Many Faces of Madness[1]: Mindless Destruction with Snapshots of Preservation

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Keywords: Chipko movement, Sudesha Devi, Adivasi, Jacinta Kerketta, preservation, resistance.

Mots clés : le mouvement Chipko, Sudesha Devi, adivasi, Jacinta Kerketta, préservation, résistance

In this paper, I bring together two temporally and spatially separated lands as well as the struggle for conserving the forests and lives of the people there. My attempt in presenting the narratives of resistance by women in these different lands, situated faraway from each other (the foothills of Himalayas in the Uttarakhand region is the first territory and the red soiled tribal region of Jharkhand is the other one) looks at a concern similar to both: that of environmental preservation.

This feminist account traces the biography of Sudesha, one of the major protagonists of the Chipko movement through the documentary film *Sudesha* (1983) and the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta, a writer, journalist, activist, who through her biting poems lays out the values, histories, memories and concerns of her people with acute sensitivity, and irony. Sudesha Devi and Jacinta Kerketta are from two different times and from varied locations but they are similar in relation to their concern for environment and are committed to the cause of preservation of nature. Sudesha, during her struggle, worked with the community on an everyday basis and created a movement to protect the forests in the 1970s. Due to her education and powerful

[1] I borrow this title from an eponymous documentary film by Amar Kanwar depicting the degradation of environment due to mining, deforestation, water and soil pollution due to industrial waste, destruction of mangroves etc. in India.

writing, Kerketta is lending her voice to take up the issues of the tribal people, particularly from Jharkhand, to the national and international level and is keeping the environmental concerns alive today. One aspect which has a strong resonance between the two protagonists of my paper is their strong opposition to the idea of development which treats the local rural poor, whose lives are dependent on natural resources, with complete disregard.

The Chipko movement is considered as one of the first environmental movements (1973) in the Indian context to protect the forests. It may be interesting to note that the tribal land "Jharkhand" (also the name of a State in India), which means, the forest region, also has a long history of protest against exploitation of its forests. State sponsored exploitation of natural resources and alienation of Adivasi[2] people from economic development processes thus shaped the "social pressures that led to the creation of a politically meaningful Jharkhand region and repeated demands for a separate Jharkhand state"[3]. Before I proceed with the specific regional theme, a brief account of the current Indian developmental context is in place.

It is quite common to find in contemporary writings on India (in newspapers, novels, academic books[4]) the presentation of contrasting images of the country: the rising number of Indian dollar-millionaires versus the countless millions sunk in poverty and misery; the rapid global expansion of the Indian software and entertainment industries versus the hurtling trains-without-brakes of farmer suicides and assaults on women; gated communities, high-rise townships, and smart-cities versus collapsing mofussil infrastructure and the canker of slums like exploding supernovas; unprecedented social and territorial mobility versus the resurgence of ethnic and religious hostilities. Given the magnitude and complexities of India's contradictions, it is quite difficult to attempt a detailed account of all the factors shaping "power and contestation" (Menon and Nigam) in India today. What I want to record here, from a feminist perspective, is the difficult relationship between the Indian State and the female citizens in preserving

[2] The term Adivasi literally means 'initial dwellers' and designates communities which are not always included in the system of classification of castes in India. It is often translated as 'tribe'. Apart from the derogatory sense of the word, the term 'tribe' is politically loaded in the Indian context, given, among other things, the Affirmative Action policy which provides for a quota of seats in civil service and in education for those belonging to a list of communities officially recognised as 'Scheduled Tribes'.

[3] Stuligross quoted in "Political ecology of Jharkhand conflicts" by Sarah Jewitt.

[4] The best examples can be found in the novels of Arvinda Adiga and non-fiction writings like those of Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta, which provide ample evidence of the immense gaps in the Indian society. Also the following newspaper reports are but a few examples of the stark contrast between communities in India: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rich-poor-divide-in-india-widening-as-economy-grows-report/story-5iyHD5PbJa4kqCw8qBrNsO.html and https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/world-inequality-report-the-rich-poor-gap-in-india-7664916/

environment. I seek to do this by analysing the "battle" of Chipko, fought for the protection of the fragile ecology in the Himalayan valleys, not against foreign armies but against the state organizations.

The feminist ethos of these struggles is the framework, which I derive from the documentary *Sudesha* by Deepa Dhanraj and the works of Jacinta Kerketta, a tribal woman poet from Jharkhand. Taking a cue from *Am I That Name?*, Denise Riley's well-known study of the shifting historical constructions of "women" in relation to other categories used to define personhood, Butler points out:

> If one 'is' a woman that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained (3).

This does not, of course, imply that Butler proposes a refusal of representational politics—she is all too keenly aware that this would be unviable, since the field of power is based on the structures of language and politics. Her suggestion is that we take what Marx called "the historical present" as a critical point of departure, and "formulate within this constituted frame a critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilise" (5).

The nation-state, the fundamental political unit of the modern world, is a peculiar entity that is both the source and the effect of such juridical power. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan perceptively notes:

> Living *in* the nation today involves, also, living *with* the state. This is a matter of our being inescapably constituted as citizens – a fact which, in addition to the familiar duties and obligations of civic citizenship, entails every day, existential negotiation with bureaucratic regulations, welfare institutions, and the functionaries of the state; and entails being regulated by and having recourse to the laws of the land (1).

Sunder Rajan reiterates that the State does not function in a predictably uniform or arbitrary manner, nor does the marginalization of some sections of civic citizenship occur due to a singular trait such as gender; each axis of empowerment / marginalization being built upon other axes. For instance, the status of actual "women" is determined by ways in which the potential for gender equality intersects with the prevailing realities of class, caste, ethnicity, sexual preference, location etc. This well resonates with Butler's argument when she suggests that a system such as universal adult franchise (one citizen, one vote) guarantees equality and grants rights on the one

hand; but, on the other hand, it works within limits imposed by the differences built into the category of "woman". What this entails on the ground for a feminist politics is this: "1), the identification of a historical common oppression, or more correctly an oppression both inflicted on women and experienced by them *as women*; and 2), the politicization of this oppression as it becomes the grounds of solidarity and collective struggle in that name" (Sunder Rajan 16).

It is this premise on which my analysis of the documentary *Sudesha* (1983) and the poems of Jacinta Kerketta rests in the two following parts.

Part 1: Sudesha Devi - The Fight for Forest

The context of Sudesha's fight is the "Chipko" movement (literally the word "chipko" means '*to hug*' in Hindi) which was founded in India by peasant women who recognized the economic consequences of deforestation of their region. What started as efforts of protecting forests in individual villages became one of the first environmental movements in the Third World. Deepa Dhanraj's documentary *Sudesha* is an account of Sudesha's activism. She led the women of her village to save the forests, thereby challenging the rules of Indian society and women's traditional roles – her courage we see in breaking patriarchal shackles. While she mobilized the women for protests, her husband and in-laws tried to constrain her activities, and the breaking point came after she was arrested by the police and put in jail. The family did not allow her to come back on release. Though the film portrays her abandonment and her consequent loneliness, her transition into a social worker committed to the cause of environment is highlighted. In her interviews the resilience that is demonstrated speaks of a feminist consciousness and an awareness of the patriarchal oppression. In an interview when she speaks of the women reaching the timber auction office and a large police contingent running away at their sight, is a hilarious example of the impact of women's unity in the changed context, on the one hand; on the other, it is a quiet statement of the strength and confidence that Sudesha has gained due to her conviction for the struggle. In other words both concepts proposed by Butler from the quote used earlier: "solidarity" and "collective struggle" can be seen coming alive through her narrative. The women in the movement along with protecting the forests also started taking up mundane issues such as protesting against alcoholism, violence in the family, etc. This awareness of the patriarchal oppression brings the women to fight various battles, some closer to

home, or within it. In an interesting conversation, Sudesha mentions that the only time of peace, relaxation and fun that she had was in the prison where there was no house work and food was served three times a day! This again resonates with Butler's idea of the historical nature of exploitation of women by locking them in an identity trap. Sudesha's ironical statement is an indicator of her new political subjectivity which recognizes the value of her work.

Sudesha Devi and Gaura Devi were two popular women leaders in a large sea of women overshadowed by their male counterparts who played an equally important role in securing forests rights and protecting the environment. In 1974, Sudesha spearheaded the women's drive to protect the Rampur forests from contractors, going as far as spending nights amongst the trees in order to shield them from abuse and destruction when the men were negotiating with the government for land compensation. By referring to the trees as '*maika'* (mother's home) the trees became a site of strong emotional bonding and natural ties, and also the act of physical hugging developed a bond between the women and nature. Due to physically hugging the tree, the timber lobby was challenged to shoot the women instead of harming the forests. Ultimately, those sent for felling trees were forced out of the Reni village due to the mass protests by women. For Sudesha, the movement was about conserving the natural resources but it gradually also began challenging the patriarchal social norms. With other women she wanted to protect the environment, i.e. preserve its state. Simultaneously, the women were questioning the status quo, biased in favor of men, and were demanding a role in the decision-making process which directly affected them. A feminist ethos became an important factor in the development of this movement as it highlighted the relationship between the exploitation of both nature and women.

This context of women in the Chipko movement calls for a mapping of the concept of "ecofeminism" which highlights the idea of women in movements to conserve environment. The term Ecofeminism can be defined as a "value system, a social movement, and a practice… [which] also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 18). In India, Vandana Shiva has been the most influential proponent of ecofeminism. In the book co-authored with Maria Mies, they argue that women have an awareness of "the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature" (Mies 14). However, Shiva has been criticized for her monolithic projection of the

category "women" (Dietrich, "Plea for Survival", *Reflections*). Other authors too, like, Meera Nanda and Bina Agarwal, have found Shiva's position essentialist and unmindful of differences and devoid of any historical grounding (Rao 128). Taking a materialist position, Bina Agarwal proposes the term "feminist environmentalism". According to her,

> it is critical to examine the underlying basis of women's relationship with the nonhuman world at levels other than ideology (such as through the work women and men do and the gender division of property and power) and to address how the material realities in which women of different classes (/castes/races) are rooted might affect their responses to environmental degradation. (123).

My analysis aligns with this position and locates the resistance movements in Uttarakhand and Jharkhand in the materialist feminist framework.

In relation to the discussion of the filmic text it is also interesting to look at the filmmaker's journey. Deepa Dhanraj's film-making career is all about her own feminist concerns, which explains the alliances which she builds with other democratic movements. Dhanraj learned film-making and got interested in independent political documentary. She learned the most important lessons through her association with women's groups that were taking up the causes of poor and rural women workers and placing them within the framework of patriarchy and socio-economic inequality. She was the driving force behind the film-making feminist collective named 'Yugantar'[5], and made four films during the 1980s. *Molkarin* (1981) which is the Marathi word for female domestic help focused on the oppressive working conditions of hundreds of maidservants in Pune. It reported on how they came together to form an organisation to fight for their rights. In a similar vein, her second film *Tambaku ki Aag / The Tobacco Embers* (1982) traced the history of a women's trade union consisting of over three thousand tobacco workers in Nipani, Karnataka. In 1983, she made two interesting and, at that time, unusual docu-fictional films: the first was *Sudesha*, while the second was *This is Not a Mere Story* which sensitively explored the many dimensions of gendered oppression in a middle-class working woman's life (Sinha).

Sudesha depicts the difficulties that men, under the influence of the contractors and officials, start inflicting on Sudesha, including even in relation to her position in the women's groups. She decides to leave the leadership position and go along with other women. This intuitive sense of what would work for the larger group and the

[5] Dhanraj started this film collective along with Abha Bhaiyya, Navroze Contractor and Meera Rao.

benefit of the common cause, but also her unwavering commitment to the ethics of a community life and safeguarding its interest are of paramount importance for her.

Then the question arises: what is the significance of the Chipko Movement? In an easy move, one can talk of the rampant destruction of the environment and massive deforestation in that region and endorse the futility of the movement and the work of leaders like Sudesha. But one could also consider the efforts that have become part of the spirit of individuals and small practices rather than transformative changes which come in the garb of development. Some of these insignificant-looking practices, which have become the guiding forces around the world for policy makers and movements for the conservation of the Earth, are also one of the first instances of ecofeminism[6]. For example, there have been many initiatives for forest management, which can broadly be classified into four categories: the Government initiated Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme; Autonomous Initiatives; Mixed Initiatives (State-cum-autonomous); and People's Movements (Agarwal). The movement also raised important questions like, what are ways to improve the relationship between sexes which in turn could change the lives of women in the domestic setup; how could the awareness of equal sharing of power be instilled in the context of a movement?

Some of these issues get raised in the next section again in order to study a somewhat distant and contemporary context mediated by the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta.

Part 2: Jacinta Kerketta -- The Poetry of Protest

> Adivasi history has highly influenced me because this community has always fought against tendencies and forces that have wanted to enslave other human beings. Today, the Adivasi community is understanding and fighting against the designs of enslaving human beings in a different way in the name of development and industrialisation… Human beings should be concerned about the lives of these other entities also. This belief keeps Adivasi communities in close contact with nature and strengthens their belief in the life and the right of others to live. That is why, in my poems, I write against that tendency of such forces, which want to enslave humans of a lower class, just for the benefit of a handful of people.

[6] The Chipko protests managed a major victory in 1980 with a 15-year ban on felling of trees in the Himalayan forests of that state with Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India . Since then, the movement has spread to many states in the country, the Appiko Movement in Northern Karnataka, which started in 1983, being one of the best examples.

The above quote from an interview with Groundxero identifies the philosophy and essence of the poetry of Jacinta Kerketta, some of which I will analyse in continuation of my account of the Chipko Movement. The voice of this woman poet narrates the stories of struggle, resistance and values as a representative of a land and a people, and the issues of development and the injustice taking place in the name of progress. Kerketta is a poet, writer, activist, freelance journalist working in the Jharkhand region of India, which was bifurcated from the erstwhile state of Bihar in 2000. The reason for this division was largely the economic and cultural marginalization of the tribal people over centuries and their struggle to get an autonomous or self-ruled state. That dream remains largely unfulfilled but struggles are on to change the ethos of the ruling classes (Shah; Pati and Singh).

Kerketta belongs to the Oraon Adivasi community having and using its own language, Kurukh, but she prefers to write in Hindi. She speaks about this difficult choice:

> People are never worried about why my mother tongue is disappearing but when I say I write in Hindi, they have questions. I write in Hindi because I want to speak to the perpetrators of injustice and violence on my community in their own language. I write in their language so they will know what we think of them. Also it gets translated into English[7].

She knows the power of writing, including poetry, and is determined to continue. She was born in a village called Khudposh, located on the banks of river Koel in West Singhbhum district in Jharkand, close to the state of Odisha. Her village is also near the Saranda forest, which is the biggest Sal forest in Asia.

In her poem "The Flowers of Saranda," Kerketta invokes the distressing imagery of the "spade" and "pickaxe" in tears while being made to commit the most mindless of crimes akin to digging the grave of the entire humankind by cutting the trees in Saranda forests indiscriminately. These machines are working on official orders, "some scribbled pages," that have far more sinister intentions than these equipments. Giving the nature a defiant yet nurturing subjectivity, Jacinta Kerketta also weaves in an element of hope: "the new dawn brings forth another sweet blossom." The trees which have survived the mayhem give birth to innumerable fragrant flowers which surreptitiously immerse the entire forest area with a vision of regeneration. This personification of the forest for providing "perfume on the sly/ strikes at the stench/of

[7] https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/jacinta-kerketta-nighat-sahiba-kashmir-jharkhand-poems-language_in_5c41f480e4b027c3bbc14a3a. Accessed 9th November 2022.

the machine and dynamite" though seems like an antagonistic act but for the poet it is the tireless deed of nature for "the greater common good"[8]. Thus the poem reminds of nature's commitment towards life forces and the undying commitment of the local Adivasi communities, whom Kerketta represents, for trying to protect these forests. "The Flowers of Saranda" by juxtaposing both, the wonderful act of natural forces and the madness of human beings, appeals to its readers to pick sides in this war for justice conscientiously.

Kerketta's central theme provides us with a critical indigenous perspective on the modern development model and the erosion of cultural and communitarian roots. For instance, in the poem "*O Shahar*" (O City)—Kerketta writes,

> Leaving behind their homes, their soil, their bales of straw,
> Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask,
> O city! Are you ever wrenched by the very roots,
> In the name of so-called progress?

By invoking the subjectivity of the city, she is forging an alliance with it and circumventing human interventions and the pressure of everyday expansion.

Kerketta's poetry is full of metaphors from the forest and nature depicting the intrinsic bonds Adivasi communities have with them. For Kerketta, knowledge about trees and forests is both simple and profound: to live and to give and these recurring tropes are embedded in her poetry.

> She recalls, too, the communities' long history of resistance since the Santhal Rebellion in the nineteenth century. Her portrayal of the community is not written as a victim's narrative but an empowering story of survival and resistance. The simplicity of her language and the depth of her critical worldview resonate with many young Adivasi who are experiencing a similar crisis in their ancestral homelands.[9]

The rebellion referred to in the quote was led by two tribal leaders Siddhu and Kanhu against the British government and their wily supporters, the Indian landlords in 1855.

Let us consider her account of cutting, rather killing trees:

> "Why are Trees cut Down?"
> They want to drag the trees
> into the mainstream
> But do trees uprooted from their land
> Ever become mainstreamed?
> This is why trees are cut down.

[8] Arundhati Roy has a book by the same name on another major environmental movement in India called *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save the Narmada Movement).
[9] https://literaturecurry.com/blog-details/52/ten-voices-from-adivasi-literature. Accessed 9th November 2022.

This poem brings out the cruelty in the act of mainstreaming. In other words, what would be considered a process of change is in fact the path of doom. And so Jacinta Kerketta explains the paradoxes of life in the short poem, "Waiting" as follows:

> They are waiting for us to become civilized
> We are waiting for them to become human[10]

With Haiku-like precision, Jacinta Kerketta presents us a worldview that touches the pulse of the human contradictions. In this poem titled "Waiting", she depicts the humiliating attitude of the non-tribal people naming her community an uncivilized or barbarous group. She, on her part, quietly asks them to become human beings before thinking of them derogatorily. The title captures the futility of the situation and the uneasy and suspicious nature of the relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities.

Kerketta says about her poetry, "I write about the struggles of the Adivasi communities, the oppression they face in the name of development, their trials and their histories"[11]. Kerstin Bachtler almost endorsing her views further adds:

> Her special achievement is that she succeeds in grasping the main problems of the Adivasi with an analytical – realist view and depicting them in a few sentences, such as the environment degradation, habitat and ethnic identity. [12]

The poet is moving beyond the individual realm to acquire a communal voice. She takes on the responsibility of a representative, to portray the bridge between memories and possibilities. As Chaturvedi rightly pointed out, "while reading the poetry of indigenous writers, one naturally recognizes an epistemological pattern that is composed of interpersonal subjectivity, communal identity and reciprocity with nature." (8) These commonalities are not themes of poems but life philosophies that shape the poetic expression of indigenous writers across the world. Explaining the process, Jacinta Kerketta says in an interview with *Ground Xero:*

> When my own "I" speaks in the poems, then this "I" begins to feel the emotions of any other "I" just as itself. But I want to communicate to the readers this kind of feeling through the "I". I always try to feel the other "I"s and then document them in my poems. In this process of writing with my own and others' — all these "I"s — I can feel the pain of others as "I", and then through these respective "I"s, others can also feel in the same way. We often feel ourselves in others' stories. That's why I have tried to cast this deep feeling in the form of "I" in my poems. In

[10] The poem "Waiting", translated by Richa Nagar, is part of the collection *"Ishwar aur Bazar" ("The God and the Market")*. https://richa.nagar.umn.edu/publications/translations-%E0%A4%85%E0%A4%A8%E0%A4%B5%E0%A4%A6/thirteen-poems. Accessed 9th November 2022

[11] https://kavishala.in/@kavishala-labs/know-about-jacinta-kerketta-an-adivasi-young-poet-and-journalist. Accessed 9th November 2022.

[12] Quoted in https://second.wiki/wiki/jacinta_kerketta.

> every poem, rather than searching for the other, the "I" is involved in other kinds of "I" s. We have to destroy the illusion that we can stay neutral in front of these things and issues.

In this document itself, she proposes the voice as a coming together of several I's, as is the philosophy of the tribal community.

These poems from Jharkhand, resonate with similar concerns as we have seen in the Chipko Movement and Sudesha's fight. This mineral rich land has been providing iron, bauxite, coal, copper, mica and other resources to the rest of the country. Today the Adivasi communities have lost control over their *jal*, *jangal*, *jameen* (water, forest and land) and are fighting a losing battle.

Conclusion

The Chipko and the Jharkhand movements for conservation of forests have brought to the fore the connection between poverty and the degradation of environment. While all objectives have not been achieved and goals may be changing due to the complexity of the struggles, the need for sustainable development has become a common cause for the environmental movements.

The protests against development programs have become gendered in nature because of the huge participation and leadership of women. Women can recognize the connection between development and their subservient status in society and this awareness helps them voice their protests in a more nuanced way. As Manisha Rao states:

> Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply enmeshed in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests. (138)

Also, these engagements indicate the needs, and the possibilities, of thinking/acting beyond the framework of individual female victimhood, of pushing towards a conception of politics as a site of renegotiating women's autonomy and prevailing definitions of "norm" and "normality". Dealing with the tensions that undergird this new conjuncture, "the categories of identity" pose a productive challenge to both Indian feminism and the state in its journey ahead.

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Acknowledgement: I sincerely thank Madhura Joshi for her gentle persistence which helped this article take shape in the worst of times and during a personal crisis. I am truly grateful to the two peer reviewers who immensely helped me give shape to this article.