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Voices of the Dispossessed in Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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Although rural life has been extensively dealt with in a number of Indian English novels, tribals as such have rarely been depicted in them. This fact testifies to the conspiracy of silence against a large chunk of Indian society that is doomed to remain marginalized and lead its life within its periphery. The reasons for this silence are not far to seek in view of the Indian English writers' westernized background and their preoccupation with urban life and its problems. However, there are sporadic references to tribal life and its rhythms in Manohar Malgaonkar's *The Princes*, Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*, Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*.

Kamala Markandaya's sixth novel *The Coffer Dams*, like her earlier novels, presents the discourses of marginality, East-West encounter, class consciousness and cultural paradigms. The novel is set in the rural area known as Malnad, surrounded by the jungles and dominated by the tribals. The focal theme of the novel relates to "a situation common enough today in developing countries that once formed part of empires: the execution of projects—in this case the construction of a dam—that would help the country progress."¹ Markandaya, in the novel, "keeps pace with the spirit of time, thus illuminating the pages of history like the labourers of the dam site."²

The first chapter of the novel presents, among other things, "people of the maidan and the Malnad, the plains and hill-country people who had watched with awe the precipitate birth of a town in the jungle."³ The project of dam construction on "the turbulent river that rose in the lakes and valleys of the South Indian high lands and thundered through inaccessible gorges of its hills & jungles down to the plains with prodigal waste" (9) disturbs the peaceful living of these people who have long been occupying this area on both sides of the river. In conformity with tribal conventions these people worship this river as a goddess as they depend on its water for their livelihood. As the novelist puts it, "The people who lived by its waters were grateful, but wary. They propitiated it with sacrifice & ceremony and strengthened the banks with clay when the river levels rose. Sometimes when the rains failed there was no river at all, only a trickle that did not percolate through to the shallowest irrigation channels of their parched fields. At other times the land was inundated, they saw their crops drowned beneath spreading lakes, their mud huts dissolved to a lumpy brown soup and carried away on the flood tide. At both times they prayed to God, they never blamed Him. It was their fate."⁽⁹⁾

Before the work of dam construction begins at the site, the tribals are ordered to shift to some other place so that the area occupied by them may be used for the construction of grand bungalows for the British technocrats. The Chief Engineer, Howard Clinton, "a man who drew his satisfaction from building what would last" (7) is altogether blind to the plight of tribals. Although aware of the vital role the tribal laborers are going to play in a successful completion of his project, he does not show his sensitivity towards their plight. "This dreary saga of peasantry" (9) does not interest him at all. Having been born and brought up in a high class family, he is averse to everything that is primitive. He does not feel pity for the tribal

labourers even when he sees them “roistering off down the hill at week-ends, packed like sardines into commandeered contractors lorries.” (12) On the other hand, his wife, Helen is remarkably attracted to the concerns of the tribal people whose natural way of life in jungles attracts her too much. On being asked by her husband as to why she is so much interested in tribals, she replies, “I just think of them as human beings, that’s all. You’ve got to get beyond their skins, darling. Its’ a bit of a hurdle, but it is an essential one.” (12)

Clinton’s partner Mackendrick builds the roads, bridges and town houses in a woodland setting. Different categories of bungalows are built, equipped with all modern amenities. Thus, the tribal huts are replaced by the grand bungalows. Having lived for long in these huts, the tribals had got emotionally attached to them. Their forced rehabilitation in a less convenient place reflects the suppressive & exploitative attitude often adopted by the powerful people towards the powerless labourers whom Clinton considers as worthless as “sods”. Clinton’s colleague, Mr. Bob Rowlings is at variance with Clinton with regard to this perception of the tribal labourers. While Clinton holds them in contempt, Rowlings is remarkably appreciative of their sense of courtesy and holds, “courtesy was in-bred here among the local labour.” (20) Although Clinton despises the tribals, he gives immense value to their indispensable co-operation in the building of dam. It is for this reason that he aspires for “their strength behind him without which he knows he might as well pack his bags.” (23) The leader of Indian Labour Union, Krishnan’s apprehension that the labour problems are endemic in India finds favour with Clinton. Employing the Indian labourers on priority basis is one of the conditions of the contract signed by Clinton with the Govt. of India. To fulfill this condition, Mackendrick recruits the technicians from among those who live in the surrounding jungles. Clinton is surprised to see these unskilled technicians “trailing away down narrow footpaths into the jungle on their leave days and as far as he could tell the wilderness swallowed them up.”(12)

The British technocrats are excessively arrogant and callous towards the Indian technicians & labourers. On Indian soil they indulge themselves in “a subtle ravage struggle for domination over the mass whom Krishnan presently led, whom Clinton needed behind him.” (21) Krishnan, despite holding a dominant position due to being a leader of labour union is not given the importance he deserves. The British Engineers hold him in low esteem on account of his identity as an Indian. Occasionally, he feels let down in the company of the British Engineers. His suggestions & warnings with regard to the impact of North East monsoon, cyclones & labour troubles are not taken seriously by Clinton and Mackendrick. Stung by the British Engineers’ prejudice against him, he angrily utters, “Brush us off like flies, hurt and insult like splinters under his skin, despise us because they are experts and we are just beginning. But it’s over now. Our day is coming. The day when they will listen to us.” (19)

British technocrats are averse to any type of relationship with Indians other than that of master-slave relationship. They deem it fit to keep themselves aloof from Indians than to mix with them on any occasion or at any place. As Jackson says, “We like keeping ourselves to ourselves.” (36) While Clinton is the most stubborn and obstinate technocrat, blind to the difficulties of even those who stand for his strength, his wife, Helen and colleague Mackendrick have some degree of resilience in their dealing with Indian labourers. Helen’s female friend Mrs Millie, unlike Helen, represents the culture of coffee parties, club meetings and hotel dinners.” There was a ruthlessness in her that matched Clinton’s.” (38) An occupant of a grand bungalow in Clinton’s Lines, Millie is excessively insensitive to the plight of her servant Das who lives in “a tin-can structure that filled smoke and threw him out whenever he cooked his rice.” (40) Clinton’s indifference towards Helen leads her to go closer to “the fragile huts that a man and a boy could put up in a day or a determined wind can demolish in less: the primitive patches of surface root crops of community with one

harvest in mind, rather than the recurrent cycle of growth, the haphazard cleaning, over shadowed by overreaching forests. On these impermanent flyaway foundations, whole people built whole lives.”(43) Her desire to associate herself with tribals is fulfilled with the co-operation of Bashiam “the hill man whom they called junglywallah or more disparagingly, the civilized junglywallah.” (44) Bashiam’s passion for machines like her husband’s disappoints her because she “expected people like Bashiam—a backward people—to be content with natural things like hills and woods and a water pump or two, and this expectation made any further desire on their part smack of effrontery. Perhaps they contributed, with their humble acceptances, perhaps they were easily contented; but sometimes their loves and wants extended beyond and why not, she thought: they were creatures of the nuclear age however much it had bypassed them. It was ludicrous not to acknowledge it; to delude oneself that no one among them hankered for the offerings of the age to which they belonged.” (45-46) From Helen, Bashiam does not hide his love for machines. He proudly affirms, “Machines are to me what they are to your husband.” (46) Helen is remorseful that her husband’s project has played havoc with the peace and happiness of tribal life. She ruefully utters, “It must have been quiet before we came, before the blasting began.” (46) To Helen Bashiam unhesitatingly reveals his plight which is common to all tribals. Having acquired expertise in the operation of machines, he cuts himself off from the tribal huts and “the jiffy towns, the tin and canvas camps, the contracts rigged up at breakneck pace for the labour.”(47) His condition is not different from that of those who leave “their families behind to answer the call of the wealthy building and contracting firms, when the work is over, return to their roots, razing to the ground the temporary structures they had helped to build in a jiff at boom time” (47) For several weeks after her arrival in India Helen is kept in dark about this harsh reality confronting the tribals who were ousted from the place where Mackendrick builds the grand bungalows. The fact about tribals’ forceful displacement by Mackendrick at the behest of Clinton hurts Helen deeply. The following dialogue between her and Bashiam reflect her anguish against the maltreatment meted out to the tribals including Bashiam:

“Do you know what they call you behind your back? “junglywallah” he said at once without hesitation, Do you know what it means? A man of the jungle. An uncivilized man. “What it really means” she said cruelly, “is someone who doesn’t count. Someone who gets kicked around and doesn’t do anything to stop it. There used to be a village where the bungalows arewhere our bungalow is . A tribal village. A small settlement”. “Yes.” “When they were told to go, they went.” “Yes”. “Without protest. Just got up and walked away, like animals.” “I suppose you could put it like that.” “You were—you are—a member of that tribe. It was their land. They didn’t want to leave it, they were persuaded. Why did they allow themselves to be? Why did you? Without even protesting?” (48-49)

Obviously, Helen is excessively sympathetic towards the tribal labourers whereas her husband is condemnably cruel & apathetic towards them. He loves the work but hates the workers. He is aware of the poor workers’ helplessness and misses no chance in taking an undue benefit of it. He comfortably says to Mackendrick, “we could sack the entire coolie labour force overnight and have a queue a mile long by morning if we wanted and they know it.” (54) He considers the workers’ loss as a gain worth consideration. That is why he tells Mackendrick, “Dock their pay and you’ll have them wrapping themselves round your feet. You know what these people are, live from hand to mouth.” (54)

Millie Rowlings, like Clinton, treats the Indian labourers as people worth hatred. She organizes the parties to keep the British families united so as to successfully face the

problems and challenges in an alien land where the people dislike the way of living life in total ignorance of the harsh realities of life. In one of the parties she expresses her contempt for Indians:

“They won’t let you get drunk in this bloody country. Damn them. Damn them.” (56)

The labour force engaged in the construction work consists of two wings—the lowlanders and the local recruits from the tribe. Clinton’s decision of imposing fine on both wings of labour force creates ruckus in the labour union and provokes the labourers to fight the suppressive measures adopted by the British technocrat. Bashiam represents the spirit of protest when he says to Helen, “We are an emotional people. The spirit has been bruised as well as stomach.” (70)

The lower echelon of Indian society presented in the novel comprises the tribal families divided between the layers of primitivism & modernity. While the old generation represented by the tribal chief is supportive of the old system of their dependence on forests for their sustenance, the young generation represented by Bashiam believes in the speedy growth & prosperity by way of earning money through jobs in private or state run firms. The conflict between the old & modern tribal generations intensifies after the Clinton-Mackendrick construction company attracts the young tribals by offering them salaries in lieu of their physical labour. Although the old tribal chief opposes the young tribals’ growing tendency of madly running after money instead of depending on forests for livelihood, a large number of tribals join the company at the sacrifice of their socio-economic ethics. Aggrieved, the old tribal chief tells Helen, “They are becoming as money mad as you foreigners are.” (72) On Helen’s emphasis on the importance of money as a useful commodity he comments, “Useful you say. What for, I ask you: for that rubbish they buy from the camp shop? Tin cans & cardboard books, and scented pigs’ grease to plaster on their hair, for this they moan.” (72)

The old tribal chief apprehends that the consequences of young tribals’ hunger for money will cause them immense loss later or sooner. He is of the view that because of their materialistic approach to life “they are punished and are hurt like small children. Like fools.” (73) Excessively sad at this morbid situation, the old man prophetically opines, “But before that they will learn what is real and mourn what is lost. A score or more before they bend the river... the Great Dam will take them, the man eater will have its flesh.” (73)

Clinton’s contempt for the tribesmen drives him to prevent his wife from getting close to the tribal life. Helen’s statement that the snakes are harmless enrages Clinton and leads him to sneer at her blind faith in the words of tribals. Offended by her obsession with tribal ethos, Clinton asks her not to attach weight to the words of “a people who worshipped birds and beasts and probably snakes, decking the forest with scruffy hutches which they knocked up out of driftwood and crammed with leaves and flowers for their deities.” (76) In order that she may not go ahead with her growing proximity with tribals, he sternly instructs her to “keep away from those bloody aboriginals and behave like the other women on the station do.” (78) He also warns her that she cannot be in a good relationship with him if she continues “to hobnob quite so much with the tree men.” (79)

As contrasted to the British technocrats’ grand bungalows known as ‘Clinton’s Lines’ tribesmen’s huts, not very far from bungalows, are unsafe & fragile. Apart from these bungalows, the British technocrats have their grand residences in their native country. But the tribesmen have no option except to uncomfortably spend their lives in their huts. To Helen’s query as to why the tribesmen don’t move to other places the old tribal chief replies, “there were no reasonable moves left to them. Depending on water, they were tied to the river. But downstream the ramifications of building requisitioned the river banks until the

terrain grew untenable. Upstream beyond the sheltering hill, they and their huts would be in the path of the South West monsoon winds. Those fragile huts that would take off like kites at the very first puff. Backs against a mountain, she thought, they had been pushed as far as they could go. Physically speaking no further retreat was left so they stayed where they were while the bed of the valley quaked and dust flew through the hatch on their ramshackle huts and settled grittily in every nook and cranny.” (104)

Despite being born & bought up in a tribal family, Bashiam does no longer belong to the tribal community because “he put shoes on his feet and worked with machines.” (131) Taking his obsession with machines into account, the tribesmen, at the behest of the old tribal chief, build for him “a tin shack roofed with corrugated iron and sheets of plastic like the temporary shelter the contractors had hustled up for the first contingent of workers.” (131) Being a man having the spirit of self dependence, Bashiam, instead of occupying the shack, sets about constructing the refuse that he wanted in the insalubrious region into which the tribe had been cast.” (131) Thus, provoked by the tribesmen’s efforts, Bashiam builds a hut for himself. “Till now, he had lived, as the other workers lived, in shacks and tents and barricades up and down the country.” (131) His hut is outwardly similar to the other huts. The only difference is in respect of “furniture which consisted of a table, a string bed, a folding canvass chair, a hinged cane door. Comforts unknown to the others which now were indispensable to him. From the door post hung a small hurricane lantern. He felt for it in the darkness, lifted the visor and lit it, looking round the interior by the light of the steady yellowish flame. It was familiar, clean. Someone had swept the floor, sprinkling it with a clay wash that kept down the dust. A plaited rush mat lay beside his bed.” (132)

To finish the work of dam construction on scheduled time, Clinton requires a large number of labourers. As he is aware of the fact that India does not suffer from the shortage of cheap labour, he asks Mackendrick, “Go ahead, get as many as you can, we have got to finish on time.” (144) To meet the demand of cheap labour, Mackendrick turns to the tribals & employs a large number of them as labourers with the result that “the long lines of cheap labour could be seen, working ineptly, in a way that consolidated every atom of contempt in which Clinton already held them, alongside highly efficient costly machines, carrying away in shallow trays on their heads all manner of detritus, gravel, clay, the grey sludge from the river banks that oozed through the wicker & wattle on to their naked backs.” (147) The tribal chief is extremely sad to see the people of his community “shackled between a modern juggernaut and time, the ancient enemy armed with teeth and a new ferocity.” (111) Although desirous of preventing his people from joining the construction work for the sake of money, the old tribal chief deems it worthwhile not to think of doing what he cannot do. This thought gives him contentment & mental peace and in this state of his mind he tells Helen, “But it is necessary to guard the inner feeling. Because, you see, one is shaken to pieces if there is inaction without & a hurricane raging within.” (145) The old man’s sense of contentment & acceptance leads Helen to conclude that the tribals are closer to truth & divinity. One day she is shocked to see the tribals “attempting to salvage the roof of a hut which the wind had lifted bodily from its crumbling base and dumped in the river. The thatch was sudden. Fronds broke away from the parent hulk, and the grappling lines refused to bite, slithering off the surface of the disintegrating remnant.” (146)

Four days before the completion of dam construction a disastrous premature blast occurs due to the non-functioning of signal system. The blast tragically claims forty lives with two bodies having “marinated in the river, at the upstream section of the dam.” (160) Having heard about the fatal accident, a large number of tribal reach the accident site to inspect the extent of loss. The horrible sight “pricked their eyes, and formed hard angry knots and clots in their chests. Because the dead were pitiful, scrapped up from their scattered landings and assembled in a broken, rag-doll kind of way along the bank which had borne

such weights before, and was stony.” (161) Thirty eight dead bodies are evacuated with the help of crane. But despite all possible efforts, the two dead bodies remain irretrievable. While the tribals are anxious about whether missing the dead bodies will be restored so that they may be cremated with tribal rites & rituals, the British engineers are not serious about locating them. Lefevre says, “In time, the currents will free them.” (163) Echoing his perceptions, another engineer Handerson utters, “In time the fish will have them” (163) Showing his insensitivity, Clinton suggests, “Their bodies can be incorporated. Into the structure.” (163) Thus, the British technocrats’ attitude towards the dead is discriminatory. While Wilkins & Bailey are cremated by them with Christian rites & rituals, the dead tribal are ordered to be incorporated into the structure. Krishnan is not wrong when he says about the rude British technocrats, “They think differently when their kind is not involved.”(172)

On the issue of restoring the dead bodies to the tribals for cremation with rites & rituals, Helen & Clinton are at loggerheads with each other and “the distance between them widened.”(176) Showing his disagreement with Clinton & his like- minded colleagues, Helen strongly favours the tribals’ demand of restoring the dead bodies. She supports the tribals’ belief that “the spirit will not be freed until its body has been revered.”(177) Hurting her feelings, Mr. Rawlings suggests, “It is time for us to rap them down.” (178) He bluntly tells Krishnan, “We have not time to bring up the bodies. The rains are due, the Dam is at risk.”(178) Aware of the tribals’ adamant stand on stopping the work till the bodies are restored, Krishnan warns Rawlings to reconsider his decision to avoid any serious eventuality in view of tribals’ firmness of protest. He tells Rawlings, “the labourers will not resume for reasons which have been made clear.”(179) The warning cuts ice with the British technocrats’ arrogant decisiveness. Mackendrick suggests that the problem can be solved if with the help of Bashiam’s expertise “the boulders were lifted whole.” (181) To address Clinton’s apprehension with regard to Bashiam’s capacity in lifting the boulders, Mackendrick tells Clinton, “the crane men can work wonders with their machines. One might almost say, “perform miracles.” Let us take the chance that Bashiam offers.” (182) Bashiam unhesitatingly accepts the challenge and goes down to the river “not only to gauze but because it was something he lived by wound into him through the years, its hold strengthened with his absences.” (182) Exuding his self confidence & showing his sense of belongingness to his community he victoriously utters, “I must do it since they are my people whom I cannot shed although I have tried. My people, who are the impediment as they have long been said and are now proving themselves to be, which it is for me to remove.” (182) Despite his awareness of the fact that the crane Bashiam is going to operate for evacuating the dead is defective and can imperil his life, Clinton lets Bashiam take risk. Before embarking on a great adventure that may cost him his life Bashiam prays to Devi to take care of him while fulfilling his grand responsibility towards his community. Mackendrick & Clinton, who considered Bashiam as no better than a junglywallah, grow highly appreciative of him and collectively say, “the man is entirely reliable.” (187) Within a few moments of operation, Bashiam succeeds to bring up the dead bodies to the pleasant surprise of the onlookers. But as luck would have it, before he completely stops the operation and gets down the crane, the jib of the crane breaks & falls down “imprisoning in its crushed cage the man who could still be seen at the controls”(190) with the result that Bashiam is seriously injured and crippled.

With the arrival of monsoon, the rains fall heavily & continually with the result that the British technocrats’ bungalows are surrounded by water forcing them to get “marooned on top of a ruddy hill.” (205) Some of them run towards jungles to escape from the flood. Helen & Mackendrick hurry to the hut of the old tribal chief who is now on the verge of death. Helen pesters the dying tribal chief to satisfy her query and thereby disturbs him in fulfilling his desire “to look within.” (209) Lefevre is excessively worried about the safety of the “Great Dam” in view of the continual heavy rainfall. He anxiously thinks that if the

abnormal conditions continue, “the coffers will have to be breached or the river will burst its banks. The whole land basin, where the tribals are, is in the risk of inundation.” (212) The “phenomenal rainfall” causes worry in the mind of Clinton & Mackendrick also. Lefevre’s idea of the breaking of coffers finds favour with Mackendrick who, in turn, advises Clinton that if the coffers are not breached, the entire land basin will face the danger of extinction. Mackendrick’s advice does not find favour with Clinton to whom “the beauty of structures.”(215) is more important than the safety of land basin. Enraged at Clinton’s firmness with regard to the breaching of coffers, Helen fires a question, “Is there to be no line drawn at which one stops.” (217) Unfazed by Helen’s pricking question, Clinton shows his unwillingness to relent and testifies to the fact that “there were indeed no limits, no frontiers which he would not cross or extend so long as the power lay with him.” (217)

From the above discussion it is evident that the work of dam construction draws a line of demarcation between the privileged the underprivileged, the exploiters & the exploited, the rich masters & their poor workers, the primitive & the modern. While Clinton represents the culture of domination over the powerless, Bashiam, a “junglywallah”, stands for the section of society for which the fate has in its store countless trials and tribulations, problems & challenges, humiliations & exploitations. As the editor of the Indian Express dated 23 April 1992 posits, “The reports of inhuman exploitation of tribals, especially their women, by privileged classes make painful reading. It has been going on in almost all places where the Adivasis have been brought willy-nilly in contact with the plains-people in the name of conferring on them the fruits of development. In the process of change, much of their natural habitat has been destroyed and their traditional source of living—the forest, depleted beyond recovery. The rhythm of tribal life, which our poets have sung about, is now almost a thing of the past. The alienation and de-culturalization of those communities resulting in large numbers of them taking to the vices of modern civilization—trafficking in liquor, drug, sex—is itself a tragedy. If this is progress, the Adivasis would have been far happier without it.”⁴

Exploiting the powerless has been an old policy of the powerful. In the novel, Clinton’s men force the tribals to vacate the construction site and shift to some other place. Thus, the project of dam construction not only displaces the tribals but also encroaches upon the natural surroundings of the tribal area. As Niroj Banerjee puts it, “The history of human civilization tells us that nature—the jungle, the river, the country side—is an integral part of the village life which is in the novel threatened by the painstaking plans and charts of the British engineers and technocrats. The dam, thus, becomes a symbol of modernity itself encroaching slowly yet steadily over the tradition bound and, unenlightened village in the lap of nature”⁵

The manner Clinton treats the tribals smacks of his arrogance and ruthlessness. His behaviour represents the aggressiveness of self indulgent masters and Bashiam’s submissiveness stands for the subservient attitude of the labourers. By adopting the policy of divide and rule, Clinton creates split among the laborers of different grades with the help of the strike breaking force that, “would swarm up the hill at the first beckoning by Clinton and Mackendrick.” (70) Thus, the tribal laborers who are denied the right to protest, apart from their natural right to live respectfully as human beings, are doomed to face the curse of complete dispossession and deprivation.

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