usually indentured landless labourers. Janu learnt to read and write through a literary campaign. Janu's career started at the age of seven as a babysitter and then as a daily wage labourer. This shows the life of the tribes confined within the forest and the lack of exposure to the outer world.

C. K. Janu is known to the world by her voice for the tribal people, especially women. Influenced by her uncle, P. K. Kalan, she joined the communist party. As women of their community don't go outside, she took part in the party's meeting with great struggle. Later, she became an activist through Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU). She fights for the land rights and land reclamation of the indigenous community in Kerala. The lives of these indigenous people are entangled with nature. Tribes and nature are not separate. In particular, women play a significant role in keeping their interwoven life with nature alive. This is clearly portrayed in the autobiography *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of CK Janu*. As said by Janu, nature is their mother, serving, protecting, comforting, caring, teaching, *etc*. The direction of the wind, the chirping of the birds, and the changing seasons are all sources of knowledge to the Adivasi. As the sea is the mother to the fishing community, the same is nature to the tribes.

2. Susceptible Peasants

Tribes worked for the *jenni* of Thrissilleri, a migrant who usurped the forest and became a landlord. They obeyed his orders as he was the one who gave them work. The main work of the tribes was paddy farming. They worked mostly in the rice fields. Janu was involved in this work at an early age. She is involved in manuring the soil with cow dung, digging the soil, sowing, weeding, transplanting, watering, reaping, threshing, drying and piling the hay. They used to work from sunrise till sunset whether it was rain or shine. It was the only source of income. "The backs of our people seem to be bent because they have been terrified of so many things for generation" [1]. During the rainy season, they left the field only after planting the whole field, in spite of the downpour. These poor souls left for home at dark after ploughing the fields like animals and slept in hunger. They were so innocent that they failed

*Author for correspondence

to demand even their wages. They neither demanded nor left the fields of the forest. They have been innocent slaves for generations.

3. Bountiful Mother

Mother Forest always fed her children. Tribes dug out tubers from the forest, caught fish from the stream, collected honey and gathered wood for fire. "In the forest one never knew what hunger was"[1]. The girls would graze the cattle of the jennmi. Then they would cut the young bamboo to make a musical instrument called *chini*. When blown, it would sound unlike the other sounds of the forest. This helped them to recognise each other when they are far away.

Their cattle too recognised it. "The forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us"[1]. While clearing the land and setting fire, they felt like burning it alive. When the hill is on fire, it would burn for days together, creating fear in them. On watching it, Janu felt as if a human were burning alive.

4. World of their Own

The tribes were so familiar with the forest. "No one knows the forest like we do"[1]. They had no idea of education and schooling. None took the effort to create awareness. When they happened to meet strangers, they disappeared into the forest. The children were scared of the new faces. The elders scared them, saying that outsiders are like bulls and buffalo. It shows their nature of being away from the outside world. The children were comfortable in their own culture, atmosphere and people. They knew only their forest. It was their place of comfort as a mother's lap. They left the forest to visit Thirunelli for the festival.

They were mere spectators, buying things and eatables of low cost like puffed rice, glass bangles, *etc*. They remained aloof. They squatted and enjoyed the festival. Late at night, they rested near a stream in groups, in open fields, enjoying the sounds from the festival ground, watching the moonlight in the clear sky. These people never worshipped any God or Goddess. "Many indigenous cultures maintain deep spiritual connections to nature, often expressed through rituals and ceremonies"[4]. They worship only their forefathers, offering honey and performing rituals. Once when Janu and her friend Ammini came across a book of her sister, they were wonder-struck on seeing a picture of a machine tilling the field and women engaged in transplanting. "Maybe the teachers with knowledge from these books were ignorant of all this. Ammini used to tell me that these lessons were meant for teachers"[1]. So, the world of the indigenous people was with sound practical knowledge than that of literate people. They seemed to be the master of knowledge in their own land without any formal education.

5. Mother Nature

This autobiography pictures the life of the tribal community with nature and their sufferings on their separation from it. Their relationship with nature is rooted from generation to generation. Thus, Janu says, "We didn't own the land, but the land owned us"[1]. These people used the natural resources for their necessities and preserved them for future generations. They didn't act as if they possessed the forest; they remained one with it. They enjoyed the smell of the earth in different seasons. It shows their bond with the soil. Janu says that it could be felt only when we are one with nature. "The earth gives out scent only when we work on it. Fallow land is like a tree untouched by the wind"[1].

The scent seems to be the language of the earth to communicate with the toiling souls. It's enjoyed only by the indigenous community. When hungry, they would rush into the forest to gather something to eat. It never deprived them of its resources. Janu's friend was a source of knowledge about the forest. She wasn't interested in studying. But she would narrate stories of her own with the knowledge of the forest. She loved to learn by observing the woods. Apart from working in the fields, Janu and Ammini would walk about the forest. Ammini possessed a sound knowledge of all the trees, herbs, shrubs and creepers. She would talk about their medicinal values. "Indigenous peoples possess unique knowledge about their environments, ecology, medicine, and more, passed down through generations"[4]. From the sounds of the birds, she would identify them. She was thorough with the directions in the dense forest. For all the knowledge she possessed, nature was her teacher. "They used their knowledge system to preserve food for long periods so that they could use it during the monsoon months when cultivating and collecting became difficult, and thus would not starve"[2].

6. Exploitation of the Party

Janu was acquainted with the party, Karshaka Sangham, while working. They promised to get them more wages. Tribal people were taken for the party's processions. Not knowing their value or the reason for the gathering, they joined the party as instructed. Thus, the party grew stronger. All innocent people were made use of. Suddenly, migrants from the South came and started a coffee plantation. Slowly, they took the lands, offering a bottle of arrack to the tribal men, which was their weakness. The community fell into the trap and gradually lost its lands. The indigenous community slowly mingled with the civil society. The invaders' culture attracted the trapped community. Their life met with the change here. Paddy fields started to diminish. Wire fences arise here and there. This scared the children. Access to the forest was restricted. "The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 recognises the rights of the forest-dwelling tribal communities and other traditional forest dwellers to forest resources, on which these communities were dependent for various needs, including livelihood, habitation and other socio-cultural needs"[3].

"The Adiya of Mathunga forests had lived in harmony with nature until the Government of Kerala enacted its land reforms and decided to civilise the adivasi and give them alternate habitats"[2]. Through her autobiography, Janu narrates the life of the Adivasi when disturbed by the government and private sectors, trying to deprive them of their birth root. "The Kerala Government's intention of building resorts and artificial tourist sites in Wayanad was the primary reason for the government's concern to rehabilitate the Adiyas in alternative spaces"[2]. The forest holds its identity, speaks its history and carries its lives. Janu says, "Our land was taken from us, and with it they tried to take our identity, our history and our future"[1]. Janu did not voice owning the forest, but to preserve their bond with nature. "A desire for self-governance and control over their lands and resources remains a significant aspiration"[4].

Fields became scarce, turning them jobless. Every jenmi was at the party. It was an eye-wash that the party stood for the people. "Our people, who had never had to keep records and documents for their lands, would once again have to work in those same lands as labourers and grow crops for the jenmi, at a wage that could not even keep our hunger away"[1]. Pathetic situation prevailed as they were slaves in their own province. They were prisoners of the situation.

7. Evanescing Identity

The condition and lifestyle of the people saw a slow but drastic change, which was pitiful. They had to approach shops for groceries. Ration cards, electoral rolls were entered into their huts. "Tribal communities tend to be organised around kinship groups rather than a centralised government or political system"[3]. Hospitals, schools, and shops emerged, which led to the need for money. They were poorly paid, and agitation was of no use. The next issue was loss of identity. Their language was taking a new form with the blend of new words from their school-going children and party members. Their problems were not only language but their work, lands, hunger and safety for women among party members. They have been used as mere voters to win elections. There were many unwed mothers.

Trees were loaded in lorries. But the tribes were not allowed to collect even twigs. The situation grew worse to the point that even the ground where their ancestors were buried was encroached. Slowly, people understood that the party played an important role behind the scenes. It wasn't for the welfare of the people. It stood only for power and money. Janu became aware of the move of the party. The indigenous community started losing land as they had no proof of ownership. The situation became tense when some forty-five families moved to their ancestral place in Thirunelli. They were arrested, beaten, but still they stood for their rights. The place turned into a disputed land, lacking all basic facilities like water, groceries, electricity, voting rights, jobs, *etc*., but still, they managed to survive with the available resources. People who were living a peaceful life with nature were portrayed as a group of unclean people. The children were taken to hostels, where they were molested and thrown into society as incapable citizens. Those harmless children are forced to take up menial jobs for their livelihood.

8. Conclusion

The core message of the autobiography is to preserve the forest and the natives. Through her personal life, Janu portrays the collective struggle of the indigenous community. Their valuable lifestyle, like songs, dance,

customs, and medicines were a product of their own lifestyle, which was closely knit with nature. This cannot be seen or practised in the present civil society. Their culture and identity should not be destroyed. All is the evidence of their existence for generation after generation. They had huts to protect them from rain, heat and animals. Large courtyards were for gathering. They were one with nature, counting the months by the falling leaves. Seasons were known by the chirping of birds. The movement of the clouds taught them the direction of the wind. The noise of the flowing stream, blowing wind, hissing and clicking creatures were the rhythm of life. Such people are ripped from their nativity, drifted away from culture and are thrown into the civil society with congested houses, lacking basic facilities, and are portrayed as unclean and unfit in the modern crowd. Janu fights for her innocent community. She compares themselves to the gingilli beetle, which struggles for its life. "The gingli flower beetle cannot argue with a microphone that makes a great noise"[1]. Janu took her community place after place where they faced brutality. Still, they struggle as they have no place or land. They are under life and death struggle. The harmless community remains helpless. "In 2003, protesting against the inaction of the Government in fulfilling the promises made in the agreement, the tribal people led by Janu encroached upon a reserve forest in Muthanga in Wayanad District of Kerala and established a tribal settlement'[1].

Let us adore and worship the Supreme power by respecting His creations. Let the aquatic animals swim in water, the terrestrial ones breathe on earth, and the tribes live in their own territory. Let Nature rule the earth with its own ecosystem.

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