Indigenous cultures and the ecology of protest: moral economy and “knowing subalternity” in Dalit and Tribal writing from India

Pramod K. Nayar

University of Hyderabad, India

Published online: 02 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: Journal of Postcolonial Writing (2013): Indigenous cultures and the ecology of protest: moral economy and “knowing subalternity” in Dalit and Tribal writing from India, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, DOI: 10.1080/17449855.2013.815127

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2013.815127

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Indigenous cultures and the ecology of protest: moral economy and “knowing subalternity” in Dalit and Tribal writing from India

Pramod K. Nayar*

University of Hyderabad, India

Through a reading of two Dalit texts, Bama’s testimonio entitled Karukku and Baby Kamble’s life writing The Prisons We Broke, and tribal eco-activist C. K. Janu’s unfinished autobiography Mother Forest, this article examines the ecology of protest in postcolonial India. It argues that the narrative devices and rhetorical strategies of these texts propose what E. P. Thompson terms a “moral economy” that constitutes, in these cases, a critique of existing socio-economic conditions (which amount to an immoral economy). These strategies also construct a model of the subaltern as a “knowing subaltern”: one who demonstrates historical consciousness, political awareness, advocacy and self-reflexivity. The article analyses the principal rhetorics in this discourse of eco-protest in writings from marginalized communities: those of suffering, fear and loss, labour and community.

Keywords: Dalit; tribal; life writing; subalternity; ecology; protest; rhetoric

That aboriginals, indigenes and tribal cultures have a strong connection with the land is a truism. First Peoples, writes Jeffrey Sissons, “are rooted in particular landscapes and histories” (2005, 13). Postcolonial India – that is, the Indian nation state after its political independence from England in 1947 – has been witness to numerous instances where tribals and First Peoples have had their lands taken away, their habitations destroyed and their very way of life (often integrated into the ecosystem in a mutually dependent and peaceable relationship) placed in jeopardy in the wake of “development”, “modernity” and “progress”.1 My focus in this paper is on the ways in which a protest against the implications of these terms, and their larger context – the postcolonial nation state – is articulated. How does a tribal culture formulate an ethics of protest when its connection with the land is threatened? What language of protest is forged in the crucible of a land ethic that is quasi-utilitarian and quasi-spiritual? Finally, how does political economy, with its questions of labour, wage, and land distribution – the “ecology of protest” – connect with this struggle?

“Postcolonial” here is used as a signifier for post-independence India, where the cultural, social, economic and political legacies of the colonial past are still writ large, and where Indian society with its many caste-class dynamics has moved since the 1990s from a socialist model of economy to a neo-liberal one. The term “subaltern” is here used as shorthand for the dispossessed, marginalized and underprivileged, who lack agency or the right to make informed choices.

My study of the rhetoric of eco-indigenous protests includes two Dalit life-narratives by women: Bama’s Karukku (2000) and Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke (2008).

*Email: pramodknayar@gmail.com

© 2013 Taylor & Francis
Karukku is the first Dalit life-narrative by someone from the Tamizh-language in southern India. Bama, after schooling, joined a convent but left upon discovering that it retained older caste hierarchies. Her narrative exposes the cruelties of the caste system, the nexus between upper-caste landlords and the machinery of law and order, and the hypocrisies of the convent. Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke was published in 1982 in the Marathi original, and is written by an activist in the Dalit movement. It is an ethnographic account of a community of Dalits in Maharashtra state, central India, but also a political memoir. Both Bama and Kamble address questions of land ownership, the labour of the Dalits, the inequalities of labour and land distribution, and the links between Dalit toilers and the land. The third text, Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C. K. Janu (2004), is the life-narrative of eco-activist C. K. Janu, the spearhead of the tribal land rights movement in Kerala (see note 1). It links ecological activism with local politics, labour questions and tribal welfare issues. “Dalit” comes from the Marathi word Dala, meaning “of the soil”, suggestive of “being ground down” and now refers to the socially oppressed castes in India (Dumont 1980; Omvedt 1994; Ghose 2003); Dalit narratives represent a genre of writing from subalterns who have been oppressed for centuries. Dalits rarely own land, and are often exploited labourers in farms owned by upper-caste landlords. Their protests against caste atrocities and marginalization often move into class struggles for land and decent wages.

My informing assumption here is that just as victim- and atrocity-writing generates a human rights discourse, so eco-protest writing produces a particular kind of subject for human rights. The literary and the cultural contribute as much to the construction of a human rights discourse as does the juridical and political (Slaughter 2007; Nayar 2012b). Cultural apparatuses – law, popular culture, literature – are discursive systems that constitute subjects, even as the subjects produce specific discourses.

Subaltern writing constructs particular kinds of subjects, which, in turn, modify current and future human rights discourses. They are constituted through specific narrative devices, in narratives representing a material manifestation of invisible subaltern discourses. Furthermore, Dalit and subaltern writings must not be ghettoized by being treated merely as social documents. Their aesthetics and narrative devices should be examined for a new rhetorics of protest, and granted the same kind of attention as more “mainstream” literature; this has been happening in criticism from the 2000s (Rege 2006; Richman 2008; Kumar 2010; Nayar 2012a, 2012b).

Tribal and Dalit writings develop a specific set of narrative devices, that I call “eco-tropics”. Indigenous peoples generate what Rob Nixon (2005) among others has termed bioregional writing, with a historical and spatial specificity that is unlike any colonial or even postcolonial writing. In what follows, I shall use the term “eco-tropics” to signify a set of tropes rooted in the land and local culture, visible in terms of four rhetorical modes: suffering, fear and loss, labour, and community. Eco-tropics also carries a distinct geographical tinge, incorporating a linguistic-narrative act into the spatial, tropical – to play on both “tropics” and tropes” – location of postcolonial India. One might go so far as to say that the subjugation of land and of subaltern narrative voices is precisely what is highlighted by “eco-tropics” in works by Bama, Janu and Kamble. Thus, eco-tropics are at once a mode of speaking and a material context.

Eco-tropics provide not only a set of symbols and signs in the form of life-narratives but they also mark an ecology of protest by proposing a “moral economy”, of land use, conservation, and way of life characterized by fairness, justice, egalitarianism and goodness in the place of the existing unjust economy. The term “moral economy” is associated with the work of E. P. Thompson, and his work on 18th-century English
society. For Thompson, a community’s sense of “moral economy […] taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people” (1966, 63). He adds elsewhere when writing of the notion of a moral economy that:

It is possible to detect in almost every eighteenth-century crowd action some legitimising notion. By the notion of legitimation I mean that the men and women in the crowd were informed by the belief that they were defending traditional rights or customs. […] commonly, the consensus was so strong that it overrode motives of fear or deference. (Thompson 1993, 188).

In the Dalit and Tribal texts under discussion, “eco-topics”, linked to the sense of a moral economy, help produce a larger semiotic universe of social protest: that is, the larger context of shared representations in any society or culture within which individual narratives and representations can make sense to the reader. The signs map suffering, anger, anxiety, physical trauma, exploitation and distress, all linked to their location in, and relationship with, the land. Bodies, selves and lives in subaltern writing are all spatially plotted: geographical location, displacement and spatial setting determine the subjectivity, or the sense of selfhood or personhood of the subaltern writer (Smith and Watson 2001, 57–58). Signs, symbols, and narratives offer us rules and conventions through which we can understand “protest” or “exploitation” because there is now a vocabulary we share. They constitute the discourse of “eco-indigenism” “ecological threat is ‘ethnicized’ and ethnic subordination is ‘ecologized’ ” and there is an emphasis on the community’s moral responsibility to care for the environment against any destructive forces (Sissons 2005, 23). Similarly, The Prisons We Broke and Mother Forest both address links between land-law and land-state policies.

Eco-tropics can be seen as more than just tropes about bodies and societies. Janu, Bama and Kamble develop a new tropology not simply to romanticize the land, or to move from “subjugated” knowledges and voices to “celebration” as Geetha and Srilata (2007) propose. The new set of tropes and narrative styles rooted in material conditions assert symbolic, textual and editorial control over the authors’ immediate settings, land and ecology. Eco-tropics approximate to “emplaced rhetoric” (Gorsevski 2012), a form of discursive and symbolic communication that underscores the physical world of earthly existence and connections of individuals with nature.

The moral economy proposed in these texts is an alternative to India’s current neo-liberal, caste-ridden and exploitative economy and development model – an immoral economy, so to speak – in which market forces and social inequalities have condemned to a life of suffering ethnic groups that have always lived close to nature. The critique of socio-economic conditions which it enables is characterized by what I call a “knowing subalternity”, which emphasizes historical consciousness, political awareness, advocacy, self-reflexivity and self-critique among the tribals (Nayar 2012b, 105). Knowing subalternity is the making of the citizen-subject. The citizen-subject is not yet a completely free agent able to choose her or his life plot, but is also not completely a victim whose subjectivity has been reduced to that of a slave, captive or labourer without rights, claims or identity. The moral economy is what is anticipated and proposed in this process of becoming – as the victim recognizes injustice and then acts as an individual with agency – whereby the knowing subaltern is able to look at rights, trope wrongs, and make demands for fairer development processes.
The rhetoric of suffering

Here is Bama’s graphic description in Karukku of an entire community’s sense of fear and experience of suffering: “I was pained to see even older people trembling, shrinking like small children, frightened by the power and wealth that the [convent] sisters had, burying their pride and self-respect, running to do the menial tasks assigned to them” (2000, 23). The eco-trope of suffering hinges upon the condition of the body. The tremulous, cowering bodies within the convent convey lower-caste victimization by contrast to the obvious wealth, power and privilege of upper caste bodies. Bama’s representation of cowed bodies also maps a sociocultural condition of timorous Dalit “subjects” kept poor for the explicit purpose of menial labour. The caste identity is imbricated with the political economy of labour and therefore of class.

Dalit autobiographical narrative embodies social, as well as individual suffering. The narrative cathects an entire community’s suffering into a localized spot (hence the term “emplaced rhetoric”): the victim’s body, personality and identity, and links this individual suffering with the scars on the social body of the Dalits. Pain, the threshold condition of human and bodily existence (Scarry 1987), is the primary mode of conveying trauma here and corporeal trauma is an instantiation of psychic and social trauma. The loss of bodily dignity and bodily coherence in Bama’s images of cowering, shaking and running suggests bodies being manipulated through socially-constructed conditions of terror. The rhetoric of suffering works to show how a social condition takes the bodily form of the loss of dignity and human rights.

This passage also shows the absence of a moral economy. Janu’s portrait of the landlord and the toiling-suffering tribal in Mother Forest similarly points to the social inequalities of her setting and the intersection of businessmen and politicians with the state machinery of law and order or administration that makes the tribal labourer suffer, starve, be beaten and abused.

In the uneven socio-economic conditions of contemporary India, bodies – beaten (Bama, Kamble), hungry (Janu), cowering (Bama, Kamble and Janu) – reflect the economic identity of the human but also their ethical and subjective positions: wealthy bodies control poor bodies in a binary structure of ordering and obeying, involving power and fear. This image of differential corporeal conditions within the same topoi, based upon a person’s class and caste, gestures at India’s immoral economy through the trope of the “untouchable” or “slaving” body. The body becomes the site of political mobilization and resistance.

The bodily suffering in all these texts seems to vindicate Sharankumar Limbale’s (2004) claim that Dalit writing’s aesthetic is founded upon material conditions of suffering. In The Prisons We Broke, Kamble describes the posture a Dalit has to adopt before the upper castes: “He had to stand with his back bent all the way and greet anybody [ ... ]. He had to bend down, till his head touched his knee” (2008, 78). But the eco-tropic that demands this rhetoric of suffering also pushes the body trope in another direction in Kamble’s text. Human bodies that suffer are situated on a continuum, not with other humans, but with animals:

We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called humans only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise there was no difference between us and the animals. But how had we been reduced to this bestial state? [ ... ] Who else, but people of the high castes! (49)
Similar accounts occur elsewhere in Kamble (80–82), as the animalization of the human recalls very real historical conditions of existence for many Indians. Starvation, lack of health care, beatings and suffering construct their subject-positions and their subjectivities in the current contexts of unequal land-ownership, excessive labour, and unfair living conditions. Bama describes the condition of labouring bodies thus:

We’d [ … ] go here and there all over the fields where the groundnut crop had been pulled up, and use our shovels at random to hammer into the earth and rake it, so that we could pick up all the stray groundnuts. The Naickers [upper caste landlords] were never happy about this, though. They would chase us, throw stones and pieces of wood at us and drive us away. [ … ] If we found any groundnuts, well and good. If not, we had nothing. (Kamble 2008, 43)

The absence of an effective moral economy is underscored again when Bama notes how hard the Dalits work on the farmland while remaining land-less, food-less and fearful, despite their contribution to the material economy of the village and the landlords. Starvation, Kamble notes, is endemic to the Dalit communities (57). The rhetoric of suffering is embedded in the larger narrative of an unjust political economy of landownership, wage labour and state indifference.

The rhetoric of fear and loss

In the opening paragraphs of *Mother Forest*, Janu describes how the tribals burn the undergrowth:

When the virgin earth catches fire it gives out a strange smell. Like it is being roasted alive. It is a scary sight when the hill catches fire. In the night it looks as if a human being is being burnt alive. (2004, 1–2)

The eco-tropic here is one of fear and loss. In offering a view of a farming practice, Janu’s description approximates to an ethnographic one. The simile, “as if a human being”, and the image of the earth “roast[ing]” combine to achieve something more. Janu nudges the aesthetic of beauty toward an aesthetic of fear with the “scary sight” of the forest burning, in an innovative eco-tropic that refuses to idealize the land. Her admission that “in the forests one never knew what hunger was”, comes after the aesthetic of fright (2). She is calling for a healthy respect for the land and ecosystem but also for its appropriate use.

Janu’s description of the landlords and plantation owners offers another kind of fear. “Since the *jenmi* [local term for landlord] was the only provider of work, our people were quite frightened of him” (2004, 12). She elaborates:

When our people worked in the fields there would be a man dressed in a sleeveless shirt standing on the ridge supervising our work. We were quite frightened of him. In those days we were afraid of almost everything. The backs of our people seem to be so bent because they have been terrified of so many things for so many generations. When our people speak they don’t raise their eyes and that must be because they are so scared. [ … ] In those days just getting a glimpse of the *jenmi* was a terrifying experience for our people. (13–15)

Janu corporealizes the unjustness of the economic system in this description – involving bent backs and lowered eyes – of the tribal labourer.
The earth catching fire in Janu’s account is an eco-trope because it embodies a particular feature of their immediate ecosystem: the random fires in the forest. At no point in the telling does the fear, however, become either hatred (of the land) or insecurity (concerning survival). Janu assures us that the forest looks after its dwellers; nobody goes hungry there. Civilization, civil society and cultivation seem to hold more threats than the unruly jungle. Further, the threat from the land is immediately mitigated when Janu paints the picture of true horror – the landlord – experienced when the tribals work on the land. The term “eco-tropic” fits Janu’s narrative perfectly here: the jungle, though presented as frightening, is not really so, while cultivated lands and humans are more than tropes; they are truly, materially, scary. Foreign culture – embodied in the *jenmi* – induces anxiety and fears in First Peoples.

This eco-tropic of fear, loss and disgrace is also commonplace in Dalit writing. However, Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* works the eco-tropic towards questions of knowledge and power. Kamble (2008, 30–37) maps the religious rituals of her Dalit community in Maharashtra in detail, and concludes:

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. (37)

Here the eco-tropic is of loss rather than fear: Kamble maps the “epistemological landscape” of castes. Communities – by definition, located in specific spaces – are embedded in misery and ignorance. The “mire” is a landscape of superstition, although not simply an eco-trope for Dalit or tribal “backwardness”. Its power as an eco-trope may be attributed to biological, pathological and ecological (i.e. organic) images Kamble uses: mire, rot, perish, life. A community dies in that location, and the emplaced rhetoric that Kamble uses links life and death to an ecosystem.

The epistemological landscape is thus one where the local upper castes control knowledge and relegate Dalit communities to superstitions and rituals that have been sedimented for generations. When Kamble refers to intergenerational trauma and loss, she maps a continuum, a legacy of ignorance and anti-modernity engineered by upper castes. The rhetoric of loss is one of knowledge and subsequent ignorance, but it also gestures at a clear sociocultural divide between castes. Knowledge becomes the marker of power and social control. Significantly, the control of the epistemological landscape also implies control over the land, which is owned by the upper castes.

Kamble then shifts the horizon of action within this rhetoric of loss:

We may be coarse and ignorant, yet you must admit that we have been the most devoted children of Maharashtra, this land of our birth, and it is we who are the true heirs of this great land. You played with our lives and enjoyed yourself at our expense. But remember, we may have lost everything, but never the truth. (2008, 37)

The rhetoric of loss gestures explicitly at the loss of land, birthright and the right to a dignified life. Like Janu, Kamble maps the trope (i.e. of knowledge-scapes) on to and in contrast with actual material losses, utilizing the discourse of eco-indigenism, where links with the land and surroundings have been severely traumatized under the pressures of “modernity”. This rhetoric is highlighted in the following chapter, where Kamble offers a fable of a hungry family (39–40).
Kamble focuses on the loss of reason by the upper castes as a condition that confines the Dalits: “our reason was gagged” (2008, 49). Later, she maps epistemological landscapes in speaking of the diseases that afflict the Dalit sections of the village, where in the absence of modern medical treatment, death comes through superstition (80–81). As in Mother Forest, the trope of loss and fear echoes the actual conditions of poverty and threat to survival, where these conditions are explicitly linked to practices of land-ownership, where the traditional users of the land – the tribals, who rarely possess documentary evidence of individual ownership – are evicted from it (except those willing to work as bonded labour) and the lands come into the possession of landlords and business houses. In Karukku, by contrast, Bama records the womenfolk’s fear of the police arresting and torturing their men and humiliating them (2000, 30–31). Through being “shamed and insulted in front of all the children” (16) by the headmaster in her narrative of school life, Bama is made aware of both the loss of individual dignity and of her caste affiliation (17).

If human rights are premised upon human dignity, then such accounts clearly point to contexts in which particular individuals, because of ethnic or caste identity, suffer loss of dignity. In Janu, Bama and Kamble, the rhetoric of fear maps the social conditions of disenfranchisement, exploitation, physical suffering and trauma, material poverty and anxiety. Tropes that represent fear, suffering and exploitation move beyond the merely figurative to remake meaning; that is, bodily metaphors or symbols help the disenfranchised or subaltern to produce a new vocabulary that signals social conditions of exploitation, oppression and protest. A whole new language of protest emerges. While Kamble acknowledges a non-modern, superstition-ridden tribal way of life, she also admits that tribal and Dalit cultures need to preserve themselves in the face of foreign cultures. Like Kamble, she shows that knowledge, land ownership and social conditions deny large segments of the population human rights, dignity and life itself. When Kamble speaks of generations of Dalits “rotting” in ignorance, she points to the denial of knowledge as being inextricably linked to the denial of life, over several generations.

The rhetoric of labour

The labouring bodies of the individual and the entire community constitute the embodying of a critique of unfair socio-economic conditions. It is at the heart of the eco-trope of labour in the narrative of protest. In The Prisons We Broke, Kamble emphasizes that the labour of the Dalits sustains the village and the upper-caste households: “It’s not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy – it is the very life blood of the Mahars! [...] Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars” (2008, 56). In Karukku, Bama offers a similar description:

From the time that I was a small child, I saw people working hard; I grew up amongst such people. At home, my mother and my grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest. And to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour. (2000, 41)

Both authors offer a moral critique of the way the economic conditions of the community or village are organized: the Dalits labour without reward and the upper castes enjoy the fruits of this labour. The labouring Dalit body functions as trope for unnamable and unending suffering, and as a sign of the discriminatory social order and the economic context of postcolonial India.
The rhetoric of labour in subaltern writing shows how Dalits are forced to perform particular functions and work as decreed by the upper castes. Bama notes in *Karukku* that, first, all lands are owned by upper castes, and that the Dalits were “bonded labourers” (2000, 41–42). Second, tribals, are prevented from practising their traditional work because the lands on which they toiled for generations have been confiscated, turning them into “into mere wage labourers” (30).

The rhetoric of labour, linking political economy (ownership, wages) and subjective conditions (loss of dignity in Janu), intersects with the rhetoric of deprivation and suffering brought on by unequal land distribution, deforestation and wages. “It was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive”, writes Bama (2000, 45). When labour was a communal activity, it offered a measure of dignity, as Janu emphasizes. But when labour is forced upon them, either by state-corporate collusion where forests and tribal lands are mined and tribals who have lived off the land for centuries are displaced (as in Janu’s narrative), or by older forms of structural inequalities (as in Bama’s and Kamble’s texts), then labour becomes a marker, not of dignity, but of oppression. This inequity was a structural one, where the Dalit labourers were rarely paid their dues.

The rhetoric of labour in Janu, Bama and others illustrates the continued subjection of the subaltern. Although the Dalits labour endlessly, they are the ones who benefit least from their work. When they were independent workers (as tribals were), or sought alternative forms of work (as Dalits did), they occupied the role of citizenry, since productive labour that contributes to the economy is a feature of citizenship. The denial of age-old traditions and systems of labour becomes the denial of particular identities. In Janu’s narrative, when the tribal loses the right to labour in the forest, a particular subjectivity is denied: that of the individual who lived and laboured in a companionable relation with the land. Privatized land entails the loss of livelihood for the tribal, just as the control of vast tracts of arable fields by upper-caste landlords results in large numbers of Dalit workers. When the state refuses to ensure an equitable distribution of resources, it denies segments of the population an income, and therefore identity.

Circumstances conspire to create not citizens but subjects, a process achieved through the transformation of the work itself. When Dalits are accused of not working hard enough – that is, according to Kamble, of getting food “free of cost” – they become idle subjects (53). The transgression of the moral economy is evident when the upper castes ignore the Dalit labourers’ work and accuse them of being parasites: the indolent and non-working Dalit is seen as monstrous. Aligning labour with morals, the charge of parasitism effectively locates the Dalit beyond the pale – enacting the practice of a particular “untouchability”.

**The rhetoric of community**

Elsewhere, I have proposed (Nayar 2006) that Dalit memoirs might be read as *testimonio*, presenting a collective biography of the community in the guise of an autobiography (the term *testimonio* is usually associated with writings by those disenfranchised, while “memoir” signifies life writing from elites [see also Geetha 2011, 324]). Janu’s *Mother Forest*, like Bama’s *Karukku* and Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, resists becoming wholly autobiographical by focusing on the community and its *topoi*, producing instead an auto/ethnography. The community’s connection to the land, Janu suggests, may not be recognized in a court of law, but nevertheless has subjective,
spiritual and mystical validity for the tribals. She writes, in what is clearly an eco-trope of community:

The life cycle of our people, their customs and very existence are bound to the earth. This is more so than in any other society. When projects are designed without any link to this bond, our people suffer. This may be wrong if looked at from the point of view of civil society. But it is self-evident when we go to the newly formed colonies. (2004, 47)

The quasi-spiritual element in Janu’s assertion is an important aspect of the tribal claim to the land for, as Andrew Gray (1997, 119–121) has demonstrated in the context of the Amazonian Arakmbut peoples, territorial links are legitimized through the spirit world. Janu suggests that her people’s bond with the land is partially validated through the presence of ancestral spirits – hence her battle for the community’s sacred burial sites.

A key element of postcolonial testimonio is the emphasis on the cultural trauma of the entire community, which functions as both trope and context for symbols of protest (Nayar 2006, 2008). The rhetoric of the community in subaltern writing is firmly embedded in a land ethic. Kamble describes how, as children, they played over harsh and inhospitable lands:

The ground would be covered with various creepers and thorns. But we were completely oblivious to this. We danced as if drunk, sweat running down our faces, our hair in tangles, and our bodies covered in dust. [ … ] We are the children of this mother earth; we have survived all the thorns, the sun and the heat. We kept praying to god for a little comfort which never came our way. We smeared our foreheads with earth and finally the same earth took us into her arms; in the end we merged with mother earth. (2008, 43–44)

The oneness of the subaltern with even inhospitable land is underscored in Kamble’s description, similar to that of Bama and Janu, of communitarian suffering (and a community of sufferers). This dynamic of singularity (individual suffering) and commonality (communitarian suffering) is significant because at no point do Kamble, Bama or Janu “see” only their own trauma.

Throughout these narratives, the narrator functions as an advocate for the community. The individual becomes a synecdoche for a community where she is recognized only as a member of her group. In Kamble therefore, the individual is the “smallest unit of a people’s self-determinative capacity and potential for development” (Slaughter 2007, 222). Knowing subalternity is a condition in which the individual subject’s awareness of being part of a whole is pervasive. The knowing subaltern positions her claims at the intersection of “natural law” (transcendental precepts that go without saying and which accrue to an individual simply by virtue of being human) and “positive law” (the juridical and civil code that legislates and formulates rights). This intersection is also the one between the individual and the community. Knowing subalternity is thus the rise of the collective-sense within an individual’s voice of protest.

Conclusion: knowing subalternity and postcolonial protest

The moral economy that Bama’s Karukku, Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke and Janu’s Mother Forest advocate via their eco-tropics allows for a fair distribution of land, basic dignity, an equitable distribution of resources, and a respect for subaltern cultural practices. These narratives demand ethical considerations in the economy and politics
for the entire community. In order for this claim to be effective, the narrative fashions a speaking subject, since all “claims narratives” demand a victim-speaker upon whose narrative of violation a discourse of human rights is initiated.²

Eco-tropics produce a claims narrative for human rights. The tropes of the body, the land, labour and community, however, necessarily exceed their function as mere figures of speech and function as signs of protest by referencing actual social conditions. Territorial connections, ethnic cultural practices and the economy merge into an eco-indigenous discourse through these eco-tropics. That is, they are at once tropes and realist narrative acts in and through which particular kinds of subjects are formed. Through the use of specific figures and modes of representation, the narrator sets up a particular kind of context – of social protest – within which the speaking voice is that of the citizen-subject. Conversely, the citizen-subject’s voice enables readers to see the larger semiotic universe of protest. The human who fits into the moral economy envisaged by Janu, Bama and Kamble is a “citizen-subject”,³ who emerges through the process of protest. Such a citizen-subject is defined by a process of becoming rather than being; he or she demands or claims his or her status, rather than having it guaranteed.

The narratives thus signal the arrival of a knowing subalternity, conscious of various forms of oppression. The knowing subaltern draws our attention to multiple markers of identity, and the social contexts in which land rights or wages are aligned with class identity, gender roles (both in Bama and Kamble, although this is not the focus of my essay) and patriarchy. Self-reflexive and politically conscious, the knowing subaltern is the newest entrant into the discourse of rights in the postcolonial nation. (This self-reflexivity is noticeable, for instance, when women narrators point to the unequal gender relations within Dalit families and refuse to privilege or romanticize Dalit life.)

Narratives of knowing subalternity not only propose a moral economy, but also posit a particular kind of human within it. Protesting against unjust conditions that dehumanize the tribals, Janu, Bama, and Kamble offer us an alternate vision of the tribal being that not only claims rights to the land in the face of advancing capitalism, but also a moral responsibility toward this land.

The moral economy proposed within these narratives is built on, primarily, an awareness of the lack of fit between ethics, morality and the caste system or property laws in postcolonial India. That is, a subaltern like Bama, Janu or Kamble is aware of the mismatched goals of the state (listed in, say, the Directive Principles of State Policy of The Government of India), the so-called political programmes of emancipation, or the rhetoric of development in the country, the platitudes and gestures at supporting the downtrodden, and the continuing inequalities and oppression of the vast majority of citizenry.

Further, the consciousness of this lack of fit signals a reasoning subject – the basis for all human rights narratives (Ignatieff 2001; Slaughter 2007). Bama, Janu and Kamble, as knowing subalterns, consistently refuse to privilege the (traditional) sovereign subject of human rights (of human rights discourses and courts of law). Instead, they affirm the principles of self-determination and a larger human dignity not predicated upon the individual but on a group identity. Each author therefore shifts from individual to communitarian suffering. Kamble declares that she “wrote about what my community experienced” (2008, 136). Janu leads the agitation to reclaim traditional burial land, or land for an individual house, on behalf of the community as a whole (2004, 41–42). Bama speaks of the problem of educating the Dalit girl child (2000, 68).

However, to introduce a caveat, the postcolonial auto/ethnographies I have dealt with here and elsewhere focus on an individual’s situationality in a particular community rooted in a particular place – Bama in interior Tamizh Nadu, Janu in the forests of
Kerala, Kamble in Maharashtra’s hinterland. These narratives depict bioregionalism, moral economy of place and eco-indigenism, but do not account for different kinds of people in that place. The binary of landlord versus tribal or upper caste versus Dalit dominates these texts. But, as Sonya Martin argues, we need an “examination of the greater connection between different people and the ecological contexts in which all communities are rooted” (2010, 258). Villages, forests and hinterlands are dynamic spaces where different kinds of people and communities live, learn and influence the place. Migration, for example, of different castes and classes, such as trader-castes, into and out of such locations needs to be studied in order to see how different configurations and caste–class dynamics are embedded.

The knowing subaltern in the postcolonial context is one whose emancipation is never an individual act. If the self-aware subject must function within a particular socio-political formation and become capable of “fully exercising the rights enabled by that formation”, as Slaughter (2007, 9) theorizes, then the self-aware subaltern subject fully exercises the claims to rights of that entire demographic formation. Emancipation and human rights work here by devolution: from the community to the individual. Adapting Slaughter’s (2007) argument, one could say that the postcolonial life narrative in Janu, Bama and Kamble’s texts is about human rights, but in a discourse where the human is linked to a community itself rooted in the local landscape, and conveyed to us through ethnographic details. This bioregional discourse links traditional localized cultural practices with contemporary legal rights to the land. Rather than romanticizing the landscape, these authors propose a critique whereby land ownership, labour, locality and histories of peoples be reasonably examined and respected before “development” schemes, redistribution and wages are determined. This respect and recognition implicit in the narratives’ claims is, I suggest, the moral economy proposed in subaltern life writing.

These three texts narrate caste and class struggles while consciously foregrounding the community’s connections with the ecosystem. The sense of collectivity that emerges positions the narrator as a knowing subaltern advocating reform and as a claimant for human, communitarian, cultural and environmental rights, and therefore distinct from the citizen-subject. The knowing subaltern is the new historical subject whose advocacy and self-reflexive critique, cast within eco-tropics and emplaced rhetoric in the four principal modes I have isolated here, shames us. The knowing subaltern seeks an ethical approach to land, labour and community, even as she positions all rights as communitarian. In the postcolonial context of development, this genre is therefore an indispensable tool to incite public debates about the ethics of development and the question of human rights for all classes of people.

Notes
1. Tribals and poorer communities have been displaced in post-independence India in Kerala, Gujarat (the Narmada project) and Andhra Pradesh. The Hindu recently noted that tribals displaced four decades ago for the Nagarjunasagar Dam in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh still lack safe drinking water (Sridhar 2010). On the killing of five tribal protesters in 2003 during a land occupation movement in the Muthanga Wildlife Reserve, Kerala, see Krishnakumar (2003).
2. Joseph Slaughter (2007) has convincingly argued that human rights narratives and law depend on cultural forms such as the European Bildungsroman, in which there occurs the self-aware subject. Slaughter (2007, 4) also notes that the novel is not the only form in which such a subject is constructed.
3. A citizen-subject is a citizen who is “in enjoyment of all his ‘natural’ rights” but who is “always a supposed subject (legal subject, psychological subject, transcendental subject)” (Balibar 1991, 45). He is suspended between the “titular natural rights of man and the positive rights of the citizen” – one who is no longer the subject to another but is not yet a sovereign subject in its own right (Slaughter 2007, 110).

Notes on contributor
Pramod K. Nayar’s interests include postcolonial studies, English colonial writings on India, posthumanism and literary-cultural theory. His recent publications include Frantz Fanon (2013), Digital Cool: Life in the Age of New Media (2012) and Colonial Voices: The Discourses of Empire (2012). Forthcoming are Posthumanism and a five-volume edited collection, Women in Colonial India: Historical Documents and Sources.

References


