
Book Reviews

Contemporary Voice of Dalit

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The poet Jothibai Pariyadath's *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior*, translated into English by Swarnalatha Rangarajan and Sreejith Varma and published by Orient BlackSwan is that rare kind of compelling storytelling that contextualizes a very powerful personal narrative into a chronicle of subaltern struggle. That subaltern struggle which is increasingly found embedded in the lives of the disenfranchised poor.

That the uprising of an illiterate adivasi woman who stood strong and long and unfelled against a multinational corporate giant is reminiscent of others of the genre, such as a *Gauri Devi* or a *Bachchi Devi*. This book draws out quite simply, home-bred leadership of the most disadvantaged and marginalized caste and gender in the quest for life's most necessary necessity—water.

That recreation of the original narrative is often fraught with syntactical challenges of communicating the exact idiom and tenor of the original narration was perhaps not entirely lost on the translators of the present work. Yet the English translation is simple and lucid, almost uncomplicated, much like the life of the woman whose story it tells. By choosing to retain the colloquial terms which cannot be substituted into the English language without losing the spirit of the original, the translators have brought to life Mayilamma's world and her times for the reader. As they traverse back and forth through the three languages of Malayalam, Tamil and English, we see a fascinating chronicle of her life as it pans out in the backdrop of the arrival of the multinational mafias, their unscrupulous pillage and exploitation of natural resources and the irretrievable loss of traditional ways of life. The marginalization and displacement of the tribals is built into the larger question of international environmental justice and state role.

A fine example of writing 'straight to the point' is when the first chapter relates a simple anecdote of an ordinary everyday activity—of drawing water out of the household well which has been progressively contaminated and even fatal due to the unscrupulous seepage of the industrial effluents released by the company. Indeed, repeated allusion to 'the Company' to imply the Coca-Cola Company, throughout the book is perhaps a very potent reminder of the East India Company rule that held the country in shackles (and shambles) for over two centuries. This time around, we faced Cola-nization! The poem (p. 25) sung by the *anganwadi* child from the pamphlet he holds, captures this most effectively:

Perched on the top of a mango tree,
A Plachimada bird chirped:
'My throat is parched, dear people!
Your Coca-Cola surely cannot wet my parched throat!
O man from the alien shore,
I am not used to it.
My nest is here, so is my family, my land and its people.

After devouring the rice that quells our hunger,
 After sucking dry the water from the Earth's womb
 O man from the alien shore!
 You and your lackies will leave with your bottles!'

In fact, Mayilamma's life narrative is so engaging that the reader is absorbed in a fascinating journey of the tribal life. The rituals of births, marriages and deaths, the dances and drumbeats immerse the reader in as much a community ceremonial as an adoration of an indigenous culture. And yet, one is never allowed to altogether forget the omnipresent monster that is ever present in the background, threatening to defoul, to ravish, to obliterate that which is treasured and what is more, rare—the adivasi connect with nature. In so many ways, this book lays bare the environmental terrorism that goes on when capitalist corporate giants decide to base their apparatus for reaping rich profits through exponential consumerism in the midst of rich flora, that is to be found nowhere else but in the remotest tribal village or agrarian setting of a developing or under-developed economy.

Pitted against other eco-inspired formidable Malayalam life narratives such as C. K. Janu's (2003) celebrated *Janu: The Life Story of CK Janu*, Kallen Pokkudan's (2002) autobiography *My Life Amidst the Mangrove Forests* and Nalini Jameela's (2005) *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker, Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* holds its own in its sharp portraiture of a people forgotten in the annals of environmental injustice.

The only slight that may be picked in the book is to do with it not having incorporated the details of the post-shutdown phase of the Plachimada movement in the first edition of the book (2002), or the present second edition for that matter. The Coca-Cola Company in Plachimada shut down in March 2004 but needless to say, the ghost of the corporate megalomaniac continues to wreck the everyday lives of the people.

Roughly eighteen years of the Coke plant shutting down its operations, the underground source of water has been despoiled for all generations to come. While the movement has continued to the present day, albeit somewhat tepid; the people are forced to buy water from other sources. The very thought of the gregarious greed of a behemoth driving indigenous peoples to buy what was theirs in common ownership for as far back as memory can recount!

In the present day in Plachimada, those who can afford it—buy mineral water. One is not lost to the cruel irony of the situation that those countless packed cartons of Kinley bottles that make their way into Plachimada are straight out of a Coca-Cola plant. Yet, the victimized Plachimada people continue to be denied compensation through the various pre-election manifestos.

This book makes an important and necessary statement on not just an ecology, but also the cultural, economic and political processes that affect it. And in that, it is a necessary and compulsive read.

References

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