

### ***Why do you not pluck mahuas from trees?***

*Ma, why do you wait all night for mahuas to fall? Why do you not pluck all the mahuas from the tree?*

*Ma says, "They stay in the womb all night.  
When the time comes for them to be born,  
they fall to the ground themselves."*

*At dawn, they lie soaked in the dew,  
We pick them up and bring them home.*

*When a tree undergoes  
Labour pains all night,  
Tell me, how can we shake its branches hard?  
Tell me, how can we forcibly pluck  
Mahuas from a tree?*

*We only wait  
Because we love them.*

### **ENGLISH-LANGUAGE INTRO**

**Kamayani:** Hi Jacinta, welcome to the Dreams, Dialogues and Disruptions podcast.

**Jacinta:** Hello, thanks a lot.

**K:** I would like to start by talking about your writing. You have written extensively about Adivasi lifeworlds and resistance in journalistic and poetic registers.

How do you think the language deployed in poetry enables socio-political critique?

**J:** Thank you for this question. I feel poetry enables a lot more autonomy of writing. At least that's what I have experienced in my life and writing because having worked from the beginning as a journalist, I have felt that writing is impacted by the pressure of office work or how it is viewed by the higher-ups — what you can and cannot write, its contents.

So when I started writing poetry, I felt that I had full authority over my writing and I could express myself and my ideas and feelings in my own, distinct way. So poetry gives me self-confidence in my writing, as well as the freedom to express my thoughts and emotions through the medium.

**K:** Thank you for putting forth the power of poetry before us, Jacinta. In the last decade, you have published four anthologies, five if we include the children's book *Jirhul*. I would like to mention the first three anthologies *Jadon ki Zameen*, *Angor*, and *Ishwar Aur Bazar*. They illuminate the complex relationship between human beings and nature. In *Jadon ki Zameen*, you made the forest come alive, in *Angor*, you cited the history of Adivasi protests. *Ishwar Aur Bazar* criticized communalism and capitalism from an Adivasi viewpoint. While the anthologies share

common principles and thoughts, there is also this indication of a journey that your process and perspective has undergone through the years. Can you elaborate on that journey?

**J:** While writing my first collection, *Angor*, I was traveling across all the districts of Jharkhand, meeting women and staying in villages. I had left journalism by then. During my travels, I read a lot of history and then visited the relevant places. All of that impacted the first anthology, wherein things are said through images and historical references. By the time I came around to writing the second and third anthologies, I had finished my travels. I was working with people at the grassroots level on issues such as the education of Adivasi girls and helping the community organize themselves to work towards their demands, instead of waiting for external help from NGOs and the like. My writing was heavily inspired by the people, their lives, their relationship to nature, their struggles, as well as sociopolitical events — basically, how I was living and working at the grassroot level. I think that one's writing is deeply related to one's life in the sense that the experiences and ideas you develop in life influences your writing. Many a time, when we consider what we write, we can understand it by considering how we live. So I feel that my journey in life finds its way into my writing.

**K:** Let us talk a little bit more about how life and writing are intertwined. Your latest collection *Prem Me Ped Hona* draws on Adivasi definitions of *prem* (love) to subvert and challenge our existing structures and hegemonies. It also reflects on the relationship between the human and the non-human. Can you tell us some more about it? Also, how did you transform this idea into the form of poetry?

**J:** My fourth collection *Prem Me Ped Hona* is my attempt at examining relationships and emotions. There is a lot of literary material on love. However, the lens through which love is seen is often dictated by the society where the writing originates from. I observed that a piece of writing entrenched in the caste system would speak about love as a tool of possession and control. Due to social conditioning, even if we write about the sublime aspects of love, in life we do not observe this alternative form.

Keeping this aspect in mind, I was looking into Adivasi society, how life and other things move around this emotion. So, my poems speak to the political and social facets while keeping love at the center. I observed that in Adivasi society love is not about control or possession over a woman, be it her body or her life. We live in harmony with the rivers, hills, forests — the open air — and our mindset is also such that we are open-minded and accepting. The way we see love is similar, as less rigid and more adaptable. One of the reasons I wrote these poems was because I wanted to challenge the rigidity around love by presenting an entirely different way to look at it. And this philosophy of life and mode of living life runs counter to the emotions and writings borne of the caste system. That's why I wanted to write that small collection because it talks about those two philosophies of life, and the relationship between the caste system and the different forms love takes.

**K:** I would like to talk about the need for possession or occupation a little more, adding to what you have already said about the need to possess what you love. The way we see infringement

on Adivasi land and resources in particular, possession seems to be a fundamental truth of the capitalistic and casteist society we currently live in.

As a journalist, you have covered the Adivasi struggles in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa. You touched upon a wide range of topics including law, society, politics, and culture. According to you, what is the most effective way to fight back against the possession of Adivasi land and resources by the government and corporations disguised as development?

**J:** Yes, we can speak about possession. I believe that the more disconnected we get from the environment, the more insecure we feel. Most actions have insecurity and fear as their motivation. This applies to the need to possess as well. The Adivasi community's rootedness with the land, river, hills, and forest makes it quite secure and generous. You would never see an Adivasi wanting to sell the water from a river for profit. This security and generosity are reflected in each aspect — their way of life, their imaginaries. However, every community undertakes a different journey towards strengthening their economic condition.

We can see that insecurity and fear can inspire a strong need to possess resources and power. The same fear makes them hoard and hold on to power because they do not want to be under anyone else. This is the clash I see with communities with land or ancestral property. Such communities resort to looting instead of building a commons based on sharing. You can see that this insecurity and fear also prevails in their interpersonal relationships, particularly around love. The need for possession and control plays out in their emotions as well. Adivasi communities are generous in comparison, due to their connection with nature. Sharing is a part of their consciousness. They don't care much for bargaining, or making a profit.

This clash in ideologies results in the policing of women's bodies in the name of religion and culture in the Adivasi community due to increasing insecurity as well. I have noticed that if a community has been historically deprived of land, their desire for land grows generation after generation. The same thinking prevails when talking about the nation. They will not talk about community and togetherness, the country becomes a mere piece of land to acquire. They would want to control it using power, whether it be through political or military means. I have noticed this across the world, not just in India, Orissa, or Jharkhand that the Adivasi way of life focuses a lot on harmony and community.

Capitalism and other power structures hinge on possession. Whoever has the strength and ability would want to possess resources and power even by force. This is what the Adivasis are struggling against. It feels like there is no way out but a continuous fight. The insecurity and fear I spoke about requires a large collective effort to overturn in India and across the world. There needs to be a collective shift towards making space for partnerships and sharing. Maybe then this struggle for power, whether social or political, can finally lessen.

**K:** Thank you so much Jacinta, we will talk further about your writing and what can be further definitions of empowerment after this short break.

## BREAK MUSIC

**K:** Welcome back, Jacinta. You had written an essay for the publication *The Funambulist*. The title of the essay is *Jal-Jangal-Jameen*. You wrote that the Adivasi women are empowered and are made self-sufficient by the forest. Can you tell us how Adivasi feminism links patriarchy to ecological destruction and challenges it?

**J:** *Jal, jangal, jameen* (Water, forest, land) don't fall under the caste system. Therefore, the communities associated with water, forest, and land fall outside of the said system. Our ancestors went against the system and chose to live amongst *jal, jangal, jameen*- places with rivers and hills. Water, forest, and land provide a feeling of security and independence for the Adivasis. The need for independence is at the core in adivasi communities, so they are always in a tussle with the outside systems that threaten it. Adivasi women live with the same rootedness to nature. If we were to compare it to the prevailing caste system, the world of adivasis grants more freedom to the women. However, a separate conversation could be had about Adivasi women feeling burdened with added responsibilities as a result of the freedom. They are expected to be an active participant in many areas of life, which could be burdensome. But as far as independence and dignity are concerned, the women live a far more expansive life with the rivers, hills, and forest.

Control is at the heart of the caste system. The same structure is used to control women as well as those falling under the lower castes. The pattern of control in both instances is similar. In comparison, since the Adivasi communities do not fall under the caste system, women's decisions and movements are not policed by men. There is definitely more dignity and independence of decision making. Adivasi women are not ruled by the whims of men, they follow the rules of the land and nature. The women and men find ways to work together. I feel that the connection to nature in the Adivasi community empowers women.

But as the ownership of the land started to get more formalized through the deeding of land instruments by the British or land reforms and surveys, Adivasi men started to think of themselves as the rightful owners of the land through inheritance. When people conducting surveys asked who owns the land, they claimed the farms as theirs. Before this, both Adivasi men and women used to think of the land as a shared resource belonging to everybody and not just the men. The struggle of Adivasi women for water, forest, and land even now is contentious because it raises the question- do they want the land for themselves, their independence and dignity, or are fighting for the rights of the men owning the land because of the documentation? This is an ongoing debate in the Adivasi community right now. You will see the structure of control over women and resources forming here. So yes, I have to agree that the unfair power structures outside the Adivasi community have ended up affecting them as well.

**K:** I would like to touch upon what you said because it relates to what we were talking about earlier about possession as well. There are many parallels between the structures of patriarchy, capitalism, and the caste system. The way powerful castes and classes oppress the less

powerful is similar to how men oppress women. Historically, power has always been viewed as subjugation.

In this podcast, we are attempting to take a look at power through a feminist lens. We are trying to examine the definition of power differently. Maybe from the point of view of capability or agency. Not power 'over' but power 'to' do something. As a writer, how do you engage with the word "empowerment"?

**J:** I would like to talk about how Adivasi communities view power — they believe that any power exists to be shared. If you have an excess of something when compared to others around you, it is your responsibility to share it with the community. It can be knowledge, capability, resources—anything. We also see an excess of anything as futile, since we all have to go one day. We believe in returning it to nature. Nature is so powerful and yet it shares its gifts without any discrimination of caste, religious beliefs, or colour. This feeling is strong within the Adivasi community as well. Living a cut-off life while accumulating power is meaningless to the community. Anybody with more power is expected to be more responsible to others around them and take care of them, the same way nature takes care of the Earth and its people.

I don't see accumulation of resources as power, either. As a writer, I believe there is power in how neutrally and lucidly you can view the world. As a woman, I believe we have been conditioned into behaving in many visible and invisible ways. Why do we do what we do and for whom, or on whose behalf? At times, we are told that we need to do something for the good of the society. This is also pressure put upon us by the patriarchy, following the pattern of control. This control is also exercised upon women while putting pressure on them to do social work also. It is patriarchy at play under the garb of greater good.

So, as a writer and poet, I want to go beyond conditioning. I want to maintain my autonomy and have clarity while looking at the patterns and connections in the world. Empowerment for me is also the ability to be with myself, be in nature, be with my body. I find it empowering to see things clearly and write about them. I also want to lead the way for many people stuck in the same conditioning whether they are doing social work or not through my writing.

**K:** You said something very important right now. While discussing empowerment, it is vital to note what kind of empowerment we are talking about. We should be mindful to not talk about empowerment on someone else's terms and conditions.

**J:** True, true. I agree. Empowering others comes from an inherent sense of responsibility you have as a person with power and resources. This can also actually lead to a feeling of control. At times, people in power fail to ask what different types of empowerment might look like. They want to empower without really understanding empowerment fully.

I also feel that there is this pressure to empower many people, in multiple ways, as soon as possible. The word empowerment has become a project to execute rather than encourage an organic rate of growth. It becomes kind of a chore or a job, it leads to pressure. This needs to be examined at its core. We have to be discerning about who wants to do what. To be free from the

game of control disguised as empowerment is also something to think about. We have to be able to see it clearly for what it is.

Both men and women need to reflect collectively upon what emotions they are feeling and what they are doing for themselves and others. How you feel and the work you do are connected, I think.

It is important to collectively observe what impact your work is having on yourself and the people around you. Are they able to grow naturally? How is their inner development? Are they happy with their lives and bodies? Are their lives dignified? When it starts feeling like the universal values are blooming like flowers in the work we put in, we shall feel about empowerment differently. We will look at it as a tender, effortless, loving and natural feeling. It is that feeling that will let us know that there is growth among the people. That is something which cannot be encapsulated in projects and data, it will be the feeling that we shall have during our journey. I feel empowerment lacks this emotion at times.

**K:** You have painted a lovely picture for us, Jacinta. Empowerment is a feeling, like a flower blooming. And your poetry has many similar beautiful metaphors inspired by nature. I feel this picture you have painted perfectly captures everything we spoke about today. Thank you so much for giving us your time.

**J:** Thank you so much.

**ENGLISH-LANGUAGE OUTRO**