Soft Power, Crisis of Existence and the Tribal People of Kerala: A Study of *Mother Forest, the Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu*

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Abstract

Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" which he says means "getting others to want the outcomes that you want." The world's largest democracy India is also the home of millions of impoverished people including many indigenous tribes that are impediments to the desired rapid economic and political growth of India. Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu, written by Janu Bhaskaran and translated from the original Malayalam into English by N. Ravi Shanker, narrates the story of the struggle of the Adiyas, a tribal people of Kerala, whose identity and livelihood is threatened when they are dispossessed of their ancient land in the forest. The tribe is led by Janu, a girl from their community, whose struggles against the soft power of the State inform the crisis of existence of these tribal people. This paper will attempt to study the crisis of existence of the tribal people in the narrative of Mother Forest using Nye's theory of "soft power". This paper will attempt to expose the authoritarianism of State policies vis a vis the helplessness of the indigenous people in the face of displacement from their original habitat as described in Mother Forest.

Keywords: *Mother Forest*, Janu, soft power, indigenous people, crisis of existence

Introduction

The concern in this paper is India's developmental agenda and its equation with the various classes of people living in itscities, villages, and forests. As a case in point, I referto C. K. Janu's Memoir *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu*. India's development and recognition in the global sphere as a growing economy is based on various developmental policies that foreground the economic and social development of its peoples through its various developmental programmes while protecting the rights of the indigenous or adivasi population who reside in the forests and plain lands. It is

common knowledge that the world's largest democracy India is the home of millions of impoverished people including many indigenous tribes who are impediments to the desired rapid economic and political growth of India due to their resistance to give up their forests and land for development. Forests inhabited by the indigenous people are rich in natural resources and the lands are fertile that the Government and other agencies vie to occupy and develop to further the overall economic development of the country. *Mother Forest*: *The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu* is written by Janu Bhaskaran and has been translatedinto English from the original Malayalam by N. Ravi Shanker. It inscribes the socio-political struggles of the Adiya tribals and narrates the conflict between the developmental policies of the Government and the rights of the adivasi. It is the story of the struggle of the Adiya, a tribal people, or "adivasi", living in the Wayanad District of Kerala, whose identity and livelihood arethreatened and they are thrown into crisis when they are dispossessed of their ancient habitat in the forest.

C. K. Janu herself is a member of the Adiya tribe who have been indentured labourers by people from the mainstream for a very long time even prior tothe independence of India. Janu has broken the narrative into two parts. The first part of the narrative describes how the adivasis of Wayanad who lived in harmony with nature and their forest, Mathunga, were territorially marginalised by the migrants from Travancore, a place in the north of Kerala, and pushed to the deep regions of the forests which were considered unarable and "worthless wastelands" (*Mother Forest* vii) by settlers who migrated from Travancore and other places. The Adiyas, writes Janu, were sufficiently provided for and never knew hunger as they cultivated and collected whatever they needed from the forest: "in the forest one never knew what hunger was"(2). The migrants easily usurped the lands of the Adiyas because like all tribal people the Adiyas, who lived in harmony with their environment, did not have a strict sense of ownership of land. Like the Konyaks of Nagaland and the Maria Gonds (Kundalia xvii), the Adiyas too had "their own design of development" (xvii) instead of stamped individual ownership. Anugraha Madhavan and Sharmila Narayan in their article entitled "Violation of Land as Violation of Feminine Space: An Ecofeminist Reading of *Mother Forest* and *Mayilamma*" published in 2020 notes the important connection between the adivasi and land. They explain:

> 'Adivasi' is the umbrella term used to indicate the tribes in India, even though the gap between indigeneity and the constitutional scheduling of the tribes has been problematised to a large extent. It translates to "original inhabitants or indigenous people". . . Drawing from Lewis and the other stories of "narrative scholarship". . . from the tribes themselves, land thus becomes central to the construction of a unique identity at the ideological and spiritual level and also determines access to resources and therefore lifestyles and livelihood at the physical and economic level. (14)

Janu underscores the oneness that the Adiyas had with their land and ecosystem which had for centuries sustained them. They became a part of the ecosystem:"The *erumaadam* (a hut built on tree top) was built between two giant trees so high above the ground that from it we could see all our lands, the unending forest, and the sky" (3). Janu says that "no one knows the forest like we do. Theforest is mother to us. More than

a mother because she never abandons us" (5). The forest was their mother and tutor and no one ever went to school for formal education. Indigenous knowledge system was oral and cultural and was passed down to each generation. We read that the Adiyas could instinctively predict the change in weather likewhether and when it would be windy and when it would rain. 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. The adivasis were shy of the outside world and avoided interacting with people from the mainstream. This attitude of the adivasi put them at a disadvantage and the migrants who had usurped the forest and occupied their land were now the landlords or the *jenmi*, who employed the adivasi in their lands for meagre wages. Janu's narrative is laced with regret, she states: "After our forefathers had toiled so much to clear the woods and burn theundergrowth and convert the hillsides into fields they (the *jenmis*) had taken themover as their own. That's how all our land became theirs." (15). *Mother Forest* recounts stories of interaction and exploitation of the innocent adivasi by both state and non-state agents. Janu remembers that"In those days we were afraid of almost everything. The backs of ourpeople used to be so bent because we were terrified of so many things for generations. When our people speak they don't raise their eyes and that must be because they areso scared" (13). The migrant landowners enticed the tribal men with intoxicants like alcohol and tobacco and made them addicts so that there would be minimum resistance from their end. The Adiya men became so dependent on the *jenmi*for livelihood and intoxicants that they fell easy prey and were unable to escape the clutches of the exploiters and became psychologically enslaved.

Although a lot of anthropological study has been done on the adivasis of India and a host of literary texts exist either primitivizing or romanticizing the adivasi and their problems a few of them are written by the adivasi themselves. The body of critical work done on adivasi literature is basically socio-religious or socio-cultural analysing the lives of adivasi as depicted in their oral narratives. Janu Bhaskaran's unfinished autobiography, *Mother Forest*, has not received the attention that it should from literary critics. There are two major critical essays one by Elen Turner in 2012 and the other by Anugraha Madhavan and Sharmila Narayana in 2020. While Elen Turner focuses on the feminist aspects of Janu's *Mother Forest* vis a vis Anita Agnihotri's *Forest Interludes* Madhavan and Narayana focus on the ecofeminist aspect of *Mother Forest*. This paper will further the critical discussion by laying emphasis on the neo-colonial policies of the Government of India used subtly on the Adiya adivasi of Matunga forest in Wayanad, Kerala, by exercising its soft power on them. For analysis, I shall be drawing upon the theory of soft power propounded by Joseph Nye, Jr.

Soft Power

Joseph S Nye, Jr. had coined the term "soft power" in the last decade of the twentieth century. He defines it as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced" (Nye, Jr. x). He further explains that "When you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend

as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction. Seduction is always more effective than coercion, and many values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities are deeply seductive" (x). After the World War II, America and the other powerful nations of the world realized from the history of the once invincible Roman kingdom that muscle power or hard military power was not enough to retain hegemony over others. They realized the futility of the Machiavellian policy of being "feared to be loved" (1). Instead, winning people's hearts and minds was seen as the key to become powerful. Nye describes power as the capability:

> to affect the behavior of others to make those things happen. So more specifically, power is the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several ways to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them withthreats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract andco-opt them to want what you want. Some people think of power narrowly, in terms of command andcoercion. You experience it when you can make others do what theywould otherwise not do. (2)

People of poorer countries and countries that use repression on the masses find the "other's" culture to be more progressive and alluring, little knowing that it sets the trap. Nye calls this co-optive power:

> Co-optive power-the ability to shapewhat others want-can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture andvalues or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices ina manner that makes others fail to express some preferences becausethey seem to be too unrealistic. The types ofbehavior between commandand co-option range along a spectrum from coercion to economicinducement to agenda setting to pure attraction. Soft-powerresources tend to be associated with the co-optive end of the spectrumof behaviour. (7)

He goes on to expand his concept of soft power positing,

> The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: itsculture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values(when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies(when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority.)Let's start with culture. Culture is the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society. It has many manifestations. It iscommon to distinguish between high culture such as literature, art, and education, which appeals to elites, and popular culture, whichfocuses on mass entertainment.
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> When a country's culture includes universal values and its policiespromote values and interests that others share, it increases theprobability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationshipsof attraction and duty that it creates. (11)

Soft Power and the Crisis of Existence

My concern in this paper emanates from the question that while the Government of India recognizes the rights of the indigenous or adivasi people, enshrining their rights and pledging their protection in the Constitution, and educates the masses on these rights, how are these rights being violated and indigenous people rendered

landless and destitute?It may be noted that after the independence of India, the then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru "formulated the Panchsheel principles meant to guide government actions in dealing with tribal people. More recently, PESA [the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act], 1996, and the Forests Rights Act, 2006, have made a difference" (Kundalia xvi). But tribals in the remote places of India are largely unaware of the legislations and of their rights. The legislations are intended to protect the tribal people against exploitations of mainstream society, "strengthening 'tribal' cultural institutions, while at the same time furthering their integration with mainstream society" (xvi). These measures, although done with the best of intentions, only complicate the lives of the adivasis or the tribal people. The policy makers and people in the mainstream fail to take into account that the tribals have their own unique system of development practiced by them sustainably over centuries. A similar case in point is the struggle between the Canadian First Nation people and the Government that wanted the Makenzie Gas Project which would run a 1300 km pipeline from Beaufort Sea through indigenous lands to the Makenzie River Valley, which would, in turn, be highly destructive to the environment. The Government of Canada initially engage in dialogue with the indigenous people of the area. Thea Luig observes that "Contemporary discourses, such as sustainability and inclusion of traditionalknowledge, have been added to the vocabulary of speakers. The legal framework of aboriginalrights and participation that has been developed in the past three decades now servesas the basis for the procedure. Nevertheless, the people who gather at these meetings facethe same dilemmas surrounding industrial development, its adverse effects, and its possibleor supposed benefits" (76). There were many hearings between 1970 and 2006 where the aboriginal Elders told their stories of how they respect the land on which they live and go out to hunt. "While local Aboriginal people presented their concerns at the hearings, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced in public that he wants to see the Mackenzie GasProject starting as soon as possible and without too many conditions on it" (76). It was a lost case for the aboriginals there. Nye's argument that one of the important facets of a country's soft power is its political values and its narrative of economic development finds expression in the case of the conflict between the Canadian Government and the Canadian First Nation people where the State's soft power is the ultimate winner.

Janu's narrative in the *Mother Forest* presents a similar crisis. The narrative critically questions the place and rights of indigenous people in independent India. This paper as proposed attempts to study the crisis of existence of the tribal people in the narrative of *Mother Forest*in an attempt to expose the authoritarianism of State policies vis a vis the helplessness of the indigenous people in the face of displacement from their original habitat as described in *Mother Forest*. The Adiyas like other adivasis are self-sufficient, autonomous, and a well-functioning unit dependent on their land and forest for their livelihood. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive* discusses the centrality of forests to Indian civilisation especially the adivasi, she argues that: "As a source of life nature was venerated as sacred and human evolution was measured interms of man's capacity to merge with her rhythms and patterns intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The forest thus nurtured an ecological civilization in themost fundamental sense of harmony with nature" (56). The Adiya of Mathunga forests had lived in harmony

with nature until the Government of Kerala enacted its land reforms and decided to civilize the adivasi and give them alternate habitats.

Mei Mei Evans, a noted environmentalist, states that "personal testimonies like the biography of Janu are the "life blood of environmental justice movements" (qtd in Varma and Rangarajan 180). In this context Anugraha Madhavan and Sharmila Narayana's note that "majoritarian politics by capitalist and casteist powers have been major factors in pushing the tribals into a new category, that of indentured agricultural slave labourers. This positioning places them at an extreme disadvantage, pushing them deeper into the depths of poverty while alienating them from the land to which they belong" (15) is worth attention. Capitalist and casteist powers in India operate upon stories of the idolization of the high culture of the majoritarian Hindus and Christians. At this point we can refer back to Nye's theory of a country's soft power resources by means of which the country influences the minds of the people resisting its power by universalizing that country's culture.

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Similarly, the culture and the ways of life the mainstream Hindus and Christians were made to seem as superior and ideal to the Adiya of Wayanad. Janu tells us that tribal knowledge systems and lifestyles were undermined and children were taken away to tribal hostels to be educated in modern civilized knowledge and thus initiated into their alienation from their land and people. Initiation into modern ways of living, travelling, and entertainment furthered the alienation to such an extent that most of the tribals instead of protesting exploitation considered it their duty to tag the line of argument of the governments that they were possibly impediments to the economic development of the country.

The political agencies and the Government both tried to influence the behaviour of the Adiya. The Adiya men were given to alcoholism and addiction which made it easy for the developmental agencies to lure them into agreeing to give up their lands, and thus they fell victim to the soft powers ofState. When the wildlife sanctuary was built in Mathunga forest, as a part of the Government's policy of tourism development, the original inhabitants were made to leave the forest, consequently, they were rendered homeless and destitute. The Communist Party of Kerala too, in order to gain political milage, tried to influence them by attracting them into resistance campaigns and protests impressing upon them that this was the way they would gain back their land in the Mathunga Forest. Janu's reaction and herstruggles against the soft power of the State inform the crisis of existence of these tribal people. In January 2003, the Adiya were mobilized by Janu, occupied a part of the wildlife sanctuary in Mathunga protesting against the government's failure to honour their commitment to the tribals,

that is, the restoration of land alienated from them for development. Commenting on Janu's endeavour to get back their lost land Sreerekha comments that "These movements see land as the only path towards a long-termsurvival of the community; as the solution. In today's context, a demand for ownership to land by any marginalised communityinevitably faces severe forms of state repression" (56). In the case of the Adiya, the State used power and forcible eviction which resulted in the death of one tribal and injuries to others. It is pertinent to note Stephanie Lawson's argument:

> The politics of indigenous identity has become a global phenomenon with numerous groups active at the international level, promoting their claims not just to recognition but to particular rights and interests usually based on prior occupation of territory, asserting a valued way of life associated with the land, and a need to safeguard indigenous heritage for future generations. Particular manifestations of the politics of indigenous identity, however, remain firmly anchored within the realm of individual sovereign states, many of which in fact owe their very existence to the large scale dispossession of the indigenous people. (1)

The large- scale dispossession of the Adiya adivasi from their land pushes their identity into crisis. They are unable to safeguard their home and cultural heritage.

Elen Turner in her essay "An unfinished story: The representation of adivasis in Indian feminist Literature" (2012) points out that the attitude of the colonizers towards the adivasi of India has not undergone much change in the nationalist inclusivist India. She argues that the "Primitivising and romanticising tendencies emerged in colonial era studies of adivasis, which were utilised by the colonial government. Though the British devised elaborate hierarchies of civilisation as a justification for their rule, with adivasis somewhere near the bottom, they also celebrated adivasi nobility, independence, honesty, simplicity, and spontaneity. . . . . This spontaneity and simplicity meant they were always in danger of irrationally rebelling against colonial rule and therefore needed to be controlled. . ." (329). Turner discusses Ajay Skaria's comments in this regard and quotes from his opinion in her essay. She writes:

> As Ajay Skaria notes, '[t]he knowing mind belonged to the nationalist elite' . . . and the idea that adivasis were the 'younger brothers of the more advanced plains nationalists' was a central theme of Gandhian and nationalist thought . . . . The discourse of post-independence Indian governments has not been vastly different. Since at least the 1960s, the emphasis has been on assimilating adivasis so that they become 'developed', as their 'wildness' 'epitomized Indian backwardness; this backwardness had to be overcome and extirpated for the nation to become modern or simply for the nation to become'. . . . (329-330)

*Mother Forest*which narrates the woes of the Adiya adivasi is located in Kerala one of the most literate States of India. This state is heralded as one of the most 'advanced' in India, with almost total literacy and basic living standards on a par with those of the west (Bhaskaran v). Kerala was also one of the first places in the world to democratically elect a Communist government (v). Around 1991 Kerala undertook economic liberalisation with the rest of India. The state's small number of adivasis generally did not benefit from the successes of its alternative route to development (ix). Adivasi lands were encroached

upon and they were exploited as cheap labour.

In the passionate account of her struggle in *Mother Forest*, Janu speaks of her childhood and her life in the forest, and her political awakening as a party worker in the CPM. Her growing disillusionment with it, and her break from it after she felt it had betrayed the tribals. Janu confesses:

> Problems specifically related to our people were not discussed much in the Party or the Union. The Party saw us as a vote bank only. Therefore issues related to our agricultural lands or better conditions of life for us hardly found their way into Party circles. The speeches made in the Party classes were not what we could easily understand. They were full of strange words with hidden traps. They tried their best not to let us speak. (34)

She condemns the atrocities towards tribal girls in the hostels where they are supposed to receive education of the civilized and to adapt to the cultural ways of the mainstream. The CPM Party which used the innocent adivasis to join their rallies and shout slogans that they did not even understand in reality. However, the party merely used, ridiculed, stereotyped, and dehumanized them. The seduction and attraction of the soft power that the CPM of Kerala had over Janu results in her falling into the trap of the Party and betraying the faith of her people. She could not give them back their land. The second half of the book recounts Janu's adult life and her political activity – the more 'public' spheres of her. Her words are pointers to the outcome of soft power used by the State development agencies which have pushed the poor adivasi into further crisis. Janu exposes the crisis when she says that all their people had become mere wage labourers in their own land and "*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 land belonged to the migrants" (30).

Conclusion

Janu's *Mother Forest* is a unique storywhich narrates the angst of the tribal people of the Mutanga forest in Wayanad and subtly exposes the soft power of nationalist, democratic and civilized values used first by migrants who usurped the land of the Adiyas and reduced them to poor indentured labourers and then by the government of India and the political parties of Kerala who tried to lure away the adivasi from their rights over land and indigenous cultural heritage. The Kerala Goverment's intention of building resorts and artificial tourist sites in Wayanad was the primary reason of the governments concern to rehabilitate the Adiyas in alternative spaces. The children were taken to hostels to be educated in the seductive values of the mainstream like "democracy, human rights, andindividual opportunities" (Nye x) such that they became alienated from their own cultural heritage and seemed to want whatever the government wanted. The Adiya's were seduced by the co-optive power of the Government and the political parties. The culture of the "other" seemed attractive to the disposed Adiyas and appeared to be more progressive and alluring. Unfortunately, this set the trap for them and pushed them into crisis. Joseph Nye, as I have already noted, calls this soft power co-optive power and explains that "Co-optive power-the ability to shape what others want-can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of

political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic" (7). The Adiyas fell prey to popular propaganda that they were impediments to national economic growth and for years accepted the stigma of being outliers willingly.

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