Land Alienation and the Cloud of Struggles in Select Life Narratives from Kerala

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Kerala, with its beautiful landscape gets depicted in the global tourism map as one of the breathing points for leisure and relaxation. The lush green land with its salubrious and delightful climate makes Kerala the ultimate haven for relief and retreat. The unsullied backwaters and many an immaculate hill stations add to the beauty of the landscape. The mesmerising shades of the land is encapsulated in the phrase 'God's own country'. The official website of Kerala's tourism department welcomes the whole world to this God's own country. However, highlighting only the selected pleasant geographical aspects of the region involves conscious efforts to eclipse those counter narratives which can rupture the notion of progressiveness of Kerala by juxtaposing caste and land.

The interrogations on land, caste and the subject are taken up for the study to bring out the fact that geographical space turns out to be a socially constructed reality rather than a mere physical entity. This is typified in the life writings of Seleena Prakkanam and C.K. Janu. What makes it relevant to take up these life narratives together for the study is the interpenetration of caste and land in forming the narrative

subjectivity of these women with minimal acceptance in public intellectual discourse.

Both Seleena Prakkanam and C. K. Janu seek the help of transcribers in order to articulate their personal experiences. Though the authenticity of experience can be contested due to the mediation of an external narrative agency, these life narratives emerge as the cultural texts which explore their socio-cultural position in a particular spatio-historical moment. What is personal becomes political too. The documentation of experience is done by a politically emerged self. C. K. Janu's life narrative as transcribed by Bhaskaran was translated into English by N. Ravi Shanker in the year 2004. In the Malayalam source text, the title is *C. K. Januvinte Jeevitha Kadha* (The Life Story of C. K. Janu). But the title has been changed as *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu.*

The enduring values and underlying principles of indigenous life have been manifested in the life narrative of C. K. Janu. Janu belongs to the Adiya tribe, one among the thirty-five tribal clans in Kerala. Her story as told to Bhaskaran is about the history of adivasis and their futile struggle for survival for years and their attempt to get their land back. The life tale unfolds through its orality and collective memory. The way in which an illiterate Adivasi woman's experience is entangled with the vibrant legacy of folk traditions on one side, and the politics of land on the other, brings home an expansive ecological concept of environmental justice.

In her attempt to juxtapose their aboriginal life and the current alienated life, Janu makes a nostalgic recollection of the exuberance of her mother forest. At the outset of her narration Janu shares reminiscences about her childhood and how it is deeply associated with nature, forest and soil. As children they used to go to the fields to collect *chappa* and also used to catch fish from the little stream. Children knew well how to lure out the crabs from the sludge of the fields. They were seen almost all the time walking aimlessly and grazing the landlord's cows. They plucked their favourite wild fruits of *karappayam,*

mothangappayam and *kanjippayam*. Forest trees yielded sweet honey. Elders wanted the children to collect reeds from the forest and make it into bundles. Even children were adept at locating elephants' footprints in the bamboo groves. They drank deep from the waterholes and enjoyed the pleasures of the cool breeze and cold water from the rocky fissures. As forest dwellers, they never felt hunger. They enjoyed eating wild tubers and fruits. They could easily snare fowls and water snakes seen largely in the thickets on the water side. Back home, they cooked crabs and fish caught from waterbodies.

Janu remembers her short stint at Vellamunda where she worked as a domestic help for a school teacher. For the first time she travelled quite a distance from their place. She was a girl of eight or nine at that time. Janu's graphic description of the journey treading the unfamiliar path is in stark contrast with her life in forest:

> that was the first time i travelled so far from our place. can't remember the route we took. had to walk quite a bit. as we walked we could hear the chug chug of a Motor Pump from the fields. and get the sharp smell of a Chemical sprayed on the paddy. it was then that i saw different sorts of men wearing Shirts and Dhotis. we had to walk keeping a safe distance from them. (Janu 2004, 7)

The hypocrisy and the hollowness of the literary programmes and the welfare programmes which were meant for the upliftment of the tribals are laid bare in the narrative. Janu got actively involved with *Karshaka Thozhilali Union*, a left-wing agricultural labourer organisation, only to realise the exploitative practices of its leadership. An impression was created that the leftist party stood for the people toiling on the land. There were agitations whenever the party dictated. And it is quite interesting to note that every *jenmi* (landlord) in that region were having the same party membership! Janu makes a scathing attack on those party workers who stood with money and power. Acted as middle men

between the tribals and jenmies, they constantly monitored and exploited the tribal culture and the tribal economy.

Janu renders a realistic account of the land encroachment of the migrants from the South. By planting coffee on the land of the tribals, those encroachers made the tribals to toil as labourers for poor wages in their own aboriginal land. While the jenmies took over only the tribal land, the migrants took over the tribals themselves and made them toil. Under the guise of a civilizing mission, several changes have been brought in the aboriginal land:

> 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 lands belonged to the migrants. Big landlords did not require land anymore. Their younger generation became educated and looked for jobs. Some found profitable enterprises and went abroad. 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. They called them commercial crops. Paddy fields began to dwindle. (Janu 2004, 31)

The tribals were deprived of their motherland as they were incapable of producing any documentary evidence to prove their land ownership! The migrants with their self-aggrandizement motive could acquire survey numbers for their encroached land. In their radical move to restore the alienated land, Janu and her people forcefully occupied a small hillock in Thirunelli only to be beaten up by the police. At present, the land is disputed and in the jurisdiction of the court. Janu justifies the so-called act of violation. The agitations were called on because they wanted their own land to live on and also their own land to cultivate. They staunchly believed that they were the real dwellers of the forest land. The needs of the community were absolutely different

from the needs of the civil society. By no means they could accept the forest rules and restrictions thrust on the community by the civil society. Getting legal permission to live on the land and acquiring survey numbers for land ownership were beyond their ken.

The newly created residential colonies exclusively designed for the tribals do not match with their life cycle and customs which are absolutely bound to earth. Their system of life was complete in itself. When transplanted to new residential colonies they were deprived not only of their land but also of their familiar environment in which they existed. Without their own forest streams, hilltops and trees and without a place to bask in and relax themselves, the picture of a group of unhygienic people was framed gradually. Janu observes that while the tribal men get easily influenced and corrupted by the civil society, tribal women have enough resilience in them to stick on to their unique culture. Janu recalls: "Even from earlier days, our women are used to doing men's work in the fields and seem to derive some power from it" (Janu, 2004, p.53). The tribal women do not make a blind adoption of the methods and manners of a so-called civilized society. Unity is their strength. They are bold enough to keep their unique tribal culture. Adversities can only make their will stronger. Janu firmly believes that it is through the women their ethnicity and their unique sartorial ways are retained. Money cannot lure them, nor can they be scared by muscle power. Unlike tribal men, tribal women were not at all susceptible to the tempting offers of the agents of the civil society. They are absolutely proud of what they are. Janu herself is a good case in point.

Janu's life narrative ends with an earnest exhortation to her own community. It is all the more necessary for them to adhere to their customs and traditions. And they all should be beware of those encroachers on their land who would take advantage of their ignorance about civil society. Janu earnestly feels that many of their problems will be resolved only if they live and remain close to their land.

In an age when the corporate powers take over both the terrestrial and the aquatic wealth, the agitations like Chengara land struggle becomes historically and politically significant. In her experiential narrative *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum* (Chengara Land Struggle and My Life) Seleena Prakkanam, the leader of the agitation group, elaborates on her intervention with the institutionalised casteism and education. The life narrative of Seleena Prakkanam attempts to explicate the fact that rights over land and its possession are directly related to caste. A solid and indestructible sense of her community rights coupled with her realisation on the connection between landlessness and the social impoverishment of the Dalits prompted her to lead the Chengara land agitation. The narrative puts forth a very discernible question: why the actual workers on the earth are deprived of its ownership?

The much flaunted and puffed-up rustic inviolability endorsed by the so-called highbrow writers get interrogated in this account of Seleena Prakkanam. An absurd and ludicrous belief in casteism entrenched in rural life is represented here from a Dalit perspective. Seleena renders a very poignant account of how she bears the stigma of wretchedness throughout her school and college life:

> I always felt that some teachers were trying to avoid my presence in the class. When they teach, they would not even look at my side. They appeared reluctant to answer my queries. Doubts from students like me were not properly answered because they seriously felt that it was not at all necessary for us. In the class we always occupied the back bench. And it is true that we never wished to sit in front. (Prakkanam 2013, 13)

In India, especially in Kerala there exist an unquestionable connection between the land of wealth and socio-political supremacy. And this undisputed relation between land and power explains why the tribals and Dalits secure low-grade points in the power hierarchy. The

deplorable condition of the dalit families living in the 'harijan' colonies exclusively meant for them, is highlighted in the narrative. Before organising the Chengara land struggle, the leaders had to do some data collection as part of their squad work in the dalit habitations. It revealed to them that in Kerala caste is reflected even on land. In other words, by looking at the places here one can predict the caste of its dwellers. Seleena Prakkanam renders a vivid account of her visit to dalit colonies:

> We could see only the deceived in many places. What they could tell all about were the stories of those upper caste people who got hold of their forefathers' land with fraudulence. There are people who have made their house on rocky terrain without a grain of sand. These kinds of houses are mostly seen in places like Seethathodu and Chittar. Their burning life experiences would burn us too. (Prakkanam 2013, 39)

Despite an amazing developmental advancement of Kerala after the much-hailed land reform bill, the truth remains that a lion share of the community of Dalits in Kerala is deprived of land and land rights. It is an undeniable fact that Dalits are unable to survive the social stigmatization in terms of caste. The Dalit thinker Sunny M. Kapikkad comments:

> What the land reform legislation achieved was the granting of legal ownership to the castes that controlled land through the leasing of *varams* and *pattams*. Naturally, the benefit of the land distribution went to the savarna middle castes who were *pattakkar* or *varakkar*. While in Travancore they were ezhavas and Christians, in Malabar they were thiyas and Muslims. As for the landowning upper castes, not only were the many loopholes in the law used to save as much of their land as possible, but they were also able to

> get compensation from the government for the land they were forced to give up. It was impossible for Dalits who were neither landlords nor pattakkar nor varakkar, to get land under this law. (Kapikkad 2011, 469)

These socially and culturally downgraded landless folk organised themselves in Chengara estate and made a rallying cry for some cultivable land for their sustenance. More than seven thousand families from all around Kerala especially from the southern districts, met at the Chengara Estate and built hutments there. Despite the heatwaves of weather, severe illness, dread of violence and grievous bodily harm, unemployment and poverty, land-deprived multitudes stayed there in the Estate and clamoured for their land rights. As the prominent leader of the *Sadhujana Vimochana Samyuktha Vedi* (an organisation for the landless people in Kerala) Seleena Prakkanam could organise the agitation impeccably. A cross-section of Kerala's landless folk was gathered together based on the realisation that there exists enough arable land in Kerala to be redistributed legitimately. It is a historical fact that most of these landless people happened to be either dalits or adivasis. It is an undeniable fact that even today many of the socially vulnerable groups are unable to enjoy the benefits of the much-glorified land reforms of Kerala. The surplus land meant for redistribution was inadequate to be allocated among the landless as the plantation sector did not come under the purview of land ceilings. Under the pretext of protecting the interests of the poor landless people, the land law, in fact, stood in favour of those corporate giants who owned vast stretching acres of land in the form of plantation estates.

The members of the Chengara Land Struggle Committee were accused of illegal land seizure and self-aggrandizement when they met the ruling political leaders of the state asking for justice. It is quite ironic that the Harrison Malayalam Plantations, the colossal usurper and the tax defaulter gets white washed by the same Establishment!

The life narratives of C. K. Janu and Saleena Prakkanam can be read as a proclamation of dissent against the social exclusion enforced on the dalits and tribals. They emerge as the cultural texts which explore their socio-cultural position in a particular spatio-historical moment. No doubt, the narratives enunciate a radical subaltern perception revealing the double standards of the Establishment. Their fight is not to attain any new privileges and rights. On the contrary, they strive to ensure the civil rights guaranteed in a modern democratic establishment. But the most unfortunate fact is that both the public and the mainstream media are inclined to gauge their efforts as some organised move to grab something illegally by force. For both Janu and Seleena the public life is more significant and intimate than their personal life and, sometimes both the personal and the political aspects of their life merge into one. The engraved thought process unveiled in the narratives is that of a narrative subject striving to quash the gap between the binaries of exterior and the interior self.

The rustic wisdom of these ordinary rural women as evinced in their life narratives explicitly demand a realignment of equations vis-à-vis environment, land, and survival exemplifying its connection to the global environmental justice narratives. Both the narratives "attain the status of a planetary narrative of environmental justice" (Jinu & Scaria 2019). As David Schlosberg rightly points out, "Justice in the environmental context must address not only distribution, but recognition, participation, and capabilities" (Schlosberg, 2007). Asserting their right to represent the grassroots and voice out their protest in terms of land and environment, the life narratives of C. K. Janu and Seleena Prakkanam exhibit a faithful depiction of the environmentalism of the poor as they resist a natural access to the strategically woven linear narratives of Kerala modernity.

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