

Mapping tribal dilemmas and resistance over modernization- Attitudinal and cultural traits of the Baduga tribes in the Nilgiris hills of Tamilnadu as exposed in *When the Kurinji Blooms* by Rajam Krishnan

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ABSTRACT

*Modernization has brought about a marked change in the outlook and social behaviour of the tribes in India. The British policies were instrumental in the isolation of tribes from mainstream. Loss of identity has become a subject of concern in the lives of the tribes. Tribal interests and welfare are often at loggerheads with the imperatives of national development. Their indigenous culture and roots of existence are under constant stake in the modern world. While economic opportunities exist, they often come at the cost of cultural erosion, displacement and social challenges. The present paper focuses on the attitudinal and cultural traits of the Baduga tribes in the Nilgiris hills of South India, and their dilemmas over modernization as exposed in the novel *When the Kurinji Blooms* by Rajam Krishnan. The objective of the study is to measure the impact of modernisation and developmental policies that has drastically altered the tribes' relationship with the natural environment.*

Keywords: Ecological Degradation, Seclusion, Developmental Projects, Industrialization, Indigenous Culture, Dilemma.

INTRODUCTION

Indian society has been structured into rural and urban societies based on the geographical surroundings and socio-cultural features. The tribal groups live in isolation with their distinct language, culture and religion. In the modern day, they are categorized as socio-economically backward. Today, regions dominated by tribal people have become the nucleus of various struggles and violence. Government developmental projects like construction of dams and industries in the habitats of the tribes are subjected to wide discussions as they pose a serious threat to their lives and properties. Displacement of tribes from traditional ecosystems cause trauma beyond repair. Compulsory Land Acquisition for construction of dams and roads, mining operations and reservation of forests for National parks force these innocent crowds to leave their natural abodes. Thus development projects have often become a threat to the tribes as they deprive them of their traditional livelihood without alternatives. Nearly 40% of the tribes in India have been displaced by development projects. Various studies have been conducted on the life of tribes at the wake of industrialisation across the country and the interpreted data has been used for a comparative study in this paper. Several research projects have unveiled the problems faced by the Toda, Kurumba, Kattunayakan, Kanikkar and Paniyan Tribes of Tamilnadu, as a result of modernisation. The suffering of the Baduga Tribes that has been spoken less is taken for analysis in this paper. According to Ekka and Asif (2000), land alienation for 'public purpose' that includes various projects of government like industry, mining, sanctuaries, dams are a serious

threat to the tribes. Many tribes have agitated against rehabilitation, resettlement, inadequate compensation, loss of culture and identity. Their right to live with dignity, land, food and water rights are violated and denied for the sake of national interest. (Prakasam,2004). E.Selvarajan in his article “Alienation of Tribal lands in Tamilnadu: Panel Data Analysis”, reports land as their only tangible productive asset that gets easily manipulated.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper explores the Tribal dilemmas over Modernization and its aftermaths as exposed in the novel *When the Kurinji Blooms* by Rajam Krishnan. The paper projects the emotional havoc undergone by the Badugas across the Nilgiris slopes at the dawn of modernization. It scrutinises the connection between tribal livelihood, ecological degradation and devastating effects produced due to the interaction of the tribal communities with mainstream. As the winds of change and modernity invade their protected lives, the innocence and harmony that dominated the tribal way of living gets replaced with conflict and tragedy. The study is highly essential to understand and analyse the effects of development projects on the tribes as it impinges on the social and cultural aspects as well. *When the Kurinji Blooms* helps in delineating the safe and secluded life of Baduga’s in the Nilgiris hills before the advent of modernization. The writer has carefully studied the life of the Baduga’s before plunging into the act of writing, through various surveys, conversational techniques, and living with the tribes. This preferably becomes a strong base for the novel on the Baduga tribes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kurinji is a flower that blooms in the Nilgiris slopes once in twelve years. Today, living close with nature is a thing of the past. People are primarily concerned with money-making. The hill that was once covered with vibrant blue flowers belongs to rich tea and coffee plantation owners today. It is very true that no more the sweetness of the honey from Kurinji can be relished but for imagination. These plantations stand as tall and powerful symbols of modernization and the changes in the life of the people in the Nilgiris Hills. The term “Baduga” or “Vadugan” means northern and the Baduga’s are believed to have descended from the Canarese colonists of Mysore. They migrated to the Nilgiris three centuries ago owing to famine, political turmoil and local aggression in their territorial regions. The Baduga’s are generally found in the Nilgiris and Kunda hills of Tamilnadu. They tend to live in extensive villages, known as Hattis, made of rows of thatched or tiled houses. There exists a popular myth that nobody can beat a Baduga in making Mother Earth produce to her utmost capacity. By projecting the story of one family living on Nilgiris hills, the writer has tried to depict the kind of life led by the people in the entire Blue Mountain.

The family of Jogi stubbornly clings to the traditional of living and therefore remains backward. Meanwhile, the family of Kariamalla that adapts itself to the modern world’s needs progresses. Jogi’s world as a child remains unadulterated by the artificial glitters of the outside world. As he grows up, the environment in the Nilgiris undergo remarkable change. It destroys the inner peace and contentment of the

inhabitants, thereby creating conflicts amongst the hitherto united families. Families that so far cultivated seasonal crops such as samai, ragi, and potatoes, begin growing tea with the sole objective of making money. Once money becomes the primary motive, culture and tradition begin to fade. Nanjan, a young graduate in Civil Engineering and the rebellious son of Jogi, was interested in changing his old-fashioned village. Many other educated men in his community were like him, coming forward to build a promising future for their Hatti (village). Nanjan became a crucial member among the team of young experts appointed by the government on a massive project in the Maragathamalahatti of the Nilgiris. It was very much the place he was born and brought up. Experts from all over the country came to the Hatti to build a dam, across the Kumari River in the Nilgiris. Carried away by enthusiasm, Nanjan spoke to his mother about the modern technological advancements he had seen in the city during his studies. He explained to his mother about the construction of dam and thereafter the magnificent view of the Hatti. Jogi, his father who was silently listening to the conversation was unable to control his anger. Jogi's incensed heart uttered,

“So many people will get food to eat and clothes to wear. People living here will go without food. To give jobs to educated fellows like you, they are drilling land, ravaging Mother Earth. Men are mad after money.” (241)

Jogi strongly believed that money and land can never be equated. Nanjan stood stunned when his father had an emotional outburst. He was unable to discern if it was the same father who used to tell him enthusiastically, “This Mountain will be covered with lights. I dreamt of it when I was young.”(243). Rajam Krishnan welcomes progress while her admiration for the old ways remains undimmed. The Kurinji flower grows wild in the Nilgiris ranges and the entire mountain is generally covered with a profusion of bright blue flowers every twelve years. When the Kurinji blooms, there is an amazing increase in bees and availability of immense quantities of honey. Earlier people measured time in terms of the Kurinji's flowering. But today, due to the destruction of the environment the Kurinji in bloom is a rare sight. At present the slopes are completely covered with coffee and tea bushes as a result of various developmental schemes implemented by the government. Jogi believed that the growing number of people had to struggle hard for living in near future. He staunchly believed that mankind achieved progression only by breaking down hills, levelling valleys, damming rivers and capturing nature's energy. He considered his son a traitor to the soil who had lost his heart for money. He felt that Nanjan had no concern for the very soil that fed them for generations together. The Dam's Construction sub-merged several lands of the Baduga's. During this massive process, a wide road encircling the dam was also constructed. Godowns were built to house important materials for the project. Jogi was upset, as he would lose his only land. On the other hand, Nanjan boldly declared, “What if we lose the land? The government will not just take it away. They will pay us a good sum of money for it”. (249). Jogi was thunderstruck by his son's attitude as he felt food and money can never be equated. It was unfair to snatch the food out of their mouth and pay them money in return. Like a predatory snake, government was fast approaching them in search of food, demolishing the beauty of the Blue Mountains. It was a cry of anguish from the heart of man who knew nothing other than farming. The land always stood as a symbol of social security. The writer here emphasises on the

tremendous value and hopes associated with Lands in the rural areas. The sweeping changes that Jogi witnessed had an overwhelming impact on him. He was caught between tradition and modernity. He extremely felt that accepting modernity is directly proportional to the denial of ancient customs. As a result of the dam's construction roads teemed with several activities. The roads were lined with cloth shops owned by people from the north and other stores that sold a various accessories that were unknown to the locals. There existed along the road several exclusive clubs, cafes, luxurious hotels, street lights, double-storey buildings, roundanas, convents and churches. Modernization destructs the indigenous pattern of living and replaces it with a more westernized one. The Baduga's customs and practices transform due to the effect of modernization. They get confused as their contacts with the outside world are few and formal. Many happily accept the norms of the modern world but retain the emotions of the tribal world. They resort to farming and work in other's fields. Very soon farming also gets modernized as there develops a demand for productivity. The innocent, uneducated tribes of the hills were ignorant of the changes that modernization would bring. Only the younger generations, who were exposed to education from the tribal community, progressed with time. It is very true that the dreams and aspirations of the tribes in the hills cannot be separated from the soil that has always been a part of their being. Nanjan mocked at Jogi's innocence unaware of the huge investment initiated towards the project by the Government. Unable to bear the insult, Jogi cried aloud,

“Ignorance? You who were born yesterday, how dare you talk with contempt, calling me ignorant? Is this what education has taught you? The soil has fed and clothed us. The blood that courses through our veins comes from the soil! The land is your mother! How would you know the worth of the mother who has given birth to you? Scoundrel! My heart burns! It is like a volcano erupting! As soon as you have finished your education, you are talking of giving away the land for money! Can currency be equated to a mother? Can one put a price on a mother? “(251).

Nanjan stood paralyzed with fear, unable to convince his father. Jogi felt that education had made his son a traitor to Mother Earth. He remembered how he once felt that education would someday make his son grow away from their tribes concern. Jogi had a disciplined upbringing. He always obeyed his parents and lived up to their expectations. He could not understand why his son Nanjan always stood against his wishes. More than a highly applauded good conduct, the greatest wealth he had inherited from his father was a passion for the soil. At the crack of the dawn Jogi would have a bath, milk the cows and attend to the morning chores. After cooking a handful of grain, he would gather wood to feed the eternal fire. After serving Hiriyan, his cow, he would loosen the soil in the plot behind the temple, enjoying the task. He would sow seeds and water them from the brook that ran nearby. He took immense pleasure in finding tiny shoots emerge from the soil, become sturdy, green and grow heavy with grain. When he reverentially placed the harvest in front of the deity, he experienced thrill and joy beyond expression. Thus Mother Earth, considering him as her most beloved son, gave proof of her vigour that delighted him. Jogi could not experience all this henceforth, as his land was to be sold. He felt that the modern civilization that was in progress was the immediate consequence of Western education. Nanjan had never experienced the pleasure of tilling the land and

reaping the crops. Nanjan became fond of Krishnan Gowder's daughter. Though his father hated Krishnan Gowder, Nanjan was firm in his love. Krishnan was one of Jogi's childhood friends. They had whiled away their time grazing buffaloes in the nearby jungle, roaming together and playing independently. But Krishnan was the first in their community to go to college and earn a degree. His grandfather Kariamalla was able to offer him with education and their family progressed with time. Krishnan accepted his daughter's love whereas Nanjan masked all his feelings from Jogi and his foster mother Paru. He felt it to be a tough task convincing them. Jogi's elder brother Rangan was also against the intrusion of modern civilisation in their secluded life. He was gathering people for an agitation and advocated that it was treachery to amass wealth which was rightfully theirs. He demonstrated that the outsiders had no right to deprive them of their land. Slowly the tribes realized the truth and joined the agitation. The Baduga's despised the artificial lights set on the slopes and believed that they can never outshine the stars in the night sky. Rangan vehemently declared that no member from their Hatti earned a fat salary from the construction project. This irritates Nanjan and he remarks,

“What you are proposing is impractical. You are not going to be done out of your compensation. Periappa, are you aware of the extent to which natural resources are tapped in other countries? Why should we remain buried in dirt? Should we not progress? Can you visualize the number of industries that will draw power generated by this project? And think of the benefit to the succeeding generations. You need to have a change in heart. Villages will be no different from towns. We will enjoy all the amenities here, in our hatti.” (263)

He further revealed the poor road facilities from their village to the town and no good schools for their village children. Even as a boy, he remembers walking twelve kilometres up and down every day to go to school. He emphasised that nothing could be gained by envying the progressed. He wanted them to give up their obsession with the land keeping in mind the well-being of the future generations. Though Nanjan used all his persuasive powers to make them change their attitude, all were in vain. Nanjan staggered out of his house. To him, his parents' ignorance was like the impenetrable darkness. It was not only mere ignorance. It was blind love for the land coupled with blind ignorance that overrode the innate high ideals of his father. He felt that even ten thousand kilowatts of electricity could not pierce the blind ignorance. Nanjan's foster mother Paru strongly felt that Western Education made her son speak against them. Nanjan was her only hope and was an answer for all the cruel blows, defeats and setbacks she had suffered all her life. She could not let him slip away. Nanjan was so irritated that he uttered,

“Do you have anything more to say? You need not have educated me. You need not have humiliated me. Is it fair to stand in the way of progress? What would you do to a rat that destroys the crops, you have lovingly tended? Won't you kill it to save your crops? Periappa, who is filled with jealousy, is obstructing the construction, and is like the rat. And you listen to him? You have put me to shame.”(268)

On the other hand, Jogi and Rangan went to meet men of their generations and fanned the flames of anger by pouring out their grievances and plotting vengeance. They were unable to understand the sound effects of modernization. They felt that the government and the educated were planning for their community's downfall. Offices sprang up and godowns were established in the fields of the villagers. Sound of rocks being blasted to lay roads echoed throughout the hills. To the Baduga's it was Mother Earth's call in agony. The entire family began to fall apart due to Nanjan's love for progress. He wanted to put the best use of the knowledge he had acquired for the benefit of his village. People blamed Nanjan for his education and called him a Traitor to the Motherland, since he worked for the Government. They were not in a mindset to listen to Nanjan's innovative ideas. They firmly believed that the blood of the Blue Hills did not run along his blood and felt that it was rather full of venom. Jogi was heart-broken as his son resolved to sell the land to the government. He went up to the hills and took a view of the panorama of the scintillating blues and greens of the hills. He stood there forgetting himself in that vastness, while a feeling of deep sorrow unleashed from within. He remembered how as a child, he enjoyed watching the hills. With his eyes closed, Jogi got drowned in the pleasurable sensation, which he will by no means experience till his death. This happens to be the problem faced by majority of the tribes in our country. Developmental projects in the areas dominated by tribes give rise to involuntary displacement of the tribal population thereby creating untold miseries and trauma. Apart from the cost of relocation, it leads to the loss of agricultural lands, environmental degradation and marginalization of the weaker sections. When Jogi tried to warn Nanjan about their culture and its value in the Blue Hills, he despised his words by saying that culture could be imbibed only by mingling with people of learning. Nanjan was sure that only Krishnan could understand his feelings as he was educated. On the contrary, even Krishnan felt that the construction of Dam was needless. He felt sorry for his people who remained untouched by education and therefore labelled "backward" by the mainstream population. Jogi and the people of his community understood that the village youngsters' were fascinated by the sights of the city, straight-roads and multi- storey buildings. The youngsters from the community felt that they were untouched by progress since they lived in oneness with nature. Earlier Baduga's had the task of tending the temple fire. It was not an ordinary task. One has to be pure in mind and speech and respect the rules governing it. After Jogi, there was no one to tend fire. When Nanjan went to school and college, the very great custom of tending fire to the temple died along with him. He feared that the future generations would soon forget their valued customs and rituals. Educated men like Krishnan and Nanjan considered that lack of aspirations prevented their people from reaching great heights. They remembered the joy they had found in learning and acquiring knowledge. But Jogi and the men of his generation were not ready to accept any changes. They wished for a miracle to prevent the construction of the dam and restore the blue hill's beauty. Rangan and Jogi trigger the workers in the dam construction area demanding for more wages. It soon gained significance as a revolt against management. There were posters all around the village and people protesting. The Baduga's were unable to witness their Blue Hills being partitioned in the name of development. Crowds swarmed all over the bazaar and indulged in violence. Unable to control the situation, the police resorted to firing. The once silent hills strongly echoed the sound of gunshots. Three years pass by but nothing could stop the development in the Maragathamalahatti. Meanwhile many men of Jogi's generation had died. His

brother Rangan was no more. Several changes were seen in the hilly region. In the Tamil month of Maasi, the village wore a festive look never seen before in the mountains. From every nook and corner of the mountain, people gathered at Maragathamalaihatti. Their cries of jubilation filled the air. It was the eve of the Kumari dam's inaugural. Jogi, who had seen five Kurinji spans, sat on the grassy slope witnessing celebrations with a heavy heart. No one was alive except for his son in his family. As far as Jogi could remember, he had never seen such a festive crowd in the hills. He said to himself,

“Was there such great rejoicing because there would be no more darkness? Was there great happiness because all their fears had been laid to rest? Were these the triumphant cries of a newly awakened young society striding forward on the path of progress? Were these the victory celebrations of a resurgent hillfolk who had proved that there was no unawakened society in New India? Or was it a grand festival to felicitate those achievers who had ensured a marvellous future for those yet to be born in the lap of the hills?” (293)

Jogi's mind was filled with countless questions. He remembered how he and his men from the Hatti fought against all these modernizations, only for the good of their community. In a sacred hour, Kumari Dam was opened to the public. Dazzling electric lights suddenly lit up the entire hillsides. Jogi's eyes were filled with tears. The winds of social change and modernization had thus invaded the protected lives of the people of the Blue Hills. The Baduga's innocence and harmony with nature thus got replaced with conflict and tragedy.

Conclusion

Development implies a process or movement, presumably forward or upward towards a better status than what really existed. The tribes when exposed to the forces of modernization face dilemma. It definitely takes time for them to co-exist with the mainstream, as changes cannot be implemented within a day. Their sense of belonging to a community gives them a strong ethnic identity. The money given as compensation by government for their relocation endorses consumerist tendencies that destroy their traditional pattern of living. Illiteracy among tribes is also one major hindrance for development. The Baduga's who were ignorant of town life, slowly started growing potatoes and learnt to sell them in the market. As a result of their contact with the outside world, some of the younger generations from the tribal community adapted themselves to the modern world's needs. But majority of the Baduga's still retain their tribal emotions. Official records state that the Baduga's migrated from their traditional habitat due to the construction of industries, hydro-electricity and irrigation projects. The writer has projected the harsh realities the tribes undergo. Christian missionaries and Western Culture were predominant factors that influenced the life of the modern day Baduga's. The younger generations imitated the Western culture in different aspects of their social life, thereby ignoring their own culture. This led to the degeneration of their tribal life and art forms. The Baduga's geographical isolation from the mainstream is yet another reason for their resistance against modernization. They found fulfilment in staying close with nature and were afraid of the modern man's world. The high altitudes and plains were conducive for their living as it prevented outsider's intrusion.

Thus, it is not about tradition or modernization but more about freedom as a form of development. At the same time, the tribes' notion of freedom is rooted in their cultural tradition. Thus for the Baduga's, freedom is associated with their identity, culture and livelihoods. It is very true of the tribes in contemporary India who participate everyday in wide number of micro-level social movements against industrialization, construction of big dams and other similar developmental projects. All their agitations demonstrate their unwillingness to welcome modernization that infects their livelihood. The paper thus reflects on the dilemma that exists amidst the Baduga Tribes and their strong resistance against the developmental policies implemented by the Government.

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