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Beyond Displacement: Gendered Subalternity and the Post-Independence Idea of Development in Sara Joseph's *Budhini*

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Abstract:

The post-independent era of India was characterised by an ambitious infrastructural evolution, the Damodar Valley Project (DVP). DVP emerged as a symbol of progress and national development. However, this leap towards modernisation brought significant socio-cultural consequences, particularly affecting the indigenous tribal communities such as Santals. They were not only geographically displaced but also were uprooted from their cultural and spiritual heritage. Joseph's *Budhini* (2021) serves as a poignant literary exploration of these displaced natives. This paper focuses on the novel's protagonist, Budhini, the titular character, a Santal woman whose life epitomises the complex challenges marginalised women faced in post-independent India. The pivotal point in her life was the garlanding of the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the subsequent societal ostracization. Employing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the "gendered subaltern," this study delves into the layers of subjugation Budhini endures – from patriarchal norms and caste-based discrimination to the overarching impacts of corporate and legal frameworks. This paper asserts Budhini as a representation of the gendered subaltern. It illuminates the intersections of gender, caste, and indigenous identity within the broader context of India's post-independence idea of development, offering a critical lens on the narratives of tribal communities and their women.

Keywords: Damodar Valley Project, Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), Budhini, Santal woman, Gendered subaltern, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Post-independent India.

Sarah Joseph is a distinguished Malayalam writer, activist and founder of Manushi, an organization for thinking women. Some of her notable works are *Aalahayude Penmakkal*, *Othappu*, *Ooru Kaval*, *Mattathi*, *Gift in Green* and *Budhini*. A central figure in the *Pennezhuthu* (Women's Writing) movement, Joseph's writing amplifies the often-sidelined perspectives of women, challenging societal conventions with her evocative characters and narratives. Her works, especially *Gift in Green* and *Budhini*, are marked by an ecofeminist approach, illustrating the interconnectedness of women's oppression and environmental degradation. This perspective is woven into her portrayal of characters and settings, highlighting the resilience and vulnerabilities of both women and nature.

Joseph's storytelling transcends traditional narratives, blending personal, political, and environmental themes. As an ecofeminist writer, her contributions advocate for gender equality and environmental sustainability, making her a crucial literary figure in contemporary Indian writing, sparking essential dialogues on gender, ecology, and social justice. She was awarded the *Odakkuzhal* Award in 2021 for *Budhini*. *Budhini* was translated into English by Sangeetha Srinivasan. Jinoy Jose P commends the translation for maintaining the essence, tone, tenor, and texture of the original Malayalam novel. He also applauds Sreenivasan's translation as a parallel universe, another original, showing the high quality of her work (P).

Joseph's novel *Budhini* is a heartrending exploration of the life of a young woman caught in the crosshairs of India's post-independence developmental fervor. The narrative unfolds in the shadow of the ambitious Damodar Valley Project, a symbol of India's infrastructural aspirations, where Budhini Mejhan emerges as a figure of subaltern resistance and resilience. Her life, entwined with the dam's construction, becomes a metaphor for the displacement and environmental upheaval that accompanied India's march towards modernization.

Budhini is not merely a tale of individual struggle, but a reflection of the collective memory of a nation undergoing rapid transformation. The novel raises critical questions about the cost of development and the voices that were silenced in its wake. The character of Budhini stands as a testament to the gendered subalternity that pervades the developmental landscape of post-independent India, where women, mainly from marginalized communities, often bear

the brunt of socio-economic changes. Joseph expresses, “Budhini started taking shape in my mind as a symbol of crores and crores of people who have been drowned in memory during nation-building, mega projects, including dams, and companies such as DVC and Bharat Coking Coal Limited” (Joseph xii). Through *Budhini*, Joseph critically engages with the themes of gender, power and displacement, offering a nuanced critique of the era’s developmental ideology and its impact on the subaltern populace. Despite the novel’s critical acclaim and its profound commentary on post-independent India’s developmental landscape, there remains a gap in literary scholarship that scrutinizes the intricate interplay of gender, subalternity, and development as portrayed in the novel.

In the aftermath of its independence in 1947, India embarked on a path of nation-building and development, seeking to overcome centuries of colonial exploitation and forge a new identity on the global stage. The era was marked by the leadership of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who envisioned India as a modern, secular, and industrialised nation. Nehru’s developmental model was heavily influenced by socialist ideals and focused on large-scale projects, particularly in the sectors of irrigation, energy, and infrastructure. The construction of dams, steel plants, and factories were seen as secular temples of modern India, symbols of progress and self-reliance.

However, this rush towards industrialization and modernization came with its own set of challenges. Large-scale displacements of rural and tribal communities were commonplace as the government requisitioned land for development projects. “The post-colonial Indian state and its allies, with a developmentalist agenda uppermost in their minds, have made loss of land, displacement, migration, and forced resettlement a part of Adivasi experiences” (Damodaran and Dasgupta 1353). The environmental impact of such projects was often overlooked, and the voices of those affected were silenced.

Moreover, the inception of the Damodar project predates India’s independence, rooted in British colonial interests. Laporte notes that it was “a product of British enlightened self-interest, in that the 1943 flood threatened to sever supply and communications lines between New Delhi and Calcutta and hence jeopardize British war efforts” (Laporte 751). Post-independence, Indian leaders, continuing this colonial legacy, established the DVC without fully addressing its environmental impact and the resultant displacement of marginalized communities. This oversight contributed to internal colonialism, perpetuating the exploitation of the subaltern for corporate gain.

Establishing the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) in 1948, an act sanctioned by the Indian Parliament, was a watershed moment in India's post-independence infrastructural evolution, significantly impacting local communities—a theme central to Sarah Joseph's novel, *Budhini*. Initiated as a response to the devastating Bengal floods of 1943, the Damodar Valley Project (DVP) was India's first comprehensive river valley project, modelled after the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), symbolizing a leap towards modernization. WL. Voorduin, a senior engineer from TVA, was hired to provide the technical input. He was appointed as a member of the Central Technical and Power Board to replicate the TVA experience. The Damodar Valley received immense rainfall leading to loss as run-off and flood. In the Damodar basin, the mean annual precipitation is 24 million acre-feet in normal years (Goodall 371). "Of this amount, 19 million acre-feet falls in the upper reaches, in Bihar Province (present day Jharkand), where the run-off is large, varying from 55 to 85 percent of the precipitation. In the lower valley, comprising the flat alluvial soil of Bengal, the run-off may be as low as 15 to 20 percent. About 9.5 million acre-feet reaches the Damodar and Barakar rivers in the approximate ratio of 3:2" (Goodall 371). Simultaneously, India was producing only nine electrical units of energy per capita per year, which was very low when compared to the figures of US and Mexico, which was 1500 and 180 respectively (Goodall 374). As a nascent independent country, India had to prove its might in the international arena. Therefore, the need for the Damodar valley power was immediate for the coal mines of Jharia, for the bauxite deposits of Chota Nagpur, aluminium from Bihar and for the commercial synthesis of ammonia, calcium nitrate, and calcium carbide.

Between 1948 and 1959, the DVC constructed four multipurpose dams: Tilaiya (1953) and Maithon (1957) on the Barakar River, Panchet (1959) on the Damodar River, and Konar (1955) on the Konar River. These dams, hosting six thermal and three hydroelectric power stations, serve multiple functions beyond water storage and hydroelectricity, such as irrigation, flood control, navigation, and recreation. However, all these functions "tend to require maintenance of high reservoir levels" (Klingensmith 11). Meanwhile, to control floods, empty reservoir space needs to be maintained to accommodate the sudden surge of water. The solution is to "build high dams, impounding reservoirs so large that they can store a quantity of water sufficient to enable the release of plenty of water into the river below the dam, without restricting uses that need storage of water above" (Klingensmith 11). This paradox often leads to controlled releases during heavy rainfall, ironically turning these flood-prevention structures into sources of human-made flooding.

Developmental projects, while heralding progress, have exacted a significant human cost. Displacement is a primary consequence. Since independence, approximately 50 million people have been displaced because of developmental projects (Hemadri et al.). “Large dams alone took away the lands of at least 16.4 million people” (Baviskar 28). And the “tribal communities which account for just 8% of India’s total population constitute about 40% of the displaced persons” (Patwardhan 6).

Joseph writes:

It was not even ten years after India had won her freedom. The welfare state had given these people a taste of freedom by capturing their fields and villages. There was no thought given to rehabilitating them. Seventy-five thousand families. It is not an insignificant number. (93)

Therefore, these tribes became ‘internally displaced people’ because of the implementation of the colonial capitalist developmental projects post-independence. The problem did not stop with the uprooting of millions of economically weaker people, thousands of hectares of fertile land submerged under the dams. DVP’s four dams submerged 48.21-thousand-hectare area of land (Singh 566), which predominantly belonged to the tribes for many hundred years. “The Damodar Valley project (DVC) alone has displaced 93,874 persons from 84,140 acres of land in 305 villages” (Areeparampil 1527). The colonial law, the Land Acquisition Act 1894, facilitated the procurement of these vast lands. According to the law, the rehabilitation of the project affected people is done by cash compensation. It does not include measures to offset job losses or livelihood disruptions for those not owning land. It failed to compensate landless workers, small farmers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, artisans, cattle herders, fishermen, and others relying on local natural resources. Areeparampil calls this dispossession of tribals from their land unleashed by the ruling classes of the country as “a new type of internal colonialism” (Areeparampil 1525).

To the indigenous people, land is not a commodity. It is tied to their spirituality. The indigenous people do not have the concept of claiming ownership of their land. The land is a communal property which belongs to all the members of their tribe, their ancestors who look over them as spirits and the future generation. This outlook is incomprehensible to anyone who does not belong to the indigenous community. “To separate the indigenous people from their land is tantamount to tearing them apart from their life-giving source” (Areeparampil 1526).

Das writes:

In 1953, when the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC) acquired 41,000 acres of land mostly from the indigenous communities in the districts of Dhanbad, Jamtara and Purulia and erstwhile Bardhaman district, close to 70,000 people were displaced. These displaced persons with loss of land, house and livelihood were not adequately compensated, neither were they absorbed into the production units only 350 persons had received compensation and jobs. Years later in 1992 the Supreme Court's directives to the organisation in favour of compensation for some of the displaced persons who had appealed to the apex court did not see full implementation. (Das 5)

The illusion of compensation is portrayed in the novel through the conversation between Mangol, Robon Manjhi's son and Rupī, the journalist. Mangol tells Rupī that,

'I wanted you to know that he is trapped in the memories of 1959. The word that was given then remains unkept to this date. In the first Five-Year Plan, the amount set aside for those who lost their lands was very meagre, just 4 per cent of the total amount. Even that amount didn't reach them. Robon Manjhi suffers not from memory loss but from the unremitting memories of things past.' (243)

Robon Manjhi's character in 'Budhini' embodies the plight of millions of indigenous people caught in the web of development-induced displacement. Stripped off their land, alienated from their communities, and marginalized because of their identities, these individuals represent the human cost of India's aggressive development agenda. The lack of compensation for their land and trauma underscores the systemic neglect and exclusion, reflecting the novel's critical stance on the so-called developmental progress.

The communal farmlands of the Santals were procured by the government to construct the DVC. Budhini's family, once reliant on communal farming, faced upheaval as their land was requisitioned for the project. Joseph describes the event: "The gormen took the woods and farms and walled up the river. They said they would give dams instead. Dams benefit not just one or ten villages but hundreds and thousands of communities" (28). With the loss of the communal farmland, the members of the community were struck with hunger and malnutrition. The older people and the newborns perished every day. The youth finally decided to work at the DVC. However, they were hired as stone-breaking labourers. It was the first time her community members worked outside of their land, and most importantly, were paid in cash. Her father was among the first lot of labourers who went to work at the DVC. Budhini's Baba bought home rice, dal and mustard oil on his first salary. He disgruntled to his wife, "I couldn't

believe we had to pay for rice! My hands trembled, Budhini's ma''' (43). This moment captures the shift from sustainable agriculture to precarious labour. It marked a loss of autonomy and a descent into subaltern status for Budhini's family. Without the communal land, the family was pushed to the periphery. Budhini's mother too joined the DVC to run the family. With the mother off to work, the household chores befell on Budhini.

When both her father and mother went to work, Budhini babysat the younger children, grew vegetables in the backyard, tended the pigs and chickens, led the goats out to graze, cooked rice, gathered firewood, prepared cowpat cakes, kneaded mud to polish the walls, tidied up the courtyard several times, washed clothes... (43)

The above passage describes how Budhini was robbed of her childhood by the DVC. She had to run the household in the absence of her parents.

The influx of cash into the lives of indigenous people changed their lifestyle in various ways. The villagers no longer foraged in the woods. They bought their food and wood from markets in Asansol. Brass lotas were replaced by stainless-steel tumblers. Instead of *hadiya* (country liquor made from rice), bottled liquor from cities was consumed by the villagers. Store-bought samosas were preferred over traditional homemade *jalpitas*. Some women substituted the *panchi* and *parhan* with synthetic sarees to show their upliftment. Many women gave up wearing mud bangles and started wearing glass bangles. Therefore, the traditional aspects which were part of the Santal identity were slowly replaced by the modern fast fashion.

Before the DVC, Budhini's life was intertwined with nature and tradition. She loved visiting the woods, throwing the *palash* flowers into the river, collecting firewood, tending cattle, and taking them to graze, playing *banam* (flute) in the woods, swimming in the river, observing birds, plants, caterpillars and so much more. She also spent her childhood with her friends Chotroi and Mani. These simple pleasures of her childhood were abruptly replaced by the harsh realities of modernization, with the establishment of DVC. This transformation underscores the novel's theme of innocence lost to industrial progress.

Budhini joined the DVC at thirteen as a child labourer, along with her parents. She was employed to break stones, like her parents. "Sitting in rows with their heads down, many people, like Budhini, particularly children, pounded away at the rocks, reducing them into gravel-sized chunks. The contractors taking rounds would not permit them to raise their heads" (24). The dispossession of land made them destitute. Children of indigenous people joined the

workforce doing the same job as their parents, indicate that there was no economic mobility. The development project catapulted them into irrecoverable impoverishment.

After the inaugural of the DVC, the managerial and executive jobs at DVC were filled by middle class educated men from Bengal and Bihar. The children of indigenous people broke stones to combat hunger and forfeited education to work. After contributing their teen years to the construction of the DVC, they were not educated enough to work at the DVC. This was the modern-day enslavement of indigenous people. This descent from self-sustained farmers to exploit labourers illustrates a cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement. Moreover, the vast mass of people who migrated to work at the DVC slowly populated the indigenous lands and displaced the natives. Eventually, the indigenous people became a minority in the land that belonged to them for hundreds of years. "During 1981-91 alone the proportion of STs to the total population in the whole of Chhota- nagpur and Santhal Parganas fell from 30.26 per cent to 27.67 per cent" (Areeparampil 1527). This shows the displacement of the natives and the settlement of the outsiders.

Budhini's life took a tempestuous turn after garlanding Nehru at the inaugural ceremony of the Panchet Dam. The Statesman newspaper reported that "it was right that those who had worked on a project should have the honour of declaring it open" (Padmanabhan). Joseph symbolizes that moment as the intersection of indigenous life and political power. Budhini was dressed in her traditional attire to welcome the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. She was young and innocent. She felt out of place. She obeyed the orders that were given to her by her employer, the DVC. This staged event, contrasting Budhini's cultural identity with the formality of the ceremony, highlights the gap between indigenous experiences and the bureaucratic machinery of development. The following scene poignantly illustrates the exploitation and marginalization inherent in such developments.

It was a face too frightened to wear a smile! Her body language reflected the uncertainty and predicament of a girl who happened to be in a world that didn't really belong to her. Certainly, she was inexperienced; the fear of doing an unknown task lurked behind her brooding look and doleful posture. Her extended arm, adorned with silver bangles, was muscular. Like a dancer's pose, her forefinger and thumb pressed against a lever. She was in the traditional panchi and parhan of a Santal girl, wearing flowers in her hair along with a silver flower clip, pagra in her ears and a phuli on her nose. Her nose

pin glistened even in such a faded picture. Her look was intense, unyielding, and at the same time, sorrowful. Her deep black eyes were more profound than her puerility. (94)

Budhini's traditional attire and adornments connect her to her indigenous roots and the natural world, emphasising the deep bond between indigenous communities and their environment. Her evident discomfort in the depicted setting hints at the displacement or alienation that indigenous communities often feel in the face of modernization or urbanisation. "A heavy rose garland trembled in Budhini's hands" (110).

A DVC officer had told her earlier: 'Budhini Mejhan, you should put this garland around his neck; and Robon Manjhi, you should give him this bouquet. He is a significant person, the prime minister of India, do you understand? You should behave with respect. Now, you stand here. When I call you, come this way.'

'Who is he?' Robon Manjhi asked Budhini quietly.

'Gormen,' she said. Robon was stunned. Solemnly, she stood there holding the garland for the gormen, deadpan and tight-lipped. She was holding the garland just how the DVC people had given it to her, as if the slightest of movements would make its petals fall. (110)

The narrative underscores the vast chasm between the lived experiences of indigenous communities like Budhini's and the formal, bureaucratic world of political ceremonies. Her lack of recognition of the prime minister and her reference to him as "gormen" (likely a mispronunciation of "government") further stress this distance. The meticulous instructions given to Budhini and Robon Manjhi by the DVC officer reveal the event's staged nature, where every action was choreographed for optics. The crowd's enthusiastic applause contrasts with Budhini's solemnity, suggesting a disconnect between the event's celebratory nature and the personal implications of individuals like Budhini. Her unfamiliarity with the event and its significance, combined with her solemn demeanour, underscores the exploitation and marginalisation of both nature and women in patriarchal systems. Budhini's marginalisation is played out against the backdrop of the dam, which symbolises human dominance over nature.

The benefits of a dam could not be neglected. The DVC said electricity could be produced out of water. Budhini imagined electric lights gleaming in all nooks and corners of Karbona, which was otherwise enveloped in darkness. There would be lamps inside the houses too. The DVC said they would give the villagers electricity for free.

Not just to Karbona, but to the neighbouring villages also. That seemed to be a good thing. (112)

While Prime Minister Nehru was rendering his celebratory rhetoric of progress and modernization, Budhini was introspectively contemplating the implications of “taming” a river. “She wasn’t enjoying it even a little bit. What could be right? Was it the right thing to tame a river, or should it continue to flow without any hindrance?” (112). While the speaker extols the virtues of human triumph over nature, her introspective questioning of the dam’s implications contrasts with the dominant narrative of progress, highlighting the often-overlooked perspectives of those most affected by environmental changes. Budhini’s mother tongue, Santali, remained unrecognised by the Indian Constitution until 2003, which further emphasises the marginalisation of indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. These systemic challenges make sure that the subaltern does not speak. Thus, Joseph’s narrative critiques the unchecked modernization that leads to intersectional oppressions of women and indigenous communities who depend on natural resources.

Upon returning to her village after the inaugural ceremony, Budhini faces immediate ostracization. Budhini and Chotroi went back to the village after the pompous ceremony. The whole village was eerily deserted. The village’s deserted streets foreshadow her rejection. “She stopped at the well, panting. The moment she lowered the bucket into the well to draw some water, a group of youngsters jumped out of nowhere and surrounded her, shouting *seta* (stray dog)” (116-117). Marang Soren, Chotroi’s elder brother, led a mob of youngsters. There were nearly eight or ten of them. Marang, who had a profound love towards her and wanted to marry her earlier, now cussed at her when she entered the village. “‘Don’t dare to touch the well,’ Marang yelled. He seized the bucket and rope from Budhini. ‘The gram sabha is gathering, you bitch. You may not need to drink water any more’” (117). Her attempt to seek refuge in her home reveals another harsh reality: her parents have abandoned their home, leaving Budhini to confront her isolation and fear alone. She was shocked by the disordered home and the silence in the village. She trembled in fear. It felt like she was being hunted.

The manji of the nearest village asked, ‘What justifies the rabbling crowd in Karbona?’

‘A Santal girl has defiled her clan. She has married a diku by putting a garland of flowers upon his neck.’

‘A Santal girl is not supposed to marry a diku, is she?’

‘No, she is not. It’s a custom since the beginning of the seven Santal tribes. That’s law and justice.’

‘And what are the law and justice?’

‘A Santal girl is to be joined only with a Santal. Be it a man or a woman, the one who marries a diku should go out of the clan.’

‘What’s the penalty for breaking the law?’

‘Nothing less than bitlaha.’

‘So?’

‘So, I seek permission to ostracize the woman called Budhini Mejhan.’

With this, the hollering, dancing and heavy drumming began again, much stronger than before.

Fuck... fuck...fuck... fuck... (123)

The act of garlanding the Prime Minister was interpreted as marriage by the chieftain of her tribe. Manjis from nearby villages were invited to the *bitlaha*. A *bitlaha* was executed. *Bitlaha* means “to be outcasted” (Campbell 73). A *diku*, a person who is not Santal. Women and children were prohibited from participating in the *bitlaha*. Youngsters, men, Manjis and Dihri, “the Superintendent of an annual hunt, and President of the Supreme court of the Santals of the district for the settlement of social matters”(Campbell 145) were the participants of the *bitlaha* and they all were intoxicated with *mahua* and *hadiya*. It was like a native carnival with loud drumbeats. When the drum beat crescendoed, all of them stripped and their nudity was outrageous. They all processioned to Budhini’s home accompanied with vulgar songs and drumming. The naked cortege followed Karbona’s manji who held up the “bough of a sal tree that had just two leaves. One was shaped like a long pipe and the other was folded on each side, pinned at the centre, looking like a flat plate with a groove in the middle” (124). This was a symbolic representation of Budhini’s transgression. The mob danced maniacally in front of her home.

They fixed a bamboo pole to the entrance on which a burnt-out log of wood, a worn-out broom and some used leaves have been tied. And then, like a hurricane set free, they stormed into the house. Those who raced in urinated on the walls, floor, stove, pots and other utensils. Some of them squatted low on the courtyard to take a crap. They

entered every room and defiled everything. They wetted the cots and sheets with their urine. Pulling out clothes from the lines, they relieved themselves all over them. They barked at the percussionists to play the rhythm of taking a leak. The pipers presented the sound of passing water, triggering mysterious rumbles of laughter.

Chotroi hid under a charpoy. Budhini stood frozen in a dark corner. Before she could resist, four or five of the men had hauled her into the courtyard. Loud, animated cheers rose as the hunted animal fell. The rhythm of hunting grew more raucous. They danced, lifting their long sticks, bows and arrows, roaring boisterously all the while. Marang and his friends were under the influence of arrack. They held their members in their loose fists, moving their hands up and down the shafts. Dhukdhuk...dhuk... (124-125)

The chieftain addressed the mob and ordered the villagers to sever their ties with Budhini. Budhini became a cautionary tale to the youngsters. The mob threw Budhini into the street, made jeering and offensive remarks at her, and stone-pelted her to the periphery of the village. The Santals punished Budhini for no wrong of hers. Her parents could have saved her by paying the penalty, but they had no money, and they did not want to antagonise their community. Budhini's public humiliation extends beyond mere ostracization; it is a display of patriarchal power and societal rigidity. The chieftain's declaration resulted in the abasement of Budhini, reflecting the harsh consequences of defying tribal traditions. Her struggle intensifies as she faces betrayal from her community and family, highlighting her dual oppression as a female and a Santal. Budhini is pushed to the margins, both literally and figuratively. However, Robon Manjhi, later known as Raavan Manhi, who gave the bouquet to Nehru, did not face any consequences for his act.

Budhini's challenges grew rapidly as she loses her job at the DVC amidst the escalating tensions between the Brahmins and Santals over Budhini's alleged marriage with Nehru. During the feud, Suman Goshal vowed that "the Santals were created by God as the slaves of the bhadralok" (142). He also swore, "That pig, the whore! Is she a wife! How dare she call herself the wife of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru! Phew! Who does she think Nehru is? If I get my hands on that pig that feeds on crap, she will get screwed" (142). The Santals who spoke for Budhini were also humiliated and beaten. Suman Goshal and his other Brahmin friends spoke of Santals in vulgar, casteist slur and were in a hunting frenzy to kill Budhini. Her parents, who were present at the workplace, did not protect and save her.

Joseph describes Budhini's struggle for survival in this passage:

Like any animal that would run in fear, Budhini ran for her life. She didn't see the rocks or pits on her way. In fact, nothing bothered her. Racing through the darkness, she ran down the steps to the river. Through the treacherous shores of the Damodar, she continued stampeding over thorns, bogs and wild bushes. (146)

This incident also casts light on the fact that the non-native population at the DVC was a majority. The cultural differences among them were huge, and the non-natives were enforcing their values on the natives, leading to communal clashes. Moreover, the DVC did not show its solidarity towards Budhini, which shows that the whole garlanding act was not a recognition of indigenous contrition but a mere publicity act. Her plight, symbolizing the plight of many subaltern women, is compounded by her parents' inability to protect her, leaving her to navigate a hostile and patriarchal world alone.

Budhini ran all night and ended up in the presence of a kind man named Suvir Datta. "Come," he extended his hand and held her hand in his. After that, he didn't withdraw it until the day he died" (147). He was a disciple of Tagore. He took her to his home, provided her with food, shelter and clothing. This peace did not even last a night. The following day, a mob presented before Datta's house roaring, "Thrash this pig to death, this slut who has come to stay in the agrahara" (152). Datta's family members too were casteist. Finally, Datta moves out of his home with Budhini. They both start working in a coalfield as daily labourers. At the tea shop near the coalfield, Budhini, being the tribal wife of Nehru, was constantly a topic of discussion and debate. One day, such a conversation took a violent turn among the Hindus and Muslims. People cruelly beat Budhini, and she becomes a victim of religious violence. Here, her gender, caste, religion, and indigenous identity all work in tandem as the tools of her oppression. Datta, the humanist, saves Budhini that day, too. "Holding Budhini's hand, Datta ran to the coalfields. They discreetly boarded a truck carrying coal to Purulia. 'Don't be afraid,' he said. Budhini was not afraid" (159). Her courage grew from then on because she knew was in the safest hands on Earth. Out of the kindness of his heart and for her safety, Datta ended up staying with Budhini. Later Datta married her and had a daughter named Ratni.

After all these injustices, Datta instilled hope and resilience in Budhini. He persuades her, "The yesterdays belonged to them, Budhini. Tomorrow will be for Ratni" (161). After the death of Nehru, Datta, with the help of a couple of journalists and Somnath Hembrom, wrote a letter to Rajiv Gandhi. In due course, Budhini was reinstated in DVC at thirty-eight. For twenty-three years, she suffered incessantly. It was Datta who stood by her.

At the novel's end, Rupi, the journalist meets Budhini and Joseph describes that moment as:

"The woman who descended the steps was not alone. It was as if she was accompanied by a deluge of hundreds of millions of people who had been uprooted and ousted from their own soil; of the vast forests and hundreds of villages and farms that existed no more" (265).

The story of Budhini is an homage to the millions of development induced displaced people.

Budhini is not only a novel on marginalisation but also a story of the assertion of the Adivasi agency. "Voices of Adivasis—although multiple and fractured—can be heard as they assert their identity, express their politics, and creatively negotiate with the state and its institutions" (Damodaran and Dasgupta 1353–54). Shalini M observes that Joseph is aware of her outsider position and asserts that the novel's narrative is in a problematic position, as Joseph "can only ever imagine the struggles of the Other" (M 142). However, through the character Datta, Joseph calls the readers to be the voice of the unspoken, speech-denied, and voiceless people. Joseph had unearthed the injustices that happened to Budhini from the criminally forgotten past. Spivak, in the concluding paragraph of her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" asserts, "the subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 104). Budhini, as a gendered subaltern, could not speak for herself. However, "representation has not withered away" (Spivak 104), and Joseph, through her narrative and characters, has represented the subaltern and given agency to the Adivasi woman, Budhini.

Budhini is a gendered subaltern and a victim of development. The beginning of all her misery was DVC. The rehabilitation package for the displaced indigenous people never reached them. The development ideologies of the government were indeed a deluge of disaster for the indigenous community. The DVP also had a massive impact on the environment. Mass afforestation and submergence of vast lands altered the ecosystem of the region. Furthermore, the river Damodar, which was once the sacred river of Santals, is one of the most polluted rivers in India. The river Damodar flows through the Chota Nagpur Plateau. The Chota Nagpur Plateau is known as the Ruhr of India because of the numerous industries in the region. The industrial effluents from the coal mining plants, steel plants, fertiliser manufacturing companies, cement industry and others are dumped into the river, making it lethal for human usage. "The water pollution of the river has the potential to impact 25 million people" (Singh

and Pandey). The alternative to large dams is small hydel schemes and small dams. They are both cost-efficient and effective in meeting our needs. Irrigation science is the need of the hour and not large dams.

Consequently, the post-independent India's developmental projects have negatively impacted millions of indigenous people to whom justice is still a far dream. The subaltern indigenous women who are already fighting the patriarchal society are marginalised beyond measure by the developmental projects, which are inherently capitalist and exploitative towards them. When a subaltern woman is displaced, she is swept away like dust in a sandstorm. In India during mass displacement, predominantly men owned the land. Thus, rehabilitation policies did not take the subaltern women into account. They must be given equal or even more aid than their male counterpart. Thukral mandates that "the rehabilitation plans must ensure joint ownership of both spouses at the time of new allotments" (Thukral 1503).

Budhini's story, as narrated by Joseph, is not a mere tale of individual suffering but a representation of the widespread impact of post-independence developmental projects on marginalized communities. The novel highlights the profound environmental and social consequences, particularly for indigenous women, who shoulder the burden of these development projects. Throughout the novel, Budhini never experiences the benefit of the development that marred her life. Shiva states, "Women's increasing underdevelopment was not due to insufficient and inadequate participation in development rather, it was due to their enforced but asymmetric participation whereby they bore the costs but were excluded from the benefits" (Mies and Shiva 73–74). Predominantly the Indian society is patriarchal and being a subaltern worsens a woman's situation even more. In this context, the novel emerges not only as a literary piece but as a crucial commentary on the need for more inclusive and equitable development policies that recognize and protect the rights and identities of the most vulnerable.

Budhini's experiences reflect the narrative of many who were displaced and disempowered by the very processes that promised growth and prosperity, a tale poignantly captured by Joseph's writing. Joseph's portrayal of Budhini serves as a powerful voice for the subaltern, those often silenced by societal structures. Joseph, with an ethical responsibility, unearths the forgotten history of Budhini without diluting her voice. A subaltern will choose to remain silent most of the time, and it is the essential responsibility of another human being to actively support the subaltern and assist them in finding their voice.

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