

WOMEN IN NATIVE LAND STRUGGLES OF AUSTRALIA AND INDIA: READING THE LIVES OF AUNTIE RITA AND C.K JANU

By

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Abstract

The struggles to regain lands and to ensure land rights of the aboriginal people had been in the pages of history since the beginning of colonisation. Campaigns for land were strengthened by the involvement of women to get back access to the dispossessed land of the original land holders. Europeans described the acquired lands as being 'waste lands or deserts or uninhabited or unoccupied terrains' as the aboriginal people were not even considered as human beings. Same is the case with the tribal people of Kerala. The subaltern groups of Dalits (the down-trodden group in the caste hierarchy in India) and Adivasis (the indigenous or aboriginal communities of India) have lost their lands due to illegal encroachments, land seizing, emergence of plantations and various government developmental projects. The women of these ostracised sections showcased great courage to resist and fight for their land rights. This study focuses on the role of women in native land struggles of Australia and India by the close reading of two selected life writing works - the biography of Rita Huggins (aka Auntie Rita) titled Auntie Rita (1994) and autobiography of C.K. Janu titled Mother Forest: The unfinished story of C.K. Janu (2004).

Keywords: *land rights, dislocation, alienation, government, land struggles, aboriginal and dalit women.*

Introduction

Land is one of the basic requirements and rights of human beings. Struggles for rights over land have occurred throughout the world at different periods of time. Among these movements, the struggles of aboriginals and tribal people become particularly relevant as they are

considered to be the true children of soil. For a long period of time, aboriginals have been cut off from their native land by the so-called "civilized" white masters and the governments in the name of colonization, industrialization and developmental projects. The native tribal population of India has been one of the most underprivileged sections of

the society from the precolonial era and continues to be so even in the independent and democratic times of the twenty-first century. Even though they are assorted as Scheduled tribes and are granted reservations according to Indian constitution, gross injustice continues to be meted out to the real owners of land. Tribals are cheated by big corporates that betray them by robbing them of their land. Aralam is a typical example. This tribal resettlement area epitomizes the gross injustice done to the tribals as a large chunk of the farm is now under private ownership. The *Adivasis* are forced to inhabit the portion where there is acute shortage of drinking water and other basic amenities.

As per the general statistics, the *Adivasis* in Kerala constitute just one percentage of the entire population and inhabit in the mountains of the Western Ghats. Thrust aside by socio-economic factors, they have never been the real recipients of the governmental schemes executed to reduce their impoverishment. In lieu, they were bereaved of their traditional rights over their natural resources and conventional knowledge, resulting in several struggles for land across the

time. The prominent *Adivasi* land struggles at Kannur (1999), Muthanga (2003), Aralam (2004), Chengara (2007), Arippa (2012), Perim chamkutty (2012), Pooyamkutty (2018) and Thovarimala (2019) were attempts to claim their promised lands to live in peace and harmony. Women have always been at the front line of most of the protests related to land and environment in every part of the world. We have umpteen examples in India from the earlier days to the recent times when we see daring women like C.K Janu, Mayilamma, Sugathakumari, Leelakumariyamma and so on. Janu remains in the limelight with her dramatic entry into politics and her staunch support of the recurring land struggles. Selena Prakkanam, a leader of DHRM (Dalit Human Rights Movement) who emerged through the Chengara struggle, is another example.

Through this paper, I would like to make an attempt to relate two remarkable women who played significant roles in the land rights movements in India and Australia. The Indian tribal leader C.K. Janu hailing from Kerala has been an iconic figure in the *Adivasi* land struggles of Kerala

in the beginning of the 21st century. Likewise, Australian aboriginal leader Auntie Rita contributed a lot to the land right movements of Australia in the 20th century. Here is an attempt to trace their contributions against the backdrop of land rights movements in both the countries, thereby drawing comparisons and contrasts of the issues of the natives they championed, through their life writings - the biography of Rita Huggins (aka Auntie Rita) titled *Auntie Rita* (1994) and autobiography of C.K. Janu titled *Mother Forest: The unfinished story of C.K. Janu* (2004). Most of the sagas of exploitation of land and natural resources have woman as the victimized subject. Any change in the environment is bound to affect them more as they are the ones who cater to the needs of everyone in the household. Unfortunately, the forces behind the exploitation of both land and women are the same.

Women as the real Guardians of the Land

The natives and aboriginals are the real custodians of the land. Land is intimately connected to their own culture, arts and tradition. Michael

Dobson, Aboriginal and Torres Islander Social Justice Commissioner, said in his article titled "Land Rights and Social Justice" (1997),

Everything about Aboriginal society is inextricably interwoven with, and connected to, the land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of Aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown the land up. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves. (41)

Habitually, a harmonious relationship was maintained by the aboriginal people with their land, both cultivated and forest plantations, which was indeed an integral part of their lives. These humongous resources were inseparable to their authentic way of living and thriving. Their genuine survival is through the symbiotic relationship with their lands and even now they haven't turned away from this eco-centric culture which is absolutely unique. The crisis

of their peculiar culture is visible by the random construction of *Adivasi* and aboriginal colonies as a part of sidelining and disenfranchisement.

The primal symbol of power is the land of a territory. The problems of *Adivasis* and aboriginal people cannot be resolved unless and until their disputed issues of the land ownership is tackled effectively. Whereas, for these people, the resources that they collect from the land were their sole revenue and therefore they maintained a lifelong blood-relation with their land. Hence, they cannot survive without their lands. Unfortunately, individuals with land ownership only can play a dynamic and greater role in the socio-political spheres of a society. So the marginalized sections are tactically distanced from all kinds of political and bureaucratic institutions of power.

The aboriginal and tribal women play a brilliant role in the preservation of their innate cultural values as women are regarded the guardians of tradition in any cultural community. They take care of the songs, dance, medicinal and agricultural practices that are unique to the tribal culture. C.K Janu proudly

says in her autobiography that, "In our community, women always take up more responsibilities than men... Women go to work in the fields. Digging, sowing, preparing the fields and any kind of work on the land. Also take care of the little ones in the hut" (Janu 46). Hence, any disturbance of the status quo derails their lives. All kinds of degradation or disintegration happening to the land will strike the women first and they are the first to resist it. They often choose the path of deliberation and compromise rather than taking up arms. In Kerala, C.K Janu adopted the methods of stand-up protests, sit-in protests and hut-building protests to invite the attention of the Government to their land issues.

In the recorded historical conditions of Kerala, *Adivasi* Dalit women struggle to acquire land and other essential resources perpetually. In the social hierarchy, especially in the caste system and patriarchy, women are being marginalized and oppressed every time irrespective of centuries. The form and nature of marginalization may be unconnected and non-identical. Not only in the case of the caste, but also the nature of gender relations works in different

levels among *Adivasi* or Dalit societies. C.K Janu's assessment of the political consciousness of women's status within their community is that the indigenous women would undertake more responsibilities than anyone else in their families. They would work in the fields and perform every kinds of agriculture as per the requirements. They would undertake all the works including tilling, ploughing, sowing and making the soil fit for the cultivation. Moreover, they would look after the kids at their houses too as their slothful partners hovered in their cliques. Men would spend so much time for sitting idle and going to the forest. The trend was that their men spent time lavishly on the veranda of the local shops with a coterie of drunkards.

The women who understood the politics of resistance and protest came forward to initiate land struggles under the leadership of Janu to preserve their resources. Janu believes that no women of other sects have the political capacity to undertake such struggles as they lack such horrific experiences of injustice and brutality. Janu reveals about their tribal harmony and sorority in her

autobiography: "The affairs of our women are not similar as to the women of the public. The harmony among us happens often because of our social subjectivity as *Adivasi* women. They have the strength not to budge from something they feel right" (63).

Janu fights for the redistribution of land to the 3.5 lakhs of landless people in Kerala. Muthanga agitation was a major turning point as it engendered political marshaling among the tribal people for their rights. She had to face more than 75 false cases filed against her of which most of them have been dismissed later. Janu thoroughly believes in the life of ordinary tribal people even though she lack any revolutionary manifesto or guiding philosophy of her own. The lack of education hardly ever stood in her glorious combats as an obstacle once she has determined to fight for the rights of her people as land becomes inextricable to them.

Land is a major issue for both India and Australia. Natives of Queensland, Australia were taken to the reserves from their original places in the name of aboriginal protection and were kept

under surveillance and paternalistic control for decades, separating half-castes from the full-bloods and parents from children. The stories of C.K Janu from Kerala and Rita Huggins from Queensland are classical examples of how women contributed to the land struggles of their countries.

Shared experiences of dislocation and alienation

Both Janu and Auntie Rita appertain to native tribal culture, though Rita was a half-caste by birth. When Rita was just a child, a Trooper arrived at their camp and forced her to get onto a crowded cattle truck. Rita says that many of the “wild bush blacks” had their family members snatched away from them (Huggins 10). So, Rita was uprooted from their *Pitjara* land along with the half-caste members of her family in the 1920s as a child and lived in Cherbourg Aboriginal reserve under many restraints and laws. Although as a single mother in Brisbane during 1960s, Rita had the desire to make something better for herself and her community. While, Janu could enjoy a beautiful life in the forest till the land was taken away by the Government and impoverished them.

The significance of land for the aboriginals is evident from the words of Jackie Huggins, the biographer of Rita says, “...it is my deeply held belief that we came from this land, hence the term ‘the land is my mother’ (46). She continues by foregrounding that the land is their birthing place, their cradle; it offers them connection with the creatures, the trees, the mountains and the rivers, and all living things. Huggins asserts, “There are no stories of migration in our dream-time stories. Our creation stories link us intrinsically to the earth. We are born of earth and when we die; our body and spirit go back there” (47). Janu also considers her forest land as their mother. We can see that tribal communities give privileged positions to both the women and land by respecting them in abundance.

In *Auntie Rita*, the relationship with the land is tied-up to the perturbing trauma of deportation and ghettoization. Her story recalls that the spaces of ‘land’ and ‘home’ have a strong nostalgic feeling in Aboriginal consciousness. Notwithstanding the torturing experiences of deportation and isolation, which Rita Huggins encountered at a very young age, the

land remains for her a solid rock of Aboriginal existence: 'It will always be home, the place I belong to' (7). *Mother Forest* also echoes the same experiences of alienation and displacement where the owners of the land turned into mere wage labourers. The natural forest had turned into the departmental forests.

On close reading, it is visible that the forced displacement of tribal folks from their ancestral homes towards the crowded colonies for the sake of rehabilitation causes mental distress for these people. As every community has its own customs and rituals, which people are forced to give up when they get uprooted and displaced. The so-called developmental projects, employment schemes and rehabilitation facilities by governments are not sufficient to protect the interests or livelihood of these tribal communities. For those people who are engaged in land encroachment activities and acquisition of forest lands, they contemplate the land as a space to conquer, or the land as a commodity. The land in the gaze of the colonizers fails to account for the mythical vista of the land as a sacred and vital space in the Aboriginal life.

These are evident in the words of both Janu and Auntie Rita.

In the reserves of Australia, women were treated very badly and the girls were put to moral policing. Mothers had to be very attentive to look after their children or else they were taken away by the whites. Permits were required for entry and exit. In the case of Kerala, some of the landless people were taken to colonies and flats in the name of rehabilitation where they could not survive. The lives of the *Adivasi* women are often taken for granted in Kerala.

The upsurge in the starvation deaths and suicides due to huge debts and liabilities resulted in Arippa, Muthanga and Chengara protests. The impractical implementation of the Kerala Land Reformation Act of 1957 was the reason behind all these disastrous results. Men were caught up in the vicious circle constituted by the money lenders and blade mafias and were exploited brutally. As the *Adivasis* are landless, they cannot have houses, survey numbers, ration-cards, rationing food or electricity. The residents are denied all access to basic facilities and are constrained to a

pitiable existence and abominable conditions. But in Australia, we can see positive signs in the life of Rita and her people. They had rationing facilities and provision of other basic requirements. But their lives were still determined by the authorities. Even though the situations and incidents encountered by different women may differ, their shared experiences and collective consciousness made them united for the protests for the land rights. Janu and Rita were from different countries but had shared experience of humiliation and torture as women with a truly universal spirit.

Jackie Huggins states that in the 1960s, Aboriginal issues increasingly came to the national attention. Groups of Aboriginal people began to protest against exploitation by the government and mining companies by pressing for the liberation of their land. The protests to get back the stolen lands were gaining momentum during this period. For these Aboriginal people, the relocation and resettlement away from their lands can only result in boomerang movement of return. Following the 1967 Referendum, Aboriginal people were “excited and

hopeful” (Huggins 84). During this period, Rita began to volunteer the initiatives of the One People of Australia League (OPAL) which was established in 1961 in Queensland to advance Aboriginal issues. Established by a British Christian missionary, OPAL was designed to raise the living standards of Aboriginal people living outside of the missions and reserves. Rita didn’t see OPAL as being a principally political organization, which she preferred because she repudiated politics.

Once the tribal women became aware of their land rights, they were ready to fight for their land to retrieve their culture and language voluntarily under a leader like Janu or Rita. The different approaches put forth by OPAL (One People Australian League) and AGMS (Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha) are very notable. OPAL was founded by a white woman, Muriel Langsford who was a missionary and it held liberal views. They were very keen to uphold aboriginality without resorting to revolutionary approaches that often led to violence. They expected a harmonious relationship with whites.

The organization remained apolitical too.

AGMS gives utmost emphasis to land struggles across the state. They have been fighting for more than 15 years, and the land rights continue to be the top priority of *Adivasi* movements. With the formation of the *Adivasi* Gothra Maha Sabha (the Grand Council of *Adivasis*), movements developed to occupy excess lands held by the Department of Forests and extensive estates as well as lands under government control which were meant to be allocated among landless people. AGMS was also apolitical but recently Janu has joined her hands with Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP). Both OPAL and AGMS relied mainly on media and publicity to bring their cases to the forefront. They wanted the mainstream society to discuss the rights of the natives. There were external interventions in the name of making improvement in the tribal lives and they all resulted in adversities. Also they trapped the tribal people more into violence, alcoholism and drugs.

C. K. Janu was brutally hunted out during the years of Muthanga when the

police tried all the violent tactics to capture her and others who were at large. Her supposed hideouts were set in fire by the police who wanted her either dead or alive. Rita and Janu are comparable in their political stance. They do not seem to care very much for the ideological righteousness of those parties or leaders supporting them. This could be largely because they cannot afford to be so idealistic and had to be pragmatic in order to protect their rights.

Both Rita and Janu had clearer insight of the society as victims but are unbiased in judgements. Rita always took mature, practical and diplomatic standpoint depending on the situation than many of her contemporaries, which could be due to the experiences and exposure she had in life. She always chose the path of deliberation and compromise and had a great rapport with the whites within OPAL and outside it. Her attitude is one of pride and firmly asserts the necessity of articulating one's needs. We can observe the absence of violent tactics in protests of both these women. Both of them assert their identities as aboriginals or natives but are not

against integration. They strive for what is rightfully theirs. Rita along with many of her friends like Celia Smith, Auntie Jane Arnold and many others was a pillar of support for Aboriginals who did not have much exposure. She worked towards improving the condition of the aboriginals by negotiating with the authorities. She was instrumental in organizing different programmes to revive the native culture and supported the movements for aboriginal land rights under the aegis of OPAL.

Initially, it was the white members of OPAL who did the training and public speaking to assist aboriginal people. Rita acquired a lot of adoration from these people and enjoyed making non-Aboriginal friends. Over a period of time, Aboriginal people began to participate more in the projects and ventures of OPAL just like Rita. She took charge in running the OPAL summer camps, which gave Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children a chance to mingle and make friends. As Rita gained enough confidence in communicating with non-Aboriginal people, her house gradually became

the “unofficial Inala office” of OPAL, and she worked as the director of this organization for 25 years.

Rita points out that OPAL is often represented as an assimilationist organization. She defends it by claiming OPAL was focused on making Aboriginal people feel equal and empowered while recognizing their difference, rather than assimilating them into white society. Nonetheless, she also assumes that this focus has driven the organization away from its original obligation: “Black and white working together” (Huggins 87). In Australia, Rita gets opportunities to get treated as a person of mainstream society. She receives recognition and acceptance from whites. But in Kerala, Janu is not getting that kind of an acceptance due to her low caste status and female identity. The patriarchal systems marginalized her and continued to oppress the tribal community.

Janu and her life underscore that the illustrious Kerala model of development was not sufficient to make much change for the socio-economic life of the overlooked sections of Kerala. Extreme levels of

poverty incapacitated the *Adivasi* villages from functioning just like the mainstream society. High levels of exclusion, both developmental and social along with extreme low levels of empowerment in the political and economic spheres continuously debilitated the tribal communities. Low level of access to moral and legal entitlements, negligible involvement in development matters with less autonomy, atypically huge sucking up of developmental resources exclusively meant for tribal people by intermediaries resulted in desecration. The successive governments never took any get-up and go measures to restore their land to them. Besides, the tribals never received any acceptance in the policies framed by the government and these blueprints remained incoherent. The tragic part of these events is that they not even had land for proper burial and for performing cremation rites. The dead were buried either inside their huts or in someone else's land. This pathetic and dreadful plight of tribal folk prompted Janu to come up with the agitation.

Poor human development with lack of literacy and access to health care

ensued in stunted growth. Rapid deterioration of traditional knowledge along with lost of cultural attainments shattered the moral base and patronage of the tribal members. Interlopers set their feet in these aboriginal or indigenous lands with their malicious thoughts of exploitation, especially land and women. The proliferating urge to consider tribal people as myrmidons in criminal activities like illicit distillation, cultivation of narcotic plants and stealing of forest wealth occur uninterruptedly. The most disheartening issue is the exploitation of women by outsiders and the now increasing domestic violence due to the alcohol consumption of tribal men. But, no significant actions are taken by the authorities to preserve their lives or lands.

Janu emphasizes that land is not a tradable commodity for the tribal community and the right to live and die in the lands where they were born is the most fundamental idea for them. She points out that once they are alienated from their lands, they have to work as slaves or coolies. Their forefathers learned things from nature and land. It was possible as long as

they had rights over land and natural resources. By the intervention of party bosses, corporates and governments, the tribal leaders were treated as pawns of vote bank in the political schemes. The sheer wretchedness of Adivasi situation motivated women like Janu to come up with struggles. The mainstream political parties needed them only for exhibiting tribal people in processions and gave no role except to shout slogans. Even these parties began to view Janu as 'other' and gave a shade of 'foreign agent' or 'enemy traitor'.

Conclusion

Being the people with more attachment to land and its culture, the aboriginal women are trying to interpret their identity in an assertive manner. Both Rita and Janu are the representatives of brave and courageous women fighting for their rights. The importance of immediate and mature actions from the part of women to tackle their own issues is the major highlight of their lives. It is common for women especially those belonging to the underprivileged groups to face allegations regarding their character, integrity and morality

when involved in activism. Only very few can brave such attempts to destroy their morale and remain. Once they remain they are completely dedicated to their causes being more aware of what is at stake. Native women leaders like Rita Huggins and C.K Janu have played a crucial role in their respective countries in renegotiating land right issues though in different manner and such leaders will be necessary nowadays when the atmosphere is charged with radicalism and violence.

Both Janu and Rita resisted the strategies of the mainstream society to marginalize them as 'other' and to grab their lands in the name of developmental programmes and government schemes. They understood that the forceful dislocation of these aboriginals and *Adivasis* resulted in the alienation and rootlessness among these communities. As the real guardians of the land and its resources, women played pivotal role in the land struggles. Being the key preservers and managers of biodiversity, women's voices assumed to have a special position, unfortunately they go unheard in politics and policies. The land struggles initiated by AGMS by

Janu and OPAL by Rita invites our attention to mainstream the perspectives of women and the marginalized communities they represent. Their intrinsic concerns for

human and environmental sustainability along with the preservation of Aboriginal and Indigenous cultures have to be recognized.

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