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Gendered Epistemologies and the Women Leaders of *Muthanga* and *Chengara*

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Abstract— *The Muthanga and the Chengara land struggles in Kerala were unprecedented in the way in which the tribal communities questioned the much-acclaimed Kerala Model of Development, which was flaunted all over the country and the world. These struggles also marked the paradigm shift in the Dalit and Adivasi fight for claiming self-respect through a change from a thrust on government-oriented welfare schemes to the just demand for a sizeable, cultivable land for ensuring livelihood for every Adivasi. This paper attempts to look at the emergence and transformation of two subaltern, rebel, women leaders of Kerala, C. K. Janu and Selena Prakkanam, against the historical context of Dalit-Adivasi subjugation and their growth through the Muthanga and Chengara land struggles. From being 'docile' bodies in control of certain political forces, they have, through years of relentless revolt against the conditioning of the society, emerged in the direction of being women who have challenged the gendered male prerogative in the production of knowledge structures as against experience in their pursuit of a dignified living.Their presence in the political visual field of Kerala, rises up every now and then, as a mote in the eyes of the governmental regimes which suppress the uprising with an iron hand, as these women representatives strive to demystify the myths associated with the Dalit and Adivasi cause, foreground instances of the past resistance and build a knowledge base in their authentic, Dalit and Adivasi histories.*

Keywords— ***Adivasi, Dalit, Land, Rights, Women leaders***

I. INTRODUCTION

"In my childhood there were no mirrors at home, and there was no such tradition either, I saw a mirror for the first time when I went to *Vellamunda* as a maid to look after a baby, it had a wooden handle.... when I came back from *Vellamunda* I found a piece of mirror stuck with some dung on the back wall of our hut. a tiny little piece of mirror, we preserve our seeds like this, stuck to our walls with dung, I never knew who stuck that piece of mirror to the wall like a seed, because it was tiny it was not possible to see myself fully in it. it could show me only in fragments, need to buy a whole mirror". (Mother Forest 55-56)

The Kerala Model of Development, widely acclaimed by the international community as exemplary, has also been subject to critical scrutiny, particularly from Dalit and Adivasi perspectives. The trajectory of development in Kerala, beginning with the Communist-led protests against landlords and culminating in the marginalization of Dalit and Adivasi communities within 'Laksham Veedu' colonies (a government project which started in 1972 for building houses for the landless)—characterized by minimal land ownership and inadequate infrastructure—reveals a profound neglect of the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution. However, alternative viewpoints exist. For instance, Luisa Steur[17] contends that characterising Adivasis solely as victims of the Kerala development model is "unwarranted" and "dangerous," as such an argument "ignores the present limitations of neoliberalism on initiatives for the emancipation of subaltern groups and prevents them from using their historical political experience to dynamize their

present political initiatives" (25). Moreover, the term 'Adivasi' itself is often viewed as a governmental construct rather than a primordial, indigenous identity, given the diversity of tribal communities in terms of language, customs, religion, social hierarchies, and ways of living.

II. METHODOLOGY

This paper seeks to analyze the roles played by C. K. Janu and Selena Prakkanam in the *Muthanga* and *Chengara* Adivasi land struggles, focusing on their emergence as leaders who challenge the notion that knowledge production is the privilege of an elite few. The study employs a rhetorical analysis of their autobiographies—C. K. Janu's Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu (as narrated to and written by Bhaskaran)[9] and Selena Prakkanam's *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum*[14]- alongside excerpts from their speeches. This analysis is grounded in a discourse-historical approach, emphasizing the role of social interaction, political power dynamics, and historical context. Developed primarily by Ruth Wodak and colleagues, DHA integrates linguistic analysis with historical and socio-political contexts to understand how discourse shapes ideologies, identities, and power relations (Wodak & Meyer)[19].

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gendered epistemology examines how gender shapes the construction, validation, and dissemination of knowledge. It challenges the traditional notion of objective knowledge by revealing the influence of social power structures on epistemological practices. Feminist empiricism, a central theoretical framework within this field, critiques conventional empiricism for its androcentric bias and advocates for the inclusion of women's experiences. This approach argues that integrating diverse perspectives leads to a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the world. Another pivotal framework, feminist standpoint theory, posits that marginalized groups possess unique, epistemically privileged insights derived from their experiences of oppression ("Feminist Epistemology")[18]. Standpoint theorists contend that these insights challenge dominant narratives and enrich scholarly inquiry. Additionally, feminist postmodernism interrogates the notion of universal truths by emphasizing that all knowledge is inherently situated and context-dependent. The concept of situated knowledge further reinforces the idea that every epistemic claim is embedded in specific cultural, historical, and social contexts. Collectively, these frameworks highlight the prevalence of epistemic injustice, wherein biases systematically devalue marginalized voices ("Feminist Social")[8]. Ultimately, gendered epistemology calls for a more inclusive, reflexive, and equitable approach to knowledge production, transforming both academic inquiry and societal understanding.

IV. LAND RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S STRUGGLES

The major tribal protests for land rights in *Muthanga*, *Chengara*, and *Aralam*, which emerged in the 2000s, were unprecedented in that they brought to the forefront the legitimate demands of tribal communities—groups often perceived as beneficiaries of governmental welfare schemes(Asianet 2016)[1]. However, the reality was starkly different. These welfare measures were frequently co-opted by intermediaries, preventing resources from reaching the Adivasi communities. Similarly, the Land Reform Acts of 1963 and subsequent years primarily benefited the middle castes, exacerbating the deprivation of the most marginalized. In her autobiography, C. K. Janu describes how settler men systematically encroached on tribal lands, pushing indigenous communities deeper into the forests, even as these settlers aligned themselves with the Communist Party and received its support. She poignantly reflects, "In our area, the Party, the *jenmi*, and the estate owners had grown to merge into a single tree" (35).

This realization—that political parties instrumentalized Adivasi communities for electoral gains and public demonstrations while providing only token compensation—became evident to the women leading these movements. C. K. Janu and Selena Prakkanam articulated the disillusionment that stemmed from recognizing that successive governments, regardless of ideology, had failed to uplift these communities. Instead, Adivasis were mobilized primarily as a collective workforce for protests, receiving minimal remuneration. Despite being politically engaged, they remained structurally disempowered—a paradox that aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of power, wherein individuals are both subjected to and agents of power. In their autobiographies, Janu and Prakkanam illustrate how their political awakening transformed them from passive participants into autonomous leaders.Rekha Raj[13] has observed the evolution of the Dalit female political consciousness, noting its emergence in the late 1980s, its relative silence during the 1990s, and its resurgence in the 2000s. Inspired by Dalit movements across India, Dalit women increasingly engaged with issues of land rights, political representation, and gender justice, both individually and collectively (11-13).

After years of grassroots activism, C. K. Janu, under the aegis of her organization *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha*, initiated the *Muthanga* protest in 2001, demanding the redistribution of land to Adivasi

communities. A similar struggle emerged in 2007 with the *Chengara* land movement, led by figures such as Laha Gopalan and Selena Prakkanam under the *Sadhujana Vimochana Munnani*. These movements marked a departure from earlier anti-caste struggles in Kerala, led by Dalit activists such as Kallara Sukumaran, Pambady John Joseph, and Poykayil Appachan. While earlier movements successfully pressured the government to implement welfare measures for Dalits and Adivasis, the protests of the 2000s signified a shift: rather than being passive recipients of governmental aid, these communities openly resisted their systemic marginalization and asserted their agency in defining their own futures.

As C. K. Janu recalls, at the onset of the Muthanga agitation, the government initially announced a month's supply of free rations for participants, later extending it to four months. However, the activists rejected this offer, insisting instead on their demand for productive land. The *Muthanga* agitation was met with severe repression, as the government employed significant force against both leaders and activists, with the police and segments of civil society in Wayanad playing a role in the crackdown. Similarly, in the *Chengara* land struggle, the shortcomings of Kerala's land reforms—particularly the failure to redistribute lands classified as plantations—became starkly evident. The movement began in 2007 with approximately 300 families occupying the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations, whose 99-year lease had expired in 1996, yet the company continued to hold onto the land. Over time, the number of landless families participating in the protest grew to 7,000. The struggle faced hostility from the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM), yet it persisted despite numerous challenges (Devika)[5].

The state's response to these movements was marked by harsh suppression, and mainstream media largely remained indifferent. However, these struggles signalled a significant shift in the political engagement of Dalit women—from being perceived as passive subjects within political frameworks to becoming active agents advocating for their rights over productive land. This transformation is a distinctive phenomenon in India's social and political landscape. The violent crackdown on Adivasi protestors in *Muthanga*, within the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, culminated in a tragic loss of life on February 19, 2003. The incident underscored the simmering discontent among Kerala's Adivasi communities, reaching a critical flashpoint. In the aftermath, the state—bolstered by leaders from both ruling and opposition parties—attempted to justify the use of force. Allegations of links between the protestors and groups such as the People's War Group (PWG) of Andhra Pradesh and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were swiftly made, only to be later retracted by the police due to lack of evidence. However, these claims had already influenced public discourse, shaping perceptions of the movement (Bijoy & Raviraman)[3].

The Emergence of an Organic leader: C K Janu

Throughout history, Adivasi communities have been alternately excluded and included within state policies, their recognition contingent on shifting political imperatives. It is within this context—marked by systemic deprivation and the framing of protestors as threats to state stability—those organic leaders such as C. K. Janu and Selena Prakkanam emerged. The media widely circulated images of C. K. Janu following the *Muthanga* crackdown, depicting her with swollen cheeks and a bruised body as a victim of police brutality(*India Vision*)[7]. The protest, which reportedly resulted in two fatalities—a protestor and a policeman—left many others injured. The representation of *Muthanga's* violence, however, was problematic. While the media fixated on the dramatic imagery of tribal protestors, including women and children armed with kerosene, bows, and arrows, ready to resist either through self-sacrifice or confrontation, little attention was paid to the suffering of those beaten, tortured, or sexually assaulted. Official records failed to acknowledge the actual number of casualties, reflecting a broader systemic tendency to erase the lived experiences of the marginalized. Sreerekha[16] observes in this regard:

> As land restoration for the landless remains a contentious issue—from *Muthanga* to *Chengara* and beyond—the prospect of reclaiming alienated land has emerged as a viable, though fraught, alternative. Expanding private plantations, trusts, and state corporation lands operating at a loss or with expired leases have become focal points of struggle for Kerala's landless population. In this context, while legal setbacks may be inevitable, they often serve as catalysts for broader political mobilisation. (62)

Following the partial success of the *Muthanga* struggle, C. K. Janu continued her activism, lending her voice to similar protests, including the *Aralam* Farm movement, under the banner of the *Adivasi Gothra Mahasabha*. In 2016, she entered electoral politics, founding the *Janathipathya Rashtriya Sabha.* However, her decision to align with the right-wing National Democratic Alliance (NDA), after years of association with Communist movements, sparked controversy. While she later reversed this decision, she defended her initial move by arguing that neither the Congress nor the Communist parties had effectively improved the conditions of Adivasi communities.

Janu's political trajectory attracted further scrutiny when she purchased a car, leading to media speculation

about her financial resources (Asianet News, 2017)[2]. She dismissed these criticisms, asserting that Adivasis, if granted sufficient land, could generate income independently and afford such purchases. She also condemned the entrenched casteist mentality that resisted the idea of a tribal woman attaining economic self-sufficiency. At the same time, she faced criticism from fellow Dalit women activists who had participated in the struggle but remained far from realizing their aspirations for land and dignity.

The intense scrutiny surrounding Janu's financial status and political choices underscores a broader pattern: Dalit and Adivasi leaders, particularly women, are subjected to heightened moral expectations and relentless public surveillance. Their actions are judged not just within the framework of their movements but against the moral codes established by dominant castes—codes that these elites themselves are rarely held accountable to. This double standard reflects the ongoing challenges of negotiating visibility and power within Kerala's socio-political landscape.

Dalit leaders, especially women, often destabilize dominant Malayali expectations, as evident in media portrayals of their activism. For example, during the *Kudil Kettu Samaram* (hut-building protest) in front of the Secretariat, one of the main allegations against C. K. Janu was that she wore silk sarees and appeared on television wearing makeup—suggesting that she was "funded" by external interests. Such allegations reveal a deeper discomfort with Dalit agency. While the Adivasi struggle succeeded in capturing public attention, it did so within a framework that expected activists to embody an infantilized, pure, and innocent ideal—dependent on mainstream society for guidance. This imposed an unspoken emotional burden on Janu, compelling her to conform to Kerala's dominant political culture, even as she sought to disrupt it (Raj 61)[12].

Selena Prakkanam: From Resistance to Knowledge

In her autobiography *Chengara Samaravum Ente Jeevithavum* (*Chengara* protests and My life) (Santhosh & Manoj)[14], Selena Prakkanam recounts the journey of the *Chengara* land struggle, beginning at the grassroots level with efforts to awaken Dalit consciousness through persistent household campaigns. What set the *Chengara* revolt apart from conventional political demonstrations was its meticulous planning and execution. Occupying the estate and ensuring the well-being of hundreds of protestors—including women and children—was no small feat. They faced starvation, disease, and the constant threat of internal conflicts. Most significantly, there was the looming danger of state repression.

She recalls a pivotal day in August 2007 when, while recovering in the hospital, she was urgently summoned by the movement's leader, Laha Gopalan. He informed her that the court had issued an eviction order, and by the following day, the police would arrive to clear the protest site. Under no circumstances could they allow this to happen. There was only one way to resist. Prakkanam listened without reaction as she was told what was expected of her: she must prepare herself for self-immolation. That, she was told, was their only weapon against the state's might. The next day, she and twenty-two male protestors had committed themselves to death. However, in a twist of fate, the court postponed its decision, and the planned self-immolation was called off (Santhosh & Manoj 48-49)[14]. Reflecting on this moment, she questions why, even when everyone else chose to sacrifice themselves, she had been instructed to do so as an obligation. Why was even the choice of death taken away from her?

For the protestors, their bodies, along with kerosene cans and stones, were their only weapons. Images of women and children holding kerosene cans and men with nooses around their necks, poised to jump, appeared in the media but failed to provoke any meaningful response from the Malayali public or the government. Instead, political leaders dismissed their desperation as melodramatic and insincere. In one particularly harrowing incident, a protestor was seized by the police while bathing in a nearby pond. Witnessing this, a woman named Omana Sunil cried out for his release. In a final act of defiance, she doused herself in kerosene and threatened to set herself ablaze. The police, momentarily unsettled, retreated, allowing the man to escape back into the plantation. Despite their resilience, the protestors faced relentless physical and psychological assaults, not only from law enforcement but also from plantation laborers backed by estate owners and with the silent endorsement of the ruling party.

Violence, Stigma, and Systemic Erasure

One of the most pervasive stereotypes about Dalit and Adivasi women is the notion of their supposed moral laxity. The tragic narratives of "unwed mothers" in Attappady and Wayanad only reinforce this harmful perception. Even during the *Chengara* struggle, protestors were subjected to sexual allegations. More disturbingly, four women were raped by trade union members of the plantation while police officers stood by as silent witnesses. Yet, their complaints were ignored—not only by the state and judiciary but also by women's organizations that failed to take up their cause. The case was eventually dismissed for "lack of evidence" (Sreerekha 61)[16].

As the movement progressed, Prakkanam began to see fractures within its leadership. She grew disillusioned with Laha Gopalan, who seemed increasingly preoccupied

with manufacturing martyrs for the cause. His transformation into a career politician, coupled with his eventual compromise with the government, left her unable to continue working within the movement. When she distanced herself, allegations of financial mismanagement were leveled against her, and people were incited against her. Disheartened by these betrayals, she left *Chengara* to continue advocating for Dalit rights in her own way, aligning with the Dalit Human Rights Movement (DHRM).

A New Direction: Knowledge as Resistance

Today, Selena Prakkanam is the president of DHRM in Kerala and is working to transform it into a political force. She wears the signature black shirt emblazoned with Ambedkar's image, jeans, and a black headscarf—a uniform that unsettles the mainstream visual field(Dalit camera)[4]. DHRM members, guided by the revolutionary legacies of Ayyankali and B.R. Ambedkar, have embraced Buddhism. Predictably, the state has branded them as extremists, accusing them of political violence and subjecting them to constant surveillance. DHRM activists have spoken out about the torture they endure at the hands of the police, particularly in the aftermath of false accusations (*Nervazhi*)[11].

Over the years, Prakkanam has evolved—from a leader who once used her bare body in defiance of the establishment to one who now seeks to create a lasting intellectual foundation for the Dalit movement. She has come to realize that the struggle for Dalit and Adivasi liberation requires more than bodies in revolt; it demands bodies that think. She records in her autobiography that there are no shortcuts to liberation. The true strength of the movement, she insists, must come from historical awareness and rigorous study. She recalls how she once saved money to buy Ambedkar's books, only to find them nearly stolen by fellow protestors who sought to silence her intellectual growth (Santhosh & Manoj 146-147).

Challenging the Dominant Narrative

As Gopal Guru[6] famously observed in the context of Indian academia, there exists a pernicious divide between "theoretical Brahmins" and "empirical Shudras." This mirrors the way mainstream society dictates that Dalits, and other marginalized communities may only speak about their "experiences" while upper-caste intellectuals reserve the right to "theorize" them. Juschka[10] further argues, when a dominant hegemony monopolizes the construction of theoretical frameworks, it strips the marginalized of their political and cultural power.

This epistemic violence extends to Dalit women as well. The same mainstream society that imposes rigid moral expectations on them simultaneously denies them the right to produce knowledge. However, as Prakkanam and C.K. Janu demonstrate, Dalit women are not merely subjects of history; they are its authors. By unearthing suppressed histories of resistance, challenging dominant narratives, and documenting their struggles, they are actively constructing a knowledge base that will shape future movements.

V. CONCLUSION

In their journeys, both Prakkanam and Janu have planted the seeds of experience, emotion, courage, and intellect—building a collective body of resistance that seeks dignity against all odds. Prakkanam concludes her narrative with a powerful reflection: "she is not alone. There are many Selenas who have fought for the cause yet continue to struggle. She insists that a true leader is one who creates other leaders" (Santhosh & Manoj, p. 149)[14]. Her story is a testament to the ongoing evolution of Dalit and Adivasi movements in Kerala—from physical defiance to intellectual empowerment, from survival to self-determination. The fight continues, not just in the streets, but in the pages of history yet to be written.

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