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A Sense of the Self from the Margins: Theorizing Adivasi Experience in Kerala

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Abstract

A socio-literary theory achieves coherence by running a complex abstraction of human experiences through a philosophical prism. Its internal consistency is derived both from the universal legitimacy bestowed by its audience, as well as the mathematical precision of its logic. Critical Theory, with its foundational claims to an emancipatory politics, thus derives part of its legitimacy from its promises of a moral and ethical future. Here, the plurality of experiences disrupts the objective and distanced abstraction with an invested, particular engagement. The context of this paper is provided by a battle over the right to represent/mediate political modernity in Kerala. I focus on two Adivasi self-representations which challenge the identity

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strait-jackets projected on to the Adivasis and attempt to refashion and recreate their identities, politically as well as culturally, on the basis of their lived experience.

KEYWORDS: *Theory and Experience; Identity; Self-representation; Adivasi; C.K. Janu; Narayan; Modernity; State*

Introduction

In India,the experience of theory has always had an imported feel. Vast variety of the academic endeavors that produced tomes of writing depended on the Eurocentric abstractions of human experience imported almost exclusively through the medium of English. On the other hand, our nationalist scholars, when challenged by the implications of this intellectual colonialism, spent a considerable amount of time recovering a parallel classical notion of indigenous theory. This endeavor depended in the 19th century almost exclusively on then newly assembled Sanskrit-based archives and later in the 20th century extending to Pali, Tamil and other Indian languages.

This attempted recovery of an indigenous tradition of theory too was laden with its own internal contradictions.Here we need to remind ourselves that the Indian history of knowledge housed in these archives is also a closed autobiographical narrative of certain privileged communities. These communities managed to exercise control over the authorial production well into the post-colonial era, (one could justifiably argue, well into the present) with occasional rebellions and strategic co-options. The identitarian revolution in the 1990s, driven by the increased self-assertion of Dalit movements, Mandal-inspired backward caste movements, Adivasi movements for land and forest rights, minority movements post-Babri Masjid

demolition, laid barethe privileged hospitality that the theory enjoyed in the elite humanities and social science disciplines. Likewise popular responses to the emergence of a strong Adivasi movement, led by the Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, and the brutal state reprisal of their agitation in 2003, laid bare the bivalence of condescending benevolence and the ruthless violence that characterises mainstream Kerala society's attitude towards the Adivasi communities in the territory. Gopal Guru had pointed to the divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical shudras in Indian social science practice. According to him, this divide caused by the lack of egalitarian conditions in the everyday life of disciplines in academia would 'crush the confidence of the marginalized (Dalit/Adivasi), lower their self-esteem and humiliate them through epistemological patronage or charity' (Guru 2002).

What could be the nomenclature of these 'insurrectionary' knowledges that are altering the foundations oftheory as we understand it today? In this paper, I examine this question through a close look two Adivasi narratives from Malayalam.These two Adivasiself-representations: *Koccharethi*(Narayan 1998), which is considered to be the first novel on Adivasi community by an Adivasi and *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Jeevitha Katha* (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003), an auto-ethnographic testimony by C.K. Janu, challenge the stereotyped identities projected on to them and attempt to refashion and recreate their identities, politically as well as culturally, on the basis of their lived experience.

Aspirations to a normative self

In his prefatory note to the novel, a Narayanan voices his unease with the fact that the "Adivasi stories that one comes across in cinema, in television and in certain publications have no relation

to the truth" (Narayan 2003). In an interview with M.K. Harikumar, Narayan elaborates upon his reading experiences since childhood.

> In the periodicals that I have read then and in the works that I have read later on during my official life, I have realised that all of them misconstrued Adivasis and their customs. When I saw the attempt in many literary works to project the Adivasis in general and my own community, *Mala Arayans* in particular as jungle tribes without any semblance of culture, knowledge or customs, I felt the need to inform the outside world, i.e. this 'civilised' world about the foundations of Adivasi heritage and self-esteem and about what the Adivasis possess as their own.(Narayan 2003)

In this excerpt, we see that Narayan links the narrative representations with the self-esteem of the individual and the pride in the community identity. It presents an individual who is unapologetic about his Adivasi identity; yet he kept the novel under wraps for fifteen years because of the negative initial response from a well-wisher.

Koccharethi deals with the arrival of modernity to a small Adivasi community in the north-eastern hill regions of the erstwhile princely State of Travancore. Starting in the 1920s, the plot traces a *Mala Arayan* family across three generations. The central characters linking the three generations are Kunjipennu and Kochuraman. The life of the couple along with their daughter, Parvathi tries to capture the complexities of modern Adivasi life in Kerala. Parvathi successfully completes her matriculation and joins government service as a clerk in the Central Excise Department in Ernakulam (Cochin), soon after Indian independence and annexation of

Travancore to Indian Union. The education that granted a right to enter the road to development for the younger generation also causes a rupture with the values, beliefs and the way of life of the elders. Their needs, aspirations and desires are undergoing a transformation. As Parvathi tells her mother,

> Mother you don't know anything. There are dues to be paid at the hostel—for stay and food; then travel fare to the office, lunch, oil, soap, powder, toothpaste, laundry, occasionally a cinema. Wouldn't I have to buy a dress? [...]
>
> How can I go to office wearing the selfsame skirt? Employees should be dressed decently. My colleagues change their dress every day. I manage only once in two days. (Narayan 1998)(157)

Individualised and severed from the customary ties with the community, they can move away from their families and communities as we see the case of Parvathi, where she elopes with Padmanabhan, an educated and employed person from her own community with whom she falls and love, but cannot marry due to family opposition.

The aspiration to an educated, salaried middle-class is contrasted with the characters of youth like Sekharan and Raghavan, who fail to get sutured to the new discourse of development. Yet, Narayan is arguing in favour of a suturing into the mainstream Kerala society and nation at large, while retaining their identity. This retention of "identity" may or may not carry the dominant markers that identify Adivasi in the mainstream narratives. In many ways, the new Adivasi selfhood, employed in the cities, leading a middle-class existence gives renewed energy and hope to Narayan's narrative.

This promise of an unproblematic modernity is not taken for granted by Narayan. It is true that the educated among the younger generation move into the urban middle class existence, without much hassles: while studying, they were benefited by the financial assistance from the government, and on completion of their education they get jobs on account of the reservation policies of the state. But the older generation brought up in a different value system perishes in the process. The story presents this as the traditionally educated and relatively well off medicine man, modern enough of educate his daughter, Kochuraman's personal prosperity and exposure to the outside world did not suffice to meet the very modern needs like hospitals.The modern medical practice in big hospital alienates Kunjippennu and Kochuraman as the prospect of the doctors cutting him open alive make them run away from the hospital The novel ends with a dying Kochuraman and a terrified Kunjippennu standing lost in the dark streets of an alien city. Modernity presents the irony that the medicine man who saved many lives with his intimate knowledge of herbal medicines should die in an urban hospital with a disease unheard of in his community in the past.The arrival of arrack which contributed to Kochuraman's illness, is a very modern phenomenon for a community who drank only toddy that they themselves tapped from the palm trees. The Arrack trade which contributed enormously to the coffers of the government, might be viewed as an alien institution of modernity that spells a medical, economic, and cultural catastrophe for the Adivasis.

Narayan spends considerable energy in defending the Hindu identity of Adivasis. Actively promoted by the British missionaries, religious conversion had offered many Adivasis a

way out of at least some of their troubles. The possibility of educating their children in the English schools established by the missionaries appealed to many of them. However, Kochuraman says, "My name is Kochuraman. I don't want to be converted and be called *Arayan*Mathayi. I know that—being called *Pulayan*Thoma or *Chothi*Avira etc." (Narayan 1998)He is pointing to the fact that even though conversion does improve the financial and economic position of Adivasi families, their social position does not change much. They are still associated with their original castes.

When Narayan is talking about the Adivasis who haven't converted to other religions, he uses terms like 'original' and 'traditional'. A character in his novel says:

> "My friend, I am him. *I believe in Hindu religion and civilization*. But there is no record or evidence. I remain as a mistake, overlooked by the god and the men. Those of us who go to church are called Christians, but for education and government job they would say *Mala Arayan*." (Narayan 1998)(168; emphasis added)

While the record keeping that accompanies government-sponsored employment and educational benefits necessitates 'identity', there is also the assertion to be a part of Hindu religion that comes from an Adivasi himself. Through royal edicts, the interactions and interventions of outsiders on Adivasi areas were strictly regulated in the pricely state, and it is an acknowledged fact that the major marginalization of Adivasis in these areas started only after the independence with the large scale migration from the plains. By and large the settlers were Syrian Christians. The Adivasi communities in these regions, like anywhere else in Kerala, had to struggle against the economic and cultural hegemony of this dominant group. The attempted appropriation of an oppositional Hindu identity should be understood in this context.

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Confronting Self as the Other

In *Secularism and Toleration*, ParthaChatterjee talks about the imaginary figure of a minority woman leader, who would be talking to the mainstream society and the institutions of the state as well as her own community in her attempt to engage in a strategic politics.

> She will in fact locate herself precisely at the cusp where she can face, on the one side, the assimilationist powers of governmental technology and resist, on the grounds of autonomy and self-representation, its universalist idea of citizenship; and, on the side, struggle, once again on the grounds of autonomy and self-representation, for the emergence of more representative public institutions and practices within her community. (Chatterjee 1998)

I think, this imaginary figure of the minority woman leader could perhaps characterizesAdivasiGothramMahasabha Leader, C.K. Janu and her political position. In this section, I attempt to explore *Janu: C.K. JanuvinteJeevithakatha,* using this imaginary figure.

The book is a re-creation of Janu's oral narrative of her life and politics. It has been divided into two segments: the first one deals mainly with her childhood memories and growing up, while the second one is more of an exploration of her political positions. However this division is arbitrary as there is a great deal of overlap between the personal and the political in Janu's narrative.

At the moment of recording her testimony, Janu was living in a hut on a hillock that she had encroached upon, in Panavalli, near Thirunelli in Wayanad. She had occupied the hill along

with forty-five landless and homeless Adivasi families. The hill had originally belonged to their ancestors and then had a case pending in the court:

> However, because this is disputed land we cannot demand drinking water. We cannot get electricity also though a transmission line passes by. And because the houses do not have numbers, we cannot get ration cards either. And we cannot apply for anything. Because Party people don't get our votes, our names are also not there in the voter's lists. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(42)

Janu is occupying not just a marginal position in terms of her community's history, she and her fellow-Adivasis are still outside all the enumerations of the state. But how did Janu, a farm hand who was illiterate till her twenties, reach where she stands now? It is a story of a struggle from the marginal position that her community occupies in the contemporary history of Kerala.

Janu also has her take on what is known as the agrarian crisis in Kerala. The disappearance of paddy fields, the move to commercial cash-crops, and the dependence on other states for food grains are hotly debated in Kerala. She says that after driving her community out of their lands, the migrants and the *jenmies* grabbed their land. But later on, migrant settlers from central Travancore came to own all the land.

> Big landlords did not require land any more. 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 this commercial crops. Paddy fields began to dwindle. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(52)

While the migrants changed the way farming was done in Wayanad, their's was also the mode of farming which the state promoted through the text books and its policy measures. Thus, the people who learned to cultivate from the books, took over agriculture. According to her, soon the complaint that agriculture was not profitable enough, followed. A community that learnt its trade from the land, alone can work the land. Alienated from their lands, with agricultural work insufficient to sustainthemselves, Adivasis had to look outfor other kinds of jobs. This also broughtAdivasisinto the cash-based economy. This indeed was the beginning of a slippery slope to misery.

> […] we started eating things bought from shops. We had to go to the ration shops for rice and wheat. Ration cards, electoral rolls, and numbers for the huts came being. We started buying *mulagu*, *thuvara* and *payar* from the shops. Became indebted to the shopkeepers.
>
> More needs meant more money. We now had to buy medicines for fever. Injections and prescription slips came into existence. […]
>
> Hospitals, with machines to detect vitamin deficiency in our people, started functioning. Armed with prescriptions for a balanced diet people bought tomatoes and potatoes from the shops. There were hospitals for women to give birth in. This created a need for more money. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(32)

Indeed, Janu is talking about the same modern medical facilities that according to the state were one of the most important things that Adivasis needed. But without the purchasing power and a sustainable and exploitation free habitat, it led only to further immiseration.

The educational drive from the state herded the younger generation of Adivasis into the ST hostels in the faraway cities. Janu considers this move to have far-reaching consequences.

> Unable to study or to pass the tests in the new syllabi they lost their balance. They had to, for the cities to get their menial jobs done. Our people began to apply for such menial jobs. They became good-for-nothings by writing competitive tests and failing miserably in them. And the government ridiculed us further with the figures that proved that our people were in a position to compete with people from civil society. Certain ruling forces and power centers emerged who could stamp this society underfoot as a group of people who always failed. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(48)

Every failure to achieve "merit" rendered Adivasis as a group permanently in need of assistance. In opposition to this, Janu points out that they had earlier lived in a self-sufficient system. It may not have sufficed to the needs of the mainstream society, but it was sufficient to the needs of the Adivasi communities. The new development projects struck at the roots of a harmonious ecosystem where the new generation of Adivasis learnt significant life lessons from nature. As they were officially conferred with the minority status in the modern nation-state, the historical marginalisation and exploitation of the Adivasis took a modern form as well.

Janu also refers to the celebration of Adivasi customs and rituals by the mainstream society. Academies and research projects were instituted to study the cultural life of Adivasis.

But what they overlooked was the fact that these customs and rituals had no relevance outside the milieu and the moment in which they originated.

> All our songs, customs and medicinal practices were born from the system of life that we adopted as intimately related to the earth. They have no existence in a different system. […] Folk art academies took over our customs like *gaddiga*. All these traditions were signs of our presence in this world. They cannot exist in another system and it is not for the community to insist so. It is not the need of this community to recognize these signs. They should exist on their own, striking a balance with the changes that time brings about. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(50)

Janu says that excavating such customs and traditions and celebrating them is the habit of the mainstream society. She regrets that this has made inroads into her community as well. There are people who believe that these customs and rituals need to be preserved. But Janu does not think so.

> No society can insist that any good or bad tradition of theirs should remain unchanged. …. As long as the earth, the forests, the sky and the wind exist new lives come into being, basking in Nature's sunshine, drawing energy from its winds and continuing to exist, glowing and resurgent. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(50)

To Janu, customs and traditions are constantly remodelled and recreated based on the historical experiences. A museumized preservation of customs and rituals could only be a burden in this process.

Family has been a major site of the reform for the pedagogic mission of the state. The valorisation of the modern nuclear family as the ideal is tied up with the 'domestication' and subjugation of the woman. Janu mentions marriage traditions among her *Adiyar* community. She says that they too have marriage ceremonies, though not so grand like in other communities nor did it carry much importance: "Man and woman stay together. Sometimes they shift to a hut of their own. They have children." In such a system, where marriages were not founded as normative ideal, opting out also was easy:

> Following this tradition when I was around seventeen some ceremonies were performed in my case too in our Chekkote area. But I had told them I didn't want it. I didn't like all this. …. I didn't stay with him for long. I didn't like to move much within our tradition with the men in our community […](Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003) (25)

The state initiative is to mould the family as the basic unit of the state. Janu's move out of the tradition is not an entry into this statist paradigm. Rather she would prefer to stay outside of it. She is invoking another tradition within her community against the statist options.

> 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 on

> even now. Theirs is a resolve that is hardened by the wind and the rain of the forest and the in the face of other difficulties. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(53)

She says that even from early days, women in her community are used to doing men's work in the fields. According to her, they derive some power from this. She feels that men in her community are more corruptible than women, because statist and liberal initiatives of reforming the Adivasis are patriarchal and mostly seek to interpellate the men as citizens:

> They spend a lot of time just doing nothing or wandering about in the forest. These days they waste their time on shop verandhas. They will just go on squatting there. They have become very lazy with easy access to toddy and arrack. *Interference from outsiders has caused all this. Our men waste their time waiting for government projects or submitting applications.* It was this same attitude that led us to lose our lands. Most of them lost their lands for a pinch of tobacco or a glass of tea or some arrack. Many in the civil society and the Party have taken advantage of this. But this has not happened through women. Our community can surely grow only through the togetherness of our women. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(46-47; emphasis added)

Janu is drawing strength from the sense of community that still survives among women. Her hopes for the regeneration of her community also come from this solidarity of women.

The political thrust of AdivasiGothraMahasabha also rejects the attempted Hinduisation of Adivasis. Identifying with the Dalit politics, Janu says that,

> In our community there are no gods or goddesses like among the Hindus. Never seen or heard of fair fat gods or goddesses in our tradition like in the Calenders. When we were young there used to be a big tree near our hut in Thrissileri and a stone placed underneath it. We used to worship that. Our forefathers rested there. Once a year we appeased them. There used to be some rituals for that. (Bhaskaran, Janu: C.K. Januvinte jeevithakatha 2003)(19)

Janu's rejection of the Hindu gods is also a rejection of the assimilationist thrust of nationalist discourse and its citizenship normed as upper-caste middle-class Hindu male. Here, Narayan and Janu are travelling in divergent paths.

This move is among the many crucial divergences between the two. Their positions differ from each other in their attitude towards the mainstream Kerala society and culture or their takes on Hinduism or the survival strategies of the community. But both Narayan and Janu are redefining the Adivasi identity and releasing it from the identity strait-jackets imposed on them. Both of them believe that the leadership of the Adivasi struggles should come from within the Adivasi communities itself. They are the modern Adivasis taking charge of their destiny. Their divergences as well as convergences are pointing to the complexity of the Adivasi identity position in Kerala which, instead, of weakening the Adivasi cause give it a unique inner strength.

Conclusion

Literature, more than any other discipline, focuses on the value of the narrative. Narratives provide a sense of the self and the other to its readers. Any new or radically original literary work tends to alter the contours of the familiar/familial relationship one has with the sense of the self. This indeed is the significance of the texts, which I have discussed in this paper.

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Adivasi identity in Kerala is not a monolith. It speaks from a plurality of locations and doesn't conform to the simplistic binaries of a pure/corrupt paradigm that the 'enlightened' mainstream representations of Adivasi selfhood imply. Narayan's and Janu's narratives simultaneously broaden and deepen the sense of the self for the Adivasis in Kerala (and sense of the self as other for us). Any act of narrativising a lived experience always already involves a process of abstraction where experience is verbalized and a coherence imposed. In this, Narayan follows the more conventional, quintessentially middle-class genre of novel whereas Janu's testimonial problematizes the understanding of the self as implied and implicated in a conversational narrative framed by someone else. In both these texts the concrete experiencing self is simultaneously present and absent at the same time.

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