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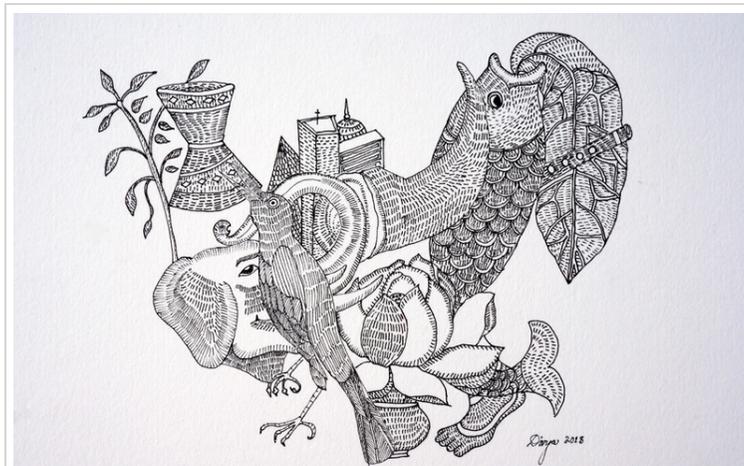
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N. RAVI SHANKER

MOTHER FOREST



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(The unfinished story of C.K.Janu, published by Women Unlimited, New Delhi, in 2004. Translated from Malayalam.

Originally published in Malayalam by DC Books, Kerala, as "JANU – the life story of C.K.Janu" in 2003, written by Bhaskaran.)

Where we all lived there was a time when work just meant pulling out the paddy seedlings transplanting them in the fields and such. Mostly work related to paddy farming. plantation work became common much later. Work like manuring Coffee, manuring Pepper and such was simply absent. Most of the labour we did was only in the rice fields. Carrying dung to the fields, digging up the soil with spades, sowing, pulling out the seedlings, transplanting them, weeding, watering, reaping, carrying the sheaves of corn, and such; again picking the left over ears of corn from the harvested field. Then more work like threshing, drying the straw in the sun, tying up the hay into sheaves, and piling up haystacks. I was already doing all this at ten or eleven. At that time my wages were two rupees. When I was twelve or thirteen I got two-and-a-half three rupees.when I was even younger I used to go to the forests to clear the woods for the way we used to farm.

In the uncultivated forest the trees have to be cut down and the undergrowth cropped. The bushes would be thick with creepers and thorny bushes all to be hacked down with choppers and heaped up with sticks. Then the undergrowth would be set on fire. We call it torching the *punam*. When the virgin earth catches fire it gives out a strange smell, like it is being roasted alive. It is a scary sight when the hill catches fire. In the night it looks as if a human being is being burnt alive. The fire would blaze for several days then smoulder on with loud crackles every now and then. And when it rains the hill looks like a woman with her hair shorn, the wild water all blood-red gushing angrily. After the rains the earth would be flattened into beds and the soil dug up with spades. Then we did the sowing and such.

When young all of us children would go the ridges of the fields to pick *chappa*, or to the little stream to catch fish. Or else to lure out the crabs hiding in the slush of the fields, or to graze the landlord's cattle, or to roam aimlessly in the woods, or to pluck wild fruits like *karappayam mothangappayam* or *kanjippayam*. *kanjippayam* was plentiful.. When eaten it turned our tongues blood-red. Or we would look for honey in the tall trees. Or gather reeds and make bundles of them. In the bamboo groves we would look for the footprints of elephants, would drink deep from waterholes, or just relax slipping our feet lazily into the cool water. We would dig into rocky fissures looking for water or bring home pieces of cane. In the forests one never knew what hunger was. We would dig up wild tubers and eat them.

When quite young we used to catch fish in the stream gushing by while our elders toiled in the fields. Or snare water snakes. Or look for water fowls in the thickets of *kaiitha* growing abundantly by the stream and trap them. We caught fish with a makeshift net of worn cloth. Tiny little fish like *paral and mussu* . To catch crabs we needed to make a noose at the end of a long thick blade of *marappullu* and place a *muttal* in it as bait. Both boys and girls would join in. After the day's labour, when night had fallen, we would come back to our huts and cook the fish and the crabs and gulp them down.

In our younger days no lamps were lit in our huts. 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. The ember glowed and glowed. When it grew really dark outside everyone would gather in the courtyard. Those who munched tobacco would do just that. We would sit for hours listening to what the forests mumbled. Or warm ourselves by a pile of burning wood and roast some wild roots in the fire. They could also be eaten raw.

When we were young our huts had some land and woods around them. Also fields. We used to sow or plant *thuvava chembu thina* and *muthari*. Even little children used to join in this work. to scare away the wild pigs monkeys and elephants we used to build shacks perched high on the trees and beat on makeshift drums made of empty tin containers. The *erumaadam* was built between two giant trees so high above the ground that from it we could see all our lands the unending forests and the sky. during the monsoon we could see the approaching rain from so far away. Sometimes from as far away as Coorg.

When it rains in the forest the sky and the trees both turn an ugly grey. When it rains the giant trees all bend down and become as small as infants. The wind signals the arrival of the rain. in the wind the big trees tremble. it is awesome to watch them sway like that. it is as if the hills were swaying as one. Making us wonder how the beehives managed to stick to the trees and how the bird nests hung on.

From the *erumaadam* one could see the herds of elephants from far off. And the deer who came to savour the young shoots. One should never run uphill if trapped in front of an elephant. Elephants run uphill quite fast. One should always run downhill. The elephant cannot catch you then. Running downhill makes its tongue hang out. If the pigs came they were sure to dig up all that was planted. And they would do it stealthily in the night. But if the elephants came we could sense them by their spoor and we could drive them away by lighting fires or making a din.

During the monsoon we hardly dared go out. There was very little to eat too. Couldn't look for tubers either. Leeches swarmed the forests in the rains. And no songs flowed from the *chini*.

When it poured we had to worry about the elephants huddling too close to the huts. And about whether the torrents would wash away the huts or whether uprooted trees would fall on them. The howling wind would be really frightening. Innumerable little creatures of the forest would cry relentlessly. Day would turn into night in the forest. it would be pitch black all around. The leaves, clustered thick, would sway in the dark and the frogs would go mad croaking. it would be really chilly. All of us children would huddle together inside the hut warming ourselves by the hearth our tiny bodies glowing with the warmth. The adults would be out in the fields as it was transplanting time for the paddy seedlings. When we children squatted in a group a strange smell would come off us . Don't know whether hunger has any smell.

When it rained the adults would return late from work. There was always more work to do in the rainy season. We children would be sleeping by the time they

returned. Sometimes there would be nothing to eat. Our people had no cattle. And no money to buy them. But grass and woods spread all around. Our boys and girls would graze the *jenmi's* cattle. We grazed them in the forest till darkness fell. That's when we would enter the bamboo groves and cut pieces of young bamboo reeds to make *chini*. We could make music flow from it by blowing into it. its sound was unlike the other sounds of the forest. We could recognise it from quite far away. Even our cattle could.

No one knows the forest like we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother, because she never abandons us.

C.K.Janu is a leader of the Adivasis (meaning the original inhabitants) of the south Indian state of Kerala who inhabit the evergreen forests along the Western Ghats. The forests saw a steady stream of illegal migrants from the mainland who gradually subjugated the Adivasis and usurped their lands. Through various Forest Acts, the Government also took away their lands as they had no concept of ownership of land. Adivasis, gradually, became a much exploited lot.

In 2001, C.K.Janu led a huge agitation by the Adivasis for land in Kerala by pitching tribal huts in front of the Government Secretariat complex. The Government had to accede to their demands.

Later, the Government went back on their word and C.K.Janu led another agitation to occupy a small tract of forest land in Muthanga. This time, the agitation was brutally suppressed and the police opened fire on hundreds of Adivasis including women and children. C.K. Janu was hunted down like a criminal and incarcerated for a long time. She now leads an organization called Gothra Maha Sabha (The Conference of the Tribal Clans.)

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JOHN ([HTTP://JOHNPMAHEW.BLOGSPOT.IN](http://JOHNPMAHEW.BLOGSPOT.IN))

Nice story. Well told. Can feel the same as I spent my childhood in Kerala.

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