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Cry of the tribesmen

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Mother Forest, The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu

by Bhaskaran. Translated by N. Ravi Shanker. Women Unlimited. Pages 71. Rs 75.

TRIBESMEN are indigenous aboriginal people of the land, for they had long settled in different parts of the country before the Aryans penetrated India to settle down. Comprising 7.18 per cent of India's population, according to the 1981 census, the problems and perils of this community go unnoticed. With a distinct culture, identity and a way of life, which they feel is in danger, their dispossession from their lands only re-emphasises their doubt that they are the stepchildren of the state.

Written by Bhaskaran and translated from Malayalam by N. Ravi Shanker, the story is a saga of the struggle of C. K. Janu, a young vibrant woman who is fighting for her people's cause.

As more and more land was taken from them in the past in the name of development, tribesmen got alienated from their roots without even realising it. If the government took possession of the land in the name of "development", the local landlords extended their fields into their forests by offering the tribesmen intoxicants and mistreating their women. The tribesmen, who were passionate supporters of the CPM, were betrayed by the party workers because the latter had a hand in not only spreading vices, but also making unwed mothers.

C. K. Janu, an ardent supporter of the CPM, got disillusioned with the party, as she felt it was not working for the welfare of the tribesmen. She broke from the party, as the party's existence itself was based on money, power and influence.

The book also gives a wonderful account of forest life. Janu talks about the beetles on gingli flowers, their blowing into the bamboo reeds to make music. The tribesmen are one with the jungle, they associate with it, thus their life and livelihood, i.e., agriculture, cannot harm the jungle. They care for the jungle, for they understand the life inside it. For example, Janu says, when trapped in front of an elephant, one should always run downhill as the elephant's tongue (trunk) hangs out and it cannot run. The author tries to prove that with these people deriving their life, their joys from the jungle, can they harm it?

Through her struggle, Janu talks about their fight against civil society, which doesn't understand the tribesmen's need to work closer to their land. The life, culture and laws of civil society are different from the tribesmen's, but the latter have a balanced life, which is threatened when their land is snatched from them.

Janu says civil society may find the life of the tribesmen different, but they were once one with nature. Janu's cry is a voice to leave the tribesmen alone with nature. The huts where they lived initially were not convenient, but these lay in the lap of nature from which the little ones would learn lessons. "Time and seasons could be told from the chirping of certain birds. The months could be counted when the leaves fell from the trees. From the darkening clouds descending on the hilltops and forests, we could gauge the direction of the wind."

With no formal education, Janu and her people have been victims of our political system. The founding member of the Adivasi Vikasna Pravarthake Samiti, an organisation for tribal development workers, she has



represented the tribal cause in the United Nations in Geneva, in which prominent tribal leaders from Asia, Africa and Latin America participated. With Arundhati Roy supporting their cause, Janu's demand to reclaim the lost lands of the tribesmen and return them safely to their old traditions and customs seems relevant.

The book written in an unconventional way shows that the Kerala civil society's development has left the marginal tribal communities largely untouched.

The author has successfully delivered the message about the deteriorating condition of the tribesmen. The book is an expression of the author's concern for the tribesmen and their cause, which is narrated through Janu's life. With the tribesmen calling the forest, the book rightly argues the cause of the tribesmen.

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